RECONSTRUCTING THE NATION:
CONTEMPORARY KOREAN PHOTOGRAPHY SINCE THE 1990S

by

BOYOUNG CHANG

A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Art History

Written under the direction of

Andrés Mario Zervigón

and approved by

________________________

________________________

________________________

________________________

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May, 2019
This dissertation examines the photography made by South Korean photographers, focusing on the medium’s relationship to the political and societal changes that have been occurring in and around the country that started in the late 1980s. Focusing on art photography that took various formats from documentary to the performative, encompassing the staged, portraits, and snapshots, the dissertation addresses the development of a medium that is intertwined with the transformation of Korean society. Represented with democratization and globalization, South Korea reorganized its political system and opened its doors to the world in this era. This dissertation argues that the transformation of contemporary Korean art photography is not only a reflection of this essential reconstruction of the nation’s identity, but that of the medium itself, with its performative nature, mediated the process. The exploration starts from the early practices of the mid-20th century Korean photography and moves on to the thematic discussions of how contemporary photography addressed the key issues that mark the transition.

When the long history of military dictatorship ended in the late 1980s and democracy arrived in Korea, the nation reestablished its identity by declaring a break from the past, refashioning its history, and building new relationships with other
countries, including North Korea. This dissertation argues that the history of Korean photography parallels these shifts. Unlike in the past, when photographers had limited choices regarding what they could depict and had limited photographic models to refer to, contemporary photographers, with newly obtained freedom and various photographic languages, revisited the repressed history, reinterpreted official history, and deconstructed it according to the changed socio-political climate. As the state-led globalization positioned Korean identity into the international context, Korean photography too went through the process of challenging the preexisting notions and striving to position itself in global photography.

Fully incorporating the social, political, and cultural history of Korea and the surrounding international contexts, this dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach in articulating the history of the nation’s photography. With an emphasis on a need to contextualize artistic practices into its society, it improves the understanding of contemporary Korea and its photographic practices.
Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to my advisor, Dr. Andrés Mario Zervigón for his continuous support, his patience and immense knowledge that guided me during my studies at Rutgers. In every step of the process of developing my research, writing chapters, and completing my dissertation, he provided me the most critical suggestions. He not only shared his abundant knowledge of history of photography but also taught me ways to critically think, analyze, and write about photographs. I cannot thank him enough.

I would like to express my gratitude to my teachers. Dr. Joan Marter encouraged me to study Korean photography and helped me set the direction of my research at the initial stage of my graduate study. I also thank Dr. Susan Sidlauskas and Dr. Tamara Sears for their supports during my graduate years and their insightful comments on the dissertation. Dr. Jung Joon Lee’s discussions of my dissertation provided me fundamental theoretical frameworks that guide my research. Beyond this project, I am indebted to Dr. Nanjie Yun, my first academic mentor at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, for her inspiration and insightful guidance.

My sincere thanks also go to family and friends, who sent me endless love and support. Gyung Eun Oh shared her constructive advice on my research and encouraged me to move forward. My writing group member Saena Ryu Dozier read my manuscript and provided structural suggestions to improve my writing. Geralyn Colvil’s friendship was a source of my strength to complete my study at Rutgers. I thank Taeyoon Lee, Yunjung Yang, Hyewon Cha, and Keejae Kim for their friendship. Sukchan Cho gave me courage and emotional support throughout my graduate years. I owe my gratitude to my
parents Kyungsig Chang and Sunghee Yoo, my sister Soyoung Chang, my brothers Hyunsuk Chang, Ji-hun Bae, and George Chang, and my niece Jio Bae, who were always stand next to me with unconditional love, trust, and support. I would like to dedicate this study to my parents, Eomma Appa.
Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Acknowledgement iv
Table of Contents vi
List of Illustrations viii
Introduction 1

Historical Events that Have Shaped the History of Korea Since the 20th Century 9
Expansion of Korean Photography 18
Status of the Field 25
Chapter Outline 35

Chapter 1. The Development of Korean Photography after the Post-Japanese Colonial Era 41

Saenghwalchuui Realism: The Establishment of “Korean” Photography 43
Persistence of Japanese Influence in Post-liberation Korea 50
The Rule of American Order in South Korea and the Formation of Korean Photography: The Family of Man in Seoul 60
Constructing an Apolitical World: How Realism Photography Developed in the Korean Context 77
Documenting “Korean Tradition”: Photography until the 1980s 86

Chapter 2. Constructing Historical Memories: How Photography Documented the Past in ‘90s-Era South Korea 95

Hein-kuhn Oh’s Gwangju Story
[Constructing Indecisive Moments] 100
[Reinvention of the Gwangju Uprising and Resistance to Create a Singular Narrative] 109

Suntag Noh’s Forgetting Machines
[Commemoration of Gwangju Uprising and the Surrounding Historical Landscape] 126
[The Representation of Representation: Photography That Documents Mediated History] 140
Chapter 3. Contested Nation: A Deconstruction of Masculinized National History

A Masculinized Nation and its Reassessment in Contemporary Photography 154
Korea’s Transformation in the Late 1980s, and Photography’s Role 163
Visualizing an Emasculated Country and its Claim of Masculine Identity:
Joseub’s Performative Photographs 170
Portraits of the Korean War and the National Division: Photographs that
Document the Present of the Past 188

Chapter 4. Looking from the Outside: Explorations of Korean Identity 205
The Rise of Identity Politics and the Travel of the 1993 Whitney Biennial to Seoul 208
Nikki S. Lee: Projects
[A Korean Artist in the Multicultural US] 218
Globalization of Contemporary Korean Art/Photography and Korean Culture 240
Challenged Korean Masculinity and Its Resistance: Chan-hyo Bae’s Existing in Costumes 249

Epilogue 262
Illustrations 269
Appendix 344
Acknowledgement of Previous Publications 345
Bibliography 346
List of Illustrations

Introduction

0.1 Jaeuk Lee, Red Line, 2018
0.2 Eungju Kim, Lee Im Gyu (age 97) Near the Ocean at Namwon-eup Shinrae-ri 2nd street, 2018
0.3 Chang-Kyong Park, Sets, 2000
0.4 Chang-Kyong Park, Sets, 2000
0.5 Chang-Kyong Park, Sets, 2000

Chapter One

1.1 Eungsik Lim, Namok (Bare Trees), 1953
1.2 Sanggyu Kang, Seorwonjidae (Snowfield), 1969
1.3 Kyeboek Choi, Yeongsanomosui Bom (Spring at the Youngseon Lake), 1933
1.4 Shinzō Fukuhara, Beautiful West lake: the Light with its harmony, 1931
1.5 Shinzō Fukuhara, Spring, Okutama, 1930
1.6 Eungsik Lim, Dukeul Gada (Walking Along the Embankment), 1937
1.7 Eungsik Lim, Jeonjaeng Goah (A War Orphan), 1950
1.8 Eungsik Lim, Pinangil (Fleeing from the War), 1950
1.9 Sukje Lim, Hayeok (Loading), Late 1940s
1.10 Ken Domon, Mr. and Mrs. Kotani: Two Who Have Suffered from The Bomb, Hiroshima series, 1957
1.11 Ken Domon, Hands of Hibakusha Kikkawa Kiyoshi, Hiroshima series, 1957
1.12 Ken Domon, The Children of Chikuho Japan. 1960
1.13 Bumtai Chung, Uyu Baegeup, Seoul Malli-dong (Milk Rationing, Malli-dong, Seoul), 1955
1.14 Chung Bumtai, Gyeoljeongjeok Sungan, Seoul Gyeonggi Godeung Gunbeop Jaepanso (The Decisive Moment, Seoul Gyeonggi Military High Court), 1961
1.15 Hyungrok Lee, Jintanggi, Sokye-dong (Muddy Street, Sokye-dong), 1954
1.16 Henri Cartier-Bresson, Behind the Gare St. Lazare. 1932
1.18 Korea, Margaret Bourke-White, Life
1.19 Korea, Margaret Bourke-White, Life
1.20 Korea, David Duncan, Life
1.21 Korea, U.S. Signal Corps, Al Chang
1.22 Korea, Joseph Breitenbach, United Nations
1.23 Korea, Michael Rougier, Life
1.24 Youngsoo Han, Salm (Life), 1958-63
1.25 Youngsoo Han, Salm (Life), 1958-63
1.26 Myung-Duck Joo, Gyeongju, 1972
1.27 Myung-Duck Joo, Gyeongju, 1974
1.28 Myung-Duck Joo, Gangneung, 1980
1.29 Myung-Duck Joo, Andong, 1970
1.30 Daesoo Kim, Untitled, 1986
1.31 Kyuchul Lee, Space and Visual Perception, 1988
1.32 Bien-U Bae, Gyeongju, Somanu Series, 1985
1.33 Byunghun Min, Japcho (Weeds), 1996

Chapter Two

2.1 Hein-kuhn Oh, A Family on a Picnic, September 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995
2.2 Eungsik Lim, Gijik (Seeking a Job), 1953
2.3 Hyungrok Lee, Riverside, Han River, 1957
2.5 Hein-kuhn Oh, A Voluntary Actress, September 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995
2.7 Hein-kuhn Oh, Two Policemen, September 30, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995
2.8 Hein-kuhn Oh, A Father, Son, and Daughter. Sept 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995
2.9 Anne Ferran, Lost to Worlds, 2008
2.10 The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Secretes in the Open Sea, 1994/2004
2.11 An-My Lê, Small Wars, 1999-2002
2.12 Changsung Lee, May 27, 1980
2.13 Changsung Lee, May 1980
2.14 Hein-kuhn Oh, Four Actors Waving the Korean Flags, September 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995
2.15 Hein-kuhn Oh, Voluntary High School Student Actors in Roles of Leading Demonstrators, September 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995
2.16 Honggoo Kang, Fugitive 4, 1996
2.17 Honggoo Kang, Gwangju, 1995
2.18 Sangil Yi, Malwongdong, 1995
2.19 Sangil Yi, Malwongdong, 1988
2.22 Old Mangwoldong cemetery
2.23 Suntag Noh, Hwang Ho-geol, 1960.10. 7 – 1980.5.23, Died from a Bullet Wound Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
2.24 Suntag Noh, Ryu Young-sun, 1953. 5.9 – 1980.5.23, Died from a Bullet Wound Taken in 2006. Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
2.25 Taken in 2011
2.26 Maya Lin, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1982
2.27 Memorial Gate, May 18th National cemetery, Gwangju
2.28 Memorial Tower with ten panels of bronze bas-relief that describes the Uprising narrative behind, May 18th National cemetery, Gwangju
2.29 Suntag Noh, Ahn Byoung-bok, 1960.11. 17 – 1980.5.21, Died from a Full Skull Fracture and Left Arm Mutilation, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
Chapter Three

3.1 Joseub 5.16, Do Not Question, 2005
3.2 Joseub 5.16, Do Not Question, 2005
3.3 The May 16 Military Coup in 1961
3.4 Sanghee Song, Mother A, 2004
3.5 Sanghee Song, The First Lady A, 2004
3.6 Hwayong Kim, Merry Kwansun Odyssey: Return to the Motherland on the 60th Anniversary of Korea’s Independence, 2005
3.7 Han-yeol Yi, Collapsing, by Taewoon Jung ©Reuters
3.8 Gyoo Sik Kim, Night Hawk, 2008
3.9 Suntag Noh, reallyGood, Murder, 2008
3.10 Young Hoon Lee, Paradise, 2008
3.11 SungHyun Sohn, House of Unification, 1998-2004
3.12 SungHyun Sohn, House of Unification, 1998-2004
3.13 SungHyun Sohn, Chunhwa Chang (84, Internally Displaced Person Whose Hometown Is in North Korea), The Koreans series, 2008-2014
3.15 Joseub, Douglas MacArthur, Do Not Question, 2005
3.16 Douglas MacArthur
3.17 Joseub, Douglas MacArthur, Do Not Question, 2005
3.18 The Battle of Incheon
3.19 Reenactment of the Battle of Incheon
3.20 Statue of Douglas MacArthur at Jayu Park (Freedom Park), Incheon
3.22 Marilyn Monroe when she visited Korea in 1954
3.24 Yong Tae Kim, *DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon*, 1984
3.25 Yong Tae Kim, *DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon*, 1984
3.26 Yong Tae Kim, *DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon*, 1984
3.27 Yong Tae Kim, *DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon*, 1984
3.29 The War Memorial of Korea
3.30 The Korean War Monument
3.31 *The Statue of Brothers*, The War Memorial of Korea
3.32 Joseub, *I Hate Red Peanut!, 1999*
3.33 Joseub, *I Hate Red Peanut!, 1999*
3.34 Joseub, *I Hate Red Peanut!, 1999*
3.37 Eungsik Lim, *A War Orphan*, 1950
3.40 Hein-kuhn Oh, *A Petty Officer Standing in front of 127mm Naval Artillery Gun, October 2010*, Middlemen
3.41 Hein-kuhn Oh, *Azaleas and Soldier, April 2011*, Middlemen
3.42 A trainee soldier, Republic of Korean Army, August 8, 2016
3.43 A cadet in training, Republic of Korean Army August 8, 2016
3.44 The Korean Army performing its duty, 2015
3.45 The Korean Army, Winter Training, 2015
3.46 Commandos in training, Republic of Korea Army August 6, 2015
3.47 Hein-kuhn Oh, *Four Soldiers Before a Mock Cavalry Battle, May 2010* Middlemen
3.48 Chan-Kyong Park, *Black Box: Memory of the Cold War Images*, 1997
3.53 Hein-kuhn Oh, *A Corporal on Red Clay, May 2010*, Middlemen
3.54 Young Hoon Lee, *Paradise*, 2008
3.56 Young Hoon Lee, *Paradise*, 2008
3.57 Young Hoon Lee, *Paradise*, 2008
3.64 David Levinthal, *Hitler Moves East*, 1972-75
3.65 David Levinthal, *Hitler Moves East*, 1972-75

Chapter 4

4.17 Do Ho Suh, *Who Am We?* 2000, Offset Wallpaper
4.20 Atta Kim, *ON-AIR Project 047-1, 100 Countries/100 Men*, Self-Portrait series, 2004
4.22 Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirl Project*, 2000, Projects
4.23 Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirl Project*, 2000, Projects
4.27 Do Ho Suh, *Paratrooper I*, 2003
4.28 Do Ho Suh, *Karma*, 2003
4.31 Chan-hyo Bae, *Existing in Costume*, 2003
4.32 Man Ray, *Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy* 1920
4.33 Chris Makos, *Altered Ego (Andy Warhol in Tribute to Rrose Sélavy)* c. 1960s
4.34 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Futago)*, 1988
4.35 Yasumasa Morimura, *Black Marilyn*, 1995
4.36 Yasumasa Morimura, *Daughter of Art History, Theater A*, 1989
4.37 Yasumasa Morimura *Daughter of Art History, Theater B*, 1989
4.38 Michael Joo, *Miss Megook (Miss America)*, 1993
4.39 Chan-hyo Bae, *Existing in Costume*, 2003
4.40 Chan-hyo Bae, *Existing in Costume*, 2003

Epilogue

5.1 Jaeuk Lee, *Red Line*, 2018
5.2 Jaeuk Lee, *It’s Not Your Fault*, 2015-16
5.3 Jaeuk Lee, *It’s Not Your Fault*, 2015-16
5.4 Jaeuk Lee, *It’s Not Your Fault*, 2015-16
5.5 Jaeuk Lee, *It’s Not Your Fault*, 2015-16
5.6 Jaeuk Lee, *It’s Not Your Fault*, 2015-16
5.9 Onejoon Che, *National Hero’s Acre, Built in 1981, Harare, Zimbabwe, Mansudae Master Class*, 2015
5.11 JuChe Tower, Pyongyang, North Korea
5.12 Mansudae Grand Monument, Pyongyang, North Korea, bronze, 66 ft. each
(Left: Kim Il-Sung’s Statue dedicated in 1972 in honor of Kim’s 60th birthday; Right: Kim Jong-il’s Statue built in 2011 upon his death)
Introduction

(Fig. 0.1) A photograph depicts an empty road flanked by tall trees. While the scenery is almost indiscernible due to the darkness in the night, except for the white lines that mark the centerline and boundaries of the road, a vivid red line divides the frame horizontally and breaks the tranquility of the image. Floating in the air, the simple but intense red line divides the space into two. The laser light captured by a long exposure separates the space before the line from the receding road. At the same time, it flattens the picture plane and splits it into upper and lower parts.

One of the Red Line series (2018), which Korean photographer Jaeuk Lee created on the southernmost island of Jeju, this photograph refers to the Jeju April 3rd Incident (1948), an alleged communist mutiny and subsequent anti-communist suppression campaign that resulted in deaths of between 14,000 and 30,000 people for more than a year. The incident is one of the most important moments in Korean history, but its truth and meaning is still bitterly contested. In the Red Line series, the photographer readdressed the incident after 70 years. Despite referring to the specific event and visiting the actual site, however, his approach to the incident is rather ambivalent. The red is definitely a symbol of communism,1 and the places where the laser lights were installed reflect a decree that was given on October 17, 1948: “All of the people who pass around inner-mountain areas of Jeju farther than 5 km (3.1 miles) from the seashore after

---

1 Symbols of communist states often appear in red, such as a red star and a red flag. The national flag of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which is often referred to as North Korea, also includes a red star and a red field. Reflecting this symbolic meaning, there exists a slang term in South Korean vocabulary: “Ppalgaengi” to refer to communists, as “ppalegae” means “red” in Korean.
October 20, 1948 will be regarded as rebels and shall be shot to death.”\(^2\) While taking an incident that is related to fierce ideological conflicts in Korea as a subject matter without constraints, the photograph also does not clearly visualize it with concrete figures and violent content involving the deaths of people. Instead, the red light brings transient tension into the space that suggests the lingering presence of the incident and leaves traces on the photographic image.

Dealing with a tragic historic moment, Lee not only visited and documented the former site of the incident but restaged it in the time-space of 2017 and evoked its unstable status in Korean history. The resulting images, on the other hand, look like landscape photographs with uncanny qualities. *Red Line*, in this way, moves beyond the transparent documentation of reality and the turbulent Korean history before democratic governments arrived, involving the photographer’s subjective reinterpretation. As a contemporary Korean photographer who works both in and out of the country, what does Lee’s subject matter and photographic style imply about both the history of post-1945 photography in South Korea and its contemporary practices?

This dissertation examines photographs made by Korean photographers, focusing on the medium’s relationship to the political and societal change that has been occurring in and around the country since the late 1980s. It specifically analyzes art photography in various formats, from the performative to the staged, to portraits and snapshot photographs. By examining the images, it argues that Korean photography not only

reflected but also shaped the transformation of Korean society. In parallel with the transition of the nation, art photography made a distinct break with the past. Therefore, this dissertation also analyzes how Korean photography embodies the change of the political climate into democracy and the globalized status of the nation. With Korea’s recently obtained liberty and increased photographic knowledge, it focuses on how contemporary Korean photographers reinterpreted and critically reassessed established history and redrafted its narratives under a democratized government and explored what it means to be Korean in and out of the country.

The late 1980s were a key moment in contemporary Korean history. With the demonstrations of June 1987, the long history of military dictatorship that had lasted since 1961 finally ended, and Korea began the transformation into a democratic country. In addition, this nation, which had previously limited relationships with other countries, opened up itself to the world. Coinciding in the international context with the end of the Cold War, South Korea experienced an expedited globalization that reshaped the nation in every aspect, from politics to the economy, diplomacy, and culture. Korean photographers responded to these crucial changes, bringing about a major expansion of the medium in the country. I examine how photography became part of these changes by looking back to its recent past to develop a renewed understanding of history and by locating Korean identity within a broad global context.

My emphasis is on the importance of contextualizing artistic practices in political and social contexts. Through constant negotiations with these practical contexts, artists interact with the current discourse of society and facilitate further discussion of specific subjects with their work. Photography, according to Allan Sekula, is always the product
of socially-specific encounters, either human-and-human or human-and-nature. The history of Korean photography, therefore, is in a relentless dialogue with society. Art photography, primarily produced and circulated within institutional art systems, depicts reality beyond its first order of denotation. Through the process of interpreting various phenomena in society – social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena – and reframing them into artistic contexts, photographers construct images making direct imprints of reality as indexical representations.

In particular, contemporary photographers have used the medium as a compelling tool for reflecting the past from a renewed perspective as well as addressing current events and issues. Their aesthetic recomposition of reality, often taking dramatic modes, urges the viewer to reconsider things through different eyes and calls attention to the urgency of the issues that they address. The poised depiction of the event in Red Line, for instance, urges us to consider the incident beyond the conventional perspective of violent narrative and to rethink the Jeju Incident in the present context of 2017 without concrete narratives.

What kind of context does the Korea of the 2010s provide for the photographer and the viewer to represent and to understand the Jeju Incident through renewed perspectives? Jaeuk Lee’s photograph clearly exemplifies a recent resurfacing of the Jeju April 3rd Incident in both political and artistic domains in South Korea. Behind the increasing artistic activities that deal with the incident that have revisited this historical moment at its 70th anniversary was the fluctuating political climate in Korea. When the original incident happened in 1948, South Korea was undergoing national division and

---

under the rule of the United States Army Military Government. On the island of Jeju, the communist South Korean Labor Party, the South Korean government, and the United States Army Military Government in Korea clashed with tragic consequences.

With the connivance of the US, the Korean government cruelly suppressed the rebellion and killed numerous civilians as well as communist guerrillas, causing approximately 25,000 to 30,000 deaths over two years. For a long time, the anti-communist climate in South Korea made it taboo to discuss the massacre. It was not until the democratization of the country that the event resurfaced in Korean history. During the short period of 10 years between 1998 and 2007, a liberal party seized power, enacted the Jeju 4.3 Special Law in 1999, initiated a commemoration project, and published reports on the truth of the incident. The president of Korea president made an official apology to the victims of the state-led crime in 2003. However, when a conservative government retook power in 2008, efforts to recognize the Jeju Incident languished for the next nine years. The state repression and genocide is still referred to as “an incident” rather than an uprising or revolution, as it still has not obtained proper signification under the altering political climate. Lee’s Red Line in this context alludes to the communist accusation embedded in the enduring censorship on the discourse and the original ideological divisions that caused the incident.

Since the liberal party recaptured power in 2017 after President Geun-hye Park was impeached, the Jae-in Moon government has paid renewed attention to the Jeju

---

5 For instance, two presidents from the conservative party, Myung-bak Lee and Geun-hye Park did not attend annual commemorative events.
massacre. At the commemoration ceremony for the 70th anniversary of the event, President Moon declared the intention to offer compensation and any other necessary reparations to the victims and bereaved families. The increasing artistic practices dealing with the incident are entwined with this current mood and facilitate the cultivation of memories and belated discourses of the massacre.

The significance of photography that engages contemporary political events can be seen through exhibition culture. A number of exhibitions, including photography, that focused on the Jeju massacre opened recently in Korea. Upon the commission of the Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation, 12 photographers documented the current memory and historical signification of the massacre for an exhibition called Salieobsneun Gieog (Soundless Memory, 2017-2018). Serene landscapes of the island that a photographer from Jeju, Beylnam Yoo, presented at the exhibition Bitgae – Mangboneun Sonyeondeurui Siseonruro Sasameul Hwanwonhada (Bitgae – Reminiscing the 4.3 Incident from the Boys’ Perspectives Who Kept Watch, 2018) are embedded with memories and untold stories of the incident. In addition to these photography exhibitions, entire realm of contemporary art has engaged in the construction of collective memory of this historical event. For instance, the Jeju Museum of Art held the exhibitions 4.3 Misul Akaibeu: Gieogtujaeng 30 Nyeon (The April 3rd Fine Art Archive: 30 Years in Struggles for

---

7 Salieobsneun gieog (소리없는 기억, Soundless Memory), December 20, 2017- March 20, 2018, 4.3 Peace Memorial Hall, Jeju.
8 Bitgae – Mangboneun Sonyeondeurui Siseonruro Sasameul Hwanwonhada (빗개 – 망보는 소년들의 시선으로 4.3을 환원하다, Bitgae – Reminiscing the 4.3 Incident from the Boys’ Perspectives Who Kept Watch), April 3 – 22, 2018, Ryugaheon Gallery, Seoul.
Recollection, 2017) and Post Trauma (2018). Jamdeulji Anhneun Namdo (Sleepless Namdo, 2018) consisted of exhibitions and seminars that commemorated the 70th anniversary of the massacre at museums and art galleries in Seoul. From newly created works such as Red Line to photographers who have consistently worked on the subject, artists vigorously partook in overdue discussions of the incident.

(Fig 0.2) As of January 2019, Eunju Kim’s Dasi, Bom (Again, Spring, 2018-19) is on display at the 4.3 Peace Memorial Hall. The exhibition consists of photographic portraits posed in beautiful landscape on the island of Jeju. The seemingly casual photographs, in fact, depict surviving victims and bereaved families of the 4.3 incident posing for the camera at the site of the event. Addressing personal stories that are intertwined with the violent history of Korea, this exhibition represents a recent trend in the construction of discourse and memories of the incident. Just as the exhibitions reveal the close relationship of photography to societal and political conditions, this research investigates how this connection has been maintained and why this has been the case. To understand the connection, it is necessary to grasp what happened in Korea after the Japanese colonial era. Shifts in photographic activities after democratization are the focus of this work. The contemporary photographers that I discuss revisit Korean history prior to 1987 and reinterpret it under the changed context of democratization. This chapter provides a politico-historical background of post-liberation Korea since 1945.

---

9 4.3 Misul Akaibeu: Gieogtujaeng 30 Nyeon (4.3 미술 아카이브: 기억투쟁 30 년, The April 3rd Fine Art Archive: 30 Years in Struggles for Recollection), April 4 – May 7, 2017, the Jeju Museum of Art, Jeju.
10 Jamdeulji Anhneun Namdo (잠들지 않는 남도, Sleepless Namdo) March 31 – April 29, 2018. It took six venues including Altenative Space LOOP, Space 41, and Lee Han Yeol Memorial Museum.
11 Dasi, Bom (다시, 봄, Again, Spring), December 16, 2018 - January 31, 2019, 4.3 Peace Memorial Hall, Jeju.
While the main concern of this study is how Korean photography has responded to major events that shaped the country, the state is not necessarily assumed with fixed boundaries. Refuting an exclusive notion of Korean-ness, I also do not presume that Korean history or Korean photography is completely distinct from other histories and photographs. Basically, the introduction of photography to Korea was dependent on Korea’s relationship to other countries, in particular, its opening up to Western cultures. According to Injin Choi, who has written the only historical survey of Korean photography up to 1945, it was in the 17th century that the Joseon Dynasty had direct contact with Western cultures, including books that carried ideas of the camera obscura.\(^{12}\) It was in the late Joseon period in the 1860s that Korean envoys encountered photographs from the West in the Qing Dynasty of current-day China. Due to its closed-door policy \((\textit{Swaeguk Jeongchaek})\), Korea had very limited knowledge of photography until the country was opened to Japan, the United States, and England in the 1880s. Photography began to be introduced to Korea and developed in earnest starting from this era.\(^{13}\)

Just as post-liberation Korean history is intertwined with various international powers, Korean photography has been shaped by relentless dialogue with other photographies, and particular American, Japanese, and European models. Thus, even if this research mainly discusses photographers who were born in Korea, Korean photography is not defined as photography made by Korean photographers. Nor is it photography made in Korea, as photographs made outside the country are included as

\(^{12}\) Choi wrote that one of the envoys that Joseon sent to China every year, Jeong Du-Eon, obtained scientific books from Europe in 1631, including \textit{Wongyeongseol} (원경설), which was written by a German Jesuit who came to China as a missionary. It included information on the camera obscura. Choi Injin, \textit{Hanguk Sajinsa 1631-1945 (한국사진사 1631-1945, The History of Korean Photography 1631-1945)}, (Seoul: Noonbit, 1999), 36-37.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 55-118.
well. The reason that I concentrate on photographers of Korean ethnicity is mainly because their work immediately incorporated what was happening in and around South Korea in the political, social, and cultural domains and gave a wider picture on how Korean photography changed over time as a dialogue with society, not because their works define contemporary Korean photography in a narrow sense. Through close observations and responses to the nation’s changes, such as the modification of the political system into democracy, the expansion of foreign relations, and the change in cultural policy towards globalization, they revise the existing notion of Korean history and identity and make sharp contrasts with the photography of the past, which is connected to the era before the nation opened its door in earnest to foreign countries. The flexible boundaries that define Korean photography apply the same for the themes of each chapter. It does not and cannot encompass all that is happening in Korean photography, which is under transformation in every aspect: from subject matter to style, and from mode of production to circulation of images. This dissertation is an attempt to examine part of this fundamental shift in Korean photography through visual analysis, contextualization, and socio-political theories as well as a history of photography in general.

Historical Events that Have Shaped the History of Korea Since the 20th Century

Twentieth century Korean history began with annexation of Korea with Japan in 1910. Colonial rule ended in 1945 with the surrender of Imperial Japan to the forces of the Allies. Korea obtained independence from Japan, but the Korean peninsula was soon divided into North and South Korea along the 38th parallel of latitude. The United States
and the Soviet Union took control of the southern and northern parts of the peninsula respectively. Though the occupation was supposed to be temporary, the growing animosity between the US and the USSR and the increasing hostility in Korean domestic politics between the north and south solidified the division. In the end, the first president Syngman Rhee, an independence activist and a staunch anti-Communist, established the Republic of Korea (ROK) under the support of the US government and military forces in 1948. In the month after the inauguration of the ROK on August 15, the north also declared its own formal Korean state: The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) with Il-Sung Kim as the leader.  

After several years of confrontations, the Korean War broke out with a massive North Korean assault over the 38th parallel in the early dawn hours of June 25, 1950. The war, which was a proxy battle between the United States and the Soviet Union, lasted for three years until an armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953. The gunfire ceased, but the national division and confrontation has lasted to the present day and played a significant role in the formation of South Korea’s identity. Korean photographers, who were endeavoring to establish its own identity after the Japanese colonial era, faced a major turning point in this era. Witnessing the horror and aftermath of the war, photographers turned their cameras towards the society to document social reality close-up.

After the truce, both Koreas struggled to recover from the aftermath of the war and to establish independent nations with separate political systems. While anti-Japanism was prevalent due to the experience and memory of colonial rule, Rhee’s regime,

---

complying with the world order of the Cold War, took a pro-American stance and adopted anti-communism as a state ideology. As National Security Law (NSL), which was enacted in 1948, declared that South Korea was the only legitimate political entity in the Korean peninsula, antagonism towards North Korea was officially sanctioned. While extreme anti-communism dominated the society, South Korea shaped its essential system under the absolute influence the United States. Under this climate, post-liberation Korean culture, as well as political and economic structure, began to develop its modern identity in earnest. Photographic practices, for instance, avoided directly addressing socially relevant issues, since this could easily be associated with communism. Documentary style photography, which was popular in the US at the time, was appropriated to compose depoliticized subject matters such as the everyday lives of ordinary people in a neutralized way.

While formulating a modern identity, South Korea entered a new phase in the 1960s through several critical events. Rhee’s First Republic, which increasingly curtailed the freedom of press and was losing support from the Korean people due to corruption, faced a national upheaval because of election fraud in 1960. Rhee was accused of manipulating the results of the election of a vice-president in order to hold onto authoritarian rule. University and high school students galvanized public protests in March, and a bloody suppression followed. When the dead body of a high school student named Ju-yul Kim, who participated in the protests in southeast city of Masan, was found in the harbor with evidence of violence to his person, and the press reported his death

---

with a vivid photograph, demonstrations spread throughout the country. The April Revolution, in the end, pressed Rhee to resign from the presidency.

Following the revolution, the Second Republic was inaugurated. It adopted a parliamentary system to divert power from the office of the president, and the next president Bo-Seon Yun was elected in August 1960. However, democracy did not last long. Maj. Gen. Chung-hee Park organized and carried out a military coup on May 16, 1961 and returned Korean politics to authoritarianism. In the name of “national reconstruction,” Park established national defense and economic development as the twin pillars for his rule. To achieve these goals, nationalism, which the First Republic adopted as a state ideology, was continuously utilized as a tool to rationalize repression and exploitation of the populace and the severe limits placed on political freedom.¹⁶

The complicated conditions around Korea – the collective memory of Japanese colonialism, the reality of the Cold War, the experience of the Korean War, and the confrontation with North Korea – provided rationales to sustain the nationalist rhetoric, and they also resulted in anti-communism taking an important part in it. As the nation had to defend itself against communist invasion, the anti-communist rationale led to the development of a strong militaristic streak.¹⁷ The state-crafted Korean history was full of foreign invasions and defenses by patriotic male warriors and educated Korean citizens so as to cultivate national consciousness in this direction. As the military regime controlled people ideologically through education, the press, and so on, the Korean people were forced to internalize and to practice anti-communism and authoritarian

---

¹⁶ Robinson, Ibid., 121-145.
traditionalism. As artistic practices were under the control of government censorship, art photography continuously crafted ideology-free images and documented traditional culture that conformed with state-sanctioned narratives of a long-lasting, timeless Korean culture and identity.

The 18 years of military dictatorship ended with Park’s assassination by chief of the Korean CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) Jaegyu Kim at a private dinner on October 26, 1979. Prime Minister Kyu-hah Choi was soon elected as president. However, on December 12, 1979, right after his election, the so-called new military led by Gen. Doo-hwan Chun, head of the Army Security Command and lead investigator into Park’s assassination, carried out a bloody internal coup and seized power along with his fellow generals, including Tae-woo Roh. Facing the arrival of another military dictatorship, fierce civic resistance followed in the spring of 1980. On May 15, about 150,000 students and citizens gathered at Seoul station to protest the new military and demand political reform. General Chun and his cohorts responded to them by extending martial law, dissolving the National Assembly, closing all colleges, and prohibiting all political discussion and activities.

The short-lived “Seoul Spring” ended in 1980 with the Gwangju Uprising, a 10-day struggle that happened in the southwestern city of Gwangju. With the extension of martial law to the whole country, riot police and paratroopers occupied official buildings and brutally suppressed activists and dissident leaders. Isolated from the rest of the country, the citizenry of Gwangju fought against the military forces, resulting in hundreds
of deaths and thousands of injuries.\textsuperscript{18} The Gwangju Uprising, which solidified Chun’s complete control of the nation, also seriously undermined the legitimacy of Chun’s Fifth Republic and facilitated the ascendance of the forces of democratization in the summer of 1987.\textsuperscript{19}

The Uprising became a taboo subject under Chun’s regime since it symbolized the violent and illegitimate nature of the Fifth Republic and could jeopardize its political power. Journalistic photographs were not allowed to circulate at the time, and art photography showed an absence of representations of the uprising. Thus, when democracy arrived, the event became one of the popular subjects with which to declare the new political identity of the nation. Art photography, with its newly available freedom, not only filled the void by addressing repressed history but also responded to the process of crafting historical narratives under the new democratic government, under which discussion of political history and social issues was no longer restricted.

The prolonged military rule finally ended in 1987 with the June Democracy Movement. Chun’s refusal to discuss constitutional revision, to which he had previously agreed, expedited an explosion of protests and massive rallies. The death of a college student, Han-yeol Lee, who was hit on the back of the head by a tear gas bomb thrown by police, became a catalyst for the protests to spread nationwide. This coincided with the junta’s preparations for the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul. As Chun’s regime needed to cover up its illegitimacy and to display the nation’s economic development, national


security, and domestic peace to international organizations while hosting the games, it could not mobilize military force to suppress demonstrations, and ultimately made concessions to the protesters.\(^{20}\)

Under these conditions, the junta finally gave in to popular demand for democratization. A member of the military coup that Chun led in 1979, Tae-woo Roh was elected and succeeded to the presidency. Roh’s government was seen to be an extension of authoritarian rule: a form of so-called dictablanda (liberalized authoritarianism).\(^{21}\) On the other hand, the state started to open its doors to the world. Immediately after its inauguration, Roh’s government hosted the Olympics in 1988. The Olympics provided Korea with unprecedented contact with foreign countries and cultures. Fully utilizing the momentum obtained from the Olympic games and the international context of the end of the Cold War, Korea carried out aggressive international diplomacy, including normalizing relations with the northeast communist countries of Russia, China, and North Korea.\(^{22}\) Ordinary Korean lives were also affected as the state alleviated regulations for traveling and studying abroad. Despite limited changes in the political realm, this was a time for the nation and its people to have direct contact with foreign cultures and to situate them in the world. The increased cultural exchanges caused by globalization initiated the transformation of Korean photography in this era. Photographers who studied abroad or were exposed to more other cultures than

---


\(^{22}\) Hyeong-gi Kim, *Nambuk Gwangyueoncheonsa* (남북관계 변천사, History of How North-South Korean Relations Changed), (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2010), 141-142.
the previous generations gained broader knowledge of the medium and began to make a
break with the past. They attempted diversified stylistic languages that had not been
perceived as “photographic” in the past, including images that depicted abstract
landscapes and composed photographs.

In terms of political freedom, it was with the election of the first civilian
president, Young-sam Kim, in 1992 that Korean society went through a fundamental
change into democracy. Kim, who spent almost 30 years as a democratic activist and
oppositional leader, declared a qualitative break with the past military rule and
endeavored to reestablish a new national identity. One of the efforts made was the
symbolic act of an official reevaluation of the Gwangju Uprising as an important event
that contributed to the establishment of what he called a democratic government.23 Along
with the political system, in the post-Cold War context, Kim also adopted globalization
(segyehwa) as an official policy and vigorously pursued it to make Korea a world-class,
advanced nation.24 The government-led globalization project reached every part of the
nation. Not only did more and more people study, work, and live abroad, but also the
improved infrastructure contributed Korea to crafting a global identity. It was during this
era of massive globalization that Korean photography rapidly achieved an international
identity. Political and artistic freedom enabled photographers to cover a wider range of
subject matters, such as political conflicts, class issues, and critical assessments of
Korean history, and extensive knowledge of global photography was more available than
ever. With the support of a state that accelerated cultural exchanges and established a

23 In Sup Han, “Kwangju and Beyond: Coping with Past Atrocities in South Korea,” Human Rights Quarterly 27, no.3 (August 2005): 1005.
more advanced institutional art system, it was also in this era that Korean photography closed the distance with contemporary art that had lasted since the mid-20th century.

The liberal presidents Dae-jung Kim (1998-2003), a longtime democratic activist, and Doo-hyun Roh (2003-2008), a former human rights attorney who mainly worked for student activists, succeeded Kim. They further advanced globalization and guaranteed unprecedented liberties to Koreans. In particular, the latter two governments shared a conciliatory approach towards North Korea. Dae-jung Kim carried out what was called the Sunshine Policy and sought to build a cooperative relationship between the two Koreas. As a result, the first inter-Korean summit meeting was held in 2000 in Pyongyang, and Roh’s administration, which adopted the Peace and Prosperity Policy, followed up with a second meeting in 2007. In this era, a less-oppositional relationship between the two Koreas lasted with increased economic and cultural exchanges, such as increased humanitarian supports for North Korea, the foundation of the Kaesong Industrial Zone in the southern city of Kaesong, North Korea, and the resuming of inter-Korean reunions of families separated by the Korean War after the first reunion in 1985.25

The liberalized social climate and the tempered inter-Korea relations encouraged Korean people to look back at the country’s authoritarian past with critical eyes, and topics such as the national division, the Korean War, and North Korea were no longer taboo. Naturally, contemporary artistic practices incorporated these conditions. Not only did Korean photography deal with this tragic history and reality of the nation, some

25 Yeon-chul Kim, “Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun Jeongbu 10nyeonui Daebukgwangye (김대중, 노무현 정부 10 년의 대북관계, Relations with North Korea During Ten Years of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun Administrations),” Memory and Vision 22 (Spring 2010): 109-140.
photographers took advantage of traveling to North Korea and offered critical observations on the other Korea, expanding what Korean photography embraced in its practice.

In 2008, conservatives took back power, and the regimes of Myung-bak Lee (2008-2013) and Geun-hye Park (2014-2017), daughter of Chung-hee Park, lasted for 10 years. They took a hardline stance towards North Korea, which aggravated relations. They also suppressed societal freedom with actions such as the massive surveillance of civilians and censorship of the media, which caused them to face civil opposition and anti-government protests. When Park was impeached due to the influence peddling of people close to her in 2017, the liberals seized power as Jae-in Moon was elected as the new president. As of 2019, the two former presidents are in prison and on trial for embezzlement, bribery, and abuses of power, leaking government secrets. Interestingly, as in the 1990s, the Moon administration was similar to Dae-jung Kim and Roh in undertaking the reinvention of under-discussed historical events related to democratization and the national division and is trying to ameliorate relations with North Korea by having summit meetings and constant conversations about issues like denuclearization and closer economic cooperation.

Expansion of Korean Photography

The photographs that I analyze are interwoven with this dynamic history of Korea. For instance, photography that emerged in the post-Korean War context could not

be separated from elements such as the anti-Japanese mood prevalent in the nation, the severe anti-communist atmosphere, a strong dependence on the US, and the censorship of the people by the authoritarian state. In this situation, Korean photographers had limited choices regarding what they could depict and had limited photographic models to refer to. Therefore, they documented the everyday lives of ordinary people instead of politically-charged subject matter and used a neutralized documentary style influenced by American photography as an exemplary model. Under the strict control of culture by the state, photographic practices could not develop in diverse directions. This lasted for several decades until a major break arrived in the country.

When Korea went through the reorganization of its political system and opened its doors to the world, photographic practices took part in this change. Photographers gained more knowledge of the medium and freedom to depict what they wanted. This new era of liberation enabled them to look back at the recent past to give it renewed interpretations and position the Korean identity within a broader context. In doing so, they made a fundamental adjustment of the notion of the medium in the Korean context. The unshakable faith in the truth of a photograph that had dominated photographic practices in the past eroded, and photographic representations expanded to construct reality by fully utilizing the medium’s potential for ambiguity and contingency on context.

As the conception of what constituted Korea’s national identity was under reconsideration, the medium’s duality of documenting a physical world and its potential incapability to convey truth worked well to reveal the instability of a reality in constant flux. (Fig 0.3-5) For example, one can look to multi-media artist Chan-Kyong Park’s Sets (2000), which is a series of slide projections featuring 160 photographs taken at three
different sites. The first group of images consists of photographs of the National Film Studio in Pyongyang, North Korea, which recreated Seoul Streets for movies. The second group includes photographs of movie sets of the Joint Security Area (JSA), a 90% scale replica of Panmunjom at the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) – the de facto border between North and South Korea – in Kofic Namyangju Studio, South Korea. While the first two sets were made for movie production, the last one was designed for military use: for simulated street battle exercises in South Korean army bases.27

The film studio in Pyongyang is a recreation of cityscapes of early 20th century Seoul. The Panmunjom in Namyangju is also based off of an actual location. While these two sets provide Koreans on each side with vicarious experiences of the other Korea and evoke historical memories, they are also sites where history is repackaged and incorporated into the fictional structure of movies. On the other hand, the third set – also a fabrication – was created by soldiers for actual military training and performs as a stark reminder of the political and military realities that resulted in the proxy sets of the two Koreas. In the three sets, the real and the fake are intertwined, but the work neither clearly marks the distinction between the two nor offers concrete realities on the Korean War, inter-Korean relations, or the Cold War that caused the national division and its end.

Park’s work evokes a specific moment in contemporary Korean history. After the inauguration in 1998, Dae-jung Kim’s government endeavored to ameliorate relations with North Korea and the long-lasting anti-communism was being attenuated. As one of the outcomes of this, journalist Jongjin Im was allowed a government-sanctioned trip in 2000 during which he took the photographs at the National Film Studio in Pyongyang.

These were included in *Sets*. In 2000, the two Koreas had the first inter-summit meeting, and its impact on Korea is readily found in the facts around this work. *Sets* was included in an exhibition in 2001, called Sunshine after Kim’s Sunshine Policy, that focused on issues surrounding the two Koreas. The movie filmed here, *Joint Security Area*, assumed a non-antagonistic, friendly relationship between South and North Korean soldiers. It was released in 2000 and became a mega hit, with 1 million viewers.

As I will emphasize in this dissertation, artistic activities such as *Sets* do not merely reflect but also contribute to changes in the socio-political climate. Park’s work, in this case, both incorporated the deescalating stance in South Korea towards North Korea and invoked questions about the complicated realities that the two Koreas faced. In the changed context, this example illustrates, photography was utilized in performative way to recompose uncertain Korean histories and identities and created a generative space that provokes the viewer’s critical engagement.

Along with changes in perceptions and utilizations of the medium, art photography has gained unprecedented attention and expanded its domain within institutions of contemporary art. Colleges and universities have increasingly established departments of photography, and studio art programs have embraced the medium in their curriculum and taught theories and history of photography. Magazines and publishers

---


30 Since Sorabol Art College, which was later incorporated into Chung-Ang University in 1972, established a department of photography for the first time in 1964, more and more colleges and universities established departments of photography. As these schools produced educated photographers, their graduates took over the leadership of Korean photography from amateur photographers’ societies in the 1980s and 1990s. These
that focus on the medium highlight photographic works and encourage critiques on photography.\textsuperscript{31} Galleries, museums, and recurring exhibitions that are dedicated to photography also affirm increased interest in and financial support of the medium.\textsuperscript{32} As a recent case, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Seoul organized a large-scale survey exhibition \textit{Aju Gongjeogin Aju Sajeogin: 1989nyeon Ihu Hanglek Hyeonda Misulgwa Sajin} (Public to Private: Photography in Korean Art since 1989) that chronicled 30 years of contemporary Korean photography.\textsuperscript{33} Though it was based on a limited understanding of the medium and history of Korean photography – for instance, the title assumes a binary opposition between the “public” nature of documentary style practices of the past and photography after 1989 as the “private” expression of artists, failing to grasp the diversified directions of contemporary Korean

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{31} To name a few: there are photo magazines such as \textit{Wolgan Sajin} (월간사진, Monthly Photography), \textit{Sajin Yesul} (사진예술, Photography Art), Photonet, Photodot, and Vostok and publishers such as Noonbit, Youlhwadang, Archive Books, and IANN.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{32} In Seoul, galleries such as Ryugahoen (founded in 2010) and Trunk Gallery (founded in 2007) have steadily held photography exhibitions. The Museum of Photography established by the Hamni pharmaceutical company in Seoul in 2003 is the first museum focusing exclusively on photography. It has organized exhibitions and made publications, and its affiliated research institute, the Korea Institute of Photography and Culture, is dedicated to collecting materials on Korean photography and making documents by interviewing and arranging discussions with doyen photographers. The Goeun Museum of Photography, which is located in the southeastern city of Busan, is another museum that has focused on the medium of photography since 2007. Also, the Seoul Photo Festival (founded in 2010) and the Donggang International Photo Festival (founded in 2002) are annual events that consist of various programs on thematic exhibitions, workshops, lectures, symposiums, and so on. As well as having the primary venues of Seoul Museum of Art and Dong Gang Museum of Photography, these festivals use public buildings in Seoul and Yeongwol County in the northeast Province of Gangwon and are hosted by government bodies. The Daegu Photo Biennial, which was founded in 2006 in the southeastern city of Daegu, is another international event usually supported by state institutions such as the Ministry of Culture. These photography exhibitions prove that art photography has secured its territory with stabilized funding, organizers, visitors, and venues.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{33} In 1993, the museum changed its English name from “National Museum of Contemporary Art” to “National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art.”
\end{flushleft}
photography and the persistence of the documentary tradition in modern Korean photography – it attested to an increased interest in photography and its incorporation into contemporary art.\textsuperscript{34}

The various elements that have been involved in this development of the photographic medium range from the efforts of photographers and curators to state-led globalization initiatives. First, photographers and curators endeavored to break from the past and pave the way for new directions in photography, and to eliminate the long-lasting separation of photography from contemporary art. An exhibition, \textit{Sajin, Sae Sijwa (The New Wave of Photography, 1988)} initiated the change and experimental exhibitions followed it in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{35} Also, in this era, increasing numbers of academic programs in Korea and photographers who had studied photography abroad expedited an altered relationship between photography and contemporary art. Several exhibitions, including \textit{The New Wave of Photography, Mikseudeu Midieo: Munhwawa Salmui Haeseok Jeon (Mixed Media: Interpretation of Culture and Life, 1990)}, and three exhibitions of \textit{Hanguk Sajinui Supyeong (Horizon of Korean photography, 1991, 1992, and 1994)} facilitated this change.\textsuperscript{36} The first group exhibition of photography in 1996 at


\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Sajin Sae Sijwa (사진, 새 시대, The New Wave of Photography)}, May 18 – June 17, 1988, Walker Hill Art Center, Seoul.

the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, one of the most conservative institutions in Korea in terms of the perception of medium, was a response to the endeavors that the photographers curators made to innovate the genre. The exhibition Sajin – Saeroun Sigak (Photography – New Vision) included 20 photographers who produced straight photography that had flourished in the previous era as well as photographers such as Bohnchang Koo and Daesoo Kim who had initiated new photographic movements.\(^{37}\)

Coinciding with these efforts were overall shifts in society, represented by the inauguration of the civilian government of President Young-sam Kim in 1993. It set goals of establishing a “New Korea (\textit{Sin Hanguk})” which included globalization of Korean culture.\(^{38}\) A large-scale photography exhibition at the Seoul Arts Center in 1994, \textit{Hanguk Hyeondae Sajinui Heureum 1945-1994 (Passage of Korean Photography 1945-1994)}, emerged under this climate. This exhibition charted the development of Korean photography from the independence from Japan to the year 1994 in an effort to apprehend the identity of Korean photography and to cope with globalization.\(^{39}\) The 1993 Whitney Biennial traveled to Korea as part of a globalization project and showed Koreans how widely photography was utilized in contemporary art. This contributed to


the foundation of the Gwangju Biennial in 1995, through which the Korean dialogue between contemporary art and photography was further encouraged. These exhibitions not only provided opportunities to adopt the identity politics and multiculturalism that peaked in the 1990s in the West, but also spurred a transition in artistic productions in Korea, including in photographic practices.

With the help of international exhibitions such as the Gwangju Biennial and the increased mobility of Koreans, more and more Korean photographers encountered the global art scene. They both benefited from contemporary discourses and accelerated the globalization of Korean photography. Under these conditions, Korean photography has expanded to explore various issues around the country with diversified stylistic languages.

**Status of the Field**

Publications and exhibitions made both in and outside of Korea have guided the development of this research. Among the exhibitions held in Korea, large-scale survey exhibitions such as *The Passage of Korean Photography 1945-1994* at the Seoul Arts Center in 1994 and *Hanguk Hyeondae Sajin 60nyeon 1948–2008 (Contemporary Korean Photographs, 1948 – 2008)* at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in 2008, which reflect growing interests in photography, presented overviews of postwar Korean photography. Covering broad scopes of 50 to 60 years, catalogues published in conjunction with the exhibitions are organized in chronological order and include essays and numerous examples of photographs. While they provide historical accounts of the

---

overall development of Korean photography, they lack critical analysis of the images or thematic approaches to each time period in relation to the socio-political context of the nation. Even though they claim to deal with the entire history of photography, the essays are centered on the photography of the mid-20th century. Therefore, while discussing photographs of the 1980s and 1990s in terms of the relationship between photography and other genres of fine art, they fail to address the fundamental changes in the perception and utilization of the medium.41

A printed book called *Hanjuk Hyundae Sajinui Heureum 1980-2000 (The Passage of Contemporary Korean Photography 1980-2000)* offered a map of crucial shifts in contemporary Korean photography. A collection of articles that photo critic Dongsun Jin wrote for *Sajin Yesul* reviewed 18 photography exhibitions between 1988 and 1999. Despite the absence of a theoretical approach – probably because he wrote for a magazine not an academic journal – Jin, one of those leading the changes in the 1990s, provided various aspects of exhibitions by addressing such elements as the social, political, and cultural contexts that affected the shows, the curatorial intents, the detailed preparation processes of some exhibitions, their critical receptions, and their impacts on Korean photography.42

While in-depth research on Korean photography is overall scarce, studies on Korean photography of the mid-20th century have increased. Publications such as *Hanguk Sajingwa Rieoligeum (Korean Photography and Realism, 2002)*, *Hanguk Sajinui...*

---

42 Jin, Ibid.
Jaebalgyeon (Rediscovering Korean Photography, 2006), Hanguk Sajinui Seongujadeul (Pioneers in Korean Photography, 2007), and Hanguk Sajinui Jasaengyeok (Self-sustaining Ability of Korean Photography, 2010) deal with the photography of the 1950s and 1960s, focusing on key individual photographers. Meanwhile, journals such as AURA, which the Society of Korean Photography issues biannually, and Sajin + Munhwa (Photography + Culture), a publication of the Korea Institute of Photography, provided perspectives on the formation of postwar Korean photography. Issues they discussed included the relationship between Korean photography and the Japanese colonial era and the identity formation of post-liberation Korean photography, and a critical analysis of the myths around realism photography that had dominated Korean photography for decades. These articles became valuable sources through which to analyze realism photography.

While the above articles cover the impact of the colonial history of Japanese occupation on Korean photography, another important factor to consider is interactions between Korean and American photography. During the Korean War, Korean photographers worked with journalists from the US. Illustrated magazines such as Life

---

were brought into Korea and brought with them ideas about American photography at the time. In particular, *The Family of Man* exhibition traveled to Seoul and had considerable influence on Korean photography. A few scholars wrote about the exhibition, including BongLim Choi, who wrote an essay focused on the Western ethnocentrism behind its claim of universalism, based on solid criticisms of the exhibition in the West.\textsuperscript{46} Other writings cover the reception of the exhibition and its impact on Korean photography, which lasted for decades,\textsuperscript{47} and how its reception symbolized the process of accepting American values in the Cold War era.\textsuperscript{48}

These studies work as supporting materials for addressing the issues and problems of Korean photography in postwar society, but none of them looks closely at the socio-political climate of Korea as it intertwined with the formation of the nation’s photography. In particular, the complicated relationship of Korea to both Japan and the US and how these relationships were reflected in photographic practices were dismissed. Without visual analysis, existing studies on the subject remain general accounts, failing to create organic discussions. Also, they commonly acknowledged that the photographic model formulated in the 1950s remained dominant until the major transformation of the late 1980s, but how photography adapted itself throughout the next couple decades and how it conversed with society have rarely been addressed.


In Korea, scholarly works such as the contextualization of Korean photography into broader contemporary art or the history of photography are scarce. Critical writings on individual photographers such as *Hanuk Sazinui Peureontieo (The Frontier in Korean Photography, 2008)* and *Maehokaneun Sazin: Hanuk Hyeondaesazinui Saeroun Tamsaek (A New Exploration of Contemporary Korean Photography, 2011)* provide basic overviews of contemporary Korean photographers.49

Some essential exhibitions of contemporary photography and their publications that recollect the recent past of the nation helped shape my research. Hakgojae Gallery in Seoul presented Suntag Noh’s *Manggak Kigye (Forgetting Machines, 2012)* series, which documented the Gwangju Uprising after almost three decades. The photographs in the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue became important sources for my analysis of how Korean photography dealt with its repressed history and how documentary tradition persisted. The artist interview included in the catalogue provided background information about the project, which consists of photographs in five sub-series that the photographer made over six years. It also clarified how Noh perceived and utilized the medium of photography. Though his photographs are often understood as documentary images that problematize the social landscape around the uprising, Noh highlighted that that meaning of a photograph is always contingent on the context, and that the medium of photography has ability to manipulate and distort one’s memory.50


The exhibition *Geunarui Hullasong (Hurro Hurro, 2013)* at the Goeun Museum of Photography also dealt with issues of how to represent the Gwangju Uprising after a long time. Consisting of works by 11 photographers, including two photographic series that I discuss in Chapter 2, it contained the artistic reconstructions as well as the journalistic images that documented the event in May 1980 but were not allowed to be released at the time. Its bilingual catalogue includes essays that address the factors that affect the representation of the uprising. For instance, cultural critic Junghwan Cheon discussed shifting narratives of the uprising in relation to political climate, its position in popular culture, and its reevaluation in academia. Photo historian and critic Youngjun Lee, on the other hand, wrote about how the control of media coverage by Chun’s military regime created an impaired archive of photographs on the uprising, which also meant a fragmented truth.51

As Chapter 2 focuses on the belated representation of the Gwangju Uprising and the shifts in its narrative over time, this exhibition was a good reference for developing the outline of Chapter 2, although in-depth contextualizations of the photographs were not provided. In a similar context, *Gyeonggyeeseo (On the Line: Exhibition Commemorating 60th Anniversary of the Korean War)*, an exhibition that Ministry of National Defense organized with the Daelim Contemporary Art Museum, included works by 10 photographers who belonged to different generations. Having had different experiences and memories of the war, they showed various sides of the historic moment.52 By revisiting important moments in Korean history, these exhibitions suggest

---

various ways that photography can mediate the past and on how events like the Korean War were perceived and interpreted by photographers. I would like to further incorporate social and political contexts that affected these readings that photographers made and contextualize them into the broader history of Korea. Through that process, the close connection between history and photography as artistic production will be more clearly revealed.

Outside of Korea, a limited number of publications and exhibitions address contemporary Korean art photography. Recently, scholars such as Jung Joon Lee and Jeehey Kim have explored the close relationship between photography, memory, and history through Korean photography, embracing vernacular practices as well as art photography. For instance, one of Lee’s articles examined the relationship between photographs of the Korean War and the collective memory of the experience, focusing on the lack of iconic photographs of the war and the way that Korean photography depicted it in order to affect Koreans’ memories of the event. This writing discusses how photography contributes to the construction and sustainment of collective memory – including cross-generational memory, or post memory, which is a notion scholars such as Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer use in their work – and provides an important frame with which to analyze photography since the 1990s. Referring to these notions, I

discuss in Chapters 2 and 3 how contemporary Korean photography, after the long-lasting suppression of political and artistic freedom, revisited the past to fill a void and deconstruct a distorted history.

Numerous Korean photographers study, live, work, and show their work abroad, and they have participated in group exhibitions in foreign countries. Some group exhibitions brought Korean photographers together around ethnicity. In 2000, Bohnchang Koo, the photographer who curated The New Way of Photography in 1988, co-curated an exhibition called Contemporary Korean Photographers: A New Generation for FotoFest 2000 in Houston, Texas. As the first group exhibition of Korean photographers abroad, it presented 10 photographers who were born after the Korean War that Koo thought marked a break from the past in utilizing the medium in a different way.

Chaotic Harmony: Contemporary Korean Photography (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston 2009 and Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2010) has been the most comprehensive exhibition on the subject in the US to date. It presented 40 photographers of Korean nationality who deal with various subject matter and photographic styles, from depicting abstract Korean landscapes and porcelain wares from pre-modern Korea that were thought to represent the essence of the nation, to intensely staged images and

---

56 Among many contemporary photographers, Atta Kim had a solo exhibition with the ON-AIR Project at the International Center of Photography in New York, NY, in 2006; JeongMee Yoon showed her Pink & Blue Project at Bolinas Museum in Bolinas, CA in 2009; and Bohnchang Koo had an exhibition called Plain Beauty: Korean White Porcelain/Photographs by Bohnchang Koo at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia, PA in 2010. More recently, Seungwoo Back, Suntag Noh, and Hyoungsang Yoo participated in North Korean Perspectives, a group photography exhibition that dealt with North Korea and its representation, which took place at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, IL in 2015. The exhibition Paradox of Place: Contemporary Korean Art that opened at the Seattle Art Museum in 2015 included Suntag Noh and Yeondoo Jung’s photographs along with images from with four other Korean artists.

digitally manipulated photographs. The exhibition’s catalogue included numerous plates and essays by the curators. Anne Wilkes Tucker begins her essay with the development of Korean photography in parallel with mid-20th century Korean history and Western photographic practices. Karen Sinsheimer is more interested in the specific issue of Korean identity. While the exhibition and the catalogue offer a loose map of photography’s development, they dismiss certain critical aspects that affected the formation of Korean photography, such as how it was affected by the changing political climate.58

The most recent publication made outside the nation on the subject, Contemporary Korean Photography, edited by photo psychologist Suejin Shin, exemplifies the conditions and limits in studies of Korean photography outside the country. The 2018 publication introduces 75 Korean photographers who were active between 1986 and 2007, identified by Shin as “first-generation professionals,” with a multitude of images. From meditative landscapes to portraits and digital reconstructions of reality, the photographs address various issues in Korean society and its socio-political changes through abundant stylistic languages. While the work provides a good overview of contemporary Korean photography, its extensive scope does not carry a specific critical analysis on Korean photography and its history. 59

On the other hand, other sources raise critical questions even though they do not necessarily focus on Korean photography and art. For example, Incongruent: Contemporary Art from South Korea, published in conjunction with an exhibition under the same title, considers various conditions that formulated Korean modernity. Framing

58 Sinsheimer et al., Chaotic Harmony. 13.
the topic in terms of militarized modernity and the resistance to it, the publication presents artistic practices that revisit Korean history and reconnect incongruent elements in Korean modernity. Even though the work does not completely overlap with the scope of this study, this book laid the groundwork for analyzing photographers who reconsider Korean history and memorialize traumatic moments.60

The notion of militarized modernity that the author Young Min Moon used was borrowed from the sociologist Seungsook Moon who coined the term to describe the process of building South Korea as a modern nation. Writing from a feminist perspective, Seungsook Moon eloquently argued that authoritarian regimes adopt state nationalism and shape androcentric nations, which causes the marginalization of Korean women. In a similar vein as Moon’s “Begetting the Nation,” the book Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism included articles conveying similar strands of ideas that take into account the complicated international context of the Cold War, which involved the United States and North Korea, and Japanese colonial history, which affected the nation-building process of Korea, through the lens of gendered identity.61 These writings became theoretical foundations through which to analyze contemporary photographs that deconstruct Korean history crafted in this era, particularly its militarized, masculine nature. Furthermore, it provided grounds for interpreting Korean photographers’ interests in documenting Korean tradition in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the persistent obsession with the notion of Koreanness in the photographic practices of the late 1980s. Along with these publications, scholarly writings in the field of Korean studies worked as

60 Moon Young Min and Sumi Kang, Incongruent: Contemporary Art from South Korea (Seoul: Hyunsil Cultural Studies Press, 2006). It was published in conjunction with the exhibition under the same title at the Richard F. Brush Gallery at St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY in March 2005.
61 Kim and Choi, eds., Dangerous Women.
good references for comprehending the transformation of South Korea and its ramifications and limitations, beyond giving primary information on contemporary Korean history.

Chapter Outline

The four chapters and the epilogue of this dissertation are largely based on thematic concerns. While the first chapter covers the earlier periods between the 1950s and the 1970s/80s, the following chapters focus on more recent practices in the 1990s and 2010s. Each chapter provides in-depth discussions of the selected photographs that address the social, political, and cultural transformation of Korea. Associating realistic conditions that mediate artistic productions, they also trace the ways that the medium is perceived and utilized.

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the following chapters by introducing issues and problems latent in mid-20th century Korean photography. It explores how Korean photography developed as post-liberation Korea was under construction, going through national division, the Korean War, industrialization, and military dictatorship. This chapter discusses how postwar Korean photography was shaped in parallel with the nation-building process, and why and how the dominance of realism photography in a moderate style lasted for almost three decades without major changes. In particular, the identity formation of Korean photography is associated with the nationalistic rhetoric. Despite endeavors to overcome the legacy of Japanese imperialism and to establish a unique existence, the photography of the 1950s and 1960s closely intertwined with Japanese and American photographic practices, just as the status of Korea within the
international context of the Cold War. Vestiges of Japanese photography still persisted, though they were not openly acknowledged. American photography, on the other hand, had an outright influence and was willingly accepted as an exemplary model, along with the acceptance and impact of The Family of Man on Korean photography.

In addition, Chapter 1 explores how the repressive political climate – harsh anti-communism and a lack of political freedom – under antiauthoritarian regimes affected realism in its efforts to document the turbulent episodes that marked Korean history. As time went by, while the primary documentary style persisted, realism modified its direction to focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people and to depict apolitical subject matters. The latter part of the chapter discusses how photography participated in the reinvention of Korean tradition as the military regime crafted a timeless, continuing identity of Korea. This sort of reinvention of Korean tradition lasted until the late 1980s, this chapter argues, even as a new generation of photographers declared a break from realism photography.

Just as realism photography was part of the process of constructing an anti-Communist nation, the medium became part of the transformation of the country into a democratized and globalized nation, as the next chapters focus on one of the main concerns of Korean photographers: a political history of Korea. As photography could not fully document and analyze what was happening under the authoritarian governments, there were considerable gaps in the propagated history.

Chapter 2 focuses on photographic representations of one of the most turbulent moments in Korean history, the Gwangju Uprising of 1980. The historical narrative of this event reflects the identity reformation of Korea more than that of any other event.
The dearth of photographs that circulated around the time of the event, which both reflected the absence of concrete narratives and memories and discouraged the construction of discourses on official history, took on a new importance when the political climate changed. Efforts were made to compensate for the absence of photographs, and Chapter 2 presents various photographic series that had the Gwangju Uprising as their subject. Among several cases that recompose the event and look at the traces left in associated places and people, a good deal of this chapter is devoted to two photographic series – Hein-kuhn Oh’s *Gwangju Story* (1995) and Suntag Noh’s *Forgetting Machines* (2005-2011) – that show how contemporary Korean photography narrates the past and partakes in the construction of memory. This chapter analyzes these two series in close relation to the ever-changing political climate that caused the shifts in the narrative construction and memorialization of the uprising. What is also highlighted is the way photography is used: though the photographs seemingly inherited the documentary style of the previous generation, neutrality is utilized to cultivate uncertainty and to reveal the constructed nature of the photographs. Far from making a faithful reconstruction of the event or creating narratives of heroic struggles towards democracy, the deadpan style effectively conveys photographers’ responses to the historicizing process of the uprising and its incorporation into official history. Beyond a reflection of reality, this chapter also emphasizes that these photographs constitute historical accounts of the event.

Chapter 3 deviates further from the realism tradition in terms of photographic style as well as subject matter. Contrary to Chapter 2, which explores how photography fills the void of history, this chapter looks at how the medium of documentation nullifies
established history, deconstructs its abstract narrative, and subverts the ideological implications it carries. While it illustrates this tendency with a number of cases, specific photographers such as Joseub especially embody the transition of the country and its photography. His performative works satirize historic events such as the Korean War and the May 16 military coup as well as the people involved – or more accurately, how they were represented in official history. In particular, with the artists’ body that carries attenuated masculinity, Jo’s work dismantles the masculine ideals and nationalism embedded in Korean history and identity.

This chapter also pays attention to various formats that these photographs utilized, from the performative to portrait and the staged, which is another testament to the transformation of the nation. The deadpan style in Hein-kuhn Oh’s portraits of young soldiers who served mandatory military service terms is an appropriate way to capture their vulnerability and to demonstrate the enhanced artistic freedom in depicting the military. Similarly, staged battle simulations of toy soldiers in Seung Woo Back’s The Real World II series aptly convey the mediated reality of the Korean war and its downplayed perception among Koreans who did not directly experience the war.

Lastly, Chapter 4 turns its gaze outside the nation to look at how Korean photographers working in foreign countries. While Chapters 2 and 3 reassessed the nation’s history to redefine its identity, this chapter observes how Korean identity is challenged and negotiated in constant dialogues both with other cultures and Korean tradition. The chapter begins with an art historical context as well as the societal conditions of the 1990s in Korea and the US, to be further discussed in the later part of the chapter. The late 1980s and the early 1990s was an important era that witnessed the
flourishing of identity politics and multiculturalism. I examine how these trends in the US relate to Korean art in terms of its ramification in Korea, the socio-political climate that facilitated it, and the significance and limitations of cultural exchange.

Nikki S. Lee’s Projects series (1997-2001) is a prime example for discussing these issues. Addressing problems in and around her work, I point out the position of her work in the process of the globalization of Korean photography with similar cases of Korean artists who reside and work out of the country. While Lee’s work does not limit itself within the boundary of Korean identity, this chapter closes with the discussion of male photographer Chan-hyo Bae, who is interested in expressing the emasculated perception of Korean men in the West with dramatic statements. This chapter explores the diverse approaches to Korean identity and the stark transition that Korea and its photography went through.

As Korean photography expanded its domain, individual photographers have received critical attention internationally, and they have seldom been the subjects of a substantial art historical investigation. In avoiding to essentializing a country’s photography by disregarding its complicated history and suggesting an ahistorical, fixed identity, this project is an attempt to build a more comprehensive understanding and to contextualize Korean photography into a broader socio-political history. Photography is not merely a conveyor of a photographer’s personal expression but a product of social, political, and cultural history. Thus, an analysis of Korean photography engages the disciplines of history, politics, and sociology. Going as it did through more dramatic changes in the way the medium is utilized than other genres of art, the journey of contemporary Korean photography is closely associated with the transition of the
country. Through specific themes and photographers, though they are small parts of the many important aspects that constitute contemporary Korean photography, this dissertation endeavors to pave the way for greater reflection on Korean photography that has been in constant conversation with contemporary society.
Chapter One
The Development of Korean Photography after the Post-Japanese Colonial Era

(Fig 1.1) A little boy in a black and white photograph looks out at the viewer. The viewer’s eye is captured by the drastic contrast between the empty background and the dark silhouettes of a child among the trees. The boy becomes part of a barren landscape, which conveys no other trace of life. The title of the photograph, *Namok (Bare Trees, 1953)*, corresponds to the melancholic atmosphere of this image. With little detail, this photograph does not have specific visual information to suggest the context in which it was taken. (Fig 1.2) *Seorwonjidae (Snowfield, 1969)* is also a desolate landscape in which human figures sharply contrast with their surroundings. Three figures, possibly a mother and her two children, walk across the snow. Behind them, a snowfield unfolds, and telegraph poles recede diagonally to emphasize vastness of the field. The simplified contours of the figures minimize their presence as one of the visual elements in the composition, offering no clues as to where they are or what kind of emotions they feel. These two photographs were taken by different photographers, Eungsik Lim and Sanggyu Kang respectively, but they show a remarkable continuity in terms of subject matter and techniques. What is interesting is the 16 years of time difference between the two photographs.

These two photographs bring up important questions about Korean photography at this time. Why do they look so similar despite the gap in time? Do they represent a specific tradition in the history of Korean photography? How was this style formed, and has it been developed? How much does the seemingly enduring style have to do with the
social and political history of Korea? Is it also relevant to the discussion of more recent photographic practices?

The history of post-independence Korea is full of turbulent episodes, which critically affected the formation of the two Koreas – North and South. Though 35 years of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) ended with the culmination of the World War II, the Cold War brought about new forms of repression. The country was divided in two, which spurred the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. After three years of warfare, the two Koreas signed the Military Armistice Agreement in 1953 and redefined their territories along the Military Demarcation Line, but the conflicts continued sporadically. Meanwhile, the two Koreas went through the process of recovering from the aftermath of the war and building modern nations. In South Korea, an unprecedented democratic, industrialized nation was constructed. Traumatic political incidents such as the April Revolution (1960), the May 16 coup (1961), the Gwangju Uprising (1980), and the June Democratic Uprising (1987) represent the rise and fall of authoritative governments and military regimes and the resistance movements against them.

The photographs by Lim and Kang ostensibly do not incorporate what was happening in the Korean society in the 1950s and 60s and seem to concentrate on aesthetic qualities. However, artistic practices always cannot be separated from their society. In fact, the photographic movement that the two images represent emerged to reflect a social reality. One might ask then what affected the formation of Korean photography and its stagnation. Thus, this chapter looks into the crucial elements that contributed to the development of Korean photography and latent problems in it to lay the foundation for the following chapters. In this process, this research attempts to
demonstrate the close relationship of the nation’s photographic practices and its social, political, and cultural history – not merely reflection of these but also as an active agent in their construction.

*Saenghwalchuui Realism: The Establishment of “Korean” Photography*

What epitomizes Korean photography of the mid-20th century Korea is the documentary style *Saenghwalchuui Realism*, which translates as “everyday-life realism.” As a collective movement, a number of young photographers shared a notion of photography, presented manifesto-like writings in newspapers or magazines, and showed works at group exhibitions. The theories and practices of this movement were intertwined with postcolonial Korea, which was overcoming the trauma of the Japanese colonial era, going through the Korean War, and constructing an independent, modern nation amidst the global tension of the Cold War. Basically, Korean photographers who participated in the movement perceived the medium as a direct imprint of nature, as Lim declared that artistic value of photography lay in its ability to represent reality without deception.\(^1\) If the medium’s capacity to record reality in an objective manner was the core concept of postcolonial Korean photography, what affected this concept’s formation and development, and how is this different from the previous era?

The identity of *Saenghwalchuui Realism* is closely associated with the complicated process of identity construction in post-liberation Korea. In post-independence Korea, departing from the tragic colonial past and civil war and building an

---

unprecedented modern nation was the most imminent task. However, the tenacity of colonialism was also an undeniable reality. The vestiges of Japanese colonialism persisted, and neo-imperial domination, especially by the US hegemony, overlapped the political and social infrastructures of Japanese colonial rule. Amidst the reality of neo-colonialism, confrontations with communist North Korea, and the Cold War, authoritarian Korean governments attempted to construct a strong nation that had distinctive traditions and an essential culture.

The history of Korean photography, along with many other cultural domains, is connected to the Japanese occupation. When photography was introduced to Korea during the late Joseon Dynasty in the late 19th century and in the early Japanese colonial era, art photography did not have the chance to establish a unique identity. Commercial photography studios were the centers of photographic activities in the incipient era, and photographers were considered professionals who produced photographic portraits. Gradually, amateur photographers emerged and took over the leadership of Korean photography from commercial photographers in the 1920s. They practiced photography as a hobby and explored the genre as an art form. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of photographers studied photography in Japan, then returned to Korea and submitted works to photo contests organized by newspapers and magazines. These competitions, often called salons, took a central part in photographic practice. One of the large-scale nationwide competitions was the Jeon Joseon Sajin Salon (All Joseon Photography

---

named after Japanese contests. The most preferred style in those competitions later gained the term salon photography, and it is best described as pictorialism. The pictorialist style, exemplified by Shinzō Fukuhara’s doctrine of *Hikari to Sono Kaichō* (light and its harmony), focuses on the intrinsic qualities of the medium and dominated Japanese photography in the 1930s. Under the influence of Japanese photography, accordingly, the romanticized style of salon photography was taken up by Korean photographers.

Made with techniques such as soft-focus or pigment printing, salon photographs carried painterly effects, as *Yeongseonmosui Bom* (*Spring at Lake Yeongseon*, 1933) by Kyeok Choi demonstrates. (Fig 1.3) Willow leaves are cast in the foreground as the focal point of the image, and a group of people enjoys the scenery on a boat in the lake, creating a romantic atmosphere. (Fig 1.4-1.5) Its commonalities with Japanese photographer Fukuhara’s *Beautiful West Lake: The Light with its Harmony* (1931) and *Spring, Okutama* (1930) in terms of subject matter, composition, photographic technique, and so on clearly demonstrate the connection between photographs from the two different countries.

---

5 Park, Ibid., 42-53.
6 Shinzō Fukuhara is a pioneer of Japanese modern photography. He developed pictorialist style of photography based on his knowledge of Western pictorialist photography and later advocated a theory of “Hikari to Sono Kaichō 光と其快調 (Light and Its Harmony)” that emphasized photography’s ability to create form via light. For more details, see: Kaneko Ryūichi, “The Origins and Development of Japanese Art Photography,” in *The History of Japanese Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2003), 102-113. I also refereed to Park’s discussion on Korean photography during the Japanese colonial era. Park, Ibid.
7 *Yeongseonmosui Bom* (영선못의 봄; Spring at the Lake Yeongseon).
After liberation, photographers were anxious to overcome the legacy of Japanese photography. A number of photographic groups were founded and pursued a new trend, but their activities were still tied to the Japanese legacy. Photographers still presented their works to photo competitions and the images stuck to pictorial style salon photography as in Japanese occupation period. It was not until the beginning of the Korean War that a major break in Korean photography finally arrived. When the war broke out, photographers were hired as correspondents for military units or newspapers. Thus, photographers could no longer remain distant from society while creating aesthetic images. They were forced to the face social reality and the brutality of war. Accordingly, the prevalent Japanese photographic style waned, and a new style emerged.

Eungsik Lim exemplifies this huge transition. He created pictorialist images in the 1930s, but his photographs totally changed when the United States Information Service (USIS) hired him to record the Korean War in 1950. Formerly, he had lived and worked in the southeastern coastal city of Busan, which was not directly affected by the war. However, in Seoul, he witnessed battles and after-war scenes with dead bodies and destroyed buildings. Lim stated that this short, month-long experience in Seoul wholly changed his perception of reality and the direction of his photography, saying:

“Having arrived in Seoul, I could not take a single photograph for three days. It was because I needed more than three days to change the way to take photographs, as I used to photograph only beautiful objects. (...) Photography is not only supposed to express the beautiful, but it should address every aspect of life, regardless of being beautiful, ugly, or cruel. That was what I realized. So I termed it Saenghwalchuui

---

Reallism, and thought it was my direction as a photographer to pursue.”

Lim’s photographs of the 1930s and the 1950s display considerable differences: *Dukeul Gada (Walking Along the Embankment)*, a photograph that Lim submitted to *All Joseon Photography Salon* in 1937, carries painterly qualities. (Fig 1.6) The background is blurred with swirling clouds, and two figures carrying A-frames on the back constitute a landscape. Showing them from the back, their individual identities or emotional states do not seem to be a main concern. Instead, the overall harmony of the composition, in which every element is obscured and abstracted, completed the work.

(Fig 1.7-1.8) On the other hand, later photographs such as *Jeonjaeng Goah (A War Orphan, 1950)* and *Pinangil (Fleeing from the War, 1950)* have a more specific theme: the reality of war. They display the conditions surrounding the photographs’ subjects in a more explicit way. In *A War Orphan*, a young boy is seated on the ground in rags and bare feet, his surroundings filled with litter. Covered with dirt all over his body, he has his fingers in the mouth, and probably is eating from possibly a discarded container. While every element reflects how the war affected the boy’s life, the close-up composition makes him the focus. As he takes up most of the frame, the viewer can see his rough skin, a scab on the right knee, wrinkles on his forehead, and most of all, his gaze as it meets the camera. With these details, the photograph reveals how the war

---

affected individual lives. *Fleeing from the War* shows a family on the move, with household goods on a cart. The background is cluttered with construction materials and destroyed buildings.

As Lim’s photography changed, realism photographers proposed a paradigm shift in Korean photography to replace the pictorial style with a new concept of realism.

Photographer Wangsam Koo’s remarks clearly make this point:

“It is very lamentable that some photographers turn away from ‘realism,’ which takes the mainstream of global photography, and are still stuck in the obsolete, isolated realm of ‘salon’ photography. It lacks creativity and concentrates only on technical elements to create painterly, superficial beauty. Photographic techniques should be accompanied with photographers’ own principles and understanding of the times, history, and ideologies. However, salon pictures do not carry any resistant, active, or contemplative aspect that constitutes photographic truth. (...) The foundation of realism photography is on outdated, passive methodologies of the past, but is on the expression of reality that is in a constant dialogue with zeitgeist.”

As Koo’s words imply, it is not hard to recognize that realism photography is based on a binary thinking. Eungskik Lim also declared that Korean photography was divided into pictorialism and *Saenghwalchuui*, as was also happening in global photography. *Saenghwalchuui* defined itself by denying salon photography – and through doing so, any connections with the past – despite the similarities between

---

13 Lim, “The Present and Future of Photographic Scene: for the production of Saenghwalchuui Realism II.”
photographs of the colonial period and realism photographs.¹⁴

For Korean photographers in the post-colonial era, the most pressing issue to solve was removing the legacy of Japanese colonialism and establishing a national identity.¹⁵ Salon photography was denounced as an “art for art’s sake,” having no social or political relevance. Without any other preoccupation, according to a 19th century slogan, art should stand alone and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, pursuing pure beauty: physical, intellectual, and spiritual. An artist can choose any subject as long as it is artistry, and he/she is supposed to be detached from his/her fellow men.¹⁶

Photographers who worked in the colonial period were seen to have participated in this art for art’s sake, and for the new generation of photographers, this gave salon photography a negative connotation.

Most of all, the subject matter of salon photography was far from reflecting the nation’s immediate political and social reality. Kyebok Choi’s 1933 work demonstrates the contemplation of nature from distance. The photographer’s main concern was to create beauty of form, whether they were disinterested in the reality of average Korean people or had to keep themselves from confronting society’s harsh colonial reality. Not only was the image turned away from the society, but the photographic activities participated in the solidification of colonial rule. These amateur photographers belonged to an affluent upper class with a complicit relationship to Japan. Furthermore, by


emulating Japan’s photographic style and participating in photo contests, which were part of the cultural policy of Japan towards Korea, they contributed to the maintenance of colonial rule.\textsuperscript{17} Photographs that carried painterly qualities or were made with post-production manipulation processes that created formal beauty rather than a candid depiction were now harshly criticized as the antithesis of truth and for emulating painting and being “non-photographic.”\textsuperscript{18}

**Persistence of Japanese Influence in Post-liberation Korea**

However, Korean photography could not simply declare a break from the past and establish a disconnected identity. Traces of salon photography still remained in realism photography, as _Bare Tress_ has a fine composition and abstract qualities. Existing literature on _Saenghwalchuu_ realism cites Japanese realism of the 1950s and its advocate Ken Domon as important references.\textsuperscript{19} PyungJong Park quoted photographer Hyungrok Lee, who differentiated their “new” realism from Japanese realism. Park continues that, due to its weak theoretical foundation, the way that Korean realism differs from its Japanese counterpart is not obvious.\textsuperscript{20} Photo historian Juseok Park added that


\textsuperscript{18} For instance, Myeongdong Lee argued that “to establish the unique aesthetic of photography, it is important to respect and to adhere to the medium’s means of expression,” and harshly criticized some works submitted to the National Art Exhibition of the Republic of Korea that added colorful painterly touches on black and white photography for imitating painting. “Sajineun Sajinieoya Handa(사진은 사진이어야 한다, Photography should be photography),” _Photography_ (March-April 1967). Reprinted in Myeongdong Lee, _Photography Should Be photography_ (Seoul: Sajinyesula, 1999), 32-33.


\textsuperscript{20} Park, Ibid., 99.
Saenghwalchuui realism was another subordination to Japanese photography. He compares Domon’s slogans, which emphasized “the direct connection between the camera and the subject, the selection of realistic subject, and the absolute pure snapshot, absolutely unstaged,” with what Korean photographers declared to constitute photography,\(^{21}\) and it is hard to deny the similarities between the two.

As Lim did, many of the photographers of this generation studied photography in Japan, and Japanese photo magazines such as Asahi Camera were major references for Korean photographers. Thus, they were familiar with the country’s practices.\(^{22}\) As the concept of realism photography was widespread among photographers before the Korean War, and it was not until after the war when Lim coined the term, it can be inferred that the shadow of Japanese photography on its Korean counterpart still existed after the war.\(^{23}\) However, I suggest that anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea caused Korean photographers to downplay the continuing influence of Japanese photography and claim a distinctive identity. Realism photographer Sukje Lim had the first solo exhibition of photography in the postcolonial Korea. Regarding this exhibition, Taewoong Lee, the director of a leftist organization to which Lim belonged called The Alliance of Joseon Photography, declared:

“Since the independence of the nation, photographers have enthusiastically aspired to


open a new direction in photography. This is because their conscience as an artist awakened them to reject the benighted definition of photographic art, which is the vestige of Japanese colonialism, and to discover a new genre of photography that reflects authentic artistic spirit of our nation.\textsuperscript{24}

As is clear from Lee’s words, Korean realism photography was considered the expression of a unique Korean quality. Anti-Japanese sentiments caused photographers to emphasize that they were no longer tied to Japanese influence as they had been in the colonial era, and to underestimate their association with Japanese realism to claim a unique identity.

Photo historian BongLim Choi’s deconstruction of the myths around \textit{Saenghwalchuui} realism supports this point. Though his article does not mention Japanese photography, it refutes the widespread assumption that Eungsik Lim turned his experience of the war into a unique photographic theory and photographic movement. According to Choi, the conversion from pictorialism to straight photography that Korean photographers went through was not unprecedented in the history of Western photography. He quoted the photography historian Injin Choi, who claimed the originality of the movement and affiliated it with other photographic practices at the same time, that “the fundamental concept of \textit{Saenghwalchuui} photography is close to complicated theories of reportage and documentary photography, and it is also related to realism photography in terms of comprehensive photo-theories.”\textsuperscript{25} Thus, Choi argued,
Saenghwalchuui realism was one of the various trends of realism photography, and Korean realism photography is better contextualized in the history of photography in general.\textsuperscript{26} Despite the rhetoric of anti-Japanism, its connection to Japanese photography of the 1950s is undeniable.

Another reason for Korean photographers to reject the association with Japanese photography was its alleged conveyance of communist ideology. This is related to the neutralizing prefix Saenghwalchuui. While claiming to document social reality in a candid manner, Korean photographers avoided any involvement with communism. Lim’s remark in 1955 sums up what Korean photography was pursuing at the time.

“To keep up with global photographic trends, it is natural to explore ‘realism’ photography. However, when taking motifs from social issues, photographers should be very cautious. I would also like to emphasize that, in the national perspective, it should be prohibited to uncritically emulate so-called socialist realism, which is dominant in Japan these days.”\textsuperscript{27}

Juseok Park confirms Lim’s remark that the terms and format of Japan-oriented realism photography had affected Korean photography’s expressions of experiences of the war, and articulates ideological implications embedded in Japanese realism:

“Realism photography was derived from the socialist realism that Japanese communists steered before the World War II. These communists used photographs as propaganda against the militarism and expansionism of 1930s Japan, which was called socialist realism. The Japanese government suppressed its activities during the war, so photographic practices were reinstated after the war in a politically moderate mode.

\textsuperscript{26} Choi, Ibid. 2-6.

\textsuperscript{27} “세계적 사진 조류와 호흡을 갈이기 위하여 리얼리즘 사진을 탐구하는 것은 당연한 일이기는 하나 사회적 모티프를 취할 경우 그 선택에 신중을 기해야 할 것은 물론이다. 근자 일본에서 성황을 보이고 있는 소위 사회주의 리얼리즘 사진은 민족적인 건지에서 무비판적인 그의 모방을 특히 삼가야 할 것임으로 해서 이에 참고로 부언을 해둔다.” Eungsik Lim, “Sasiljeong Subeobui Yuhaeng (사실적 수법의 유행, Realism Trend in Photography),” Chosun Ilbo, November 16, 1955.
Ken Domon led realism photography, which represented the photography of postwar Japan.\textsuperscript{28}

Thus, it can be understood that though the impact of Japanese photography at the time on Korean photography was substantial, it carried communist ideas, so Korean photographers were cautious about being associated with Japanese photography. Besides the anti-Japanese sentiment that prevailed in post-liberation Korea, there was also anti-communism dominated the entire country and a lack of profound understanding of the Japanese realism of the 1950s. All of these factors help to explain the stance towards Japanese realism. All these elements led to Korean photographers assigning a direct affiliation with communism to Japanese realism and denying the correlation between Korean and Japanese photography. This was necessary to assure photography’s position in anti-communist South Korea.

The Republic of Korea, which was established in 1948, adopted strong anti-communism as a governing ideology. The first president, Syng-man Rhee, who studied in the US for a long time, was an extreme anti-communist. His regime (1948-1960) enacted the National Security Law (NSL), which defined communism and the recognition of North Korea as a political entity illegal, in 1948 to protect the county from the threat of North Korea.\textsuperscript{29} The anti-communism even intensified with the Korean War, so as to

\textsuperscript{28} “리얼리즘 사진이란 말은 이차세계대전 전 일본 사회주의자들의 사회주의 리얼리즘에서 유래되었다. 사회주의자들은 사진을 1930 년대 일본의 군국주의와 팽창주의에 반대하는 선천산업용 매체로 사용하면서 이를 사회주의 리얼리즘 사진이라고 불렀다. 그러나 전쟁 기간 동안 일본 정부의 대대적인 탄압을 받자 활동을 중지하고 잠복해 있다가, 전쟁 후에 이데올로기적 성향을 완화한 형태로 다시 부활되었다. 일본에서 도움 졌던 주요한 리얼리즘 사진은 전후 일본 사진계의 대표적인 사진 방법론이 되었다.” Park, “A Critical Study of Realism Photography of the 1950s,” 12.

frame whoever questioned it as a pro-North Korea sympathizer and harshly punish them. Making any critical comments on society also meant risking being accused of defending communism. First made as a temporary measure, the NSL had been reformed and strengthened over time, and the authoritative governments have used it as a tool to control the populace and to oppress opposition to the government.\(^\text{30}\)

The military regime (1961-1979) that the third president Chung-hee Park led after the May 16 coup (1961) also utilized anti-communism as a tool to legitimize its rule and to suppress resistance.\(^\text{31}\)

The antagonistic relations between the two Korea did not allow artists to gain information about the culture of the opposite side.\(^\text{32}\)

The South Korean government censored cultural products and punished anything implying communism. Under this strict social climate, South Korean photographers, who were familiar with the socialist realism that had spread to Korea since the occupation period, turned their cameras to ordinary people and their everyday lives to emphasize their apolitical stances. Nevertheless, realism was often interpreted as social realism or socialist realism, which was used interchangeably.

The term *Saenghwalchuui* was added to protect photographers from communist accusation. As Myung-shim Yuk mentioned, “At the time, people’s general conception of


\(^{31}\) For example, one of the justifying reasons for the Yushin constitution – the fourth republic – that Pak announced in 1972 was to ameliorate the rising military tensions caused by North Korean military provocations, though it was actually to allow him life-long presidency.

\(^{32}\) Cultural exchanges increased marginally around the time when South Korea held the 1988 Summer Olympics. The first official cultural exchange between the two Koreas is known to be the exhibition *Nambuk Koria Seohwaen* 남북 코리아 서화전 [Paintings from North and South Korea] in Beijing, China, in 1991, followed by a number of exhibitions in South and North Korea, Japan, and the US: *Nambukahn Yesul Eotteoke Byeonhwaeh ages Misureul Jungsimeuro (남북한 예술 어떻게 변화했나? 미술을 중심으로, How have arts changed in South and North Korea?)* (Seoul: Institute for Unification Education, 2005), 62.
realism was social realism. To avoid ideological misunderstandings in the agitated era of the Korean War, people used the term Saenghwalchuui photos,” and the depoliticized version took the lead of the realism movement. Another realism photographer, Sukje Lim, clearly proves the identity formation of Korean realism. (Fig 1.9) His photographs of post-liberation Korea, documenting the energetic lives of the working class – laborers, miners, and peasant farmers – are considered to mark the beginning of realism photography. However, due to the subject matter that suggests an issue of class and the photographer’s positive portrayal of the working class, Lim’s photographs were criticized for advocating communism. Soon, it was isolated from Saenghwalchuui realism, which is represented by a photographers’ collective, Shinseon-Hwae.

How much was Japanese photography associated with communism? What was the reception of Japanese realism to Korean photography? Though Ken Domon represents Japanese realism after the World War II, I argue, Korean realism photography was closest to his specific version of realism out of the various directions of Japanese realism photography. Postwar photo-realism in Japan was far from conveying specific ideological connotations. In “Power Made Visible: Photography and Postwar Japan’s Elusive Reality,” historian Julia Adeney Thomas argued that Japanese realism was not ideologically coherent. According to Thomas, the post-war society was in flux with an elusive reality, and photographers participated in constituting societal norms in various

---

33 Yuk, Ibid., 12.
34 Scholars commonly point out the importance of Sukje Lim’s solo exhibition in 1948 in that it showed the break of Korean photography from the colonial period: Juseok Park, “1950nyeondae Hanguk Sajingwa Ingangajokjeon (1950 년대 한국사진과 인간가족전, Korean Photography in the 1950s and The Family of Man),” in Hanguk Geundaemisulsahak 14 (2005): 47-49, Choi, “Rethinking Eungsik Lim’s Saenghwalchuui Photography,” 3.
35 In many writings, social realism is used interchangeably with socialist realism. This is mainly due to strict anti-communism, under which anything about society was framed as communist thinking. There is also an issue of translating “social realism” into “socialist realism.”
ways rather than merely reflecting existing reality.

Comparing his work with two photographers – Tanaka Masao, with left-wing sympathies, and Watanabe Kosho, with bourgeois values – Thomas stressed the political and sociological aspects of Domon’s reality: what she described as a form of “right-wing populism.” His reality entailed emotional truth, remained within aesthetic conventions, and carried paternalistic and nationalistic values. As she put it: “this populism is with a compassion directed at people whose own capacity for agency and anger has been stripped from them, making them merely pitiable objects before the camera.”36 Her critique of Domon’s conservatism is consistent with his participation in pro-government wartime propaganda such as the publication Nippon and the Society for the Promotion of International Cultural Relations,37 and his continued documentation of traditional arts since the 1930s to craft an essential cultural identity of the nation.

This pro-government position that Domon took is reflected in the series Hiroshima (1957), which represents his postwar realism photography. Documenting the effects of the atomic bomb, the book Hiroshima juxtaposes images with sentimentalism and objective documentation. (Fig 1.10) A family portrait from this series, Mr. and Mrs. Kotani: Two Who Have Suffered from The Bomb, presents the suffering of ordinary people in Mr. Kotani’s deformed skin and face. At the same time, the laughter of the family encourages the viewer to sympathize with these innocent people and to see an optimistic vision of the country, symbolized by the presence of the baby. (Fig 1.11)

37 Not only did he start to work for Nippon, an international cultural propaganda publication, in 1935, he also became a photographer for the national propaganda organization Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai (the Society for the Promotion of International Cultural Relations) in 1939.
Alongside this, Domon arranged neutral but shocking documentary images, such as *Hands of Hibakusha Kikkawa Kiyoshi*, a close-up image of impaired hands, giving the entire series an impression of objective truth. With the dynamic composition of the book, *Hiroshima* contributes to the collective victimization of Japan and the construction of a national identity of postwar Japan.\(^38\) As those images demonstrate, Domon’s realism was far from carrying communist ideology, but rather served a right-wing nationalism on the opposite side of socialist ideas.

Even if the photographers claimed to keep distance from it, Korean realism photography of the 1950s had a close relationship with post-war Japanese realism photography. In particular, Domon’s moderate style suited Korean photographers who needed to adjust to the anti-communist society. From the photographic methodologies, to the choice of depoliticized subject matter, aesthetic quality, and photographic subjectivity – the adoption of “pitiable objects before the camera,”\(^39\) as subjects – there were many commonalities between the two.

In terms of basic principles, Domon’s dicta of “the absolute snapshot, absolutely unstaged,”\(^40\) overlaps with Korean photographers accentuating that photographs should directly record the subjects without any intervention.\(^41\) (Fig 1.12-1.13) Created with these methods, Domon’s image from *The Children of Chikuhō* project (1960) and Chung Bumtai’s – a founding member of *Shinseon-Hwae* – photograph taken in 1955 confirm


\(^{39}\) Thomas, Ibid., 387.

\(^{40}\) Ken Domon, “Rearizumu Sashin to Saron Pikuchua (Realism photography and salon pictures),” *Camera* 46, no.4 (1953): 185-69; “Rearizumu Wa Shizenshigi De Was Nai (Realism in no naturalism),” *Camera* 46, no.6 (1953): 174-77. quoted in Thomas, Ibid., 386.

\(^{41}\) Park, “Korean Photography in the 1950s and The Family of Man,” 52-53.
these points with the way these two photographers picked and depicted subjects. For the series, Domon documented the destitute children of a coal-mining town to address the realities of society, and Chung’s image was also meant to reflect life in the postwar Korea. Both of them took a group of children, whose outfits are far from affluent looking: some of them are ragged or too big. Children in Chung’s images line up, holding pots to get free milk.

The children’s impoverished harsh life after the war – supposedly the theme of the photographs – is offset by the children’s playfulness and untainted smiles. In both photographs, the photographers deal with the photographed as objects to be looked at, deprived of power and too naïve to confront the photographer or the social condition. The viewer is encouraged to be compassionate to the benign children rather than being critical of the reality that they face. From the way the photographer depicted his subjects, the helpless but optimistic children in Chung’s image could be read as a collective victimization of the country, just as Domon’s Hiroshima photographs. In the case of Korea, the nation was ruined due to communist attacks and still suffering from the aftermath of the war. Despite the poverty, the photograph shows, the reality is not entirely pessimistic. Suggesting the hope that the innocent subjects disclose unintentionally, the photograph deals with social reality in a detoured manner.

As discussed so far, realism photography was largely indebted to the postwar Japanese photography of the 1950s, as much as the photography of the colonial period was under Japanese influence. Straight photographs that depicted apolitical sides of society were particular references, since it was an appropriate approach for the

---

photographers to adopt in a strong anti-communist nation. Despite the moderate style, however, due to the collective memory of colonialism and sensitivity to communism, the continuing influence of Japan to Korean photography was not openly discussed. On the other hand, when it comes to the connection with the American model, there is a totally different narrative that involves the political and cultural authority of the US in Korea. As in the discussion of the association with Japanese photography, this also has to do with the social and political conditions of Korea.

The Rule of American Order in South Korea and the Formation of Korean Photography: The Family of Man in Seoul

When World War II ended and Korea obtained independence in 1945, the United States established a military government in the Southern part of Korea below the 38th parallel. Its rule ended with the foundation of Republic of Korea in 1948, but continuing US hegemony towards South Korea was absolute to the extent that it was said that informal American rule replaced formal Japanese rule. The Syng-man Rhee government heavily relied on the exclusive support of the United States to consolidate its ruling system and introduced Western-style democracy. The subordinate relationship deepened with the Korean War, which was perceived as a proxy conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. After the truce, both Koreas underwent serious identity crises;

they were both in the process of recovering from the ruins of the war and constructing unprecedented modern nations.

In South Korea, through political alliance, the US tried to secure its hegemony against the communist enemies. As Sang-Dawn Lee pointed out, the presence of the US was omnipresent from the most basic level of providing material aid to the advanced level of shaping the country’s political and social future.46 Gradually, most Koreans thought of everything related to the US as something good, free, and desirable, and internalized US values.47

When the US was providing a new perspective to rebuild Korean society, its impact reached the realm of art as well. In particular, the United States Information Service, which was established in Korea in 1947, developed massive scale of propaganda in the cultural domain – printed materials such as newspaper and magazines, documentaries, films, and radio programs that dealt with American culture and customs, and events such as English-teaching lectures, music concerts, and art exhibitions – to promote American values and the superiority of democracy. The core of the program included spreading anti-communist ideas, isolating Korea from communism, and eventually winning at psychological warfare against communism.48 Its program also focused on displaying America’s affluence and advanced technological culture. The propaganda program evoked Koreans’ admiration and built up a positive image of

America. The propaganda worked effectively throughout the process of modernization, and Western culture started to permeate Korea society and the everyday life of the people.49

The effectiveness of the propaganda can be seen through the reception of Abstract Expressionism in Korea. Basically, it worked on a global level as part of the Cold War strategy. As John J. Curly pointed out, the Cold War was fought at the level of ideology and mass media representation rather than direct military confrontations.50 Borrowing from Marshall McLuhan, it was “an electric battle of information and images,”51 and fine art was a useful tool for promoting cultural ideology. As Serge Guilbaut wrote about the political and cultural implications of the successes of Abstract Expressionism after the second World War, the role of the cultural center of the West was passed on to New York City from Paris. In the new political situation that accompanied the Cold War, America was coming more and more to be seen as the symbol of Western culture.

At the center of shift was Abstract Expressionism. The American art world gave Abstract Expressionism international status, inserting it into dialogue with the modernist tradition and promoting it as avant-garde art that maintained a sense of social “commitment.” Besides, according to Guilbaut, there was ideological support from the United States. Based on the agreement that art would have an important role to play in the new America, a new form that was both abstract and expressionist, liberated and liberating, served the ideology of a new liberalism that avoided extremes of both left and

49 Yim, Ibid., 39.
right. The sense of “political apoliticism” was an effective tool in the politics of the Cold War. ⁵²

Abstract Expressionism was one of the most effective political weapons of the Cold War. Its abstract form effectively distinguished itself from the socialist realism that represented the art of the Soviet Union, and epitomized American values of freedom and individualism. Abstract American painting spread throughout the world with the first retrospective exhibition of Jackson Pollock at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1956 and its international tour. In the post-World War context, Pollock’s painting was championed as “a state of absolute freedom,” ⁵³ and as the culmination of and victory over European modern traditions. ⁵⁴ In spreading the movement as an official patron of art, MoMA performed a crucial role, keeping a close relationship with the United States governmental bodies, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and supporting national policies. ⁵⁵

Abstract Expressionism arrived in South Korea through the touring of American exhibitions and through magazines such as Life, Time, Art in America, and Art News. ⁵⁶ These quickly affected Korean painters. The huge canvases and seemingly spontaneous application of paint appealed them as the ultimate modern form with so much freedom in it: it was the sign of anti-communism, America, and anti-colonialism, standing in

---

⁵⁴ Curly, Ibid., Location 4931. Kindle.
opposition to the realistic Japanese colored painting and socialist realism represented in Stalin and Il Seong Kim’s portraits.\(^{57}\) Accepting the notion of abstraction as a universal language, with which one could easily communicate ideas and emotions, Korean painting fully assimilated into the American style and its propagandistic discourse, and furthermore, reproduced it. “Abstract” meant the “modern” ideal that South Korea longed to achieve, and artists like Seo-bo Park and the art group *Hyeondae Mihyeop* (the Modern Art Association) that represented them produced paintings in this style, leading Korean painting.\(^{58}\)

A similar process happened in the domain of photography, and it affected the identity formation of Korean photography for the next three decades. Defining realism photography, Korean photographers adopted frames of earlier Western photography, and at the center was American model. Basically, photojournalism was openly acknowledged as an archetype to go after to capture society in a candid manner, and Henri Cartier-Bresson was particularly acknowledged as an inspiration.\(^{59}\) His key notion of photography capturing “the decisive moment,” is reiterated by Wangsam Koo, who argued that realism photography caught the decisive moment by snap shooting without staging, as Cartier-Bresson also mentioned.\(^{60}\) (Fig 1.14) Cartier-Bresson’s influence is traced in actual images as well, such as a Bumtai Chung’s photograph, published in the newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* in 1961. Chung captured a moment when a mother and her child were holding each other right after a trial at the Seoul Gyeonggi Military High Court and

---


\(^{58}\) Kwang-su Oh, ed., *Hanguk Chusanmisul 40nyeon* (한국 추상미술 40년) 40 Years of Korean Abstract Art (Seoul: Jaewon, 1997).

\(^{59}\) Park, “Self-sustaining ability of Korean Photography.”

titled it “Gyeoljeongjeok Sungan (The Decisive Moment).” (Fig 1.15-1.16) Hyungrok Lee’s Jintanggi, Sokye-dong (Muddy Street, Sokye-dong, 1954) instantly reminds one of Cartier-Bresson’s iconic photograph, Behind the Gare St. Lazare (1932). Similar to Cartier-Bresson’s image, the main figure that is in the process of crossing the pool of water on stepping-stones is reflected on the water, enhancing the lively ambience of the image.

The main opportunity for the influx of photojournalism was the Korean War. The war urged a transition in Korean photography and photojournalism to provide a new paradigm to document the tragic history. Within the first three months of the war, 270 correspondents from 19 countries arrived in Korea, including and 11 photographers from Life magazine. The Life photographers introduced photojournalism to Korean photographers, and illustrated magazines became more accessible around the war. Eungsik Lim acknowledged his encounter with a photographer from Life, Hank Walker, who came to document to the Korean War, as an important moment that changed his oeuvre. Photographer Hanyong Kim recalled in an interview that magazines such as Time and Life were important sources for photographers and for those who worked in press organizations. From Life, he studied the layout and arrangement of photographs as well the images. Another advocator of realism, Myungdong Lee also declared, “the

---

61 Sandeen, Ibid., 32-33.
essential quality of the art of photography lies in its journalistic function” and “photography will be able to survive only within the boundary of photojournalism.”

What Korean photographers prioritized was the medium’s documentary function to convey social reality, so realism photography adopted the style of the journalistic images.

The dominant references for Korean photographers were documentary-style photographs from the US. While Japanese photography was renounced due to the colonial history, the reception of American photography was totally different. The Family of Man that traveled to Seoul, Korea in 1957 is a prime example to discuss it. From uncritical applause to commercial success and the impact on Korean photography thereafter, its reception reflects the dependent relationship of Korea on the US. Another factor to consider about The Family of Man’s reception and overall impact on Korean photography was the Cold War context, based on which the exhibition organized, modified, and traveled. The Cold War was the exact reality of South Korea, and even defined the identity of the nation. The photographic domain was not an exception. As a Cold War propaganda program, The Family of Man had more influence than any other single cultural event. When it traveled to South Korea, the artistic activities of which were controlled by repressive rule, it became a crucial standard for realism photography for decades until a major break in Korean history arrived.

If realism photography took after documentary style images as in the exhibition, what was the understanding of documentary photography in Korean photography? Can the term realism photography be used interchangeably with documentary photography to

---

discuss Korean photography? If not, what is the reason for that? Additionally, while the photographers prioritized the function of documentation of the medium and denounced pictorialism for its social irrelevance, what was the relationship of documentary photography to art photography?

Consisting of 503 photographs chosen from 2 million submissions from 68 countries by 273 photographers, The Family of Man traveled to more than 100 countries for seven years. Two years after its opening at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, it traveled to Seoul, South Korea (April 3 – 28, extended to May 5, 1957). The exhibition was extended one more week to accommodate the huge number of visitors – a total of 420,000 people. The Seoul exhibition, the first photography exhibition at the museum, involved public authorities to make a huge impact the formation of realism photography.

Though it is commonly known that Eungsik Lim invited the exhibition to Seoul, the American Embassy accepted the offer on the condition of government agencies taking up the project. In the end, the USIS – the agency of cultural propaganda – organized the exhibition, and the Korean bodies of the Ministry of Culture and Education, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Association of Photographers cosponsored it. The exhibition venue was not a private museum but the Gyeongbok Palace Museum, which served as a national museum at the time. These conditions reveal that the exhibition was handled

---


carefully on the national level and that its cultural importance was officially recognized.

Just as Abstract Expressionism represented absolute freedom with its nonfigurative language, *The Family of Man* promoted the propagandistic Cold War ideology. In fulfilling this ideology, photography’s realistic nature made the medium go through extra stages of abstraction to obtain the same goal of universality. Edward Steichen, the director of the Department of Photography at the MoMA, curated the exhibition with the utopian ambition to create “a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life, as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.”68 In achieving this abstract goal, he relied on the assumption that photography was “the only universal language we have, the only one requiring no translation.”69

In fact, the myth that the exhibition depended on was not unprecedented. In its formative era, it was celebrated as “the first universal language addressing all who possess vision.”70 August Sander’s statement on photography makes the same assertion. He described it as the most comprehensible language that was “instantly and immediately perceptible.”71 Clear imagery from mass media and the myth of photography as the conveyor of truthful information supported the exhibition in communicating with great masses of people. As Elizabeth Edwards mentions, photography can freeze a moment, enabling it to become “a metaphor of power with the ability to appropriate and

---

decontextualize time and space.” This notion endows the medium with authority to stand for a wider truth in an isolated moment in history. The evidentiary power of the medium, therefore, gives it a chance to construct an objective-looking representational system.

The exhibition design furthered the neutralizing effect and suppressed various voices and different contexts that could affect the meaning of the show. With 34 sections, it fully concentrated on a unitary theme: the universality of humanity. Each section was assigned to themes such as childbirth, mothers and children, labor, youth, and death, to which anyone could relate. Despite racial, national, and cultural differences, the exhibition stressed, everyone shares the same experiences in the private dimension. There existed no distinctive political subjectivity which might cause conflicts and deconstruction. Only man with an identical “nature” remained.

(Fig 1.17) The photographs, cropped and shorn of their original titles and dates of creation, were displayed in various sizes and formats with wall texts, like a photo-essay being transposed from magazine page to museum wall. In the setting of an illustrated magazine or newspaper, the three-dimensional display maximized the unifying effect. The exhibition designer and curator regulated the entire structure and made visitors move through the images that were hung from the walls, poles, floors, and ceilings, and dangling from wires overhead to catch the beholder’s eyes with a dynamic visual rhythm. The walls included quotes from the Bible, Navajo Indian lore, and writings by poets and

---

philosophers, additionally fixing the meanings of the photographs into a specific idea. Thus, not only did the visitors understand the narrative, they empathized with the sentimental images and blended or merged into the surroundings.

All of these strategies were intended to create a utopian vision in which all differences, histories, and conflicts could be transcended, and everyone could communicate essential emotions with each other. This ideology is based on classic humanism, arguing “in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins, one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature.”

When multiple images and texts are juxtaposed, meaning derives from the relationships between multiple pictures and accompanying texts. Since the exhibition emphasized the formal similarities of the photographs in terms of their subject matter, the photographs produced a new meaning independent from their initial contexts. Blake Stimson explained that the exhibition produced “photography representing photography itself.” Relying on its systematized, autonomous format, the exhibition presented optimistic and homogenizing impulses in a supposedly unbiased way, and differences between individual images and different contexts behind them were overshadowed by the powerful message.

According to Allan Sekula, the established myth of photographic truth dismisses the agency of the human operator that dominates the image-making process. He writes, despite its “natural” appearance, photography is not a universal and independent language

75 Barthes, Ibid., 101.
or sign system, but is associated with larger cultural, political, and economic powers. In Sekula’s terms, behind their ostensible neutrality, the photographs in *The Family of Man* carried ideological implications that were blanketed under the exhibition’s strategic construction of neutrality.

In fact, the exhibition was based on President Eisenhower’s policy of “propaganda without a propaganda tone,” and was promoted as “an emblem of the United States and the nation itself as a model for the globe.” Behind the propaganda of American imperialism was of course the Cold War ideology. Sekula indicates that the exhibition was “a careful Cold War effort to bring about the ideological alignment of the neocolonial peripheries with the imperial center, and American culture was being promoted as more universal than that of the Soviet Union.” The MoMA, which carried out wartime cultural missions for Nelson Rockefeller’s Office of Inter-American Affairs, continued to participate in the cultural Cold War. Along with its support of Abstract Expressionism, photographs in its exhibitions packaged the United States as the imperial center of economic prowess and social progress.

As this exhibition traveled abroad, more cultural and political subjectivities were involved to magnify the propaganda effect. The United States Information Agency funded, organized, and refashioned Steichen’s work to fit the structure of

---

79 Turner, Ibid., 75.
internationalized Americanism for each exhibition site.\textsuperscript{82} For instance, when the
exhibition traveled to Berlin, Germany, another divided country and America’s strategic
ally against the Soviet Union, it was further adapted to take an apolitical stance. German
photographers’ images mostly displayed children playing happily and peoples’ everyday
lives. They were sentimental of the prewar period, optimistic images depicting Germans
as strong, so that visitors from both the East and the West did not have to encounter the
ideological conflicts that caused the division of the country. The absence of direct
Holocaust issues was another effective strategy of USIA propaganda to unburden their
former enemy’s crime and to deny the possible responsibility of Western humanism.\textsuperscript{83}

(Fig 1.18-1.19) The Seoul exhibition eliminated two out of the six photographs
taken in Korea by Margaret Bourke-White.\textsuperscript{84} These are known to depict the subjugation
of partisans – a South Korean term for leftist guerrillas – during the Korean War: in one
photograph, a woman wails next to a coffin, and another one holds her arm. They seem to
be a mourning wife and mother of the dead. The other photograph depicts a man bowing
in front of a memorial ceremony table. Though they do not directly portray the tragic
incident that caused the deaths, it is likely they would evoke in Korean viewers a
particular history or ideological differences coexisting in the peninsula. By removing
them, the exhibition dissociated itself from a specific region, time, or history onto which
Korean viewers could project personal experiences and historical memories and
maintained the tone of universality.

(Fig 1.20-1.21) Two other images included were also taken in the context of the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} Sandeen, “The Family of Man on the Move,” in \textit{Picturing an Exhibition}, 98.
\item \textsuperscript{83} James, “A Post-Fascist Family of Man,” in \textit{Common Ground}, 63-68.
\item \textsuperscript{84} “Activities and Critical Discourses of Photographic Scene in the 1950s and 1960s,” 109.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Korean War, but neither of them depicts exact battle scenes or aftermath: David Douglas Duncan captured a Marine captain in a battlefield realizing that his company had run out of ammunition. For the exhibition, it was cut to show only the captain’s face, and was juxtaposed with other faces in a 3-by-3-grid format. From African to Asian, a child to an old man, the grid shows various forms of humanity, making the image a portrait of a young soldier. In the other image, Al Chang’s photograph shows an infantryman who is being comforted by his colleague over the death of another soldier. The urgency of the war was attenuated not only by the sentimental mood but also by the arrangement of the photos with other images of mourning people.

In this way, the exhibition heightened its neutrality even more, and presented an apolitical vision to postwar South Korea. Just as abstract painting did, the universalizing view of *The Family of Man* became an effective tool to build the nation’s photographic culture, proving the propaganda effective. The process of constructing a new national identity required the amnesia of Korea’s recent traumatic histories and memories since the Japanese occupation, and required a whole new frame with which to identify. As everything related to the US was thought to be good and desirable, the exhibition was a great chance for Korean photographers to appropriate the authority of the more advanced US and to insert themselves into the American order. Thus, Korean photography not only accepted a utopian but homogenizing humanism, but also internalized and produced their own version of an ideology-free world.

The construction of an ideology-free world in Korean photography is also deeply

---

85 Shin, Ibid., 368.
86 A photographic portrait of the president Rhee was installed at the entrance of the exhibition. I read this as the president inserting himself into the system of American power that the exhibition brought, as well as claiming his authority at the national museum, the site of the former royal palace of the Joseon Dynasty.
associated with the Cold War context, a critical determinant of the nation’s postcolonial identity construction. In the highly politicized everyday life of Korea, it was ironically taboo to openly discuss ideological differences despite their major impact in identity. In the name of national defense, the oppressive anti-communist society did not allow ideological diversity. Realism photography of the 1950s, though it wanted to address social reality directly, could not deal with ideological conflicts and fierce red hunts, but could depict only non-political subjects such as the everyday life of ordinary people. Thus, Korean photographers willingly assimilated with the illusion that the exhibition provided, that “everywhere everything is alike” and the faith in the essential goodness of humanity. Roland Barthes criticized the exhibition, since the ambiguous myth of the human community suppressed the determining weight of history and held one back at the surface of identity. However, this ambiguity was an appropriate way for Korean photographers to understand the world and to represent their society at the time.

Commentary of the exhibition in 1956, one year before it traveled to Korea, sums up Korean photographers’ receptions of the show. With few exceptions, most of them complimented it for “offering a new direction with great content and being an exemplary reference for photographers to follow.” For example, Soonsam Suh stated,

“We have organized exhibitions with separate photographs, but The Family of Man shows us that an exhibition could convey one’s thoughts and ideas under a specific theme and overarching story. I am truly impressed by the concept of human family that Edward Steichen suggested, which embraces everyone as an equal being who deserves to be happy.”

---

87 Barthes, Ibid., 100.
88 Haesun Lee “새로운 길이고 내용도 훌륭하고 사진하는 사람에게 좋은 참고가 되었습니다,” “Family of Man Eul Malhaneun Jwadamhoe (Family of Man 을 말하는 좌담회 A Round Table Talk on The Family of Man),” Sajimunhwa, May 1956, 42.
89 “우리가 단사진을 가지고 전시회를 하고 있는데 이번의 ‘패밀리 오브 밴’은 어떠한 테마를 먼저 가지고 그 둘레 안에서 어떤 자격의 사상이라든가 자기의 주의주장을 표현할 수 있다는
Even before seeing the exhibition, Korean photographers were ready to accept the exhibition’s unconventional format and what it represented – the American order. Without any perception of the differences that were erased in this exhibition, they agreed on the concept of the universality of human beings.

In another conversation that photographers had right after the show opened, Eungsik Lim argued,

“Looking at this exhibition, it becomes obvious that photography can inspire people and touch our hearts. By following this trend, it becomes crucial that we also participate in the trend of global photography. So now what we photographers have to pursue with the medium is clear, and without following that, we will fall behind. This exhibition suggests the correct direction of Korean photography.”

Far from having a critical mindset, it is clear that they not only consented to the theme but saw the entire exhibition as directing the nation’s photography.

In doing so, their lack of perception of the propaganda behind the exhibition and their assimilation into the theme is demonstrated in the way they reacted to the photographs of Korea. On the removal of Bourke-White’s two images, they vaguely assumed that her photographs were against Korean customs or showed a too-humble side of Korea. They blamed the elimination for undermining the coherence of the theme, though it was actually for the consistency of the show. Not surprisingly, the conversation

---

것입니다. 이번 전시회는 근본적으로 세계의 인간가족, 즉 세계의 인간은 다 한 가족이다. 다 같이 행복을 누릴 수 있다는 데 대하여 이 전시회를 주최한 에드워드 스타이렌 씨의 계획성이 있고 위대성이 있었던 것을 느꼈습니다.” Ibid.

90 “요번 이 사진전을 봄으로서 사진은 사람에게 박력을 줄 수 있고 보는 사람으로 하여금 감명을 줄 수 있고 이런 사진을 제작함으로서 세계사단에 흑화할 수 있다는 것은 결정적인 것입니다. 인체는 사진작가의 가는 길이 명시되고 있고 사진작가라 하면 있는 이러한 것을 생각하지 않고는 뒤떨어지는 것이다. 이번 사진전은 앞날에 한국 사진작가의 방향을 암시하였다고 봅니다.” “The Family of Man Eul Bogoseo (The Family of Man을 보고서, After Seeing The Family of Man),” Sajinmunhwa, June 1957, 43-44.

91 Ibid. 43.
did not expand to discuss the way that Korea and its people were represented, or to address the issue of subjectivity. Instead, Koreans concluded that the essence of humanity is all the same, as photographs from various countries with different nationalities, languages, and culture, were seen for the things that they have in common with Koreans.92

(Fig 1.22) Two photographs taken in Korea and exhibited in the Korean exhibition had problematic aspects in terms of the way Korea and its people were represented. A woman in Joseph Breitenbach’s photograph is scooping grain at a market with her child on the back. As a mother, she is leading an everyday life: she makes a living and raises a child, regardless of what is happening outside her simple world. In a traditional dress, she looks to be from the pre-modern era rather than from modern Korea. Besides serving the traditional family values that the exhibition adopted as a standard, the figures are depicted as depoliticized, ahistorical beings that do not have their own agency.

(Fig 1.23) On the other hand, high-school girls in Michael Rougier’s Life magazine image shout in front of wire fences. A Hindu scripture of Bhagavad-Gita, “the mind is restless, turbulent, strong, and unyielding…as difficult to subdue as the wind” frames this image as a conveyor of universal human feeling. Though the girls are participating in a protest against the armistice agreement in 1953, a very political moment, the photograph was decontextualized. As the history that determined the meaning of the photograph was removed, the girls’ emotions are seen as releasing private sentiments, and Korea is represented by this restless, unreasonable emotional state.

However, the photographers seemed to have been lost and immersed in the

92 Ibid, 44.
surroundings, in which no distance separated the photographs and their beholders. Stimson claims that the visitors to the exhibition entered into this shared space and obtained a group identity, experiencing the status of nonidentity between letting go of one and taking up the next identification. The compelling narrative structure in which one was supposed to identify oneself with each photograph produced the fantasy of a homogenized global community that suppressed political and economic questions and incorporated the public realm into the private domain.⁹³

Consequently, it infantilized the role of the subject, which Sekula termed “the emergence of new consumer subjects.”⁹⁴ In the Korean setting, the dependent relationship of Korea to the US that enforced the patriarchal authority of the curator, the government organizations that supported the exhibition, and the oppressive political conditions that did not allow political subjects all worked to facilitate infantilization of the subjects. Overlapping subjectivity with the prominent American perspective, the subjects obtained a group identity, and the photographs produced were seen from a privatized perspective.

Constructing an Apolitical World: How Realism Photography Developed in the Korean Context

When realism photography was developing in Korea, *The Family of Man* presented an exemplary model to emulate. The influence of *The Family of Man* was magnified by the first group exhibition of *Shinseon-Hwae*, which opened a day after *The

⁹⁴ Allan Sekula, “Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs)” *October* 102 (Fall 2002): 26.
Family of Man. Whether it was a coincidence or was planned previously, it was a great chance for realism photographers, as Juseok Park argued, to justify their style and to claim their superiority over salon photography. Park cited Hyungrok Lee, the leader of the group, to support his argument:

“There were so many commonalities between The Family of Man and Shinseon-Hwae. (...) So we thought we young Koreans could also do what Westerners did. We had thought The Family of Man as a Westerners’ exhibition, which had nothing to do with us. But looking at the exhibition, surprisingly, its contents were so similar to ours.”

Regardless of the fact that they had already worked under the influence of documentary style photography, the photographers were thrilled to find out that they “had common qualities” to Western photography and further assimilated with the Westerners’ perspective to reinforce an apolitical, ahistorical photographic trend for the next two decades. Reiterating the American style, they obtained a hegemonic position in a photographic scene that was under construction, could secure their position in the anti-communist society, and furthermore, could partake in the construction of national identity.

Realism photographs created in this era display how postwar Korea was documented. Though social relevance was realism’s initial aim, it is hard to find evidence of political conflicts, economic hardships, or class issues in photographs from this era. To convey the universality of humanity, photographers had to look beyond a specific moment in history. (Fig 1.24) Youngsoo Han, one of the founding members of Shinseon-Hwae, did this in his series, Salm (Life, 1958 – 1963), as the title suggests. In an image of

---

two girls in identical dresses, they hold each one’s hands to create a symmetrical balance in the frame. The shallow depth of the image demonstrates that Han’s focus was on the smiling girls, not on the environment around them. The photograph deals with the childhood that everyone undergoes in their life, regardless of time and place.

(Fig 1.25) Another image from this series also fails to demonstrate their principles that argued for the conveyance of social phenomenon. A row of women in traditional costumes carry baskets on the heads and are on the move to somewhere. While they are located in a bare field, no contextual information such as the approximate period and place directs the viewer to grasp a social reality. Instead, the women’s similar appearances and rhythmic arrangement create a spiral composition, which is emphasized by a bird’s-eye view.

In these images, there is no history and no politics – only people with essential goodness. The adoption of children, the aged, and women as main subjects exempt from political identification further facilitated the construction of this ideology-free space. Not only do they usually symbolize liveliness, innocence, or the past, they are deprived of critical agency towards the camera and willingly disclose their private moments and evoke sympathy. The girls in Han’s photographs makes one contemplate life, and the boy in Im’s barren landscape symbolizes destitute but still hopeful times.

In Korean history, the late 1950s and the early 1960s were crucial period that marked a watershed in the long history of military dictatorship and construction of a modern nation. Following the ongoing ideological instability that had been present since

---

the division of the country, the April Revolution broke out in 1960 against the fraudulent election of the vice president, and violent clashes occurred between protesters and the police. The revolution ended with President Rhee’s resignation and the inauguration of the Second Republic, which was short-lived – lasting only 11 months. The revolution was soon followed by the May 16 Military Coup in 1961 that General Chung-hee Park and his allies carried out to seize power. For the next 18 years, Park’s military dictatorship shaped the national identity of Korea until the late 1980s, and its importance cannot be overemphasized.

However, Han’s well-composed photographs do not show agitated historical moments directly. The trauma that Japanese colonialism or the Korean War left was absent as well. The people in these photographs are merely “little men on the street,” and, as in Steichen’s exhibition, the images drew on empathy to annihilate political identification. Lacking the weight of history, Han’s images are not so much different from Im’s *Bare Trees* or Kang’s *Snowfield*, despite the time differences.

In the discussion thus far, realism photography has been characterized by its neutralized style that reminds one of documentary photography and its depoliticized subject matter. Then, what is the relationship of Korean realism photography to its reference, the American model of documentary photography? How close is it to documentary photography in a classical sense? Can we call Korean realism documentary photography?

Documentary is a vexing term. As Sarah Miller wrote, it sometimes indicates an ontological condition of the medium due to the intrinsic function of “documenting.”

---

97 James, “A Post-Fascist Family of Man,” 100.
Documentary photography also refers to a pattern of use that involves a history of socially engaged image production. The term emerged in the late 1920s, according to Miller, not with the invention of the photographic medium. Thus, it implies a deliberate method rather than simple recording. Though there are different narratives about the origins and development of documentary notions and practices, the common assumption is that it has a socially oriented nature. Borrowing Andrés Zervigón’s definition, it is a genre dedicated to social reform or even political revolution with the intention of shaping the opinion of a mass public audience, utilizing a legible style to speak beyond a specific moment.

Both Miller and Zervigón pointed out that the classic notion of documentary photography developed under the rubric of modernist art. Miller argued that Matthew Brady’s American Civil War photographs were reinvented for their non-art, impersonal aesthetics and inspired photographers to look critically at the documentary notion. In this way, Miller refuted the common assumption that documentary photography is a social reform photography with overt political purposes, represented with Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine as direct influences. Zervigón also wrote that classic documentary photography emerged while managing contradictions between the photographer’s subjective authorship and the medium’s objectivity. The agreeable rhetoric of reform was more appealing than assertive sound of outright revolution – that of social reform photography – and its candid but lyrical quality appealed to a common humanity and led to the

---


medium’s place in the art museum.\textsuperscript{100}

Within the institutional system, documentary photography was increasingly associated with connoisseurship and aestheticized in museum collections. Moving away from social-documentary tradition, it instead presented a private view and became less and less overtly political.\textsuperscript{101} While formalism took over the political possibilities of the genre, the Cold War ideology intertwined to further stimulate de-politicization. The Photo League, a group of photographers who documented social issues, was named a subversive organization in 1947, and this accusation created paranoia to hinder any partisan commentary. In addition, Patricia Vettel-Becker pointed out a fierce anti-communism in the minds of Americans. After the second World War, the US emerged as the world’s richest and most powerful nation. When the US was redefining itself, anti-communism fueled a new Americanism. Under the social ambience, ideological intent gained cultural distrust: for instance, the New Deal came under suspicion as an ideological apparatus to restructure the nation’s democratic form of government. The Deal was associated with socialism, and thus communism.\textsuperscript{102}

By the 1950s, social documentary photography had been incorporated by photojournalism. Edward Steichen, who assumed the role of director of the photography department of the MoMA from 1945 to 1962, led this shift by replacing his predecessor Beaumont Newhall’s art-historical and connoisseurial style with a journalistic format. As discussed, \textit{The Family of Man} heavily relied on journalistic images to counter Cold War


\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.

anxiety over cultural and political differences and stressed the similarities that embrace all of humankind. In a repressive Cold War climate, images lacking the overt ideological intent associated with social documentary looked to be politically impartial statements.\textsuperscript{103}

It was this “marshaling of the last forces of documentary work” that Korean photography witnessed from the long history of documentary photography.\textsuperscript{104} That is, realism photography an immediate response to the aestheticized documentary practice fueled by the Cold War context. While the aesthetic quality constituted a significant part of the classic documentary notion, it still claimed to be involved in the socially significant events. If the history of documentary photography were fully available, in my view, Korean photographers would have differentiated it from the socially oriented practices, as they did with Japanese realism photography. Without in-depth knowledge on documentary photography, realism photography in Korea had little relevance to documentary photography in a classical sense. It is closer to the notion of “documenting” that utilized the medium’s intrinsic realistic nature to record everyday life, than “documentary” with a deliberate method. This is why the term “Korean realism photography” cannot not be used interchangeably with “Korean documentary photography.” In the oppressive social climate, in which photographers had limited artistic freedom, the well-arranged formal elements and depoliticized subjects of journalistic images were appropriate for assuring the medium’s place in the art scene and society, and the neutralizing term \textit{Saenghwalchuui} confirms their intent.

In fact, proving photography’s legitimacy as a fine art was the most imperative

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 65-68.
task for Korean photographers. Debates around photography’s artistic value were common in the 19th century when photography was called “a servant of the arts and sciences”\textsuperscript{105} and pictorialist photography claimed photography as fine art. In 1950s Korea, hierarchies among artistic genres did not acknowledge photography as a fine art medium because of its mechanical process and reproducibility.\textsuperscript{106} Efforts to improve the lower position of photography and to elevate its status to a high art are well summarized in how Korean photographers strove to found the department of photography in \textit{Daehanminkook Misuljeonramhoe (The Korean National Art Exhibition)} until this was finally realized in 1964.\textsuperscript{107}

In this situation, \textit{The Family of Man} provided a great chance for Korean photographers to claim the medium’s legitimacy as a fine art. As Wangsam Koo stated,

“In that a photography exhibition opened at Gyeongbok Palace Museum, no one can deny photography’s status as fine art. (...) Only artworks with authority could enter that museum. Therefore, the medium’s artistic value as a whole, not merely the photographs in \textit{The Family of Man}, was endorsed. I believe there would be no more controversies on it.”\textsuperscript{108}


\textsuperscript{107} This was an art exhibition that the government organized to promote art after independence. It had several departments sorted by genres, such as Western painting, Korean painting, sculpture, craft, and calligraphy. Committees judged submitted works, and selected works earned prizes and had a public exhibition. The first exhibition was held in 1948, when the republic of Korea was established, and the last one was the 30th exhibition in 1981. The department of photography was first established in 1964 for the 13th exhibition. Even after that, hierarchies were obvious in the way that the exhibition categorized the seven departments: the first three categories were Oriental painting, Western painting, and sculpture respectively, followed by crafts, calligraphy, and architecture. Photography took the last spot, and the exhibition took place in a different place that the first three departments.

\textsuperscript{108} “이번 경복궁 미술관에다 사진을 걸었다는 사실으로서 인제는 사진이 예술이 아니라고 할 사람은 없을 것입니다. 경복궁 전시장은 오직 권위있는 조형예술작품만이 걸리는 장소입니다. 이 사실로 보아 인간가족사진전의 사진 뿐만 아니라 다른 사진작품도 역시 사진의 예술성이 인정되는데 이것으로 이 후에는 이러한 문제가 없으리라고 믿습니다.” “After seeing \textit{The Family of Man},” 42.
Though it took extra time for photography to actually participate in the currents of contemporary Korean art,\textsuperscript{109} it cannot be denied the exhibition gave Korea photography momentum on which to found its identity. With the success of \textit{The Family of Man}, which was brought to Korea by American and Korean government organization, and the similarities of the photographs in the exhibition with Korean realism photography, \textit{Saenghwalchuui} realism could establish its dominance in Korean photography. As Juseok Park wrote, after \textit{The Family of Man}, photo magazines covered realism photography more than before, and the prevalence of photographs that depicted human life or human faces also increased.\textsuperscript{110}

The formulation of realism photography developed in the 1950s under the various conditions existing in and out of Korea – the remaining Japanese legacy, national division, anti-communism, the Cold War, and the authoritarian government. The US was an ideal model to take after in postwar South Korea. Realism photography, which emerged as an alternative to Japanese-influenced salon photography, adopted a neutralized documentary style as a tool to document the mundane lives of ordinary people. The depoliticized mode of \textit{The Family of Man} provided an archetype of a cutting-edge global photographic trend for Korean photographers. The non-changing space in which the real problems of the society are obscured was ruled by American order. Also, I have mentioned several times that this style lasted for three decades. In terms of the ever-changing social and political climate of the country, how did realism photography react?

\textsuperscript{109} It is not until the early 1990s that the separation of photography and contemporary art finally disappeared. It is widely accepted that hosting international exhibitions, such as the Whitney Biennial in Seoul in 1993 and the inaugural exhibition of Gwangju Biennial in 1995, enabled this. A detailed discussion is provided in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{110} Park, “Korean Photography in the 1950s and \textit{The Family of Man},” 67.
Did it deal with the same subject matter throughout the three decades? If there were any changes, what were the major reasons for that?

**Documenting “Korean Tradition”: Photography until the 1980s**

Korean photography, already under censorship, faced a further challenge in the May 16 military coup in 1961, which started a full-scale military dictatorship. Basically, the government’s priority was to achieve economic growth. Culture and the arts became part of government-driven industrialization, called “the Second Economy,” and did not have their own value. In achieving economic development and building a strong, self-reliant nation, the Park government took a different stance from the pro-American Rhee government. As a motivation to industrialize, the government aimed to recover ancient histories and to establish a cultural identity by emphasizing traditional culture that carried the spirit of self-help, self-dependence, diligence, frugality, cooperation and patriotism, and publicly funded art that cultivated these values.  

Traditional culture and its values were also effective tools to secure the political legitimacy of the Park regime that had taken power by military coup. One of the aspects of Korean tradition that were emphasized was the collective orientation embedded in the notions of loyalty, patriotism, and cooperation. This was used to legitimize the military rule. It suggested that it was a “Korean-style democracy” rooted in Korean tradition, and justified the suppression of individual freedom and anti-government protests.

After the coup, the leaders of the coup dismissed political and social organizations

---

111 Yim, Ibid., 43-44.
and prohibited national and local assemblies in 1961.\textsuperscript{112} Two major amateur photographers’ groups dissolved: *Hanguk Sajinjakja Hyeopoe* (*The Association of Korean Photographers*) and *Daehan Sajinjesul Yeonguhoe* (*The Research Society of Korean Photographic Art*), which had led the photographic scene by organizing group exhibitions and local contests to foster younger photographers, and participating in international photo contests. Restrictions on artistic freedom in the name of national security followed, as the government established *Hanguk Sajin Hyeopoe* (*The Association of Korean Photography*) to hold government-sponsored group exhibitions like the Korean National Art Exhibition.

With limited platforms and less freedom, realism photographers continued working by participating in photo contests such as *Dong-A Sajin Contest* (*Dong-A photo contest*). Founded in 1963 by a newspaper company, *Dong-A Ilbo*, the annual contest published selected works along with judges’ comments in the newspaper that sponsored it and held exhibitions at *Sinmun Hoegwan* (*Korea Press Center*). As it was founded by Myungdong Lee, director at the department of photography at *Dong-A Ilbo*, it is not difficult to infer that the Saengwhalchuui realism style dominated the contest. Besides Lee, the judges also included other photographers who were part of the realism movement: Wangsam Koo, Soonsam Suh, and Eungsik Lim. Not surprisingly, its criterion of selection was “to be non-painterly, realistic, and to conform to the customs.” Thus, prizewinners reflected the influence of realism photography and the repressive social atmosphere. They avoided directly dealing with social issues, leaned toward

humanism and human emotions, and their subjects were frequently the elderly and children.\textsuperscript{113} The Korean National Art Exhibition also had judges from realist groups and adhered to the documentary style. Over time, the limited choices of subject matter, strict standards, and restrictive communication among photographers all influenced Korea photography to become more formalistic and further isolated from reality.\textsuperscript{114}

Under the strict social climate, there was a clear line between “sound” and “unsound” culture that eradicated “alien” elements. Sound culture served anti-communism, nationalism, and traditional morality and discouraged the critical thoughts of individuals to prioritize the public function of culture. Until the early 1990s, the government did not support realistic art forms that critically addressed human rights, political regimes, or industrialization.\textsuperscript{115}

From this distinction, one might notice the contradiction between the rapid industrialization that inevitably accompanied Westernization – including the influx of Western values such as individualism – and the emphasis on Korean tradition, which was defined as “community consciousness.” The process of reconciling this dilemma well intertwines with passage of Korean photography in the 1960s through the 1980s. Despite the influx of Western influences caused by the industrialization, Park’s administration resisted cultural globalization. To resolve the conflict, it employed a late 19\textsuperscript{th} century idea from the Joseon Dynasty, TongdoSeogi (the morality of the East and the technology of the West), which is rooted in an elite nationalism that emphasized social reforms. While

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{113} Yoo, Ibid., 24-80.  
\textsuperscript{115} Yim, Ibid., 45
\end{flushleft}
Westernization of society was the actual reality of Korea, tradition had to be restored or even invented to craft cultural identity that conformed to the military rule. Once restored, tradition, as the essence of the nation, was claimed to represent a quality that ran in the blood of every Korean.\footnote{Moon, “Begetting the Nation,” in *Dangerous Women*, 36-51.}

Under a series of government policies meant to revive national culture, specific cultural motifs appeared repeatedly to confirm a collective notion of Korean identity. Ji-Young Shin discussed how modern Korean abstract painting, which followed the nationalistic discourse, appropriated the authority of abstract painting from the West and became the “ultimate modern form,” to achieve the nationalist goal of “Koreanness.” In the era of historical and cultural amnesia, traditions of pre-modern, pre-colonial Korea were adopted, Shin asserted, and *Muninhwa (Scholar’s Painting)*, a traditional abstract painting style from Joseon, was revived as a true Korean art form.

Taking ceramics, landscapes, and specific animals and plants with symbolic meanings as main motifs and often combining calligraphy, *Muninhwa* conveyed philosophical ideas utilizing pictorial conventions. Far from making lifelike depictions, it was the gender- and class-specific artistic activities of high-class men who could internalize the laws of nature and unify with nature. The world of unity, in which people looked into their inner world to eliminate the incongruity between the self and consciousness and to pursue harmony with nature, was said to represent “Eastern thought.” Encompassing Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, it was claimed to be also inherent in modern abstract Korean painting, qualifying it as carrying absolute
Koreanness.117

While the realism style still dominated Korean photography, what is noticeable in the photography of the 1970s and the early 1980s is its interest in traditional culture.118 Created under the same cultural context, the Western-influenced documentary style was adjusted to depict the pre-modern past and craft national identity through abstract origins and traditions. (Fig 1.26-1.29) Myung-Duck Joo’s works of the 1970s, for example, consist of totem poles that are reminders of shamanism tradition, Buddhist statues in Gyeongju, the capital of Silla Dynasty (57 BC – 935 AD), and old traditional style houses. These tranquil images were said to represent the essence of Korean culture and to suggest a genealogy of Korea that continues to the present. Official nationalist narrative valorizes shamanism as the essence of indigenous Korean culture.119

However, as John Lie wrote in his book, there is no such a distinct category of the Korean race or ethnic Korea in the first place, and the country’s history has always been full of migrations and naturalization. It was not until the late 19th century that the notion of the modern nation and the unity of the Korean people came to Korea from the West. This coincided with Japanese colonization, which resulted in the rise of anti-colonialism that asserted the integrity of the Korean nation with a linear history. It was Chung-hee Park’s government, under the name of establishing a secure and prosperous country, that further promoted the ethnocentric nationalism and notions of a traditional culture that had continued for thousands of years.120

120 Lie, “Introduction,” in Multiethnic Korea?, 3-10.
With this historical background in mind, Joo’s photographs can be said to contribute to creating a notion of essential Korean culture. The Buddhist statues and reliefs in Gyeongju suggest a lasting Buddhist culture, and country houses in the cities of Andong and Gangneung remind one of the Confucianism that dominated the Joseon Dynasty and its culture. Under the category of traditional culture, cultural heritages with different origins all became “Korean,” often being both mystified and idealized in a nostalgic atmosphere. In the process of abstracting concrete history and culture into ahistorical symbols, the photographs helped craft a collective notion of national identity.

Thus, the neutralized documentary style not only affected the way that Korean photography represented its subjects, but on a more fundamental level, helped it participate in the nationalistic discourse of the military regime. Just as The Family of Man homogenized differences to create an ambiguous human community and eventually promote American order as universal, Korean photography denied historical, cultural, and ideological differences, and crafted the myth of a unitary “Korean tradition” under which every Korean was expected to have the same qualities.

The next generation of photographers, who were born after 1950 – the year the Korean War broke out – challenged the documentary style and the explored expressive qualities of the medium. An exhibition that Bohnchang Koo organized in 1988, Sajin Sae Sijwa (The New Wave of Photography) is widely recognized as a turning point in the history of Korean photography. With the shared assumption of “photography as art,” the photographers of the exhibition utilized photographs as tools in their search for visual expression. With these aims, they finally entered art museums. (Fig 1.30-1.31) They used different techniques – for example, Daesoo Kim took photographs as his primary material
and added painterly brushstrokes, making the image almost abstract, and Kyuchul Lee cut
and rearranged his photographs. Their concern was not to document an event or an
object, but to convey their ideas. Later, Koo wrote that his generation used photography
“as a metaphorical visual language or an abstract form – a means of looking inside
oneself, a means of expressing Korean thought.”

These photographers, as Koo argued, “clashed head-on with the conventions of the
Family of Man romanticism,” and paved a way to the next generation with an
increasing engagement with art. However, they were still rooted in an essentialist notion
of Korean identity and a regressive view in envisioning it. Based on the assumption of
essential qualities of Koreanness, these photographers projected symbolic meanings on
their landscapes or still lives. (Fig 1. 32) Bien-U Bae, for instance, found the “Korean”
character in pine trees and photographed them in Gyeongju. According to him, their
evergreen foliage reflects an unchanging perseverance, and the robust but twisted and
tortured trunks embody the years of turbulence that Korean people had to go through.

(Fig 1.33) Byunghun Min observed the natural world to find what he thought
represented the spirit of Koreans as well. Japcho (Weeds, 1996), in which grass sprouts
towards the sky against walls of vinyl greenhouse, signifies the vitality of Koreans to
him. GapChul Lee’s documentation of shamanism and Buddhism, on the other hand, was
part of his search for the collective unconsciousness of Koreans, something that

---

122 Ibid.
photographer and writer Woongu Kang argued would make every Korean instantly feel something spiritual. Though these monochrome photographs deviated from the conventional documentary style, their pictorial and abstract qualities remind one of traditional abstract painting.

This photographic tradition’s creation of timeless space with symbols of Koreaness, the connotation of Eastern thoughts that relate people and nature, and the emphasis on the meditative quality of the work harken, like modern abstract Korean painting, to the philosophy of traditional Scholar’s painting. Therefore, despite the seeming replacement of documentary tradition, photography still served the exclusive notion of Korean identity based on nationalism. With a renewed perception of the medium but inheriting subject matters from the previous generation, photographs of landscapes and human figures that express “Korean thought” maintained dominance in the 1990s.

In its close relationship to the nation’s agitated history of national division, the civil war, the prolonged confrontation with the North, and the military dictatorship, South Korean photography was in a constant struggle of escaping from Japanese influence, catching up with Western style, and establishing its own identity. Ever-changing, unstable political conditions suppressed and controlled photographic activities. Under the pressure, realism photography could not fully analyze and comment on social, political, and cultural reality, and instead turned its cameras to day-to-day lives and tradition.

When the country went through another major transformation into democratic and globalized status, its photography also took part in the process, as before. With unprecedented artistic freedom, contemporary photographers reconsidered the nation’s recent history from a different perspective. This included political events that could not be critically discussed before. Photographers not only filled the void by constructing public memories but also examined the course of the official crafting of history. The masculinized national identity, a product of the nationalist rhetoric of authoritative regimes, and its history are other major subjects that mark the transformation of the country as envisioned with photography. When the nation achieved democratization, the country was also opened up to the world. Photographers reconsidered Korean identity from a totally different position. The following chapters will focus on these issues, along with the variegated photographic methodologies that became available to contemporary photographers.
(Fig 2.1) There is a black and white photograph of a family: the father carries a camera on his shoulder, and the mother holds a baby. Another child is seated between her parents. She stares at the camera. The parents are looking at the camera as well, with slight smiles. At first glance, this image, titled *A Family on a Picnic*, seems to be a family snapshot that displays an average family having a picnic. At the same time, however, the image reveals an interesting relationship to its title: in the background, one finds a crowd of people and a modern building with the sign of a bank. Where is the family, and what kind of picnic is it? Moreover, this photo deviates further from normal conventions of family portraits with a hue that makes the father the focus of the image. The dark hue of his jacket and his slightly turned body separate him from the rest of the family. The contrast between him and the other family members becomes obvious with the intense camera flash reflecting off their glistening faces and it encourages the viewer to reconsider the meaning of the photograph.

This image is from *Gwangju Story* by Hein-kuhn Oh, a photographic series created in 1995. The photographer was hired for a poster image of the movie *Kkonnip (A Petal)*, an adaptation of the novella *There a Petal Silently Falls (Jeogi Sorieopsi Han Jeom Kkonipi Jigo).*¹ The novella deals with the occurrence and aftershock of the Democratic Uprising of May 1980, which happened in the southern provincial city of Gwangju. While photographing the filming of actors recreating the Geumnamno Protest –

¹ *Jeogi Sorieopsi Han Jeom Kkonipi Jigo (저기 소리없이 한 점 꽃잎이 지고, There a Petal Silently Falls)*, written by Yun Ch’oe, 1988.
one of the largest protests of the Democratic Uprising – for the movie, Oh documented in and around the filming site to create this series. Though the protest was a series of bloody collisions and tragic deaths, Gwangju Story displays neither visible violence nor heroic drama for the viewers to empathize with. Dealing with such a turbulent moment in history, what explains this hesitance to reproduce its violence, and what does this hesitance mean about the state of Korean photography in the 1990s after the long-lasting dominance of realism photography?

This chapter focuses on photographs that reconsider the relationship between the past and the present and construct historical memory in the context of South Korea. With the unprecedented artistic freedom that arrived in the 1990s, photographers often went back to the repressed history of the recent past and reassessed it. The two photographic projects presented in this chapter are prime cases that exemplify this trend in

---

2 In this chapter, I refer to Dominick LaCapra, who argued that memory and history are not in binary opposition but in supplementary relation to each other. History functions as a form of memory that interprets and authenticates the testimonies of primary witnesses and sources. Dominick LaCapra, History and Memory after Auschwitz (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 17-23. Also, I use the terms postmemory, public memory, and collective memory. As will be discussed later in the chapter, postmemory is Marianne Hirsch’s term that describes the relationship of the generations that come after traumatic events that exceed comprehension, such as the Holocaust, to the past. Various forms of postmemories connect different generations through indirect experiences of events. Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” Poetics Today 29, no.1 (Spring 2008): 103-128, The Generation of Postmemory Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). I also refer to Edward S. Casey, who explained the four forms of human memory – individual memory, social memory, collective memory, and public memory – to discuss public memory. To summarize, individual memory refers to the person who is engaged in memory on any given occasion; individual memory is a primary prop of social memory. Social memory derives from shared experience, shared history or place, or a shared project, and it is shared by those who are related to each other, such as family, friends, or any kinds of acquaintances. Collective memory describes a joint remembrance of a certain event. Those who remember the event are not necessarily known to each other as long as they recall the same event in their own ways. This signifies plural remembering, and memories are assumed to have a loose resemblance to each other. Finally, public memory, as the word itself means, takes place in the open realm. It serves as an active resource on which current discussions and actions draw, and members of the public speak in terms of it. Public memory is subject to continual reassessment and revision, as collective memory is relentlessly reshaped by the social contexts into which it is received. Collective memory might be a negative condition of public memory due to its sloppy nature, but both concepts presume mutability, and the key to their constructions is political power. Edward S. Casey, “Public Memory in Place and Time,” in Framing Public Memory, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 17-44.
contemporary Korean photography. Both of them deal with the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, which holds a symbolic meaning in the history of post-colonial South Korea. It occurred at an important juncture in Korea’s post-colonial political history, which was marked by the sudden break from authoritarian rule that resulted from President Park’s assassination on October 26, 1979. Followed by civil movements, his death could have been a catalyst for the restoration of democracy in Korea. However, it met with another military coup that seized control of the government in December 12, 1979, and the heightened repression culminated in the imposition of martial law on May 17, 1980 that resulted in the Gwangju Uprising.

Though the Gwangju Uprising ended with numerous deaths and led to another seven years of military dictatorship, it was an important event that is widely recognized as the cornerstone and founding event for the realization of democratization in Korea – often compared to the Paris Commune and the battleship Potemkin. As political scientist Jung-kwan Cho argued, the Gwangju massacre, which took place in the initial phases of the regime, seriously undermined the legitimacy of the government. Thus, the junta that claimed to serve liberal democracy in opposition to communism could not merely take the same path as its precedent Park in the face of the strong yearning of the public for democracy. It had to allow a relatively high level of political pluralism and individual freedom versus the previous administration to secure its rule and to obtain popularity from the people. Accordingly, Chun’s political suppression waned, allowing opposing

---


pro-democracy movements by student groups, youth organizations, labor unions, and religious organizations to flourish.

As the uprising represents a history of struggling for democratization, the history of the event holds a unique position. As a deeply contested occurrence, the truth of which is still under investigation, no other incident in Korean history has gone through such dramatic changes in its meaning and significance. Labeled as “a riot” or “a communist-backed plot,” the Korean government in the 1980s severely suppressed the uprising and prohibited commemorating it. With its transition to a democratic polity in the early 1990s, the Korean government began to openly reinterpret the uprising as the major event that sparked the evolution to democracy and initiated official commemoration. In that the changing narrative parallels the shifting political climate of the nation and its identity, the representation of the uprising obtains a historical singularity that deserves further study.

Under the changing social climate, the nation participated in revising public memories and producing postmemories of the once-taboo subject. Along with the belated circulation of journalistic photographs, art photography also made corresponding critical responses, such as reconstructing the original event and observing its ramifications to people and the present. In addressing this traumatic moment in contemporary Korean history, the two photographers that I focus on in this chapter create dialogues with the past, sometimes taking persisting Korean tradition and culture as references and bringing the past to the present.

The two cases signify the status of Korean photography as in transition, continuing a dialogue with the past and departing from it at the same time. *Gwangju Story* is one of the earliest works in art photography that dealt with the Gwangju Uprising
and was a precedent for photographic projects that came after it. As *Family on a Picnic* shows, the series takes the form of a neutralized documentary style. However, it deviates from conventions of documentary photography that had been forged in previous decades in South Korea and carries uncertainty in conveying what it documents. Another series, *Forgetting Machines* by Suntag Noh (2005-2011), was created about 10 years later, and further incorporated discourses on, and representations of, the uprising. Taking the traumatic moment as a subject, these series exemplify a shift in Korean photography as it evolved from the realism tradition and transitioned towards a novel use of the medium under a changing socio-political context. Despite the seemingly neutral style, they are based on an entirely different notion of the medium, which contradicts the unwavering connection between photography and representation that dominated Korea photography in the past. This ambivalence is deeply rooted in the way the photographers viewed the construction of postmemories of the uprising.

These photographers’ refusal or inability to fully reconstruct what they refer to and to create a seamless structure is connected to the representations of atrocity in contemporary photography, demonstrating a radically new approach to war and trauma than what had been pursued 30 years earlier. Based on the unstable relation between history and photography, these photographers violate the assumption of transparency in carefully composed documentary images and raise fundamental questions about the process of shaping memories and writing history.
Within the context of Korean photography, the ostensible similarity in style between realism photography and Oh’s images inevitably brings up the relationship of contemporary photographers to the previous generation. What is primarily emphasized in discussing the history of Korean photography is how contemporary photography broke with the past and joined with global trends. Thus, few have discussed contemporary practices in relation to the realism tradition that prevailed in Korean photography for a long time. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity in the history of Korean photography in general, it is worth questioning the possible persistence of the past in later practices. The choice of subject matter, the assumed role of photographer, the way photographers perceive and utilize the medium, the details that compose an image (composition, flash, camera angle, and so on), the caption, and the context in which photographs are produced, disseminated, and understood – there are so many aspects to consider to read a photograph. By analyzing these elements, this chapter attempts to expand the scope of the existing discourse on contemporary Korean photography by considering its relationship to the past more rigorously.

To understand how documentary style reestablished itself in the Korean context, it is helpful to make a brief comparison. (Fig 2.2-2.3) How does Oh’s image mentioned above compare with photographs from the previous generation, such as Gujjik (Seeking a Job, 1953) by Eungsik Lim, and Hyungrok Lee’s Gangbyeon, Seoul Hangang (Riverside, Han River, Seoul, 1957)? They are all straightforward documentations with the appearance of a neutral documentary style. None of them directly testifies to turbulent
Korean history. Just as one cannot find any clues about the Gwangju Uprising of the 1980s in Oh’s image, no explicit signs of poverty and suffering after the Korean War are displayed in Lim and Lee’s images. Lim’s photograph portrays a man leaning against the wall with a sign saying, “seeking a job,” and Riverside, Han River, Seoul depicts a girl carrying a baby on her back and a basket over the head walking in a sand-field.

Lim and Lee present their themes in a symbolic way. Lim’s photograph suggests the man’s misery with a highly calculated composition: his tilted hat and downward gaze lead the viewer to compare him with the men in suits behind and highlight the misfortune of the jobless person. In Lee’s image, the girl paired with the diagonal composition created by the rhythmic arrangements of the wooden boats. Nothing looks out of balance. Along with the well-structured composition, what characterizes the photographs from the 1950s is the distance between the photographed and the photographer. The photographed figures remain non-confrontational towards the camera’s gaze as objects, and this contributes to creating melancholic atmospheres in the photographs.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, this roundabout approach in depicting society is deeply associated with the authoritarian government, anti-communist social ambience, and oppressive political system. The Cold War tension that caused Korea’s hierarchal cultural relationship to the US was another crucial factor in Korean photography appropriating the neutralized documentary style. Under these conditions, a romanticized style of realism photography, with little focus on inciting social awareness or a political reform, dominated Korean photography for a long time.

When the socio-political conditions drastically changed, allowing for more open debate about the past and the present, Korea began to look back to the recent past and
turn its eyes to repressed side of society, including its history. The Gwangju Uprising was part of this repressed history, the truth of which is still under investigation as of 2019. It is expected that artists working and presenting art under this climate would probably incorporate the country’s repressed history into their work. Coming after the long silence on social reality, especially after the dramatic transition to a democratic society in June 1987, photographers could have utilized the momentum to tell untold stories and to show underrepresented scenes. However, when dealing with this highly political subject matter, the photographers that I discuss in this chapter betray these expectations and instead remain oblique. As in Oh’s *A Family on a Picnic*, their images are devoid of clear narratives, similar to Lim and Lee’s photographs.

Even though the photographs might seem to have inherited realism photography, one major development in Korean photography is that photographers had freedom of choosing what and how to photograph, which was not available in the past. As the political climate was turning around, as will be fully discussed in this chapter, the state was openly revising its historical narrative of the event to confirm its legitimacy as a governmental body. Art photography, more a creative interpretation than a literal documentation of reality, utilized its newly obtained privileges not to participate in the abrupt commemoration, which served the regime at the time. Thus, though photographers did not represent political history directly, it is not that they evaded facing it, but rather they devised new approaches to critically respond to it.

Another point is the way the photographers perceived and made use of the photographic medium. What was behind Lim and Lee’s well-coordinated photographs was assumption of the medium making a spontaneous imprint of reality, which relates to
the famous notion that Henri Cartier-Bresson coined: “the decisive moment.” This presupposes that the photographer recognizes the moment when subjects show their most revealing arrangement and the candid camera seizes it. The photographer’s role is to wait, observe, and register the significant moment upon film before it is gone. There is neither posing for the camera nor cropping of the photographs afterwards. Thus, when the decisive moment is captured as a photograph, its content and form create an organic balance.\(^5\)

Oh’s project, on the contrary, is filled with indecisive moments, both about the Gwangju Uprising and its reenactment in 1995, which eventually throw the viability of representation for memory itself into question. First of all, photography is not a transparent trace of the real with a coherent narrative here but a medium of staging and performative fabrication of reality. Also, instead of waiting for something to happen and capturing it intuitively, Oh performs the opposite role: that of an active controller. He constructs layered structures of reality that call for a deferred signification. The novella, which provides the primary narrative, is an artistic creation of an actual event, and the movie further combines historical records, journalistic photographs, and fictional reconstruction. As the filming took place at the actual site of demonstration in Gwangju city, the movie scenes would overlap in many parts with the actual protest. The film crews set the protest with Molotov cocktails, fire, and overturned buses, and played solemn music and gunshots, making it real in recalling the past to the present.

---

Moreover, when the director of the movie, Sun-woo Jang filmed the Geumnamno Protest scene, more than 3,000 citizens volunteered to participate in the reenactment of one of the most crucial episodes that shaped Korean history. Some of them experienced or had heard about the movement at the time that it happened in 1980, and others knew about it indirectly – having heard from older generations and learned from existing resources after the fact. The diverse levels of collective memory and reality are intertwined in the reenactment. The director additionally placed about 100 professional actors dressed as soldiers and policemen in the crowd and instructed them to cause havoc for a realistic recreation of the conflict. During the filming, professional actors and citizen actors – who played both the roles of protesters and the soldiers who oppressed and killed them – acted together.

While the fictional frame is filled with actors and amateur citizen actors, another layer of reality surrounds the project: there were people from civic groups who came to get signatures on a petition demanding the truth of the movement and the enactment the Special Law on the May 18 Democratization Movement. Real policemen were placed at the filming site in case another protest was to happen and require government power to put it down. At the site, a mix of people with different intentions gathered at the actual place of the protest and performed their roles respectively; the photographer captured not only the scenes of reenactment but also the entire site during the break as well.

As Geoffrey Batchen described, “the original events have already been displaced by a movie version that was itself partly based on news photographs from 1980, and now

---

7 Ibid.
Oh’s photographs displace that displacement again, substituting a few fragmentary scenes for the movie’s narrative coherence.” Different dimensions of reality overlap, and boundaries between fact and fiction; past and present; performing, reenactment and reality; and the staged and the spontaneous are blurred and intertwine with each other. Various subjectivities are involved in the elaborate construction, but Oh refuses to incorporate them into a comprehensible narrative or present clear information on the uprising and its recreation. Consisting of mostly close-up figures and fragmentary scenes of protest, Oh’s photographs lack a clear narrative that can be instantly recognized.

Another aspect that makes the photographs indecisive, is Oh’s refusing to create an organic balance between content and form that helps the viewer perceive them in their entirety in one glance. Instead, Oh made the photographs deliberately muted and refused to indicate who the subjects are and what their roles are. A unitary appearance of impassive, deadpan images highlights the uncertainty. (Fig 2.4) In An Old Man, Sept 28, 1995, the main figure looks at the camera with a blank face, making a pair with a young soldier behind him. He might be a Gwangju citizen who actually partook in the Geumnamno Protest. If this is the case, is he a participant of the reenactment, or just an onlooker? Otherwise, he might be one of the actors that the director hired. The same applies to the young men behind him dressed as soldiers. Nothing clarifies the circumstances and no specific information signifies the meaning of the photograph.

(Fig 2.5-2.6) The repeated banal compositions heighten the confusion. A Gwangju citizen in A Voluntary Actress, September 28, 1995, and a professional actor in An Actor in a Role of a Leading Protester, September 28, 1995 cannot be differentiated

---

without the aid of caption. They both look sober, and one cannot tell if they are acting for the movie or posing for Oh’s camera. (Fig 2.7-2.8) The function of a caption as facilitating the meaning of photographs becomes untrustworthy as well, when one encounters such images as *Two Policemen* and *A Father, Son, and Daughter*. Are they real policemen overseeing the filming site, extras playing policemen, or does each person perform a different role? Similarly, the role of the family members in the filming site is also left open.

As well as displaying non-crucial moments from the uprising and its reenactment, the photographer creates a tension, not a balance, with the use of intense flash and the interaction with the subjects. When Oh first joined the filming site and began taking photographs, he soon realized both the citizens and actors were self-conscious of the photographer’s presence. Even when the movie camera was off, they acted as if performing for a movie scene, making serious faces and taking poses for him. Even spectators and civic group members who were getting signatures for petition were aware of the camera and made deliberate gestures. Being caught up by the atmosphere, he could not remain an observer. Accordingly, he participated in creating the fictitious reality by assuming the role of an earnest journalist and created a pseudo-documentary project.⁹

In every photograph, a complicit relationship between the photographer and the subjects is suggested. Either for the movie or Oh’s camera, the subjects make deliberate expressions or are at least conscious of being photographed. Documenting their gestures, the photographer marks his presence with the intensified flash. It enhances the impassive look they make and causes the people to look unfamiliar. It also flattens the space, which

---

is Oh’s dimension of photographic reality in which boundaries of fact and fiction, the past and the present, and the staged and the real are nullified. The interaction between the subjects and the photographer, both claiming their agency, escalates theatricality in the black and white photographs. Eventually, it creates a psychological distance that further blocks the viewers from empathizing with the unclear images.

All the elements of the photographs – layers of realities constructed by a series of close-up images of ordinary people and glimpses of a tragic event, the ambiguous direction of the captions, the enhanced lighting, and so on – cultivate uncertainty and deny a fixed meaning of the photographs. This is not the symbolic contemplation of the political event that realism photographs used to avoid direct involvement; it is rather an intended betrayal of common expectations of documentary images as objective conveyors of information. With no clear visible depiction of what is taking place, what does the project suggest about the uprising and its recreation, and what does this say about the tendency of Korean photography in this decade more broadly?

_Gwangju Story_, I suggest, testifies the Korean photography that was expanding its domain in both terms of subject matter and style. The new generation of photographers, who were born after the Korean War, attempted to deal with various aspects of life and society with the medium. While the previous generation focused on documenting the everyday life of ordinary people, the new generation endeavored to use the medium in various ways to look into society, to look inside oneself, or to express Korean thought through the process of abstraction. From landscapes to still lives, portraits, and documentations of performances, Korean photographers began to move from the past and
initiate a new direction in photographic practices. Oh’s work exemplifies this trend in Korean photography with a subject matter that is deeply connected to political history. He does this with an updated approach to the medium as a photographer composing a photographic reality beyond simple documentation.

Outside the Korean context, Batchen’s chapter, “Looking Askance,” posits Oh within a broad context of international photography that represents atrocity. What he focuses on is how photography can bear witness to particular historical traumas without showing them to us. (Fig 2.9-2.10) He provides examples of Australian artist Anne Ferran’s *Lost to Worlds* and Lebanese-born artist Walid Raad and The Atlas Group. Oh’s *Gwangju Story* is one of the examples that supports his arguments. The examples show an alternative way to narrate a historical event with photography. Just like Oh’s impassive photographs are reenactments of traumatic Korean history, Ferran’s picturesque landscape of a grassy hillock bears the contested colonial history of Australia but offers no drama. Also, the repetitive blue prints combined with small black and white photographs in the archive of The Atlas Group relate to the Lebanese civil wars between 1975 and 1991. Consisting of group portrait photographs of those said to be lost at sea during the war and blue fields that are reminders of pre-war Beirut, the photos evoke a reality about the civil war without chronicling events.

(Fig 2.11) One might recall Vietnamese-American photographer An-My Lê’s *Small Wars* (1999-2002) as well, which depicts reenactments of the Vietnam War in the forests of Virginia more than 20 years after the war ended. Her images are also full of
ambiguity, raising doubts on documentary photography’s truth-telling function and questioning whose perspective crafted the existing narratives of the war.\footnote{Karen Irvine, “An-My Lê: Small Wars.” http://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/2000/6/an-my-le-small-wars.php} Hers are all non-iconic images that abandon photographic tradition in representing atrocity. Taking national history as a reference but showing nothing of critical importance and no identifiable subject matters, borrowing Batchen, these pictures not only challenge the presumed capacity of documentary photography to tell the truth of a given situation in a condensed way, but also open up a new possibility for comprehending atrocity in art photography as they encourage the viewer to bring his or her own knowledge and imagination to understand them.\footnote{Batchen, Ibid.,226-239.}

While Batchen aptly analyzes how Oh’s photographs destabilize documentary convention and derive photographic truth from layered structures of a fabricated historical event in the context of contemporary art, \textit{Gwangju Story} needs closer scrutiny in terms of the relationship of the original event to Korean history. Other than jeopardizing the medium’s expected capacity of truth telling, what do the vague contents of the photographs signify about the traumatic event, and how did the photographer incorporate historical knowledge and compose his own reality?

\textbf{[Reinvention of the Gwangju Uprising and Resistance to Create a Singular Narrative]}

Regarding the disinterest in a faithful recreation of the Gwangju Uprising, I suggest that the uncertainty in this project points to the photographer’s stance on the significance of the event in Korean history at the time of the movie being filmed. To
support this hypothesis, it is helpful to review the development of the movement and the process of its documentation and memorialization. The 10-day struggle that lasted from May 18 to May 27 in 1980 began as part of nation-wide protests against the new military regime of General Doo-hwan Chun that emerged after the downfall of the military regime of Chung-hee Park (1961-1979). Facing harsh revolts against the return of military rule, General Chun extended already-in-effect martial law to the entire country, suspended the cabinet, and closed the National Assembly. The military had full control of the republic: it closed down all university campuses and arrested political leaders including Dae-jung Kim, whose political ground was South Jeolla province and Gwangju, its capital city.

When students and activists in Seoul decided to suspend demonstrations on May 15, 1980, students in Gwangju held another torchlight march on the next day and discontinued their demonstration. However, riot police and paratroopers occupied the provincial government, key official buildings, and universities, and began to arrest student activists and dissident leaders throughout the city. This incited Gwangju citizens as well as activists to assemble at Chonnam National University and to shout slogans urging political reform and Chun’s retreat. Paratroopers beat, clubbed, knifed, and bayonetted the protestors. Demonstrations spread to the downtown area of the city, and brutal repression followed. At the violent suppression of civilians, infuriated ordinary citizens joined the protest, so it got bigger and more assertive and more people were injured, shot, and killed. On May 27, troops moved into the city with 30 tanks and guns blazing, and the movement totally failed, leaving large numbers of casualties.14

This 10-day struggle holds a long-lasting legacy that shaped the political and social landscape of South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it took a long time for the uprising to obtain a meaningful position in the history of democratization. As studies show, the collective memory and historical significance of an event depend on social and political circumstances. For instance, Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist, argued that collective memory is continually reshaped by the social contexts into which it is received. This was especially true under the turbulent political situation in South Korea during the 1980s and 1990s. The way that the uprising was perceived and remembered has notably shifted over time, and the photographers that I deal with not only reflected this condition but also participated in the shaping of collective memory. Their documentary style images reveal the fundamental ambiguity of the photographic medium in its ability to convey history in an objective way. When nothing is clearly narrated, photography performs a role of evoking the past and questioning the position of the event in the present moment. Thus, what it does goes beyond capturing the event and presenting a fixed meaning to the viewer.

At the time of May 1980, the military fully controlled media coverage and only rumors about what was happening circulated among people outside of Gwangju. The city was isolated from the rest of the country. For the first several years after the uprising, little was known other than the official stories and accounts. First, the Korean

18 Chung, Geunsik and Jongryul Kim, “5.18minjuhwa Undonggwa ‘Imeul Wihan Haengjingok’ (5.18 민주화운동과 ‘임을 위한 행진곡, 5.18 Democratization Movement and ‘March for the Beloved),”
government termed it the “Gwangju Satae (Gwangju Incident).” As in the past, anti-communist rhetoric was mobilized again to define the movement as a communist riot to overturn the Republic of Korea. During Chun’s regime (1980 – 1987), the very act of commemorating the event was considered a form of anti-government protest, and even bereaved family was barred from having memorial services at Mangwoldong cemetery, where the victims’ corpses were buried and a joint memorial service was held on May 29, 1980. Until 1985, Gwangju citizens could not freely visit the cemetery and the uprising could not be publicly mentioned, and it took another four years for it to be legally commemorated in 1989.

The June 1987 demonstrations, which started a process that brought about the democratization of Korea, served as one of the significant moments in constructing a new narrative of the uprising. There were public hearings in 1988 at the National Assembly, and the uprising was legally commemorated for the first time in 1989. Gradually, the event’s anniversary celebrations became less political. In 1990, according to the Gwangju Compensation Law, compensation was paid to the victims. Most of the scheduled

---

in Hanguk Hyeondaesawa Minjuui (한국 현대사와 민주주의, Contemporary History of Korea and Democracy) (Seoul: Kyungin Munhwasa, 2015), 188.
anniversary events were cultural and academic ones, diluting the anti-government spirit of the previous decade.

The inauguration of first civilian president Young-sam Kim’s government in 1993 accelerated this process, leading the shift in the narrative construction of the Gwangju Uprising in a different direction. Just as states, possessing interest and resources, engage in the processes of reconstructing the past according to the concerns and needs of the present,\(^2\) the Kim regime reconceived and reinvented the uprising anew to meet the needs of the present.\(^2\) Don Baker’s essay on the various visions of the Gwangju Uprising shaped over time addresses this process. Appropriating historian Paul Cohen’s framework, Baker explained three ways of viewing and discussing traumatic historical events. According to him, first there are reports of those who were actual eyewitnesses or participants. Historians, then gather multiple accounts and weave them into a coherent narrative. Finally, the narrative goes beyond the historians’ retelling and reconstruction: later generations draw lessons from significant historical events, Baker wrote, and refashion the past to cope with their needs in their own time. In this process, the original event is recontextualized, and often mythologized, to serve specific political functions of the present.\(^2\) Baker applied these three categories of historical accounts in his analysis of the narrative reconstruction of the Gwangju Uprising. Different genres of literature, drama, movies, and documentaries present competing visions and reshape the event in

\(^{21}\) Yea, Ibid., 1554.  
their own ways. The passage of time, which involves a changing political landscape, further intertwines and contributes to the creation of “a usable past,” or to the construction of a myth.\textsuperscript{24}

The way the Gwangju Uprising gained its significance over two decades proves this process of appropriating the usable past for the present. When the dominant official discourse that defined the incident as a communist rebellion that threatened national security was still dominant, a reactionary narrative was prevalent: from this perspective, Gwangju citizens were considered innocent victims who spontaneously resisted against the brutality of the martial law forces. For example, the main character of \textit{A Petal}, the novella that provided the fictional frame for the movie and Oh’s photographs, is a young girl who witnessed the martial law forces shooting her mom and became insane. She wanders around the towns of the Chonman region and is constantly raped and abused by the men around her. As a helpless victim, she symbolizes Gwangju city in 1980.

When the director Jang adapted it into a movie, a more popular form of media than a novella, the uprising was no longer a taboo subject for public discussion. As one of the earliest cases that dealt with the Uprising in popular culture, as if celebrating the newly given political freedom, the movie included detailed depictions of the uprising. At the beginning, in particular, it presented actual scenes of the uprising from a documentary film in a similar tone as is taken when the girl is victimized. The film shows the military entering the city on armored fighting vehicles, soldiers beating and firing on citizens, the violent suppression of protesters, soldiers dragging corpses on the street, roughly made coffins placed side by side in a large hall, crying women in white hanbok (funeral attire

\textsuperscript{24} Baker, Ibid., 87-10.
in Korea), the cleaning of the city, and fogger trucks running to disinfect the streets. The intro to the film summed up the entire event in two minutes. In this way, the uprising became the tragic past from which the movie was based off. The reenactment of the protest in a later part of the movie, based on which Oh’s photographs were made, thus, is clearly demarcated as a fictional recreation of the historical moment.

On the contrary to these sorts of collective memories that were under construction through artistic creations, Hein-kuhn Oh’s photographs neither took a definitive tone in depicting the event nor dealt with it as a concluded past, the truth and historical significance of which were already uncovered. In terms of continuing the memory construction of the uprising in the 1990s, Oh’s undetermined position conflicted with the official narrative structure as well. In this era, there was a complete shift in assessing the event intertwined with the nation’s full-fledged transition to a democratic society. After the civilian government launched in 1993, organizations such as the 5-18 Memorial Foundation in 1994 were created and the legislation of the 5-18 Special Law in 1995 was implemented to recover what was erased of the memories of the uprising.

Gradually, the memories of pain and fear faded, and a new image of the Gwangju Uprising with the Gwangju people as heroic defenders of democracy emerged under the mitigated political tension. However, it is important to note that just like the negative perception of the movement as a communist revolt was crafted by the military government, the newly adopted narrative of heroism and patriotism was also an official construct. In the words of Cohen, the Kim government reinvented the uprising as a usable past to meet its political needs. The most pressing task of Kim’s democratic government was to differentiate itself from the previous juntas and legitimize itself. To establish the
identity of the newly initiated government, deleted memories of the uprising as a symbol of democratic struggle were important.

Thus, as Sallie Yea asserted, the new government appropriated various means to insert itself into the uprising narrative and aligned itself with the spirit and objectives of the movement beyond simply seeking the truth of the uprising. With growing financial resources, the government carried out palpable commemoration projects to embed the righteous uprising in the cityscape of Gwangju, including three new sites. One of them is Mangwoldong cemetery that contained large-scale monuments such as Democracy Gate, Democracy Square, the May 18 Democratization Movement Memorial Tower and the Garden for Democracy. The other two sites - the Provincial Hall, the site of the last stand of the citizen protesters and the Martial Law Branch Headquarters for Jeolla province (Sangmudae) - also show how a so-called “memorial industry (Ginyeom Saeop)” took place in the city in the mid-1990s.25

As is evident from the monuments mentioned above, despite the liberalized social and political context, what remained the same was the dominance of a singular narrative that constituted official history. Even today, there is no agreed upon number of the deceased, missing, and injured civilians, and what really happened during the 10 days is an unresolved issue. Several numbers are cited other than the official death toll.26 The

26 The Martial Law Command declared on May 31, 1980, that 170 were dead (144 civilians, 22 soldiers, and 4 policemen) and 380 wounded (127 civilians, 109 soldiers, and 144 policemen), quoted in Jun Man Kang, Hanguk Hyoondaesa Sanchaek 1980nyeondaede Pyun 1: Gwangju Haksalgwa Seoul Ollimpik (한국 현대사 산책 1980년대 편 1 : 광주학살과 서울올림픽, 1980 l, Chronology of Modern Korean History of the 1980s 1: Gwangju Massacre and Seoul Olympics) (Seoul: Inmulkwa Sasangsa, 2003),119. On the other hand, the May 18 Memorial Foundation provides different numbers: 207 dead, 2,392 wounded, and other forms of sacrifice as 987. Regardless of the official records, it is often said that number of casualties would run up to 800. http://www.518.org/sub.php?PID=010104.
person who ordered the military to fire on civilians is still under debate and has resurfaced again under a new liberal government as of 2018. While un-clarified facts, distorted personal memories, and fragmentary public histories continue to coexist, a theme of heroic struggle for democracy has replaced that of communist turmoil, showing the success of current official accounts in overwriting the history of the tragic past.

Though it was during these transitional years that Oh’s photographs were produced, neither the monumental scale of these commemorative spaces nor the tone that narrated the uprising as the heroic struggle can explain Oh’s photographs. If we say that Oh’s photographs are part of the construction of collective memory but decline to be part of the dominant narrative, then what is the relationship of Oh’s vague photographs to memory and history, which had been constantly reshaped? Why did Oh avoid explicit representation of the event as the taboo subject began to be reevaluated, and was this typical of Korean photography at the time?

As discussed already, the reenactment combines participants’ firsthand experiences and their memories with collective memories in the form of historical accounts, documents, photographs, and so on, constructed in a fictional movie format. What is also mobilized in the citizen actors’ performances are their indirect experiences with regard to the uprising, which can be explained in the notion of “postmemory.” The term was coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe the relationship that the generation after one that has witnessed cultural or collective trauma – in her case, the remembrance of the Holocaust – bears to the experiences of those who came before. According to Hirsch, some massive traumatic experiences resonate deeply in the generation after them; thus, transmitted experiences – mediated by recall, imaginative investment, projection, and
creation – constitute memories in their own rights. Some events, though they happened in
the past, defy narrative reconstruction, exceed comprehension, and continue to affect the
present.\textsuperscript{27}

The notion of postmemory has been adopted by scholars to discuss the aesthetics
of remembrance in the aftermath of catastrophe beyond the bounds of traditional
historical archives and methodologies. In its aftermath and extensive trauma to the
history and people of Korea, the Gwangju Uprising can be also said to engender a trans-
generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. In the words of
Hirsch, postmemorial work strives to reactivate and reembody more distant memorial
structures within the resonant forms of mediation and aesthetic expression.\textsuperscript{28} If this is
applied to Oh’s photographs, then they are aesthetic re-embodiments of the uprising.
Then, how can we describe how postmemory actualized \textit{Gwangju Story} at the time of
1995 and mediated between the generation after the event and the actual witnesses?

As discussed, the uprising was a taboo subject during Chun’s regime, and it took
more than a decade before its contribution to democracy was publicly acknowledged. The
silence affected the construction of postmemory by means of images, stories, or
behaviors as concrete transmitters. In its capacity of realistic documentation, photography
was not an exception. (Fig 2.12-2.13) For instance, a press photographer from \textit{JoongAng
Ilbo}, one of the major newspapers published in Korea, named Changsung Lee went down
to Gwangju from Seoul to cover the uprising on May 18. He documented vivid scenes of
the protests, but it took 15 years for him to be able to release the photographs to the

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
public, and it was not until 2008 that photographs that he and other journalists took could be published in a book as part of a commemoration of the 28th anniversary of the event. Due to their shock value and impact on democracy, the images could not circulate, which must have created a considerable void in the construction of postmemory. When the photos became public, they finally could mediate the trauma and pain across generations.

(Fig 2.14-2.15) In analyzing Gwangju Story, I suggest that the photographs point to the status of memory of the uprising rather than being interested in a belated representation of the event. That is, the lack of a photo-historical record that could disseminate and shape memory about the uprising that lasted for a long time is reflected in Oh's deadpan images. First of all, Oh’s photographs refuse to provide a solid, cohesive narrative. One might be able to spot fragmentary traces of journalism photographs in Oh’s work from the way actors wave the Korean Flag and shout with their arms rising and see handed-down stories in the resolute face and gestures of a voluntary high school student actor. Overall, however, when the series is seen together, the photographs do not give us a complete account of the uprising. This is in contrast with the movie, which presented a two-minute summary made of scenes extracted from a documentary film at the beginning and included the Geumnamno protest with dramatic full details.

In the same vein, the blankness in the faces of the figures is also what the photographs signify about the representation of the uprising, which is the lack of solid narratives to circulate between generations. Regardless of the subjects’ various experiences of the event – whether they were professional actors, amateur citizen actors

---

who experienced the uprising in 1980, citizen actors who were born after 1980, onlookers of the filming, civic group members, or policemen – and the different roles – protesters, policemen, citizens, and so on – that each person took, and whether the images depict the scene of demonstration, real policemen overseeing the site, or actors taking a break, what we see is ambiguity: the performers are in an in-between status, giving us no clear information about the uprising.

The photographs, I suggest, manifest the then status of memory and history of the event – aside from the officially crafted history under the junta – by their emptiness. At the time when Oh created this series, art photography was increasingly taking note of the event and participating in the production of postmemories. For instance, Honggoo Kang incorporated his memory of the uprising, as he was in Gwangju on May 17, 1980, to provide glimpses of the event. (Fig 2.16-2.17) His photographs include images such as the superimposition of red lotus flowers on a black and white photograph that depicts coffins and corpses of the victims, and combinations of photographs of the violent suppression of the uprising and the artist running away show fragmentary moments and personalized representations. (Fig 2.18-2.19) Sangil Yi’s Mangwoldong, which documented funerary photographs, tombs, bereaved family, and visitors at the Malwoldong cemetery, is also not based on social memories of the event but is rather rooted in the photographer’s individual experiences and memory of the uprising.30

While Gwangju Story is also grounded in the void of reliable historical accounts even after more than 10 years, the way it addresses this absence is different from that of

---

30 Yi was a soldier for the Republic of Korea Defense Intelligence Command and was sent to Gwangju in May 1980 as an evidence photographer. After discharging, he visited Gwangju and documented Malwongdong between 1984 and 2000. He has presented the series since the 1990s including the Gwangju Biennial in 2000.
Kang and Yi. Instead of photographing witnesses’ primary memories partially available at the moment, it directly addresses what was erased in the public memory, such as the major protest that occurred on May 18. In doing so, however, it does not fully reconstruct the event for the viewer or sum up what really happened during those 10 days. Rather, it carries the vacancy within its contents, and accentuates it by the deadpan documentary style.

Moreover, Oh uses the medium of photography in a far more complicated way. The fictionalized nature of the photographs is not marked obviously as in Kang’s work. Instead, Oh’s photos look similar to Yi’s images, as Oh’s images are disinterested documentary photographs in principle. However, the fake and the real, the staged and the spontaneous, and the past and the present entwine each other in Gwangju Story. The photographs highlight the ambiguity to question the fact-conveying role of documentary photography, which includes documentary photographs of the event that claimed to provide truth in the past. Furthermore, Oh’s photographic reality brings the past to the present, in which Gwangju citizens were reenacting May of 1980 or acting on what they had heard as if not knowing its ramifications on history. In this way, Oh’s ambivalent images not only point to the under-discussed status of what happened in Gwangju in 1980, but also remind us of what should be examined, opening up further conversation about the representation of the traumatic history.

As much as the emptiness of Oh’s photographs demonstrates the ambiguous condition of the history and lack of postmemory about the Gwangju Uprising, the movie A Petal and Oh’s Gwangju Story themselves make up historical accounts of the event. That is, they partake in the construction of history and become postmemories of the event.
in their own ways. Baker classified how different genres of literature, movies, drama, and documentaries approach the same subject. Movies on the Gwangju Uprising focus more on the suffering that Gwangjuites endured then and for a long time afterward rather than any heroic activities that happened in the spring of 1980.\textsuperscript{31} \textit{A Petal} was one of them. Instead of depicting heroic or political sides of the conflict, the movie portrays the Gwangju people as innocent victims who were mostly apolitical until they were attacked by paratroopers, following the early narratives.

As opposed to the movie, Oh refuses to take part in either victimizing or romanticizing those involved in the event. With no violence and no drama in the indecisive moments, only close-up figures and glimpses of the filming and demonstration scene, the photos suggest only sketchy ideas about the uprising. Just as there are no innocent victims, there are no heroic protesters fighting for the abstract ideal of democracy, either. (Fig 2.20-2.21) It is obvious that the impassive faces of citizen spectators near the filming scene are not so different from those of actors taking the role of leading protesters.

To contextualize Oh’s deadpan approach, one can relate it to the process of historicizing the event. As briefly mentioned, Oh’s series was created when the official stance on the uprising was undergoing a major change and the newly established civilian government was leading the construction of collective memories in a different direction.\textsuperscript{32} The new chronicle of the triumph of democracy replaced that of a struggle against military dictatorship and oppression. The public commemoration of the uprising was being institutionalized and commoditized, displacing private memories. If art

\textsuperscript{31} Baker, Ibid., 98-100.
\textsuperscript{32} Gi-Wook Shin, “Introduction,” xxxvi
photography was still under strict censorship, Oh’s photographs would have carried well-composed images that summed up the event and depicted courageous struggles towards democracy. The lack of these narratives in Gwangju Story demonstrates the shifted condition for photographers.

To understand what Oh’s deadpan photographs discard and parody at once, it is helpful to recall the role that photography generally performed in constructing official history. From the initial stages of the medium, photography was enmeshed with the official historical record and incorporated into the institutional system, such as archives, encyclopedias, police files, and libraries. Under the dominance of the empiricism in the mid-19th century, photography shaped its position as an accurate record of past events and took on the role of historical truth telling.33 To possess a photograph was to possess knowledge; as Joan Schwartz argued, “the photographic imagination and the archival imagination are inextricably linked, and can be traced to the same social origins and intellectual climate, the same desire for comprehensive knowledge and unmediated representation.”34 Additionally, photographs accumulated and organized according to bureaucratic means, according to Allan Sekula, lose complexity and richness and gain new meanings.35 In this setting, there is no room for uncertainty.

The contingency of photographic meaning, however, is easily proven, just as the files from JoongAng Ilbo on the uprising that contained Changsung Lee’s photographs

---

34 Ibid., 4
were filled with conflicting words of “mobs, resistance, and sweeping up.”

Regardless of what happened and what the photographer documented, the archived photographs could have been easily manipulated to construct a “truth” for the benefit of the military power. Under a changed political climate, the same photographs could become evidence of another truth of the uprising to serve the new political needs.

In this sense, Oh’s photographs acknowledge the constructedness of documentary photography and resist the imposition of a singular narrative as unshakable historical truth. Emptiness in his black and white images declines to serve the needs of the present and construct a mythical past but leaves the past open to interpretation. That the fake and the real are not differentiated in the neutralized documentary images is what proves the latter. The process of making a film about a historical event and documenting the filmmaking overlaps and is incorporated into the on-going construction of history. Betraying the medium’s ability to present graphic details, Oh’s photographs encourage the viewer to question the meaning of what is represented. Renouncing the unifying impulse of official history, Oh’s photographs contribute to a critical understanding of the event and its historicizing process.

*Gwangju Story* is in the middle of constructing histories and postmemories of the uprising. It tells us so little about what it describes, and the absence of clarity contributes to the rejection of a singular narrative. In doing so, photography’s duality effectively works to evoke the past without determining its meaning. In her book, Kate Palmer

---


Albers deals with the fraught relationship between photographs and history: as she argues, photography can be a clear record keeper of history, but it is also a medium so deeply contingent on context that it is incapable of transmitting a historical truth. Oh’s photographs, which deny an evidentiary role while recording what is before the camera, hinge on this duality. Certainly, they remind us of the contingency of photographic meaning. Furthermore, they remind us of the contingency of the meaning of the uprising, which rests upon on the changing political contexts that decide who controls it and decides what to emphasize.

In Oh’s photographic reality, the Gwangju Uprising is an on-going incident, the meaning of which is undecided and is not so politically charged. Like other photographs in the era – including Kang and Yi’s work that I briefly mentioned – that began to look back at the traumatic past and integrated scattered memories of the movement, the series is rooted in the then-memories and historical accounts. In general, they are related to Korean photography that departed from the realism tradition. When the nation was reestablising itself as a democratic state and the history of Gwangju resurfaced to secure the legitimacy of the then regime, these photographs decided not to share in that role with their newly-allowed political and artistic freedom.

Thus, instead of creating well-organized images that depict apolitical sides of society or participating in the construction of national identity, Oh’s photographs are filled with uncertainty and sketchy representations of the referring event. Serving no political needs of the present, these practices deal with a highly political moment in a disinterested manner. In particular, Oh’s Gwangju Story referenced the most problematic

---

38 Albers, Ibid., 3-17.
moment of the uprising that happened in Geumnamro, which had been eliminated before in official history and was being reinvented at the time, brought it to the present tense, and revealed the unsettling condition of postmemories of the movement. While photographs of the 1990s engaged with the changing political landscape and the new representation of the uprising, later projects incorporated a more corporeal reality of how the event had been memorialized and narrated since then and the impact it left on the Korean people.

Suntag Noh’s *Forgetting Machines*  
[Commemoration of Gwangju Uprising and the Surrounding Historical Landscape]

While Oh’s project is in the process of the commemoration, Noh Suntag’s work was made much later. Ten years later, what does it mean to represent the Gwangju Democratic Uprising? Democratic governments reevaluated the event and made efforts to resolve its aftermath, such as compensating the victims and making a special law to uncover the truth of the uprising. Thus, as of the early 2000s, the uprising was often perceived as a concluded past event. *Forgetting Machines* refers to the newly created historical accounts and postmemories created up to the 2000s. Just as *Gwangju Story* is concerned about the status of memory, Noh also focuses on the way the uprising had been remembered and represented and partook in the process of memory construction.

Again, photographs are more than just a faithful reflection of reality as they simultaneously constitute the ongoing discourse of the uprising. Though Sungtag Noh inherits the method of straightforward documentation from the realism tradition, his photographs are representations of representations of the event, often revealing the frame of representation. While the photographs that I discussed earlier are rooted in the partial
memories of the 1990s, *Forgetting Machines* integrates postmemories and historical accounts that have been increasingly formulated by the 2000s, and makes critical responses about them. In this way, Noh, a former journalist, makes his work another case of documentary tradition reinvented under an altering political and cultural context. Noh shows the evolution of Korean photography from realism tradition, from the adoption of a contentious political history to the use of the medium as a means of composing a photographic reality beyond simple recording.

Just as *Gwangju Story* is derivative of the movie *A Petal*, Noh’s *Forgetting Machines* is an offshoot of a public project on commemorating the 35th anniversary of the Gwangju Uprising. Noh was appointed to a project that the May 18 Memorial Foundation (*Oilpal Ginyum Jaedan*) initiated to document commemorative spaces. The foundation asked him to document the spaces in a “positive and future-oriented way,” revealing the foundation’s desire to define the uprising. Instead of joining in the official, triumphal narrative, however, Noh made his own path in addressing how the uprising was situated in history after 27 years.

The title “Forgetting Machines” primarily contradicts the intrinsic nature of photography and the process of reevaluating the uprising in the 1990s. It reminds us that remembering is a strategy for letting go of a particular past. This point resonates with John Mack, who argued that the process of representing the past and making it

---

40 Patrick Hutton, “Recent Scholarship on Memory and History,” *The History Teacher* 33, no.4 (August 2000): 54.
meaningful in the present implies the end of grieving and forgetting. In this respect, the title of the series makes it obvious that it deals with what has been forgotten in the course of remembering the Gwangju Uprising of 1980. In doing this, Noh’s documentary style images repudiate the officially crafted historical discourse. Often abstract, theatrical, and poetic, and having rather loose connections to the event, his documentations cast doubt on photography’s capacity to convey unbiased information and unshakable truth. In this process, they also revealed the constructed nature of historical narratives.

“Dead Faces,” one of the five sections of *Forgetting Machines*, includes re-photographed funerary portraits of those who died during the Gwangju democratization movement. (Fig 2.22) The creation of this series was rooted in customary Korean funerary rites. The photographs also seem to be conventional portraits of individuals. Despite these connections to tradition, these photographs are related to a specific moment in turbulent Korean history and critically address its representation rather than just making simple imprints of reality.

The portraits are located on the side of each burial mound, but it is not common in Korea to place photographic portraits near tombs – in general, they are placed at a funerary hall, where mourners make deep bows in front of the photographs and pray for the souls of the departed. When they are getting old, Korean people prepare funerary photographs in advance for their own funerals. During the uprising, however, it was impossible to follow the usual funerary rites. Photographs were placed on coffins or in front of graves to identify the numerous massacred people. Due to the unexpected nature

---

of their deaths, many of the photos were identification photos.\(^{42}\) (Fig 2.23) After 25 years, the photographs are blurred, distorted, and torn, so that it has become hard to recognize those depicted. In failing to perform their expected function, the photographs recall the fierce violence that the deceased suffered at the time of the tragic event, and furthermore, what they went through after death.

These funerary photographs imply death on multiple levels in a close association with photography’s nature. Intended to be ID photos, they were taken while their subjects were alive and show how alive they were at the time of photographing. In being re-contextualized as funerary portraits, and combined with the cultural meaning of the photographed person inhabiting the funerary image, they became closely attached to death and become objects to recall the deceased.\(^{43}\) This contradictory co-existence of life and death in a photograph is a familiar theme from Roland Barthes’ often-quoted book *Camera Lucida* that declared, “death is the eidos of photography.”\(^{44}\) As a person placed before a lens becomes as object, Barthes compared the process of photographing to a micro-version of death. In photography, the photographic referent “has been there” and yet is immediately separated; hence, there is a superimposition of reality and the past.\(^{45}\) Barthes related the temporal paradox of the photograph to death, and stated, “every photograph is this catastrophe.”\(^{46}\)


\(^{45}\) Ibid, 76-77.

\(^{46}\) Ibid, 96.
Barthes associates the medium of photography with death centering on his mother’s Winter Garden photograph, taken when she was a young girl. Just as the photograph reminded him of his mother’s death, the funerary photographs in Noh’s project remind us of death and are directly affiliated with it. Looking at the obscured and torn faces, we are aware of the violent deaths awaiting the living subjects of the identification photographs. As their deaths took place in a public context, we know that they did not involve only the passage of time. As mentioned earlier, the photographs are also reminders of the cruelty and violence imposed upon them. Looking at them along with the detailed descriptions added by the photographer, we also know how the subjects are going to die.

Noh’s photographs of photographs create another dimension of death: the death of photographs with the passage of time. The funerary photographs connect to the time when they were taken, when the subjects were alive, to the time after death. Noh’s photographs do the same, taking original photographic portraits as references. They attest to the existence of the photographs before Noh’s lens at the time of shooting, and their future disintegration. (Fig 2.24-2.25) Two photographs of the image of Young-sun Ryu, who passed away during the uprising from a bullet wound in the face, were taken at an interval of five years and literally demonstrate this concept: Ryu’s photograph in 2006 is already damaged. Supposedly depicting the upper body, only his partial face is identifiable. Reflecting the passage of time, weather, and perhaps indifference that it experienced after 1980, the portrait exemplifies the death of image itself. Repeating Barthes, we know that the photograph is going to perish, as has been the case for the last 26 years. The 2011 image proves this: all we can recognize from the severely impaired
image might be the tip of his beret, the contour of which is incorporated into the mottled surface. In both images, the materiality of the surface overpowers the iconic function: In the former, despite the remaining presence of the deceased, the texture, cracks, and veining of the photo’s surface are the dominant visual elements. The later image of Ryu looks much worse: due to extreme deterioration, it has become entirely abstract. The palpable sense of there-ness – what a photograph is generally expected to provide – is confirmed by the sheer corporeality of the photographs and is how Noh’s photographs of photographs show the deaths of the funerary photographs in the cemetery.

The deaths of the funerary photographs and their photographic documentation, like Oh’s *Gwangju Story*, are associated with the memory construction of the uprising. Just as Oh’s photographs, which are empty of cohesive narratives, suggest the absence of a photo-historical record and an unstable memory of the uprising in the moment, the retaken funerary photographs can be read in a similar context. The damaged and blurred conditions of the images not only imply the suffering of the victims and the time they endured since their deaths but might also suggest the unstable status of a specific part of the postmemory of the historical event as these photographs themselves become postmemory. If individual faces had been faded amidst the construction of collective memory, what does this represent? What encouraged the photographer to shape postmemory by documenting the ongoing deaths of the individual photographs and commemoration of the uprising?

The death of the photographs achieves a symbolic meaning in association with their location at an old Mangwoldong cemetery. Once a small hill where the military took victims’ corpses in garbage trucks and dumped them, it became a huge modern tourist
site when the new cemetery was built in 1997. Jeehey Kim associated the meaning of Noh’s photographs in this way: she wrote that this series questions what memorialization can achieve, mentioning that films on the uprising mystify the event and emphasize the sacrifices of the participants, often ending up creating a spectacle for later generations. As her article pointed out, the photographs are associated with the way the uprising has been contextualized in the democratized nation. Even since the civilian government came to power, Noh saw, not enough truth has been uncovered. The state took leadership over the commemoration, rewrote its own crime, and crafted relevant memories and histories in line with its political needs. Over time, most civic claims seemed to have been answered, and the uprising was historicized. In response, Noh addresses how the uprising has been represented and memorialized after two decades of remaining issues.

Philosopher Edward S. Casey articulated the ambivalent trait of public memory in that it is attached to a past, and at the same time acts to ensure a future of further remembering an event. According to him, people speak in terms of the current version of public memory of an event, but this is always subject to revision, and speaks to each era individually. This explains how the public memory of the Gwangju Uprising was fundamentally revised by the late 1990s to reflect the current era, and how this affected how it is going to be remembered in the future. With the achievement of democratization – represented by the restoration of direct presidential elections in 1987, a return to civilian rule in 1993, and the peaceful change of government to Dae-jung Kim, a native of Gwangju and a victim of the uprising, in 1998 – and the series of trials of former

48 Kim, Ibid.
49 Atsumi and Noh, Ibid., 214-21.
50 Casey, Ibid., 17-44.
military presidents Doo-hwan Chun and Tae-woo Roh regarding their responsibility in the Gwangju Uprising, the movement had been legitimized and sanctified, and became part of the newly constructed national democratization narrative. Gradually, the movement was perceived as a milestone along the journey to democracy.51

Accordingly, the uprising, Gwangju city, and the people who were part of it acquired a totally different image, which has driven the dominant perception of the event ever since. For the first time in 1997, May 18 was celebrated as a national commemoration day (Gukka Ginyeomil) and a memorial service was held in the new 5.18 cemetery. As the 5.18 movement could be freely discussed and commemorated like this, there was a weakening of antigovernment sentiment and political fervor. New citizens’ groups, which do not represent direct victims and bereaved family, diversified the Gwangju Uprising narrative and diluted the privileged status of the direct victims’ groups, and the voice of oppositional minjung (“people” or “masses”) subjectivity that led the movement in the 1980s faded out.52 The tone of the 5.18 anniversary commemoration became celebratory, almost like a civic festival. As the 5.18 Foundation told Noh, the new emphasis was on looking forward and celebrating the achievement of democracy rather than remembering the painful struggle of the past. Gwangju was envisioned as an Asian “mecca of democracy” and efforts to globalize the “Gwangju spirit” as something equivalent to the Paris Commune and the Holocaust followed.

51 Lewis, “Gwangju in the 1990s,” 103.
52 The Minjung movement arose in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the repressive authoritarian regime. It affected every part of the country and sparked social movements such as the labor movement and antigovernment political struggles. The Gwangju Uprising stimulated a revolutionary fervor in the entire movement. Namhee Lee, “The South Korean Student Movement: Undongkweon as a Counterpublic Sphere,” in Korean Society, 132 – 164.
Victims were applauded as patriot martyrs, and Gwangju citizens became heroes rather than communist mobs.

The new era of democratic governments produced revised public memories. This change is marked by state-appropriated commemoration that honors the Gwangju legacy. As Casey wrote, due to its intrinsic mutability, public memory requires spatial anchorage to stabilize. Commemorative places play the role of embodying the current version of memories and fixing otherwise provisional memories. The newly constructed cemetery and other monuments do this for the uprising: they enact reassessed memories and histories and perpetuate them in concrete form. As Pierre Nora said, without concrete placements, memories would have no referent in reality. As the state structured the national recognition of the uprising, its narrative proceeded to commemorate its legacy and to celebrate the triumph of democracy in an abstracted way.

The newly constructed public memories of the uprising were materialized by monuments that carry abstract subjects such as yearning for democracy, sharply contrasting with what Noh’s photographs of individuals faces stand for. The official narrative eclipsed collective memories consisting of the struggles and suffering of individual participants and victims. Deteriorating funerary photographs can be synecdoche of fading public memories under the state-driven commemoration and create postmemories of the uprising that coexist with the official narrative.

What is problematic in the state-driven recognition corresponds with what scholars such as James E. Young addressed with critical stances about state-driven

---

53 Casey, Ibid.
memorialization projects. In “The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today,” Young questioned the way that states incorporate their crimes into the national memorial landscape and remember their own barbarity. He noted the rise of “counter-monuments” in vanishing or negative form in contemporary Germany to commemorate the Holocaust.56 (Fig 2.26) One also might recall an earlier example of Maya Lin’s 1982 *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, consisting of two 247-foot-long black granite walls with the names of more than 50,000 American dead and missing from the war carved onto the surface. The V-shaped walls, located below grade at a 125-degree angle, reject conventional heroic monuments and mark a newer form of memorial practice.57

Both the contemporary artists presented in Young’s article and Lin recalled events that they did not experience and suggested non-conventional forms of memorial works. To support this shift, Young quoted historians such as Martin Broszat, who asserted that monuments coarsen historical understanding and bury events beneath layers of national myths, to question if an abstract, self-referential monument can commemorate events outside of itself.58 According to Young, monumental forms only divest nations of the

---

56 The three works discussed in this article are as follows. Jochen and Esther Gerz’s *Harburg Monument Against Fascism* (1986) is a twelve-meter high square pillar made of hollow aluminum plated with a soft, dark lead. The artists installed an inscription that encourages visitors to add their names on the surface of the work. Covered with memorial graffiti, the monument gradually was lowered into the ground, leaving only the top surface visible. There is also Nobert Radermacher’s memorial in Neukölln, Berlin (1989), which existed temporally when a written text with the historical details of the site, a former satellite concentration camp, was projected onto trees, houses, fences, and pavements for a few minutes and Horst Hoheisel’s negative form monument to the Aschrott Fountain in Kassel (1985). Hoheisel recreated a pyramid-shaped sculpture that existed before the Nazis demolished it, and sank it down into the ground water. James E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no.2 (Winter 1992): 267-296.

57 Russell Rodrigo, “Preserving Memory/Displacing Memory,” 59-68.

58 Ibid. I also refer to Young Min Moon, who discussed large-scale monuments in Korea that memorialize historical events such as the Gwangju Uprising in comparison with the way contemporary art represents the Holocaust in reference to Young’s article. Young Min Moon, “Violence and Modernity: The Re-Inscription
obligation to remember, relieve viewers of their memory-burden, and facilitate one’s
desire to forget traumatic events. On the other hand, non-traditional monuments provoke
history rather than console and make a contrast with the war memorials of another age.
Their use of impermanent form reminds visitors of the mortality of the monuments as
well as their own mortality.

The comparison parallel how Noh’s photographs contrast with the large-scale
monuments of Gwangju Uprising. When discussing the reshaping of the uprising in the
official discourse and the shift of main subjectivity that led the process, scholars
commonly place special importance on the opening of the new cemetery. According to
them, this is the space that best reveals, both graphically and symbolically, the changes in
the image of Gwangjuites and the uprising narrative. Since its opening in 1997, the
government has held a civic memorial service there, the 5.18 Democratization Movement
Memorial Service (*5.18 Minjuhwa Undong Ginjeomsik*), eclipsing a Confucian-style
death-day ancestral ritual (*chesa*) by the Bereaved Families Association at the old
cemetery.⁵⁹ (Fig 2.27- 2.28) This shift of the main subject is reflected in the new May
18th National Cemetery as well, which includes statues and memorials in the traditional
large-scale format. The large panels on the plaza portray bas-relief scenes from May
1980, and two massive larger-than-life statues on the plaza foreground represent the
democratic struggle and abstract ideals and homogenize individual identities.

Furthermore, the new cemetery was officially assigned as “a stern historical reminder that

---

⁵⁹ This traditional ceremony not only included Confucian elements but also traditional folk culture and
shamanism that *Minjung* movement utilized in rituals of resistance and political protest. Lewis,
we must never allow injustice and tyranny to flourish in this land again” and its monuments represented as “enduring symbols of democracy in the hearts of people all over the world who struggle for freedom, democracy, and justice.”

The monumental scale that evokes the government power behind the memorialization literally overshadows the old cemetery. The old cemetery has become the symbolic center for mourning and memorialization, an emblematic political battleground against the military government for a different truth than the one long claimed by official histories, now is left with empty coffins and mementos of the dead.

As Gi-wook Shin pointed out, the situation has created conflicts between groups: some people, including some of the victims, question the government-led commemoration as abandoning the true spirit of the uprising. They have visited the old cemetery as a form of passive protest to refuse the replacement of previous memories of the uprising.

Under these conditions, Noh’s photographs depict the replaced memories and their corresponding places and fill in the other side of postmemory. Refusing to participate in crafting the state-led public memory of a cohesive, triumphal narrative, Noh presents us individual faces, describes their identities and evokes memories of the historical event. This caused the foundation to reject his photographs. (Fig 2.29) In one of Noh’s photographs, the face of Byoung-bok Ahn is almost indiscernible. The blurred photograph reveals a vague silhouette of the deceased, and vapors, probably on the glass cover of the photo frame, further obscure the image. The anonymous man is identified to

---


the viewer by his name, the dates of his birth and death, and the cause of his death – a full skull fracture and left arm mutilation.

In this way, Noh’s photographs imprint the tragic event in our memories with concrete factual elements rather than abstracted ideals. The deaths of the subjects, the funerary photographs, and the old cemetery that the damaged photographs represent not only resulted from the military regime that distorted the meaning of the uprising but also from the entire process of national commemoration and commodification under democratic governments. Presenting the fading faces of the victims to the viewers, Noh’s photographs become painful reminders of what monumental memorialization obliterates as it declares what to remember, and make themselves memories to remember and to pass onto the next generation. In this way, his photographs engage the viewer with the reality of the uprising.

(Fig 2.30-2.31) Thus, when Noh juxtaposes the retaken funerary photographs with images of Buddha statues at Unju Temple in nearby Hwasun country, which are known to be more than 500 years old, their formal resemblance encourages the viewer to link what the Buddha symbolizes to the deaths.63 Just like the funerary portraits are connected to Korean funerary customs, the images of Buddha point to the far-off past of Korea passed on to the present. From their dialogue on the Korean culture that has been maintained for a long time, informed viewers such as Koreans, can drive meaning without difficulty. The damaged photographic portraits might not perform an iconic function like the decomposed faces of the Buddhist statues. However, as the Buddha statues still carry out their spiritual functions of objects of devotion and meditation, the

63 Atsumi and Noh, Ibid., 221.
photographs of the decaying portraits still refer to the victims and turn into reminders of the tragedy and its memories. The statues specifically represent Maitreya, a future Buddha who has not arrived yet. What the photographer refers to by “has not come yet (Oji Aneun)” – the title of the section - might be the symbolic death of the victims that has not arrived yet even after national recognition of the uprising.

This sort of interpretation is supported by traditional Korean conceptions of the ancestors and funeral rites, which are affiliated with Korean shamanism. According to Korean shamanism, there are two types of spirits: good or benevolent ancestors and evil spirits or ghosts. Unnatural deaths, such as suicide and accidents, are known to produce bad spirits, which wander around the world and harm people. The type of spirit that a person is to become, however, depends more on holding the appropriate rituals and demonstrations of sincerity and good faith by the decedents, which explains the development of the complicated system of rituals in Korea. If the victims’ souls still wander around, applying this idea, it is likely a result of their not having gone through the appropriate rites than of the tragic nature of their deaths.

The meandering spirits of the dead also relate to the symbolic death that Slavoj Žižek differentiates from actual death. Žižek argues that when the dead do not have proper funeral rites, they return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt. The persistence of the dead beyond physical expiration is particularly pertinent to cases that cannot find their proper place in existing tradition. Žižek takes the traumatic events of the

---

64 The Future Buddha, Maitreya, according to the Buddhist theory, is supposed to descend to earth in the future to enlighten ordinary people and teach the dharma, cosmic law and order. “Maitreya: Buddhism,” https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maitreya-Buddhism.  
20th century such as the Holocaust and the Gulag (Glavnoye Upravleniye Ispravitelnykh Lagerykh, which means “Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps,” in Russian) as appropriate cases in which to apply this concept; in the Korean context, I find the Gwangju Uprising to be a comparable instance. That is, those who passed away in Gwangju did not receive a decent symbolic burial since the trauma of their deaths has not yet been integrated into historical memory and the memories are still contentious.

Participating in the memory construction of unfinished history, the photographs relate to persisting traditional culture, such as the funerary rituals and Buddhism that have been part of Korean culture for a long time. As both are straightforward documentations, the formal similarity between Noh’s photographs of Buddha statues and Myungduck Joo’s photographs taken in Gyeungju, which I discuss at the end of Chapter 1, is undeniable. While Noh’s photographs share certain qualities with photographs from the past, his photographs update the perspective on the tradition and the use of photography. Instead of crafting a timeless Korean identity, cultural motifs are used to reference a specific history and create a dialogue between it and the present. When juxtaposed with the victims’ faces, the Buddhas’ obscured faces and cut-off heads evoke tragedy without abstracting political issues as photographs of the past did.

[The Representation of Representation: Photography That Documents Mediated History]

As well as the way that traditional culture is appropriated, Noh’s images are rooted in a different notion of photography from the way the previous generation

---

66 The Gulag refers to the system of Soviet labor camps and accompanying detention and transit camps and prisons. It imprisoned political prisoners and criminals from the 1920s to the mid-1950s.
perceived and utilized the medium. Just like Gwangju Story, Forgetting Machines is filled with carefully constructed photographs, and the photographer arranged the whole structure of the series. Consisting of seemingly neutral black and white photographs, the narrative of the uprising is disrupted with an uneasy, sometimes uncanny tension that hinders the viewer’s absorption. In this respect, Noh’s photographs do not depart from realism tradition in which photographs are supposed to be transparent imprints of reality. Existing literature shows a limited understanding of Noh’s work. A few articles that deal with Forgetting Machines place more emphasis on the circumstances under which the series was created, with little analysis on the photographs and the medium itself.

Basically, the literature perceives the photographs are simple reflections of the historicizing process of the Gwangju Uprising, which corresponds with the notion of photography as representing “reality without deception.” Furthermore, as Noh’s photographs are concerned with addressing a political history and its memorialization, current literature analyzes Noh’s photographs as an attempt to intervene in that process. According to them, the photographer intends to “heal” suffering with photographic representations of historical trauma, or that the series is full of derision about the present status of the uprising, criticizes nationalist politics that heroize individuals’ sacrifices, and carry a strong message that forgetting should be overcome. While acknowledging the importance of the contextualization of this project, these studies fail


to recognize the photographer’s use of the medium, which is the core of this project. Unlike what historian Gwangsu Lee wrote, it is not that Noh “intentionally refuses to faithfully record and to represent the situation in a journalistic way” either, to make counter-images of the photographs that newspapers and newsmagazines publish every year in May.70

Noh takes the documentary mode and utilizes it in a more complicated way. While he primarily makes literal documents, the photographs do not arbitrate the reality around the uprising. (Fig 2.32-2.33) Like other art photography in the era that recalls the present of the past with non-iconic scenes, such as photographic portraits of a bereaved family taken where their deceased was killed or buried 31 years ago, and staged photographs at the historic sites of the uprising in which people create scenes that might be irrelevant to the memories that these places carry, Forgetting Machines is an artistic representation of the historical event. As the funerary portraits are actually portraits of portraits, Noh’s faithful documents are meant to twist the medium’s documentary capacity. Subjective intervention is involved in the disinterested surface and the incapacity of the medium’s unshakable objectivity to reveal this process.

For instance, one photograph of the series carefully distances the viewer and makes looking at it uncomfortable. (Fig 2.34) It portrays a mourning of a woman in the new cemetery with minute details in fine tone. The woman in a white hanbok, Korean traditional dress typically worn at funerals or ancestral rites, sobs over a tombstone, and depicted from behind. It might appear to be a typical press image taken on an annual memorial day, but Noh exposes the frame involved in creating a photograph, and reminds

70 “현장 사설의 충실한 기록 혹은 저널리즘적 사실 재현을 의도적으로 거부하였다.” Ibid., 125.
us of the process of producing a particular public memory. Looking at the image closely, one notices that Noh’s camera is too far from the woman for us to feel her grief. The camera looks her down from above as if the ground is tilting forward, and the lack of spatial depth fails to show the broader scene of the cemetery. Accordingly, the spot in which she is located seems to be enclosed by other tombs and white condolence flowers placed on them, and the presence of the people around her locks her in place.

Besides its unconventional composition, the photographer arranged a crucial element in the image that raises the question of photographic truth. There are shadows of people, probably photojournalists, photographing the woman from behind to capture her dramatic gesture of holding the tombstone and crying with her body leaning against it. Their silhouettes and busy gestures sharply contrast with the grieving woman, exposing that she is becoming a spectacle to consume by the camera’s gaze. One can also find lower bodies of several people on the upper part of the image, assumed to be photographers as well. With the shallow depth of spatial dimension and distractive composition, it is hard for the viewer to easily absorb the scene. The simple documentation of the scene becomes theatrical and uncanny.

(Fig 2.35-2.36) What pairs with the images is photographs that can easily be found in newspapers around May 18 every year. Typically, the camera captures the bereaved family or friends grieving for their lost one at a close distance, evoking the viewer to feel their emotion. Often, brief information on where they are located, such as a headstone on which the date of birth and death are inscribed, gives one a clue about how to empathize with those depicted. A similar scene taken from another vantage point, in a cubist photograph by Noh, however, emphasizes the conditions under which the
photographic representation took place, refusing the idea of photography as a provider of a single truth.\footnote{Fred Ritchen, “Towards a Hyperphotography,” in Picturing Atrocity, 261-263.}

Noh’s technique reveals that a photograph is not an extension of reality but a construction, and recalls German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht, who came up with the notion of “alienation effect.” This idea is a central one in Brecht’s theory. It involves techniques to distance the audience members from involvement and to adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism. According to theory of this alienation effect, or A-effect, the stage and the auditorium must be set up to avoid a hypnotic display. They must display the artificiality of the performance: theater instruments that can evoke empathy and manipulate the audience’s emotions – realistic sets, naturalistic lighting, enthusiastic acting, and an imaginary fourth wall that creates the illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality without an audience – are exposed to the audience and their illusionistic function is ruled out. The achievement of the alienation effect is that it encourages people to question their preconceptions, to eventually look at what is familiar and ordinary in a new and different way. Making things strange, it inspires people to think intellectually, instead of with uncritical identification.\footnote{“Bertolt Brecht: Short Description of a New Technique in Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect,” in The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader, eds. Michael Huxley and Noel Wits (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 93-101, Stephen Unwin, “In theory: The Alienation Effect,” in The Complete Brecht Toolkit (London: Nick Hern Books, 2014), 47-49.}

With both referring to the same historic episode, Forgetting Machines makes for an interesting dialogue with Gwangju Story. While Oh’s reenactment blurs the boundary between the past and the present and disguises the fictitious nature of the staged scenes in the deadpan photographs, Noh documents unmediated reality and demonstrates its
constructedness in the present tense. If liberalized Korean society has enabled more
discussions and reevaluations of traumatic history such the Gwangju Uprising, how do
photographic works made within the interval of a decade reflect that? Since the
inauguration of civilian government, the uprising has been constantly redefined based
upon current political needs, as is happening again in South Korea as of 2018.

To discuss the current political context briefly, in 2017, President Geun-hye Park,
daughter of Chung-hee Park who started the long history of military dictatorship in 1961,
was impeached for corruption. This was partially in response to public pressure in the
form of candlelight vigils in which more than 15 million people participated for six
months.73 Nine years the rule of the conservative Saenuri Party (Saemuridang) ended and
the Democratic Party, the Minjoo Party of Korea (Deobureominjudang), which had
succeeded in the previous liberal governments of Dae-jung Kim (1998-2003) and Moo-

Since the inauguration of the new government, efforts to reevaluate past struggles
towards democratization followed, as they had in the 1990s. The 5-18 Special Law to
probe the truth of the uprising is being processed again as of 2018, and the retelling of
struggles towards democratization is popular in the cultural realm. A movie called Taxi
Driver (2017) that deals with the Gwangju Uprising drew over 12 million viewers, and
another movie, 1987, When the Day Comes (2018), which focuses on the massive civil
protests in 1987 that ended the military dictatorship attracted more than 5 million
viewers. These trends highlight the process of establishing the current government within

73 Park, Suji and Bang Junho, “Chotbuljipoe Nujeoginwon 1500maneul Dolphaehada 촛불집회 누적인원 1500 만을 돌파하다 (Number of Participants in Candlelight Vigils Reaches 15 million).”
the history of struggle for democratization. These examples prove that the political climate affects the production of discourse and postmemories of a specific moment in history.

In discussing Gwangju Story, as it was made when the reevaluation of the uprising was about to accelerate, I associate the lack of concrete discourse on the uprising at the time of the mid-1990s with the void of photographs. Sociologist Geunsik Chung supports this point as well. He says that it took 20 years for an era of novels and movies to finally arrive. The genres are supposed to incorporate fictitious elements, according to Chung, but the truth was too somber to add much imagination, and there were too many issues to consider in adapting it in the right way.74 As in Chung’s claim, documentary photographs – such as Changsung Lee’s – came first to disclose the tragedy, and it took more time for art photography to digest the event and turn it into artwork with creative interpretations.

Noh’s photographs can be analyzed in the context of 2005 when the series was created. In Oh’s case, the past and the present intertwine in a fictional documentary format that does not carry a clear narrative. On the other hand, later photographs could incorporate postmemories of the uprising created under the democratized conditions, as Kim and Kwon’s photographs that depicted symbolic sites of the uprising or people whose lives were directly related to the ramification of the event.

Noh’s Forgetting Machines also includes more concrete narratives of the uprising, reflecting public discourses and cultural representations that had been created by that time. In accordance with Brecht’s idea, Noh makes ordinary scenes unfamiliar

74 Chung and Kim, Ibid., 196.
and urges one to question their meanings. (Fig 2.37-2.38) A uniformed soldier threatens a citizen kneeling on the street in one image, and a young man in a high school drill uniform kneels down and lifts his arms over his head to surrender to the armed soldiers in another. (Fig 2.39-2.40) The photos recall circulated images of brutal repression and a narrative of citizens’ struggles against the military power. Considering that the military regime did not allow circulation of this sort of images, it can be said Noh’s images reflect a belated expansion of discussion and representation of the event over the course of time. Like Gwangju Story, they are based on recreations of the uprising, but do not hide the fabricated nature of the scenes. While the camera’s low angle and proximity to the figures disclose the photographer’s intervention, the fierce lighting highlights the central scene and the composition exposes citizens and spectators who surround reenactments as part of the annual commemoration. The photographs, which embody the alienation effect, become reminders of historical narratives and public memories as constructions.

Making the familiar into the unfamiliar, the photographer encourages us to critically address the phenomenon. As the commemorating process is considered to be complete to certain extent, the Gwangju Uprising has become detached from reality, and its representation repeats the crafted history. (Fig 2.41) A simulation of the protest supports this analysis: a poorly made brick wall and a photo wall of Docheong (the Provincial Hall, or South Jeolla Provincial Capitol Building) and the fountain, the major sites of the uprising, provide a set for souvenir photographs during the commemorative period. Performers, who are visitors of the event, strike a pose and complete the tacky scene: dressed in uniform and a headband that says “Gwangju Citizen,” they aim a gun or hold a loudspeaker behind the brick wall. While the actual event has been displaced by
the reenactment, which is based on historical accounts, photographic documents, cultural products, and so on, Noh represents the representation again. He includes a woman that photographs the performance at the opposite side of the frame and further confirms the contrived nature of the scene.

As the official commemoration mediates the representation in Gwangju city, nothing looks authentic. As awkward as the stage is, this photograph illustrates the reality of how the uprising is memorialized. In the celebratory tone that replaced the previous discourse describing the uprising as the opposition between the military and innocent citizens, the historic moment has become a spectacle to play with. It is no longer about creating discourse and seeking ways to commemorate the uprising, but about consuming the established ones. Unlike what the previously mentioned articles argue, however, Noh neither overtly disparages the current commemoration nor claims to offer ways to reform it. He faithfully documents reality but does not assign definitive meaning, instead evoking questions. With a non-definitive tone, the photographer keeps his distance from the scenes and impedes the viewer from absorption in the story depicted.

The photographs in which Noh represents the traces of the uprising, though they look metaphorical, are not so different from the other images in this series. Contrary to the scenes of the commemorations but similar to the funerary photographs, his focus is on spaces that hold memories and histories of the uprising, such as a courtroom, a prison, the interior of a building, and a plaza with a fountain. The former Docheong (the Provincial Hall) was the headquarters of the civil resistance and the last stand of the Gwangju Citizens’ Army before the city was forcibly retaken by the Korean army; Provincial Hall Square, which contains a fountain and a plaza in front of the building, is a symbolic site
where dissidents held large rallies and read the declaration of the state of affairs at the beginning of the uprising. Sangmudae is the Martial Law Branch Headquarters for North and South Jeolla province, and was used for the detention, beating, and torture of arrested protesters and for the military trials during the course of the uprising.75

(Fig 2.42-2.46) Despite their direct connections to the event, however, these images do not tell us to what happened there in 1980. Devoid of specific contents, the images are strangely quiet. They carry no traces of the historic event or any drama with which to sympathize, and it is even hard from some images to identify which place they depict. Just as Noh refuses to appropriate the celebratory tone of the official commemoration and documents fading faces in the old cemetery, he is interested in just evoking history that these places maintain and leaves uncertainty for the viewers. The deliberate neutral blankness is how Noh narrates the uprising in *Forgetting Machines*.

While they are open for interpretation, the sites have unequal relationships to reality. Juxtaposed with each other, the neutralized style offsets the differences, reflecting the contingency of photographic meaning. (Fig 2.47-2.48) For instance, Sangmudae moved to nearby Jangseong County in 1994, and its former site in Gwangju has been developed into a new downtown district. Soon, May 18 Liberty Park was built near the original location of Sangmudae to accommodate facilities such as the reconstructed courtroom and jail so that visitors can experience and imagine the suffering of the arrested protesters. In that they bear no actual witness to the tragic incident of 1980, curator Sujong Song wrote that the politics of commemoration forge fake scenery and hollow memory. In a critical stance, she compares the relationship between the now-

75 Yea, “Cultural Politics of Place in Gwangju City and South Jeolla Province,” 12.
vanished original Sangmudae and the newly built replica to the two sets of Mangwoldong cemeteries, saying that the site no longer speaks for itself since it is not where the event actually happened. It is only a lifeless space, according to Song, decorated to learn about and honor the Gwangju Uprising.\(^{76}\)

Apart from the fact that these sites play a role in cultivating indirect experiences and mediating postmemories of the later generations, what should be noted is that Song only focused on the specific site depicted and dismissed analyzing how the photographer observed the sites related to the uprising in the entire series. Whether they are actual sites or fabricated spaces, all of the locations seem to be devoid of any trace of history. Documenting them in a disinterested manner, Noh does not assign explicit interpretations to specific spaces. Reluctant to capture crucial moments that unfold in front of the camera or to convey direct information, the photographer rather exposes how photographs can fabricate reality, casting doubt on the entire landscape of the uprising. The unstable images of the uprising, in this way, not only address the way public memories are crafted with photographs but also evoke critical discussion and participate in constructing ever-shifting memories.

As Linda S. Lewis writes, the changing political context opened a space for the competing claims and diverse readings of 5.18. It caused the construction of contradicting narratives and collective memories over time.\(^{77}\) Created with the passage of time, *Gwangju Story* and *Forgetting Machines* run parallel with this current. From the lack of concrete discourse to the institutionalized memorialization, these photographic works

\(^{76}\) Song, Ibid. 19-20.

\(^{77}\) Linda S. Lewis, “Remembering Gwangju in Post-Minjung Korea,” in *Laying Claim to the Memory of May*: 160-162.
have close connections to how the Gwangju Uprising is positioned in Korean history. As has been noted, Noh’s *Forgetting Machines* integrated more corporeal information, in line with contemporary Korean photography that increasingly focused on the uprising and partook in the evolution of the discourse and representation of it. From what caused the changed subjectivity of the commemoration to the representation of the event in the present, this series documents non-fabricated reality to reveal its constructed nature.

Despite the differences, the photographs by Oh and Noh represent how Korean photography dealt with a past event that could not be properly documented or related at the time of its happening, as its significance is reinvented under changed contexts. As straightforward documentations, they both are far from making reliable references to or symbolizing the event. In refusing to display iconic scenes and to recreate history for the viewer, their uncertain images instead urge our critical understanding of the uprising as a history, the representation of which always needs to be contested and rewritten. Beyond the medium’s belief in transparency and making the process of composing a photograph visible, their renewed use of documentary practices not only undermines the unwavering relationship between photographic documentation and truth but also contributes to challenging the imposition of a singular narrative that defines the event as a closed past.

Furthermore, it is how the photographers joined the ongoing construction of memories of Gwangju Uprising as continuum of the present. Opening up its meaning within the broad context of a democratized nation, they remind us of the need to resist a facile historicization. Having a close dialogue with society and merging corporeal accounts of a specific moment, they account for photographs that expand the scope to the
entire history of postcolonial South Korea and reconsiders it in a more aggressive manner. These photographs will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Three
Contested Nation: A Deconstruction of Masculinized National History

(Fig 3.1) Five men in military uniform stand in a karaoke room. Contrary to the serious faces they make, one’s eyes are distracted by the intense red wall and floor, a pink covered song-list book, a red and a yellow tambourine, a blinking light ball, monitors that display lyrics, a karaoke machine, and speakers arranged in a disorienting way. (Fig 3.2) In the next image, they are singing in exaggerated gestures. The man on the far right is staring forward, displaying his shirtless upper body and calves under rolled up military pants. Another man on the left, with his pants pulled down, exposes his underwear and part of his legs. The deliberate atmosphere they make in the former image is now gone, and they are immersed in singing and dancing. Familiar to Korean eyes, these photographs, 5.16 (2005) are recreations of a photograph of The May 16th Military Coup d’Etat (1961), a historic event that changed the modern history of Korea. Under the lead of Major General Chung-Hee Park who formed the Military Revolutionary Committee, 3,500 troops overthrew the Second Republic. This was the beginning of Park’s 18 years of military dictatorship, which played a crucial role in postcolonial Korean history.

(Fig 3.3) The original image depicting Park and his accomplices after the coup was published in newspapers and became a symbol of the coup and his regime. Just as Park and his allies termed the coup “a military revolution” and justified it in that they were saviors of the nation, stopping chaotic social disorder and political drift rather than usurping power,\(^1\) the pressing and serious atmosphere of the photograph emphasized the gravity of the event. The black and white photograph with the intimidating gestures of the

figures and the military setting sums up Park’s violent regime. With army trucks behind them, the soldiers look down at their surroundings with their hands on their sides. They are suited up and armed, and give threatening looks. Park takes the center of the frame: folding his arms behind his back, he has a blank expression and hides his emotions behind sunglasses. By relocating the coup to a shabby karaoke room, Joseub’s photographs parody the original image, and furthermore, what Park’s junta symbolizes in Korean history.

This chapter focuses on the relationship between male bodies, masculinity and national history and identity, which is best exemplified in contemporary photographic practices. Looking at photographs that deal with these notions, this chapter will look at how these photographs create a dialogue with the enduring past, which has been crafted with masculinist ideas. The regimes appropriated nationalistic rhetoric and highlighted the military activities of male warriors in constructing Korean history, tradition, and overall identity. Thus, just like the reformation of the identity of the Gwangju Uprising when transition to a different political situation was under way, the nation’s masculinized identity also underwent a major reconsideration. Photography participated in the process to deconstruct this particular facet and to produce updated interpretations with expanded photographic expressions.

A Masculinized Nation and its Reassessment in Contemporary Photography

As Judith Butler puts it, the body is not a passive medium, but embodies cultural and historical possibilities, and through bodily acts meaning is performed or enacted.² In

analyzing the representation of the male body and masculinity, I refer to the notion of masculinity not as an essential, fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals, but a social practices that interplay with the corporeal body.\(^3\) Also, in this chapter, the medium of photography is perceived in a performative way: referring to TJ Demon’s notion, performative photography mediates the whole process of “creating” the effect it describes, beyond a simple depiction of what already existed. While the photographs might be associated with the convention of portrait and performance, the medium enables a malleable construction of the subject; the body, as a transitory and incomplete being, materializes in front of the camera.\(^4\) The photographers that I discuss in this chapter utilize the male body, which personifies Korean masculinities in cultural and social practice, as a primary means to realize masculinity for the camera, and to reconsider history and the changed notion of the nation.

Joseub’s reconstruction of historical moments is readily related to the changed social and political landscape. Youngsook Choi discussed three contemporary Korean photographers who do similar work, including Jo, in her article. They perform the roles of important historical figures to subvert heroic and patriotic narratives of Korean history and to rewrite the propagated history. As Choi pointed out, the nationalist discourse of the president Chung-hee Park’s military government invented particular figures and glorified specific values through them to support the regime. Three contemporary photographers in this article satirize this construction of national heroes.

\(^3\) Raewyn W. Connell, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 836.

While Joseub, with his mockery and satirical reconstruction of heroic figures, trivializes the weight of history written by a military regime and recalls a violent history, two female photographers, Sanghee Song and Hwayong Kim are interested in revealing a gendered division and hierarchy between men and women in the construction of postcolonial Korea. (Fig 3.4-3.6) To make it visible, and sometimes to subvert it, they perform as heroines from Korean history such as Saimdang Shin, mother of Yulgok Lee, a master of Neo-Confucian philosophy and reformation policies in the sixteenth century; Young Soo Yuk, the first lady and the president Park’s wife who was mistakenly assassinated instead of her husband on Korean Independence Day; and Kwan Sun Yu, a national heroine for her participation in the resistance movement against Japanese Imperialism.

The military regime crafted a nationalistic rhetoric through patriotism and patriarchal ideology. It imposed the sacrifice of individual freedom and democracy in the name of national defense and economic progress. Women, in the process, were reduced to the subordinated status of a “national womb;” disciplined to be chase, virtuous mothers; or identified dependent upon the men around them.

The point is well reflected in the way the figures are represented and the considerable resemblances among them. Shin lived in the 16th century Joseon Dynasty, and Yu had a short life between 1902 and 1920 during the Japanese colonial era. Yuk, on the other hand, was born in 1925 and was assassinated in 1974. Despite the time differences, they are dressed in traditional attire, hanbok, and neat hairstyle, and show mild smiles, visualizing timeless qualities expected from women to support nationalism.
While Song exposes and exaggerates the qualities imposed upon women, Kim overthrows the historical and political burden given to Yu.⁵

While Choi aptly pointed out the gendered process of nation-building of post-1945 Korea in Song and Kim’s work, an expanded discussion is possible from the way Joseub involves his male body and violates conventional notions of masculinity. As I will analyze in this chapter, he uses his body to address this masculinized national identity and official history, and to destabilize it. While photographers were prohibited from making direct commentary on social and political reality, as the photographs in the first chapter demonstrate, the South Korean government crafted its national identity within the domains of history, education, and so on to support its nationalist rhetoric, which eventually contributed to legitimizing its authoritarian rule in the name of building a self-sustaining and economically stable country.

When the nation seized an opportunity for an abrupt transition to a democratic status, one of the following changes was a reconsideration of its history. The Gwangju Uprising, for instance, was reevaluated as a catalyst for the democratization of Korea. As I discuss in full detail in Chapter 2, this shift in the perspectives of historical narratives accompanied the government forces in rewriting history. Art photography made corresponding responses that did not necessarily correlate with the official account. On the other hand, some photographers dealt with what constitutes the core of the nation’s history and identity, such as the masculinized nature of its identity and the nationalistic discourse that has facilitated it. I examine these cases in this chapter, focusing on how

they have been crafted, maintained, and challenged, or nevertheless persisted, as it is one of the best ways to see how Korean photography developed in a dialogue with all of the transformations happening in the country.

Nationalism, in principle, claims an independent nation that is a unified, unique community with an essential culture, tradition, and history. South Korea particularly highlighted its racial homogeneity and crafted the image of a timeless Korean culture that had persisted throughout thousands of years of history. It was based on this nationalist idea that realism photography shaped its allegedly unique identity, supposedly different from Japanese models and maintained itself regardless of the nation’s socio-political reality. In the same vein, what was mobilized was an emphasis on elements such as folklore and religious practices - Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism – as “the essence of Korean culture.” As discussed in Chapter 1, photographic practices took part in this process: the documentation of traditional culture that was disappearing fast amidst rapid industrialization contributed to efforts to maintain the nation’s distinctive identity. Even the next generation of photographers, who challenged the long-lasting documentary style photography and explored various possibilities of the medium, still shared the idea of collective Korean thought and an essence that differentiated it from other countries. As photography in the 1990s inherited the subject matter of traditional Korean landscapes or portraits as well as adopting socially-relevant issues, an obvious break from the past in terms of both style and subject matter was made by the mid/late 1990s and early 2000s.

---

Despite the idea of unity, the interests of a unifying ideology make nationalism an essentially gendered discourse. As Anne McClintock argued, male theorists identify national agency by the male perspective, and the representations of male national power depends on the prior construction of gender differences. For instance, Ernest Gellner’s definition of nationhood is based on the male recognition of identity: “Men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as being from the same nation.”

Even Franz Fanon mentioned, as she quoted, “The look that the native turns on the settler town is a look of lust … to sit at the settler’s table, to sleep in the settler’s bed, with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man.” In this statement, both the colonizer and the colonized are male.

Male nationalism participates in the gendering of nations, as McClintock claimed, and utilizes gender difference between women and men to symbolically define the limits of national differences and power between men. What is also embedded within nationalism is its naturalization of the male body. Male agency is presumed in nationhood; the male body embodies the nation’s progressive ideals and is naturalized and invisible. On the contrary, women represent an authentic “body” that is backward-looking and natural.

In the Korean context, Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi discussed gendered colonialism and the androcentric construction of post-colonial Korea in Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism. According to them, despite its assertion as an

---

9 Ibid..
independent nation, 20th century Korea was a palimpsest of multiple layers of Japanese colonialism and neo-imperial domination. As the direct installation of the US military apparatus at the end of World War II symbolizes, US hegemony superimposed its systems on the political and social structures of Japanese colonial rule, and national elites who were trained under the interests of colonial rule participated in the post-liberation nation building of Korea. Thus, even though Japanese rule ended in 1945, colonialism persisted and left no opportunity for South Korea to truly decolonize.\textsuperscript{10} Just like Japan’s racial policy defined Japan as the Interior (ない, nai) and excluded Korea as the Outside (せん, sen),\textsuperscript{11} a neocolonial space was created in post-colonial Korea in which Korea took an infantilized and feminized position.

Just as gender differences serve nationalism, a gendered power relationship emerges in the relationship between a colonized nation and its colonizer. When the colonized is deprived of the right to control the territory that its people believe is their national homeland,\textsuperscript{12} the metropolitan Self – the colonizer – and the colonized Other establish a metaphoric relationship of masculine versus feminine. However, in post-liberation Korea, the regimes denied this neo-colonial reality. They internalized US hegemony – the stance of the colonizer – and reproduced it to recuperate an emasculated nation and to construct a militaristic and masculine national identity.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13} Chungmoo Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea,” in Dangerous Women, 14-31.
As sociologist Seungsook Moon noted, nationalism legitimized their authoritarian rule. The complicated conditions around Korea, the reality of the Cold War, a need for national defense amidst military confrontation with the communist North, and a national project of capitalist industrialization all provided effective rationale for the exploitation of nationalism. Nationalist sentiments, which were generated from the collective memory of Japanese occupation and the Korean War, the neo-colonial occupation of the American military, and economic dependence upon the United States and Japan, also helped the regimes mobilize anti-communism, anti-Japanism, and the goal of industrialization of the nation to establish the ideology of official nationalism.\(^{14}\)

As discussed in Chapter 1, realism photography demonstrated the process: while differentiating itself from Japanese influence, it internalized American ideas of photography that crafted a universal order and reinvented Korean photography to represent timeless pre-modern traditions. On the contrary, contemporary photographers have the freedom to reassess key events and figures and to fill the vacancy in the representation of the recent past in art photography. In doing that, they do not merely utilize the medium as a tool of sheer documentation as in the past; instead, they use the medium’s ability to show graphic details to effectively challenge established historical narratives and representations of the national identity. The newly adopted subjects and creative interpretations of them declare a transition in Korean art photography, with the help of diversified photographic styles that contemporary photographers obtained as an outcome of globalization.

\(^{14}\) Seungsook Moon, “Begetting the Nation,” in Dangerous Women, 34.
Among many cases, Joseub’s photographs clearly expose what photographs of the past dismissed and the condition that caused it, such as feminized relationship of Korea to the United States and Korea’s militarized history and masculinized national identity. His two photographic series Do Not Question (2005) and I Hate Red Peanuts (1999) deconstruct these notions, as does that of other photographers, including Hein-kuhn Oh, Young Hoon Lee, and Seung Woo Back. Reflecting the substantial influence of militarization and masculinization in Korean history, his series focus on a long period of time, from the 1950s to the democratization movements in the late 1980s. He reenacted key moments such as the Korea War (1950), the April Revolution (1960), the May 16 coup (1961), assassination of President Chung-Hee Park (1979), the Gwangju Uprising (1980), the torture and death of student activist Park Jong-chul (1987), and the bombing of the Korean Air Flight 858 in 1987 and visited government-curated commemorative spaces.

Looking at Jo’s photos together is almost like reading a summary of post-liberation Korean history. However, Jo is not interested in creating reliable narratives that facilitate the viewer’s understanding of the events. Instead, as art critic Yongdo Jeong described his work as “a distinct system of disbelief,” the constructedness is the center of his photographs. In this, his body takes a central role: the male body, which is naturalized in nationalist rhetoric, functions as an active agent and visible site that manifests the masculinized history of Korea. His exaggerated gestures and dramatic makeovers intensify the effect that the photographs produce. Furthermore, he explores how photography contributed to the construction of official history by appropriating

---

famous images from photojournalism. Dissecting the content and the structure of journalistic photographs, his work exemplifies the radical changes that happened both in Korean history and art photography. Jo’s work represents how art photography has partaken in the fundamental changes that have occurred in Korea by making critical analysis of the way history and memory have formulated the nation’s identity. Several cases will be discussed in this chapter along with Jo’s work.

Korea’s Transformation in the Late 1980s, and Photography’s Role

What happened in contemporary Korea, and why was its photography reassessing, and even making fun of its turbulent post-colonial history? Korea went through fundamental changes in the late 1980s, which coincided with a changing international context represented by the end of the Cold War. Starting in the wake of the Gwangju Uprising, the most significant moment was the June Democracy Movement in 1987. In January 1987, a university student activist, Chong-Chul Park, died while being tortured during a police interrogation, and the police and the ruling junta attempted in vain to cover it up as a heart attack. In addition, then-president Doo-hwan Chun – who carried out another military coup d’état in 1979 only two months after the assassination of President Park and prolonged the military regime for another eight years - refused constitutional revision, the main pending issue of which was the adoption of a direct presidential election. This brought about brutal protests and massive rallies against the government by various civil society groups across the country.

In particular, the demonstrations intensified in June 1987 with the death of a college student, Han-yeol Yi, who was hit by a tear gas bomb thrown by police on the
back of the head. (Fig 3.7) It was a news photograph of bloody Yi collapsing in his colleague’s arms that incited the movement to spread nationwide. Capturing in raw quality the immediacy of the protest and the violence that brought Yi down, the image was published in local and international newspapers – ChoongAng Ilbo in Korea and The New York Times in the US. As the mass media could quickly circulate the duplicated image in and out of the country, it effectively revealed the violent repression of Chun’s regime and its illegitimacy. The symbolic deaths of Park and Yi, which political scientist Sunhyuk Kim described as having created the image of the “democratic martyr” representing the history of Korean democratization, drew middle-class citizens – white-collar workers, housewives, and so on – to join the protests.\textsuperscript{16}

On June 29, 1987, after 17 consecutive days of street demonstrations, the junta finally agreed to popular demand for democratization. Tae-woo Roh, the presidential candidate of the ruling Democratic Justice Party and the successor of Chun, announced the June 29 Declaration with an eight-point pledge, which included the amendment for direct presidential election, the restoration of the freedom of the press, the protection of human dignity, and so on.\textsuperscript{17} After a few more years of “a dictablanda (liberalized authoritarianism)”\textsuperscript{18} by Chun’s successor Roh Tae-woo, the political freedoms were finally realized after 1993. Young-sam Kim, a longtime democratic activist, was elected the first civilian president, and in 1998 Freedom House finally categorized South Korea as “free.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} To-chol Sin, “Introduction,” in \textit{Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea} (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 4.
Along with the June Democracy movement, represented with a photograph of Yi as a vivid conveyor of the violent nature of the military regime, another catalyst for South Korea’s transition was sports mega-events held with a celebratory tone. As one of the hallmarks of modernity, holding massive sports events is closely linked to the globalization of the country.\textsuperscript{20} The 10\textsuperscript{th} Asian Games held in Seoul in 1986 and the Olympic games of 1988 provided Korea great chances to present itself as having developed from a war-devastated, economically backward country into an industrialized, advanced nation with openness and free competition. It was also a great opportunity for media exposure to the world and a chance to have numerous international visitors in the country.

The 1988 Olympics was a turning point, and more fundamental changes that expanded the country’s perspective subsequently occurred. President Chun opened the country to foreign leaders, business, trade, and the outside world. As well as joining a league of world trading countries and improving relationships with Western countries, South Korea fully took advantage of the diplomatic momentum generated by the Seoul Olympiad. Under the international context of the end of the Cold War - the Eastern European communist dictatorships were collapsing, the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 gave pause to conservative sections of the Chinese leadership, the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991 – Korea expanded contacts with Eastern European countries, China, and the Soviet Union and exchanged sports teams and

trade representatives with them. Accordingly, the country, which previously had limited social and cultural relationships with foreign countries, directly faced global society and encountered the influx of various cultures. The next president, Young-sam Kim, who was elected after Roh, accelerated the globalization of the country by setting up the Globalization Promotion Committee (*Segyehwa Chujin Wiwonhoe*) and initiating a state-driven globalization initiative under the name of *segyehwa*.

All the changes in and out of the country accelerated the marked transformation of the Korean people and their culture. Korea’s political transition into democracy provided greater social and political freedom than ever before, including the reassessment of history that was previously taboo. The opening of the country spread to affect individual lives: the government liberalization of travel rules was announced in 1989, only one year after the Olympics, and this enabled Koreans to travel and study abroad much more easily. Firsthand exposure to other cultures not only opened Koreans’ eyes to Western culture, but also awakened Koreans their own culture and heritage. Their enhanced cultural consciousness made them to compare “us” and “them.”

Koreans’ increased experiences of other cultures were accompanied by government-sponsored cultural projects and growing infrastructure, which resulted in quantitative developments in the arts as well as diversified artistic languages. To name a few of these developments, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art opened in 1993; the Whitney Biennial traveled to Korea in 1993 and introduced cutting-

---

23 Ibid. 10.
edge discourses in contemporary art such as identity politics and post-colonialism that were unfamiliar to Korean audiences; The Gwangju Biennale, Asia’s first international biennale for contemporary art, had its first exhibition in 1995 with state funding; and the Korea Pavilion opened at the Venice Biennale in 1995 and provided international exposure of Korean art.24

With this improved groundwork, the Korean art scene quickly developed to close the gap on global trends. Individual artists, who had more diverse cultural experiences than previous generation, increasingly participated in international exhibitions. Their artistic languages became far more variegated as the nation’s photography embodied the radical change. Beyond the neutralized documentary mode and abstract landscapes that symbolized the collective Korean identity, contemporary photographers adopted more aggressive gestures and addressed previously ignored issues with their newly obtained freedom and knowledge of global photography.

As this chapter emphasizes, postcolonial history up to 1987 was one of the most popular subjects among photographers. While there were attempts to fill the void, as in the case of the representation of the Gwangju Uprising that I discussed in the previous chapter, what also characterized Korean art in this era was rethinking the country’s recent past, the militarized nature of society, and the political subjectivity that crafted it. For instance, photographers examined remnants of the Korean War and the ingrained militaristic culture in Korea, which are both rooted in the military dictatorship that took advantage of the confrontation between the two Koreas to secure its rule.

---

A photography exhibition that happened in 2008 called 39(2) is a notable example that demonstrated how contemporary Korean photographers both reflected and expedited the changes in Korean society. It presented five male photographers who depicted the military culture embedded in Korea from different perspectives. The exhibition featured soft-toned photographs that matched closed-up toy weapons with the names of actual weapons, images of ordinary families at air shows trying out fighter planes and taking photographs, and loose scenes of reserve forces at training. The photographs disclosed how closely the war, military culture, and everyday life were connected. At the same time, containing neither actual battle scenes nor heroic soldiers at drill, they display non-conventional aspects that one would not expect from representations of war or the military. As critic and photo historian Young June Lee wrote for the exhibition, these photographs could be owed to the new cultural paradigm that demanded the deconstruction of existing military culture and contribute to soothing it as well.

An increasing interest in history also can be found in photographer SungHyun Sohn’s series that examined how turbulent Korean history is connected to individual lives. His House of Unification (1998-2004) documented released unconverted long-term political prisoners, who refused to convert from communism to

---

25 The title of the exhibition came from Clause 2 of Article 39 of the Korean Constitution under Chapter II. Article 39 defines the rights and duties of national defense that all Korea citizens have. Clause 2 stipulates that “no citizens shall be treated unfavorably on account of the fulfillment of his/her obligation of military service.” Kum Hyun Han et al, 39(2) (Seoul: Samuso: Space for Contemporary Art, 2008), 24.
26 Gyoo Sik Kim, Sunag Noh’s “reallyGood, murder” series, and Young Hoon Lee’s “Paradise,” respectively. Ibid.
democracy and served sentences of 30 years on average. Depicting these people, whose lives are so intertwined with the tragedy of Korean history, national division, and ideological conflicts, Sohn faithfully took close-ups of their blank faces and straight postures. As the images suggest no clues of the hardships that the figures went through and the subjects just look like everymen, they reveal that traumatic history that is deeply seated within Korean lives.

(Fig 3.13-3.14) Another project, *The Koreans* (2008-2014) involves a similar side of Korean history, and the images resemble those from *House of Unification*. Dealing with the history of the Korean diaspora, the photographer expanded the notion of “Korean” to include people such as returnees from Sakhalin, Russia, where their ancestors were forced to move during the Japanese colonial era, Koryo-saram (Корё сарам), ethnic Koreans in post-Soviet states who immigrated to the Russian mainland during the late 19th and early 20th century, North Korea defectors (Saeteomin), Korean Chinese (Joseonjok), Korean Americans, and Korean immigrants to Japan (Zainichi).

By concentrating on the personal lives of those who are actually associated with national history, the photographer narrates political history without a grander narrative and depictions of violence. Through Sohn’s photographs, we learn to see history from an

---

28 The prisoners included North Korean People’s Army captives, North Korean spies sent to the South in the 1950s and 1960s, people convicted of involvement in the leftist movement between the liberation from Japan and Korean War, or those who were falsely accused of being North Korean spies by the anti-communist South Korean government. There were about 450 of them in the 1970s and half of them converted in prison. About 80 people remained unconverted, and their average time spent in prison was 30 years. The state began to release them in the late 1980s, and the last person was released in 1999. In 2000, under the Dae-jung Kim government that had the first inter-Korea Summit Meeting (2000), 63 of them returned to North Korea.

29 Koryo-saram is a combination of two words: Koryo and saram. “Koryo” is one of the ancient Korean dynasties before Joseon that lasted between 918 and 1392, and “saram” means people or person. These ethnic Koreans adopted this term, Koryo-saram, to mark their separate identity that is not defined by either South or North Korea.
untraditional perspective. These photographers adopt Korean history as new subject matter. Instead of conveying the familiar, grand narrative, however, they address underexplored topics, such as history’s impact on people, and twist established history. In this way, Korean photography provides different perspectives on the nation’s history and takes part in the modification of its identity construction.

Visualizing an Emasculated Country and its Claim of Masculine Identity: Joseub’s Performative Photographs

In line with practices that focus on memory, history, and the nation from a different viewpoint and using new methods, Joseub reviews contemporary Korean history and reinterprets it. I particularly take note of how he undermines the authority of well-known historical figures and moments, and satires the nation’s constructed history and its masculinized nature. Recreating the past with blunt gestures and sometimes raking out the surfaces of his photographs of monumental commemorative spaces, he immerses himself in his own photos to satirize the weight of history beyond simply catching up with the void of the past in art photography.

One of the elements that his work discloses is the nation’s complicated relationship to other countries, which expands into a gendered relation. In Douglas MacArthur, part of the Do Not Question series, he recreated The Battle of Incheon and performs as the American general whose success in battle during the Korean War made him a hero in Korean history who had saved the country from a communist attack. (Fig 3.15-3.16) Putting on a military uniform, a blond wig, and a pair of Ray-ban sunglasses, he stands oblique and glances at the camera, mimicking popular imagery of the general. (Fig 3.17-3.19) In another photograph, he is running in a stream with other soldiers,
referring to MacArthur’s successful battle. His recreation of the battle makes sharp
contrasts both with the original event and its reenactment in the annual commemoration
on September 15 every year. In the original, the general and his people walk out of the
water with serious expressions. The annual reenactment of the battle, mobilizing naval
ships and large number of American and Korean soldiers from the army, the air force, the
navy, and the Marine Corps, is full of resoluteness, as if celebrating the triumph of
democracy beyond the commemoration of the single event.

The symbolic significance and heroic qualities that the general and his battle have
in Korean history is no longer valid in Jo’s reconstruction. Overall, the image is
unfocused. The four soldiers, scattered across the frame, take different poses from
holding a revolver and a rifle to looking through a telescope. As well as their untidy hair,
their military uniforms are not unified, as one of them wears a side cap and another one
wears an iron helmet. To keep their pants dry, they have rolled them up and are running
barefoot, like people do when playing in the water. In these photographs, Jo’s disguise is
tacky enough for the viewer to easily tell that the scenes are staged: their wigs, uniforms,
and weapons look awkward, and their facial expressions and gestures are exaggerated.
The soldier on the far right even looks to have a cigarette in his mouth. The setting is far
from being meticulous as well; the place used to simulate the landing is an empty stream
with no military weapons but the supporting legs of a bridge in the background. The
pillars of the bridge make it clear that the scene was captured in the present, not in the
1950s.

From the way the Jo performed the general, one can easily conclude that Jo
trivializes the historical weight imposed on MacArthur, but which aspect does he
undermine exactly? Among the many critics who wrote on Jo’s works, art critic Geun-jun Lim is one of the few who addressed the issue of masculinity. In his essay, Lim brought up the castration of Asian men whose countries had a colonized history and applied it to Korea. According to him, a castration of Korea took place during the Japanese occupation, and it resulted in irreversible trauma to the masculine authority of the nation. He went on arguing that the Korean War, which involved extensive American leverage on Korea, further undermined this authority. In post-colonial Korea, therefore, it can be inferred that the masculinity of Korea was subordinated to Japan and the US in an emblematic sense. Expanding upon these relationships between Korea and other countries, Lim saw Jo’s body as a symbolic site where various forms of frustrated Korean masculinity are projected: it embodies the castrated Korean male body in an exaggerated manner and reenacts a recurring frustration of the symbolic phallus.30 In Douglas MacArthur, the artist’s body and his gestures, which lack physical strength and conventional masculinity, contrast with those of the American general in a widely distributed photograph. In Lim’s view, Jo’s disguise as MacArthur can be manifesting the subordinated subjectivity of Korean men to their American counterparts.

While his analysis makes a point in that Jo’s male body can be analyzed in close relationship to Korea’s colonial history and the frustrated Korean subjectivity, Lim’s focus is more on the modernizing process of Korea than on masculinity itself. What Lim dismissed is the way that this emasculated masculinity was enacted in the process of constructing of postwar Korean history. With knowledge of the militarized aspects of Korea history, Jo’s bodily performances can be read as a specific assessment of this

30 Geun-jun Lim, “Art of an Idiot that Overstrides Powerful Idols,” in Crazy Art, Made in Korea (Seoul: Woongjin Thinkbig, 2006), 224-245.
history beyond simple parody and mockery of the past and masculinity of Korean men. If it is assumed that his body is where Korean masculinity is enacted in a symbolic sense, his performance is a metaphor of a Korea emasculated at the hand of colonial powers, though its regimes resisted this fact and claimed a masculine identity.

To be more specific, the general has a symbolic position in Korean. The Battle of Incheon was an amphibious landing by US marine forces and Korean forces at the strategic port of Incheon, the west-coast city from Seoul, on September 15, 1950 during the Korean War. United Nations Supreme Commander Douglas MacArthur took the risk of carrying out the landing. His successful landing, which seemed impossible at first, enabled the recapture of the capital Seoul and reversed the tide of the war to enable the UN and South Korean troops to advance north of the 38th parallel.

Given the importance of the battle, MacArthur has been positioned as more than just an American soldier but as a symbol of the Korean War, anti-communism, and the relationship between South Korea and the United States. His pervading influence was well traced in his memorial address by President Park: mourning his death, Park declared that he was “a true companion who understood Korea better than anyone and his presence is forever engraved into Korean hearts,” and “he left us everlasting military achievements by defending the freedom and independence of our country from communists, which made peace in the Far East and ensured the freedom of humanity.”³¹ (Fig 3.20) There is a

statue of MacArthur at the freedom park in Incheon city. While scholars and civic groups have long problematized the idolization of MacArthur, ironically proving his importance in Korean history, one of the programs of the annual commemoration ceremony is dedicating flowers to the statue.

Considering what the figure emblematizes, Jo’s tacky reconstruction visualizes US hegemony ingrained in Korean history. By inserting his effete Korean male body he highlights the hierarchal order between the two countries. The age difference between the two, as Jo looks much younger and immature, further deepens their subordinate relationship. What is not to dismiss, however, is the persistence of the artist’s masculine agency. Despite his physical frailty, he imitates the general and claims authority. This is just like the nationalist rhetoric denied neo-colonial reality and claimed a masculine national identity, mobilizing the issue of national defense.

Jo’s reconstruction of the battle recalls the history of the Korean War and its representation in Korea, and furthermore, the identity of postwar Korea. Beyond a simple reflection of the underrepresented past and the idea of supplementing photographic activities of the past with political subjects, the artist adds his own interpretations to revise memories of the historic moments. In particular, the Korean War is still on-going, and the national division and Korea’s dependence upon US military forces are part of the enduring reality of Korea. Thus, even though the nation went through a drastic transition, the militarized identity that has been maintained for a long time lingers on in society. The commemoration, for instance, includes an exhibition hall to educate the public on the notion of national defense and experience programs of combats and military culture. The

32 Cho, Ibid. 135.
reenactment of the battle is also based on the anti-communist ideology and highlights military activities. Utilizing a performative format, Jo’s photographs realize the complicated history and reality of Korea in front of the camera.

(Fig 3.21) Marilyn Monroe is another work that implies the nation’s ambivalent attitude towards the US, in which dependence upon US assistance and alienation from American hegemony contradict. In this work, Jo plays an American actress, a sex symbol and an emblem of American culture, smiling in an American soldier’s arms. (Fig 3.22) With a blond wig, makeup – he put on red lipstick and a mole on the cheek – and a red dress, his appearance is quite similar to what the actress looked like when she visited Korea in February 1954 to entertain American soldiers in Korea. (Fig 3.23) In another image, Jo takes an enticing pose, holding the soldier with his left arm and stretching out his right leg to wrap the soldier’s body.

In general, the slender silhouette of his body and the pose that does not expose the chest and the genial area conceal his gender and make his dressing up largely successful. These elements contribute to his feminization and combine with the American soldier’s exaggerated facial expression and pose. While they crack the plausibility of his performance and add an absurd humor to the scene, these images are also reminders of the relationship between Korea and the US. The confident gestures of the solider, who holds a Budweiser beer bottle as an icon of American culture, reminds the informed viewer of the presence of the US army and its representations in Korea.

---

33 Based on the 2015 program announced at the official website of Incheon City hall. There are slight modifications, but the basic elements stay similar each year, http://xn--vv4b97f26e8b.kr/posts/incheon-news/5684.
Yong Tae Kim’s series from 1984, *DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon* is a useful reference through which to discuss this issue.\(^{34}\) (Fig 3.24) This series consists of about 300 photographs that Kim collected from the photo studios in Dongducheon, a heavily militarized city to the north of Seoul where the main camps of the United States Second Infantry division are located.\(^ {35}\) From a standard ID picture; to couples in intimate gestures; to a family consisting of a Korean woman, a white man, and their child; and soldiers in civilian clothes showing off their bodies, the images are intended for private consumption to commemorate important moments, to send greetings to family in the US, or just to have fun. Thus, the subjects expose unaffected faces in front of the camera.

While the series contains numerous issues that need to be further addressed, such as Korean sex workers and interracial marriages, what I would like to focus on here is the way that American soldiers presented themselves in a laid-back manner. (Fig 3.25) An African American military policeman, for instance, stands in front of backdrop. Though he is well dressed in uniform, holding a baton, he does not pose as a tense military man. Leaning on one leg, his gaze is somewhere else, not interacting with the camera. Therefore, he looks to be psychologically detached from where he is located. (Fig 3.26) In another image, three men playfully showing off their arm and leg muscles look just

---

\(^{34}\) I refer to general discussions of this photographic series from Young Min Moon’s online exhibition in 2012. Young Min Moon, “Report from the Underside: Dongducheon,” *Trans-Asia Photography Review* 3, no.1 (Fall 2012), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0003.110.

\(^{35}\) As a member of Hyeosilgwa Bareon (Reality and Utterance), one of the artist collectives that led a dissident art movement in the 1980s called Minjung Art (People’s Art), Kim was preparing for a Korean War-themed group exhibition that the collective had organized. To get inspiration, he went around cities such as Dongducheon, Paju, Uijeongbu, and Munsan where US military bases were stationed. He was attracted by color photographs displayed in the showcases of commercial photo studios and collected them to make this series. “Yong Tae Kim” in Jeongchijeogjin Geoseul Neomeoseo: Hyunsilgwa Bareon 30nyeon (정치적인 것을 넘어서: 현실과 발언 30 년, Beyond the Politics: 30 years of Reality and Utterance), eds. Jungheon Kim et al. (Seoul: Hyunsil Cultural Studies Press, 2012), 160-167, Yong Tae Kim, “Dongducheon Kihaeng/ Dongducheon Ginyeom Sajin (동두천 기행/동두천의 기념사진, Trip to Dongducheon/ Dongducheon Commemorative Photographs),” *Minjok Mihak* 13, no.1 (June 2014): 221-232.
relaxed. The series is full of this sort of photographs, in which American soldiers flaunt their presence and nothing looks serious. Some of the backdrops depict the symbol of United Nations, images of the American flag, the Koran flag, the Korean peninsula, and the letters of “Korea” and “DMZ.” While these graphic elements visualize the reality of Korea and its relationship to the US, they mark a discrepancy with the soldiers who are not interested in them at all. The inconsistency is epitomized with the sentence, “I am sure to go to heaven because I spent my time in hell” that is inscribed in the insignia that offers a backdrop for the military police. When the photographer showed them at various locations such as an art museum, universities, and an art center at the headquarters of the US military forces in Yongsan, Seoul, the photographs were recontextualized and obtained public meaning. As the artist argued that these photographs mirror numerous ostentatious gestures that occupation troops made out of national pride, they do not merely capture personal moments and create quotidian memories but hold the unequal relationship between Korea and the US as a subtext.

While Kim literally collected and arranged existing photographs to suggest what they signify about Korean history and its socio-political reality, Joseub made this history and socio-political reality clearly visible. (Fig 3. 27) Though his *Marilyn Monroe* shares specific qualities with *DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon*, as one of the images has a similar composition and posture, Jo’s hyperbolic makeover highlights the relationship

---

36 He presented the series at such exhibitions as 6.25., the 5th group exhibition of Reality and Utterance (June 26-July1, 1984, Arab Museum, Seoul), and *Haebang 40nyeon Yeoksa* (해방 40 년 역사, 40 Years of History of Post-Independence Korea, Gwangju, Daegu, Busan, and Masan, 1984) which traveled to universities across the country. While these exhibitions had mostly Korean viewers, the two-person exhibition he had at Arts & Crafts Center, located inside the headquarters of the US military forces in Yongsan, Seoul, had American soldiers and their family as the primary audience, and thus resulted in different responses. Kim, Ibid., 230-231.

37 Ibid., 232.
between the two countries with sarcastic humor and make it an emblematic one more than a personal one. Made 21 years after Kim’s work, Jo makes use of the medium to compose reality with what he wanted to emphasize. With so much more political freedom than in the 1980s, when military dictatorship was still in power, Jo’s photographs are full of satires on the nation’s history and its construction.

From the uproarious performance in Jo’s *Marilyn Monroe*, thus, one can read more meaning than from Kim’s work. While the slim silhouette of Jo’s body contributes to his feminization, he has lifted his right arm to expose armpit hair. The fractures that he embedded suggests the constructedness and the still-lingering presence of his masculine identity: even though he performs as a woman, he refuses to become entirely a woman and remains an emasculated man. In this way, the work reveals the feminized relationship of Korea to the US and its denial at the same time.

During their 30-year rule, authoritarian governments not only rejected the nation’s emasculated status but highlighted patriotic military activities to construct a masculine identity. As historian Sheila Miyoshi Jager elaborated, President Park borrowed nationalist ideas from earlier forms of nationalism that emerged at the turn of the century and folklorists of the 1920s and 1930s who claimed to restore Korean history and tradition from Japanese interpretations. From the nationalist ideas, Park appropriated colonial images of effete manhood that had caused the loss of sovereignty from earlier nationalism and images of martial manhood were idealized as the new subject of authentic Korean national culture as he claimed:38 “the real national image of the great

---

man was not that of a weak pedant but rather of a patriotic fighter who would readily die on the battlefield in defense of his country.”

Exploiting sentiments of anti-communism and anti-Japanism, authoritarian regimes that appropriated nationalism legitimized their power and claimed themselves as subjects of “national reconstruction.” In claiming to build a self-reliant nation, the country denied emasculation to the US and highlighted its manhood. The nation’s history that was created at this stage of building a modern nation reflected efforts to solidify these ideologies. The newly constructed Korean history, thus, was filled with constant foreign invasions and patriotic military activities by men to maintain a self-reliant nation. It presented the ancient Three Kingdom period (BC 1st - AD 8th century) with emphasis on military achievements. Gwanggaeto the Great of Goguryeo (BC 37 - 668) had strong military achievements, and the general Eulji Mundeok of Goguryeo saved the nation from the invasion of the Han dynasty of China. Hwarang of Silla Dynasty (BC 57-935), an elite youth male group, was praised for its patriotic activities that helped its country unify the three nations. Also, Sambyeolcho, a special capital defense unit during Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) against the Mongol invaders, and Admiral Yi Sun-sin and the Righteous Army (Uibyeong), who saved the Joseon Dynasty during the Japanese invasions of Korea (1592-1598), were adopted as exemplary models for defensive nationalism.

By creating heroic narratives of male warriors, Chung-hee Park justified his overthrowing of the democratically organized republic and his authoritarian rule, and presented himself as the descendent of these heroes. Until the late 1980s, when

---

39 Chung-hee Park, Our Nation’s Path (Seoul: Hollym Corporation 1970), 96, quoted in Jager, Ibid., 84.
President Chun succeeded Park with the second military regime, the militaristic ideologies that justified anti-democratic and often violent ruling systems were sustained under the name of constructing a prosperous and strong nation. In these times, education was the primary means of fostering nationalist ideas and to producing “Koreans.”

Controlling culture was another means of achieving the goal of establishing Korean tradition and unique identity. For instance, the Institute of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage (중요무형문화재 월령보존과 재창조 가이드라인, Guidelines to Preserve and Recreate Important Intangible Cultural Assets) that Park’s regime initiated in 1962 nominated and supported people who had traditional artistic capacities to pass them down to next generation. Photographs that documented tradition and the essence of Korean culture, as I suggest in the latter half of Chapter 1, were produced under the politico-cultural climate. (Fig 3.28) Atta Kim’s project Human Cultural Asset series (1989-90), which consisted of portraits of about 150 elderly people who had been designated as Intangible Cultural Assets (무형문화재), also reflects continued efforts to document a collective Korean identity, which has been disappearing in the process of rapid industrialization. This sort of participation in nationalist rhetoric in

---

41 Moon, “Begetting the Nation,” Ibid., 33-66.
42 From young students to university students and the general public, the government strictly controlled the education of all Koreans to build a national consciousness. Primary and secondary textbooks for young students incorporated anti-communism and authoritarian traditionalism. Knowledge production apparatuses such as the Association of National Ethics Education Research (국민 윤리교육연구회) that conducted research on national ethics education at the university level, the Association of National Ethics Education Research that emphasized national security and Korean tradition, and the Institute of Korean Mental Culture Research (정신 문화 연구회) contributed to the nationalist discourse. The Charter of National Education that Park instituted in 1968 begins with the sentence, “we were born into this land with a historical mission for national restoration.” It was printed out on the first page of every textbook and government publication. Not only that, but every public building displayed the charter with the picture of President Park and the Korean national flag. Moon, Ibid., 33-51.
43 Jungyo Muhyeong Munhwajae Wonhyeong Bojongwa Jaechangjo Gaideu Rain (중요무형문화재 원형보존과 재창조 가이드라인, Guidelines to Preserve and Recreate Important Intangible Cultural Assets) (Daejeon: Cultural Heritage Administration, 2006), 64-65.
photography parallels with the absence of concrete socio-political realities in art photography.

In the same context, large scale government-led commemoration projects effectively institutionalized political ideologies as they anchored provisional memories in concrete forms. The memorializing of the Gwangju Uprising, as discussed in Chapter 2, proved how the then current administration revised memories and inserted itself into the history of democratization to secure its legitimacy. Similar to the critical reactions that photographers had about the way that the Gwangju Uprising was memorialized, in democratized Korea, artists began to criticize official history crafted under the authoritarian regimes and attempted to modify public memories.

In line with other cases that reconsider contemporary Korean history, Jo continuously deconstructs heroic and manly historical narratives. While the gendered nature of nationalism and relationship between nations is suggested in Do Not Question, and I Hate Red Peanut! directly lampoons the militaristic narrative of a Korean history that is full of patriotic warriors. Visiting government-established places such as the Ministry of National Defense, The War Memorial of Korea, and The Memorial Hall for Incheon Landing Operation, he utilized his male body in military uniform and created satirical performances. Furthermore, he scraped off the surface of the photographs to insert phallic imageries and to add white contours around his body to make it look thinner. In this way, his body, which displays its fragility and still claims its masculinity, disrupts the masculine order that dominates these places.

In particular, I take note of the series’ titles in both Korean and English. The Korean title, which translates into “I hate soybean candies,” is a pun of “I hate communists,” that is based on the similar pronunciations between “Kongsatang” (soybean candy) and “Gongsandang” (communist).\(^4^5\) Thus, one can easily assume that the series problematizes anti-communism, the state nationalism that supported the masculine discourse. At the same time, the English title “I Hate Red Peanut!” carries richer meanings. “Red” is related to a slang for communism, and the word “peanut,” pronounces similar to “penis,” which suggests that the artist embedded the sexual connotations.

One of Jo’s performance sites is the War Memorial of Korea (WMK). It is a large-scale state-sponsored museum located in downtown Seoul on the site of the former Korean Army Headquarters. The idea of it was conceived in 1988 under the Tae-woo Roh government, and it opened in 1994. As Jager elaborated, commemorative acts about wars are a form of making official memory and history that aims to promote and secure a particular interpretation of events and to erase or block potentially contestatory readings. Thus, upon its opening under the first civilian government, public discomfort regarding its traditional military appearance sparked, and dissident intellectuals and students criticized it for perpetuating state authoritarian power through the forced celebration of a patriotic history imposed upon the public from above.\(^4^6\) However, Young-sam Kim’s

---

\(^4^5\) This line originates from a story of a South Korean boy killed by North Korean commandos for shouting out that anti-communist message. According to the story, in 1968, North Korean commandos infiltrated into South Korea and stormed into a country house where a 9-year-old boy named Seung-bok Lee lived with his family. When they asked Lee whether he preferred North or South Korea, he chose the South and cried out, “I hate communists!” They cut out the boy’s tongue and butchered all of his family members, and only his older brother survived. Park regime widely publicized the episode by teaching it at schools and installing numerous statues of Lee across the country as part of its anti-Communist propaganda.

\(^4^6\) Jager, Ibid., 118-119.
regime embraced it as a reminder of the ongoing threat posed by North Korea, and the legacy of a military past that had survived the demise of the military dictatorship, proving the Korean War as lived reality of Korea.  

(Fig 3.29-3.31) Designed like a Confucian temple, similar to other commemorative spaces such as the Independence Hall of Korea, both the outdoor and the indoor spaces of the are filled with images of the war and its people as well as weapons that were actually used, confirming the connection between history and its representations. The most circulated images of the memorial – produced both by the government organization and individual visitors – are a panorama from a bird’s-eye view that highlights its symmetrical order, the Korean War Monument at the entrance, which is modeled after Korean-style bronze swords, and The Statue of Brothers, known to be based on a true story of two brothers who met in battle as enemies during the Korean War. With phallic forms and massive scales, which are literally masculinist, these images sum up the identity of the memorial as heir to the historical legacy of militarism and nationalism that advocated martial masculinity and brotherly strength, the core of unbroken warrior tradition.

Covering the overall war history of Korea with a particular emphasis on the Korean War, the WMK’s narrative structure overlaps with official history written with a single patriotic warrior lineage. The bronze sword, a weapon of ancient times, stands

49 Its mission is to collect and preserve documents on war, the main focus of which is how the nation overcame foreign invasions, protected the lives and properties of its people, and maintained the independence of ethnic Koreans. Also, it aims to give lessons to prevent another conflict and to contribute to peaceful reunification of the country. The War Memorial of Korea. https://www.warmemo.or.kr/front/introInfo/history.do
for long-lasting Korean history and military strength with its phallic form. The bilateral symmetry of the spatial structure in an enclosed form is also an effective means of highlighting Korean history as a generational continuum. On the other hand, the outdoor statue visualizes South Korea, as the legitimate heir of Korea’s patriotic warrior tradition, embracing the North, expressed as an unar med brother with a smaller body, with fraternal generosity.\(^{50}\)

(Fig 3.32) Joseub emulates but mocks the symbolic meanings of the original works. In front of The Statue of Brothers, for instance, Jo hugs another man in a different military uniform on the ground, not on a cracked hemispherical pedestal modeled after a tomb of the Silla Kingdom.\(^{51}\) The man that Jo holds looks stronger than the artist whose physical inferiority is accentuated by white outlines around his body. In this way, the military superiority of the South is subverted. Most of all, the brotherly love and reconciliation is transformed into homosexual love. Jo inserts small heart symbols around his face and a phallic image at his lower body. Also, another phallus at the entrance of the pedestal makes fun of familial love and the idea of national rebirth and the cycles of history that arose from the analogy between unification of the Three Kingdoms by Silla and the suggested reunification of two Koreas.\(^{52}\)

The history of unbroken warrior tradition is agitated as well. (Fig 3.33) One of the two wall reliefs at the Central Plaza carved at each end facing the main stairway depicts the Korean Liberation Army (Dongnipgun) in a fierce battle to retrieve the country from Japanese Imperial. The anti-Japanese heroes are paired with the depiction of the

---

\(^{50}\) Jager, Ibid., 133-137.

\(^{51}\) Young-jeep Choi, interview with Jager, Ibid., 137-138.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
Righteous Army of the 16th century who also are fighting against Japan, highlighting a familial code between the courageous warriors. Again, Jo’s physical weakness, expressed with teardrops as he holds his fellow soldier, contrasts with the scene behind him. the heroic struggle is exaggerated with the inscription of the word “patriotism (aeguk)” on the forehead of a soldier and white flames that emphasize their passion. The artist also scratched the photographs to add phallic-shaped figures in the mouths of the two soldiers on the left side to turn brotherly connection into sexuality.

(Fig 3.34) In making traditional commemorative culture into a farce, what accentuates Jo’s bodily performances that parody officially sanctioned history is the scratching the surface of the photographs. This physical act of contamination reminds one of graffiti art, an illicit form of painting, scratching, or scribbling on a wall or any surface, often within the public view. Though its origin goes back to ancient times, graffiti is generally linked to defacement and vandalism in modern times. Along with its illegality, its visual vocabulary – such as its material, formal, and technical aspects – has often functioned as a form of resistance against authority. For instance, the May 1968 student protests and wildcat strikes were accompanied by the daubing of their slogans in the form of graffiti on buildings to create a sense of rebellious spirit.\(^5\) As the radicalism that graffiti carries is incorporated, Jo's performative photographs further damage the narrative and the authority of the monuments that the state depicted.

An image taken in front of the Tower of Defense of Liberty at the Memorial Hall for Incheon Landing Operation obtains the meaning of challenging the traditional

celebration of military manhood through graffiti-like drawings added on the surface. A phallus on Jo’s crotch, another one at the bottom left of the tower, a spelling of the name of the tower overwritten to read “the Tower of Defense of Penis” rather than liberty (utilizing the similar pronunciations of “Jayu” [Liberty] and “Jaji” [Penis]), and two roughly scratched columns of water that add urgency all parody the masculinized nature of commemoration projects and the patriotic discourse on the Korean War.

This sort of nullifying heroic narrative embedded in masculinized history is what contemporary photographers subvert. (Fig 3.35) As the military “revolution” is trivialized and national saviors became a reminder of the status of the nation, Jo’s *The Korean War* instead presents the war as a man in rags. While no fierce battles that typify a war going on, the camera focused on Jo wondering ruined streets with bare feet. His tangled hair, dirty face and clothes, and slouchy and slender body are far from representing a masculine struggle or a patriotic warrior. (Fig 3.36) Jo, in another photograph of the series, is seated on messy street and is picking his ears and looks even to be out of his head. By portraying himself as an impotent individual deprived of power to defend himself, Jo subverted the official narrative of the Korean War that emphasized heroic efforts to defend the nation against communist attack. Jo is doing this with obviously satirical humor, eventually challenging the role of the histories in Korean nationalist discourse.

(Fig 3.37) In the way that Jo is dressed and poses for the camera to represent the war, I also recall one of the photographs that represents realism: Eungsik Lim’s *A War Orphan* 950). Showing a little boy in rags seated on the ground barefoot and eating probably rationed food, Lim’s image symbolizes the reality that the
tragic war brought about. While the nation was creating official narratives on the war, realism photographers were under pressure not to address its aftermath and to neutralize it, often taking subjects who were deprived of power to confront their realities. Jo repeats the similar sort of narrative more than 50 years later, under the different conditions, and twists it with exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. Replacing the melancholic ambience of Lim’s photograph with deliberate humor, I suggest, Jo’s work marks a departure of Korean photography from realism tradition and, furthermore, diminishes its authority.

(Fig 3.38) At the very least, Jo creates a critical deconstruction of photojournalism. That photography negotiates history as construction is spelled out in his reconstruction of Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima (1945). The iconic photograph from World War II might seem to be a spontaneous capturing of the triumph of the Allied Forces. However, it was actually planned ahead of time to justify the cost of the US intervention in the war and to raise troop morale and was the raising of the second flag that the photographer documented.\(^5^4\) Its composition is also carefully constructed to represent the heroic masculinity that maintained the nation. The flag of the United States, which is the center of the image, cuts the frame diagonally, and five US Marines and one Navy sailor raise the heavy pole on the detritus of the battlefield. The soldiers are presented as a team, as their male bodies constitute a mass and their stance makes it hard to see their faces. The abstract qualities that give the image a unifying power – the suggested movement of the flag in the wind and the condensed energy in the soldiers’

strong bodies – all enhance the masculine intensity in the photograph’s materialization of ideology and patriotism.\textsuperscript{55} The exemplary representation of the soldiers at war is comparable with the War Memorial or the photographs of Korean soldiers that military authorities distributed to promote their patriotic activities defending the country.

(Fig 3.39) On the other hand, in Jo’s parody, titled \textit{Subjugate}, the soldiers are not trying to subjugate and to achieve something courageous. Joseub invalidates the values that Rosenthal’s image exemplifies. The US flag that represents a unification of national identity is missing, since the frame of the photograph ends right beneath it. Most of all, the masculine energy of the military men erecting the symbolic signifier is dissipated. The five people, including the artist himself, in military drill uniforms – which male high school students had to wear in order to learn military skills during the military regimes – appear to be tired, or even bored, as is evident from their facial expressions and stances. They are positioned across this close-up image, making the composition unfocused. The bodies, furthermore, appear to be far from athletic, betraying the core masculinity. In this way, this photograph deconstructs ideals crafted with the photographic medium, such as courage, patriotism, and endurance, and what they serve: the nation that crafted official this history itself.

\textbf{Portraits of the Korean War and the National Division: Photographs that Document the Present of the Past}

Official memory about the wars has always been constituted within a discourse of national self-definition to promote the legitimacy of the state. In South Korea, as Jager

articulated, the Korean War has played a fundamental role in defining the masculinist language of national self-definition and state legitimacy. The War Memorial of Korea embodies this official commemorative culture with a view of the past in masculine images. Jo’s performative photographs disturb this order of a martial tradition full of male fighters who fought for the nation’s independence. For its explicit satire and lack of seriousness, his work drew a lot of attention in the art scene, sometimes accompanied by criticism that devalued its significance. Working under a liberalized society, contemporary photographers twist the official view that represents the Korean War and its central subject, male warriors, and break the myth of patriotic warriors, which parallels the drastic transformation of the country as a whole.

Hein-kuhn Oh’s *Middlemen* is another case through which to discuss this issue. It depicts young soldiers serving compulsory military duties, since the Korean War is still ongoing with sporadic battles despite the armistice agreement in 1953. Basically, Oh’s quiet images might look to be the opposite of Jo’s clamorous performances. At the same time, they share Jo’s approach in betraying traditional representations of the war and the military.

Ostensibly, Oh’s photographs take the format of portrait photography and capture the sitters in an extremely neutralized manner. (Fig 3.40) In *A petty officer standing in front of 127mm naval artillery gun, October 2010*, a young officer calmly stands in front of artillery. Instead of showing manhood, he seems to be overwhelmed by the domineering scale of the artillery behind him. (Fig 3.41) Similarly, another soldier’s fair skin, blank face, and seated pose, juxtaposed with azaleas and a cherry blossom, reveal

---

more weakness and discomfort than violent masculinity, which is suggested by the rife next to him. While their uniforms associate them with specific qualities such as manliness, patriotism, and aggressiveness, their bodies, facial expressions, and gestures expose their frailty and awkwardness.

Certainly, Oh’s photographs convey qualities that contrast with what one generally thinks about the military, war, and soldiers. Raewyn W. Connell claimed that the military has always been associated with masculinity and men. Military service offers men the resources to construct a masculine ideal defined by traditional qualities such as emotional control, overt heterosexual desire, physical strength, and self-reliance, and a military role has been seen as a normative pathway into manhood. The military trains its people, who are segregated from society, to obtain the military masculinity that includes a willingness to place service before self. Every Korean man who must serve his military service is trained to obtain these qualities. Also, as Elain Scarry argued, human bodies are central to war, as war is made real through the alteration of bodies. War, as a male territorial game that celebrates the founding violence of patriarchy through the signs of aggression and blood, involves violence and pain. Thus, Korean military men, whose training is to prepare for the enduring war, achieve

masculine traits through their bodies and are supposed to participate in the latent violence of the war.

(Fig 3.42-3.46) Typical representations of soldiers that military organizations distribute well embody the values that they are expected to convey. The Ministry of National Defense provides photographs of the army, the navy, the air force, and the Marine Corps on its website to promote their activities. Each branch also circulates photographs and videos that document their training on various platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Flickr, Twitter, and so on, as well as their official websites, and they convey similar ideas as does the War Memorial of Korea. What summarizes the photographs is their emphasis on the group identity, resoluteness, and physical prowess that the soldiers obtained in military. Their trained manly bodies look to be ready to employ violence and carry out a war.

Also, many of the photos depict their subjects as a group in training or involved in military operation to evoke abstract ideals such as courage and patriotism in defending the nation. While they highlight these activities, the composition that reveals the constructed nature of the images cultivates an urgency in the scenes by utilizing techniques such as a zoom blur effect and a low angle that make the figures look monumental.

On the contrary to those images, Oh’s photographs closely look at individuals, whose vulnerable bodies seem to be locked in military uniform, at rest and capture their subtle expressions. Since the camera is kept a distance from the soldiers, their gaze, facial expressions, gestures, and interactions with the surroundings are clearer and show how the individuals are situated in the environment. The before-mentioned image, A petty
officer standing in front of 127mm naval artillery gun, October 2010 is interested in showing the officer in the military facilities. The huge artillery takes up about three-fifths of the picture frame and its barrel protrudes forward. The officer is contrasted with it through his intimidated stance as he stands in a three-quarter pose, making a stiff face with an unsettling gaze. His small frame adds the dominance of the military facilities.

What defines him is far from physical fitness and resoluteness or the qualities of a patriotic fighter; he is rather a young man trying to adjust himself to his surroundings. (Fig 3.47) Even when young soldiers exhibit their bodies without shirts as in *Four Soldiers Before A Mock Cavalry Battle*, what attracts one’s eyes are the unsettled, frightened gazes on the innocent faces turned towards the camera. Their intertwined bodies look rather feeble, even implying homosexual connotations, rather than vigorous and conveying conventional masculinity.

Discussing this series, art critic Young Min Moon wrote that Oh presents officially sanctioned manhood built with complex conditions around the manhood in South Korea. Moon spotted the signs of anxiety in the subject’s faces and defined it as the collective trauma passed down from the colonial era and military regimes. Though he suggested changes in the military culture reflecting liberalized social climate, his analysis of the portraits focused more on how the individuality of the soldiers coexists and sometimes conflicts with the oppressive military culture forced upon them.62 Applying his analysis, the uneasiness traced in the petty officer originates in the colonial history and oppressive regimes of the past. The tension between the individuals and the group

---

can be compared to the history of the nation, when national interests came before the people so that individuals were forced to sacrifice themselves for the nation.

Though this series addresses the organization of the military and its repressive culture, I would like to put more emphasis on the overall changes in society that enabled expanded artistic freedom in depicting military masculinity. As notions of gender and its representations are always in flux, representations of military masculinity incorporated the political atmosphere as well. For instance, American photography right after the World War II provided reassurance of US supremacy through iconic images of heroes, martyrs, and military might. In the Cold War era before the Korean War, photographs replayed war in a succession of exhibitions. Edward Steichen’s Museum of Modern Art played a crucial role, and photo essays and photographic books were also part of that. Instead of the horrors of war and its ramifications, they presented vicarious experience of thrills filled with heroism, glory, and military might.64

When the rigid military rules ended, the anti-communist rhetoric that sustained Korea under the mask of national security eroded. Dae-jung Kim, a long-time oppositional leader against authoritative governments since the 1960s and Nobel Peace Prize laureate (2000), was finally elected in 1997 and followed the first civilian president Young-sam Kim. In addition to the liberalizing social atmosphere that the democratic government created, the Dae-jung Kim administration was a turning point in terms of the South’s relationship with North Korea. It announced a new policy of engagement with

---


the North, known as the Sunshine Policy, (1998 -2007) which aimed to discard antagonistic confrontation and build a cooperative system.

To ameliorate its relationship with North Korea, South Korea provided rice and fertilizer to the North, and President Kim allowed Southern businesses, NGOs, and others into the North. These endeavors created achievements such as the construction of the Kaesong City Industrial Complex in the North that stared in 2000, and a resort at Mount Kumgang built by the Hyundai conglomerate to accommodate Korean visitors. Hyundai, a leading Korean construction company and a significant supporter of a reunification agenda, offered tours as well. Since the first sailing of the Hyundai Kumgangho, a cruise ship, in November 18, 1998, about 2 million South Koreans traveled to Mount Kumgang and Kaesong city in North Korea until July 2008. The cruise ship was replaced with bus tours in 2004.65

Endeavors to alleviate inter-Korea relations were culminated in an inter-Korean summit meeting with North Korean leader Jong-il Kim in Pyongyang in 2000. At the first meeting of the two Koreas’ leaders since the Korean War, a five-point agreement, which included the easing of military tension, measures for reconciliation and peace, reunion visits of separated families, and the expedition of economic, social, and cultural exchanges, was made.66 Kim’s successor, Moo-hyun Roh, who held the second inter-Korean summit meeting in 2007, also tried to stay on good terms with North Korea.

65 Korean Statistical Information Service. http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT1ZGAG. In March 2008, Korean tourists were even allowed to drive their own cars across the DMZ to the North, and Hyundai opened a golf course in Mount Kumgang in June 2008. The tour program soon shut down, however, when a South Korean tourist Wang-ja Park, who walked past the tourist resort zone to enter prohibited zone, was shot to death from behind by North Korean soldiers. Tours to Kaesong were suspended that year, too, and this resulted in the end of the Sunshine Policy.
Under the moderate atmosphere, new views and perceptions of the recent past of Korea, including the historical narrative of the Korean War, the military, and perceptions of North Korea, emerged in art. It would be too much to say that the entire narratives around these topics were modified. Korea’s unique condition as the world’s only divided country is still valid, its ever-changing relationship with North Korea is primarily hostile, and traditional representations of the military persists regardless of time and space. Photographs of the 2010s produced by government organizations and the dominant narrative of the war memorial demonstrate this.

However, the change can be spotted at least in artistic activities in South Korea since around 2000. Most of all, artists have increasingly adopted subjects like the Korean War, the nation’s division, the Cold War, and North Korea. Even though these were the on-going reality of Korea that was shaping its identity, art could not directly address them as realism photography did. Now, contemporary artists have begun to review the obliterated history of the recent past. (Fig 3.48-3.52) To name a few earlier examples, Chan-kyong Park dealt with the national division and the ramifications of the Cold War in his multi-media works, such as Black Box: Memory of the Cold War Image (1997), Sets (2000), and Power Passage (2004-2007). Photographers who visited North Korea

---

67 Despite all these efforts, North Korea heightened tension intermittently with nuclear tests and through provoking the South with naval clashes. Kwon, Ibid.
68 Black Box: Memory of the Cold War Image is an installation with two slide projectors and a synchronizer. Inspired by the black box that then-president Yeltsin of Russia handed over to the then Korean President Tae-woo Roh, retrieved from the Korean airplane that had been shot down by a fighter plane of the former Soviet Union, which turned out to be void of any content, Park filled the exhibition with various images about the division and the Cold War, such as press photographs of North Korean spies and photographs of dioramas in the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul. Sets is a slides projection of 160 photographs taken at three sites: constructed sets in the National Film Studio in Pyongyang that recreated Seoul Streets, places designed for simulated street battle exercises in South Korean army bases, and movie sets for the “Joint Security Area (JSA)” in South Korea, a 90% scale replica of Panmunjom at the DMZ. Power Passage is a two-channel video that combined documents and movie scenes about the rendezvous
also incorporated their observations and experiences in photographic series, such as *Blow Up* (Seung Woo Back, 2007) and *Red House* (Suntag Noh, 2001-2007).

In a similar context, contemporary art exhibitions reflected this eased political climate and the increasing conversations with the North. *Pyongyang: The Subject of Seoul* (2000, Seoul Art of Art, Seoul) and *Sunshine: Three Perspectives on North and South Korea* (February 5 - 24, 2001, Insa Art Space of Art Council Korea, Seoul) were immediate responses to the Sunshine Policy. Their reassessments of Korean history and reality from various perspectives and through the use of multi-media were unprecedented in contemporary Korean art. The new direction in contemporary art that they initiated continues to today. The *Real DMZ Project*, a recurring exhibition since 2012 in Cheorwon-gun, Gangwon-do – a border area near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) – explores the country’s division and on-going conflicts.

A photography exhibition called *On the Border* (2010), for which Hein-kuhn Oh submitted portraits of soldiers, participated in this trend. After completing this project for the Ministry of Defense, Oh could continue documenting the soldiers under the consent of one of the most exclusive organizations in the country. The outcome is, as discussed earlier with photographs, a different sort of representation of military plan between the US and the USSR spacecraft and its realization in 1975, and underground tunnels that North Korea dug to infiltrate into South Korea. Chan-kyong Park, http://www.parkchankyong.com/

*Blow Up* is based on the photographer’s visit to Pyongyang. As well as being required to get permission on where to visit, the North Korean guards controlled him regarding what to photograph. The photographer was not pleased with the images made under these conditions, so it took four years before he reassessed them and created this series by editing and enlarging certain parts of the photographs and recontextualizing them. Sontag Noh’s *Red House I, II*, and *III*, which are comprised of photographs that he took in North Korea as well as in the South, point to the long-lasting division of the country and the intertwined histories of the two Koreas.

masculinity that exposes the uncontrolled side of the military. Considering that realism photography could not address anything related to the politics, this is an unprecedented achievement. Though the military still maintains its primary identity, the photographs could not only address the Korean War but also mark breaks from the heroic, manly narrative of the war and the military that previous regimes crafted.

(Fig 3.53) Oh’s camera captured this shift with subtlety. A soldier depicted in *A Corporal on Red Clay* displays debilitation. He is seated on the red soil lethargically, looking at the camera in a depressed manner. A twig on the upper left side of the frame is paired with a noose and the soldier’s left arm. They lead the viewer’s eyes to his crotch, which contrasts with a gun erected from his armpit, a reminder of military masculinity. Without assigning obvious signs of masculinity that conform to conventional codes, but rather highlighting soldiers’ vulnerability, Oh distorts the narrative of the war and military masculinity with the liberty that he obtained under the current political context. Even when the soldiers show off their physical prowess towards the camera, unnatural aspects remain in their gazes or stances, which I read as disclosing the constructedness of military masculinity that they were expected to play.

Another aspect that I point out from Oh’s photographs is the vicarious relationship that the soldiers have to the Korean War. Born after the ceasefire, they do not have direct experiences or memories of the war as most Koreans do. After 60 years of truce, the dormant war has become part of everyday Korean life. People read newspaper articles on the denuclearization of North Korea on their way to work and watch the inter-
Korean summit meetings on television while having dinner. They are trained in case of advanced attacks from North Korea, but threats of the outbreak of fighting have been empty for a long time. The coexistence of the state of peace with the latent violence that the war could bring mark the lived experience of every Korean citizen.

The oscillation between war and peace is recognized in four soldiers whose shirtless bodies are entangled. They are serving their military service but are not involved in military activities to defend the nation from the threat of the communist North. They are instead about to start a cavalry battle – a sort of chicken fight they played in their school days. Without playing any roles of violent, patriotic fighters, these men suggest regression to boyhood or even releases of the feminine or homo-social romance through male bonding.

The indirect experience that most Koreans have to the war today, which is reflected in Oh’s photographs, is a subject for other photographers, too. (Fig 3.54-3.57) Young Hoon Lee’s *Paradise* (2008) deviated from traditional representations of the military far more than Oh’s photographs, for which the soldiers still posed for the camera. He snuck his medium-sized folder camera in to his training for the reserve forces and took snapshots. As the soldiers in his shots are already discharged from their military training, their connection to the war is attenuated. The primary mission of the reserve

---

71 On April 27, 2018, then-president Jae-in Moon and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un had a meeting on the South Korean side of the Joint Security Area (JSA). It was followed by two meetings in May and September on the North Korean side of the JSA and in Pyongyang respectively.


73 Keum Hyun Han, “Photography of the Senses, Photography of Knowledge,” in *39*(2), 17-24.

74 After their release from the army, Korean men automatically become part of the reserve forces for eight years. They must get regular training for six years to maintain eligibility. For the first four years, they attend a three-day training camp, and for the fifth and sixth year, they are supposed to take a one day, eight-
forces training is to prepare personnel to enter the service immediately, given the potential resuming of the war or in the case of any national emergencies, to supplement active-duty soldiers and to defend their country from enemies. However, despite its slogan of “a warrior to secure the national defense,” the reserve force training is notorious for trainees’ slackness and lack of discipline.

Interestingly, while there are countless photographs of soldiers displaying courage, resoluteness, and physical strength that government organizations took and circulated, there is no photo gallery on the official website of the Republic of Korea Reserve Forces, and it is hard to find images that conjure up these qualities. Lee’s photographs that fill the void in the representation of reserve forces, I suggest, explain the absence. First of all, taken surreptitiously, the snapshots carry raw qualities as they are often unfocused and have random compositions. While the loose style confirms the unofficial nature of the images, they capture the soldiers roaming around, having a rest, or appreciating spring under a magnolia tree in bloom, which are all far from actual military training for war. Their untidy looks in uniform and laid-back postures further distance them from traditional images of the military and war. With no manly traits, their male bodies are not involved in physical activities, letting alone any violence.

(Fig 3.58) Juxtaposed with these images, the training ground also looks trivial. Lee’s camera looks down on it from outside to emphasize its constructed nature as a simulation of the war. In these photographs, the Korean War is not an impending reality at all, contrary to official history and its representation of the war as an impending reality

---

75 Republic of Korea Reserve Forces, https://www.yebigun1.mil.kr/
and actual threat but provides a backdrop for a sloppy military game. With qualities that
would damage the heroic narrative of the war and the military, Lee reveals an unfiltered
side of the present reality of the war.

In Seung Woo Back’s *The Real World II* series (2006-8), the reality of the war is
even replaced with simulations. Back’s perspective is different from that of either Oh or
Lee, displaying the war’s considerable impact on Korean society as well as the increasing
interest in contemporary photography in catch up with the void in the reality of the
Korean War in the earlier art photography. The series is comprised of scenes of tiny toy
soldiers arranged in urban spaces in a dark setting. The toy soldiers are differentiated as
separate nationalities by the color of their uniforms, and then are arranged in an orderly
manner based on military manuals that the photographer collected from different
countries. (Fig 3.59-3.61) Fully utilizing photographic features such camera angle,
lighting, scale, and composition, Back strategically places the toy soldiers as if they are in
a battle with each other near a parking spot or are carrying out battles in the corner of a
building. However, the figures are hardly visible as they are too small and the scene is too
dark.

Back recounted that this project originated from his experience as an international
student studying photography in London. Besides the artist’s initial conception of
expressing his personal struggle, the series carries layered meanings in regard to his
identity as a Korean man in the West. People he encountered in England kept asking
about his experience of the Korean War.\textsuperscript{76} As Anne Wilkes Tucker puts it: “The toy

\textsuperscript{76} Lee, Sohl and Seung Woo Back, “Probing into Authorial Fiction, In/visibility, and Cultural Landscapes:
Seung Woo Back’s Photography,” in *Seung Woo Back: Blow Up – Utopia* (Seoul: IANN BOOKS, 2010),
155.
soldiers are powerfully evocative of the presence and the memory of war. As a Korean in the West, he is repeatedly encountering people whose primary association with Korea is the Korean civil war of the 1950s. 77

In this view, the toy soldiers in totally different times and places of modern cities in Japan, the US, and England, and have connections to the cultural and political history of Korea as well as the personal history of the artist, 78 imply the lingering presence of the Korean War following Back abroad. Whether the viewer perceives their presence or not, the battles continue to occur everywhere: not only in the streets, but also in a phone booth, or in someone’s backyard. Some are more visible than others, with the use of dramatic lighting, and some are hard to see because the soldiers become part of their surroundings. As I will focus on the next chapter, the contested Korean identity is one of the popular issues that contemporary Korean photographers are obsessed with. This is especially true in cases of Korean artists living and working abroad.

The enacted battle scenes eventually end up as random battle scenes. Recalling the playtimes of childhood, they neither pose a real threat nor represent specific moments of the Korea War. While the corporeal bodies of the young soldiers mediate the war as the recent past in Oh’s and Lee’s photographs, Back’s version of the war is full of mediated reality as the toy soldiers substitute for actual bodies, and the recreations of the war are combinations of what the photographer learned from the military manuals, his personal experiences of military service, and postmemories of the war such as histories,

78 Lee and Back, Ibid.
photographs, films, stories, and so on. In James Young’s terms, Back’s staged photographs articulate his vicarious relationship to the war.

In *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, James Young discussed David Levinthal’s photographic projects, *Mein Kampf* (“my struggle” in German, 1994-96), a series of Polaroid photographs for which Levinthal staged dramatic scenes with toy Nazi soldiers and their victims, and *Hitler Moves East* (1977), a series of blurred battle photographs that depict German Wehrmacht soldiers’ invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. (Fig 3.62-3.66) Levinthal’s grainy photographs are created in a documentary style with extremely shallow depth, standing between history and culture. Levinthal’s reality of the Holocaust was what he experienced through television images, toys, and war photographs, such as Robert Capa’s combat images. In particular, the artificiality of his photographs reflects the condition of postmemory of the Holocaust and World War II, which has been continuously repackaged and reinvented and circulated in mass media.

Young defined Levinthal’s ready-made simulacrum as “a hybrid form of historical memory between its faux realism and fluent storytelling.” Back’s toy soldiers also exist in a mediated reality. However, Back’s photographs of battle scenes do not display recognizable signifiers from which one can recall specific historical moments, such as a Hitler figurine or Nazi flag. One might be reminded of the complicated relationships and political tension among the countries that are involved in the war, such

---

79 Mein Kampf is also the title of Adolf Hitler’s two-volume autobiography published in 1925 and 1926, in which he presented his political ideology and future plans for Germany.

as North and South Korea, Japan, China, the former Soviet Union, and of course, the US. Back’s photos refer to the ongoing status of a war whose narrative depends on changing political contexts and the consequent inter-Korea relationship. However, this sort of analysis is possible only after having obtained information about the photographer’s background, since the toys are placed in anonymous urban spaces and the photographs suggest no cultural or historical contexts.

Arranged in open settings, not in enclosed dioramas, Back’s photographs that have full depth emphasize the visual contrast between the toy soldiers and the spaces in which they are located. This comparison undermines the seriousness of the battle scene, while the dark setting and the dim light insinuate its violent potential. With no reference to history and no clear narrative structure, Back’s rather playful photographs are full of ambivalence. I argue that they symbolize various conditions around the Korean War. Back’s perception of the Korean War might reflect Koreans’ making light of the war. They also suggest the attenuation of anti-communism or nationalist rhetoric on the narrative of the Korean War. Otherwise, they relate to the ambiguous status of the war, or the unstable postmemory of the Korean War created under the authoritarian governments, which left no clear marks in this photographic series. As demonstrated by these photographers, the Korean War is the most important historical moment that shaped the identity of Korea. Despite different approaches to the subject, they all reveal that the Korean War is a living reality for Koreans that is deeply embedded in their lives.

The history of postcolonial Korea up to 1987, which was constructed by military regimes, is based on nationalistic rhetoric. According to this rhetoric, Korea with its essential culture and tradition has maintained itself through patriotic struggles against
foreign invasions, and more current regimes claimed to be heirs to the ancestors in
restoring the nation after the Japanese colonial period. As the country changed, Korean
photographers reevaluated the nation’s history. Taking major historic moments as
subjects, they reveal masculine nature and constructedness of established Korean history.
The male body as a metaphor the nation often materializes this transformation. Either
creating parodic reconstructions of important moments, casual snapshots, or deadpan
portraits of military men, they deviate from conveying abstract, epic narratives, just like
photographers discussed in Chapter 2 constructed alternative memories of the Gwangju
Uprising. With a different relationship to the state that allowed photographers more
artistic freedom and knowledge, Korean photography participated and continues to
participate in the modification of collective memory and official history. In fact, this
questioning of the nation’s identity is not limited photographs made within the country.
Korean photographers who work abroad are also concerned with how to negotiate Korean
identity under the changing socio-cultural contexts in and outside the country.
Chapter Four
Looking from the Outside: Explorations of Korean Identity

(Fig 4.1) In a photograph taken on December 22, 2000, four girls in high school uniforms are seated on a bench against a large window hanging out. One girl on the right is talking on the phone and another one on the far left appears to be doing embroidery. The two in the center are holding their cellphones, looking at the screens together. In the scene, no one seems to be conscious of the camera’s existence or that they are being photographed. All of them are fully absorbed in their activities and do not directly show facial expressions, reinforcing the quality of a casual snapshot of the photograph. However, when looking at the consecutive photographs, one notices that a vaguely similar woman appears in every photograph and the plausibility of the photographs becomes dubious, as if the photographs are not simply spontaneous documentations of everyday activities but results of contrived scenes. (Fig 4.2-4.3) A dark-skinned young woman, who stares at a camera askew lifting her sunglasses surrounded by African American friends, and a short-haired woman spending intimate moments with her partner are all the same person, Nikki S. Lee, disguised as a member of each community that she spent time with and took part in the activities of.

The artist’s Project series (1997-2001) originated in her personal history of moving from South Korea in 1994 to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology and New York University in New York. Based on her encounters with a varied cultural landscape, the New York-based Korean artist addressed the issue of identity within the context of the multi-cultural US. Consisting of a series of snapshots that documented her in 14 different communities, it crosses boundaries of race and ethnicity (the Hispanic Project),
nationality (the Young Japanese [East Village] project), sexuality (the Lesbian Project, the Drag Queen Project), age (the Schoolgirl Project, the Seniors Project), class (the Yuppie Project), and culture (the Hip Hop Project, the Punk Project). Lee chose a performative process and went through a process of choosing a community, spending time with the members for two or more weeks at a time, taking part in their activities, building an affinity with them, and documenting the moments. Often, her friends or passersby took photos of random moments.

In joining these communities, Lee willingly gives up herself and adopts sartorial codes of dress and sets of gestures and skill sets – often stereotypical – as tools with which she can communicate. Her dramatic makeovers with outfits, makeup, skin color, weight, and hairstyle transform her body, which is the primary medium, and the project is completed when she and her temporary friends pose to document their time together. After one project, she moves on to another one, repeating the same process. Working mostly in New York, sometimes in Ohio, San Francisco, and Seoul, South Korea, she explores “the endless possibilities of self-alteration,” and her photographs supposedly prove that. Between the staged and the spontaneous, the real and the fake, they represent numerous cultural communities in a casual format.

Lee’s self-transforming performances inevitably associate her with her identity as a Korean/Asian female artist working outside her country. With this in mind, how does Project relate to the societal change of Korea and its consequent impact on the country’s art and photography? In that this project was realized outside Korea, it is also important to consider under which condition the artist worked and how her work was perceived. As

---

most of the existing discussions on her work took place in the American context, considering these aspects provides a better understanding and contextualization of her work. In contrast to the previous chapters that explore the nation’s transformation around its understated political history, the scope of this last chapter goes beyond the Korean nation and questions how photographers work with Korean identity under an international cultural context.

This chapter analyzes the evolution of Korean photography that not only reflects the shift of the country into globalized conditions but also takes part in the identity formation of Korean/Asian in the Western cultures. The increased mobility of Koreans and the state-led globalization exposed Korean artists to international culture and encouraged them to earnestly rethink the Korean identity. Their newly adopted itinerant lives, contacts with Western cultures, and the critical interpretations of their native culture, which is often associated with enduring Korean tradition, are incorporated in their questioning of the Korean identity. As a legitimate genre of contemporary art, Korean photography functions as an appropriate means of exploring this issue.

Integrating their personal experiences, photographers in this chapter included themselves in their work and articulated the immediacy of the subject in various formats. These practices are also associated with what was happening in global contemporary art in the 1990s. Looking at how photographers respond to different cultures and have constant negotiations with persisting tradition to position them outside the nation, this chapter focuses on the way that Korean identity is realized in front of the camera.
The Rise of Identity Politics and the Travel of the 1993 Whitney Biennial to Seoul

As discussed in earlier chapters, the newly achieved political freedom afforded photographers more choices of subject matter, such as the nation’s recent political history and the reassessment of Korean identity. The photographers that I discuss in this chapter are no exception. In particular, they are beneficiaries of the opening of the country and the alleviated restrictions on studying and traveling abroad, which gave ordinary people mobility and direct contacts with foreign cultures both in and outside the country. This societal change provided Korean photographers opportunities to perceive and express themselves in a global context. They also provided them with new stylistic vocabularies, which expanded from simple documentations to composed snapshot photographs and large-scale performative portraits. While photographic trends before the late 1980s had an exclusive relationship to documentary photography from the US, the renewed practices in Korean photography, reflecting and participating in the rapid changes in the country, diverge from a consistent style.

As Lee moved to the US and created and presented her work in the American art scene, it is meaningful to review in which contexts she worked, in terms of both Korea and the US. The US of the 1990s, where she moved and started a career, is best described through identity politics and multiculturalism, with discussions and discourses centered on issues of cultural, racial, class, sexual, and gender differences. As Nizan Shaked defined the term identity politics “as a compound noun to refer to a historically specific political form that developed from 1950s Civil Rights to the politics of difference, of

---

representation, or identification in the 1990s,”3 the roots of these debates go back to the mid-20th century. Along with activist movements represented by the abolitionist and suffrage movements, the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement, the gay liberation movement, and the women’s movement, identity-based scholarly programs such as women’s studies, black studies, and Chicano studies developed to address questions about economic disparity, social violence, and cultural hierarchies and to enhance understanding of the relationship of identity to culture and to knowledge in the 1960s and the 1970s.4 Multiculturalism, originated in institutional agendas and the discourse of the liberal nation state, also was a response to increasing interest in how identities formed and worked.5

With the radical societal changes that occurred throughout the 1990s – the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the First Gulf War, the Los Angeles riots in 1991/1992, the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, the NAFTA treaty in 1994, the rise of the dot-com bubble in the mid-1990s and its subsequent burst in 2000, the Y2K panic, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 – debates in American mass media and academia surrounding identities and differences peaked to reflect and spur changes. What provoked the racial and sexual issues prevalent in American society saw direct reactions in art exemplified by such episodes as the withdrawal of federal funding of the National Endowment for the Arts for Andres Serrano’s Immersion (Piss Christ) (1989); the cancellation of Robert Mapplethorpe’s exhibition “The Perfect Moment” at one of the

five venues, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC in 1989 that sparked controversies on artistic freedom and censorship.\(^6\)

In conversation with this context, contemporary art accelerated the turn towards identity politics and multiculturalism. As Nizan Shaked discussed this trend in landmark exhibitions and anthologies in the American context, a series of events were stimulating debates on political art at the time. *Classified: Big Pages from the Heresies Collective* (The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1983) focused on the oppression of women as a social and cultural phenomenon. *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* (The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984/5) examined the social, ideological, psychological, economic, and linguistic structures that affect the construction of gender and sexuality within a Lacanian perspective. *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1990) surveyed political tendencies in the art of the 1980s with an emphasis on multicultural interests in the art world and critical analysis of essentialist notions of identity. It also defined identity as a construction through differences in race, gender, and class. The publications, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (1989) and *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (1990), on the other hand, problematized the distinction between essentialism and constructionism and the heteronormative Western hegemony, covering expansive cultural forms from high art to street culture in the process.\(^7\)

---

\(^6\) Schwartz, Ibid.

\(^7\) Shaked, Ibid., 157-165.
Most of all, it was the 1993 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art that best exemplified the representation of socio-political issues in contemporary art, solidifying identity politics and multiculturalism. Elisabeth Sussman, one of the curators, recalled later that it was “one of a number of shows that fixed the terms of critical debates in the late 1980s and early 1990s.” Highlighting that art production springs up from a relation of cultures of identities, and addressing problems of identity and the presentation of community, the 1993 Biennial encompassed social contexts and explored multiple aspects of identity that come to play in works of art. With a great number of women artists and artists of color whose works were formerly excluded from mainstream art venues, it explored multiple aspects of identity beyond the essentialism of the 1970s that could expand to consider representations of minority ethnicities in the multicultural American society.

These exhibitions and publications that problematized the existing order of the (art) world deepened discussions about marginalized subjects and their representations. They provided platforms for underrepresented groups, including Asian subjectivities, to speak up and address their issues under a more favorable climate. Also, when they accumulated, a considerable impact in the mainstream art world followed to incorporate radical identity politics. Subsequent exhibitions such as the 1993 Venice Biennale and its auxiliary Aperto '93, the Johannesburg Biennial in 1997, and Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany in 2002 dealt with similar issues.

---

10 David Ross, “Preface: Know They Self (Know Thy Place)” in 1993 Biennial Exhibition, 9.
As identity politics infiltrated into the supposedly neutral field of art and had increased impacts, they went through the process of institutionalization. The 1993 Whitney Biennial demonstrated how identity politics were adapted into the institutional framework as opposed to being rejected by the museum system in the 1960s and 1970s. As Shaked explained, that consolidated the reception and legacies of the politics of identity and political activism, and the critique of institutions became part of art making. The museum provided a platform for artists within which they enacted their identity through a matrix of identifications. Within the societal climate of the 1990s, the exhibition called attention to actual political situations and evoked questions of what affects identity formation and the construction of a community.

In discussing the institutionalization of radical identity politics, Shaked also pointed out that though supporters claimed that the Biennial was an anti-commercial resistance to the growing commodification of art, the Biennial was more of a negotiation than a negation of commodification. What supports her claim is the process of its traveling to Seoul, Korea, which is an under-explored aspect in studies on the 1993 Biennial. Apart from its ramifications on the development of contemporary Korean art, its tour to Seoul epitomized the commercialization of identity politics into a cultural product.

Only 40 days after its closing in New York, the 1993 Biennial, which addressed compelling issues in American society, had another opening at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. As Jina Kim articulated, this was not just the move of an exhibition from one place to another. It was the transformation of a cultural product into

---

economic capital. The MMCA negotiated with the Whitney to pay $350,000 in curatorial fees to bring the Biennial to Seoul, which was about half of the entire budget of the New York exhibition ($643,008).\textsuperscript{13} Not only art objects, but the whole system of artists, curators, museums and galleries, and the cultural context that endows them symbolic power to perform their roles was packaged into a cultural product and transported.

The changes that the Biennial went through further support Shaked’s argument. In its first time traveling abroad, 107 works by 61 artists (out of the 82 artists’ 150 works in the New York exhibition) came to Korea. The modifications were mostly based on material conditions such as shipping costs and technical issues related to large-scale installations, so as not to overspend the designated budget.\textsuperscript{14} However, curators at the MMCA also excluded works by Nan Goldin (Fiona after Breast Operation, NYC, 1991), Barbara Hammer (Nitrate Kisses, 1992), and Cindy Sherman (Untitled, 1992), saying they contained overtly sexual contents that were inappropriate to “Korean sentiment.” With the consent of the Whitney’s director, David Ross, the three were removed in the Korean exhibition.\textsuperscript{15} Upon undergoing these processes, the exhibition was repackaged to fit a totally different culture. These changes prove Shaked’s claim that the 1993 Biennial


\textsuperscript{14} For example, Firetruck by Charles Ray, a 12-by-47-foot replica of a toy fire truck, which was parked in front of the museum during the biennial, was removed. Gary Hill’s Tall Ships was replaced with another work of his, Between 0 and 1 (1993), since it was easier to install.

\textsuperscript{15} Soo Jung Kang, “Gonggong Misulgwanui Munhwa Jeongchihakjeok Teukseonggwa Silcheon Haengwi-ro Jeonsiui Yeokal (공공미술관의 문화정치학적 특성과 실천행위로 전시의 역할, The Cultural Political Characteristics of Public Museum and the Role of Exhibition as the Practice)” (PhD diss., Hong-ik University, 2016), 145-6.
demonstrated the institutionalization of identity politics and its compatibility with neoliberalism. As Jina Kim suggested, this commercialized aspect of the Seoul exhibition could jeopardize complimentary evaluations on its anti-commoditized and radical nature and has not been discussed enough in the US.  

As the changes made for the Korean exhibition prove, this case makes an interesting comparison by which to demonstrate the changed relationship between the two countries. In Chapter 1, I discuss how The Family of Man and its message received an uncritical reception, and its style became dominant in Korean photography under the hierarchal relationships of the US and Korea. As in the case of The Family of Man, American art still had a powerful influence on Korea. The Biennial provoked intensive attention and controversies, and left a crucial impact on contemporary Korean art. One of the major reasons for having the Whitney biennial in Seoul was the educational purpose of introducing cutting-edge American art to Korea. Nam June Paik, who acted as a facilitator between New York and Seoul, arranged the fundraising and made a personal donation to put the tour through, articulating, “the major significance of having the Whitney Biennial in Seoul, which is the first trip outside the US, is to eliminate the informational gap.” In the same vein, the MMCA proposal mentioned “this Biennial

---

16 Kim, Ibid., 123.
17 While it was the hottest issue in the art scene and got enormous media exposure, the reception was not always positive. For instance, art critic Hunee Jung cast doubt on how much introducing contemporary art from New York would benefit young Korean artists and the development of Korean art. Hunee Jung, “Urineun Hwiteuniiui Chungsilhan Baeoiniga 우리는 휘트니의 충실한 바이어인가 (Are we a faithful buyer of the Whitney),” Wolgannisool, September 1993, 154-159.
will provide opportunities for the general public to cultivate knowledge of contemporary art.” 19

In the article, Paik pointed out the lack of profound understanding of contemporary art and that the complicated history of identity politics, which goes back to the mid-20th century, in Korea. Discourses on identity, multiculturalism, and differences were still new to the Korean audience, who were raised on beliefs of a racially homogenous nation and whose culture highlighted harmony and collectivity over individuality. On top of that, the Korean catalogue eliminated essays from Homi Bhabha, Avital Ronell, and Coco Fusco that provided theoretical backgrounds to the exhibition, making it harder to apprehend the exhibition. Due to these limitations, it cannot be said that the Biennial was fully appreciated in Korea, though it provoked fundamental changes in contemporary art. Kang explained that the major change that the Biennial brought to Korean art was a more diversified use of artistic medium. 20

Though Korea was still under the influence of American art, the context of the travel, reception, and impact of the Biennial on Korea was quite different compared to that of when The Family of Man opened at the same museum in 1957. As the first civilian government inaugurated globalization project in the 1990s, its impact reached the cultural domain. The Korean Culture and Arts Foundation (Munye Jinheungwon) declared that the year 1993 should be an important moment for the globalization of Korean culture. Having the Biennial was part of the national project to open up the country and to develop its culture internationally. In fact, what motivated the tour of the biennial was

---

19 “이 비엔날레가 현대미술에 대한 일반 국민들의 교양 함양의 기회를 제공해 줄 것이다.” in Kang, Ibid., 127.
20 Kang, Ibid., 151.
Daejeon Expo ’93, a three-month international exposition (August 7 – November 7, 1993) in the central city of Daejeon, Korea. According to the museum proposal, MMCA was searching for ways to celebrate the Expo 93 and was exploring various models to organize exhibitions that would introduce recent trends in contemporary art. This led to the idea of having the Whitney Biennial in Korea.\(^{21}\) The curator at MMCA, Soo Jung Kang added that it was not the director of the museum but the Minister of Culture and Sports who had the final say of the project, proving that it was part of the cultural policy of Korea.\(^{22}\)

As these details reveal, the Biennial was not simply a cultural model to emulate but was integrated into the globalization process of Korean art by the government. From the initial stage, the proposal for the exhibition notes that the MMCA had the intention of opening up a conversation with American culture on equal terms, laying the groundwork to establish itself as an internationally renowned museum, and paving the way for Korean artists to make their way to the global art world.\(^{23}\) With these aims, the museum suggested that the Whitney include works by 10 Korean artists for the Seoul exhibition,\(^{24}\) through which the Korean curators could participate in the ongoing discourse of contemporary art. Though this was not realized, this episode reflects the changed attitude in the reception of American art, recalling the uncritical compliments of The Family of Man in the 1950s. Also, the Gwangju Biennial incorporated the lessons from the 1993 Biennial and organized its first exhibition “Beyond the Borders” in 1995, which centered

\(^{22}\) Kang, 126.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) Choi, 1.
on similar issues such as the boundaries and differences between nations, people, races, ideologies, and religions.25

Overall, the exhibition was an important moment for contemporary Korean art, with its introduction of cutting-edge discourses and frequent use of nontraditional media. To narrow the scope, though it has been rarely discussed in the Korean context, Korean photography was also a beneficiary of the exhibition and the changes following it. In terms of both subject matter and style, the Biennial brought about increasing interest in socially engaged art and proved that photography was no longer a separate genre but was already a crucial part of global contemporary art. How Korean photography made efforts to expand its scope utilizing the momentum created by the Whitney Biennial, the Gwangju Biennial, and so on, will be discussed more later in this chapter. Along with the growing cultural exchanges with other cultures and their impact on the nation’s art and photography within the country, global trends in contemporary art provided a proper backdrop for Korean photographers to work outside the country. When interest in how to perceive and represent marginalized groups peaked in art, Asian identity was an appropriate subject to explore. Working under these condition, Korean photographers addressed their identities such as their differences, how to position themselves in multicultural societies, and how to negotiate their Korean backgrounds, and received increased critical attention from the Western art scene.

Nikki S. Lee: Projects
[A Korean Artist in the Multicultural US]

As Amelia Jones articulated, the pivotal issue of the 1993 Biennial was “the long overdue attention to race and ethnicity” over gender and sexuality. It attenuated masculinist, European colonialist values, which had long been considered universal aesthetic values.\(^{26}\) Joan Kee also wrote that one of the impacts of heightened interest in “differences” was the “increased visibility of artists of Asian ethnic and national origin in the United States during the 1990s,” with exhibitions such as *Across the Pacific* (1993) at the Queens Museum that focused on artworks by Korean and Korea American artists.\(^{27}\) Under the climate of political and economic liberalization, which made it easier for ordinary Koreans to travel and study abroad, more and more Korean artists moved overseas. One of them was Nikki S. Lee. Under the adopted name of Nikki, she carried out self-transforming performances to address the beloved issue of “identity” in contemporary art and became one of the most well-known Korean artists in art history, as her work is included in the permanent collections of major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

At a time when identity politics and multiculturalism were dominating contemporary American art, her ethnicity and immigrant status intertwined so that her Asian body permeated the multicultural American landscape to raise fundamental questions on the construction of identity and to problematize the parameters of identity. While her work seems to be suitably located in the American art of the 1990s, it needs

---

\(^{26}\) Jones, Ibid.

\(^{27}\) Joan Kee, “As the World Turns in 1990s’ America,” in *Come As You Art*, 55.
more elaborate contextualization of its relationship to both Korean and American art. As Jones argued that the very premise of “art” entails an interest in the subjectivity that we believe to have motivated its production, at the heart of Lee’s work is her Korean identity. It involves various dimensions of discussions: she had recently arrived in the US, and her country was undergoing the transformation to a global status. This is one of the most important aspects to consider in contextualizing her work, since her photographs are intertwined with the development of photography in the 1990s and 2000s. In this chapter, I will focus on how her work addresses the issue of Korean identity within the international context, both departing from traditional notions of Korean identity and still adopting tradition. This will be followed by discussions of photographers residing outside Korea who explored similar issues with relevance to the globalization of Korea in order to explore an important trend in both contemporary Korean photography and contemporary art in general.

To analyze Lee’s work, it is useful to point out first the context under which she worked and who mainly wrote about her. As she worked and exhibited mainly in New York, critics analyzed her work within the frame of American art of the 1990s. Overall, they perceived her subjectivity more as Asian American or Korean American, similar to African American or Hispanic and Latino American, than as a Korean who had recently moved to the US. As identity politics approached the issue of identity, Lee was considered an immigrant striving to overcome her differences and successfully assimilate into the multicultural US. Mark Godfrey wrote that “Lee plays with ideas about the immigrant’s fear and the newcomer’s desire to blend into their environment.”

---

28 Jones, Ibid., 137.
Dalton argued that Lee reinvigorated debates on assimilation and passing, as she “assimilates into both mainstream and marginal cultures with zeal and success, highlighting both the intricate visual markings and broader social functions of our cultural boundaries.”

Even upon the series’ exhibition in Korea, curator Soyeon Ahn wrote that Lee unveiled her personal history of adjusting to a foreign culture, situating her work only in the context of American art.

For them, Lee’s work is a critical analysis of what constitutes identities and their representation. Godfrey wrote that Lee’s work critiqued contemporary prejudices, and the photographs, full of cultural stereotypes, were “great satires” towards the art audience that indulged in them. Ahn also said that Lee’s series, based off of persistent research on different cultures, bears serious questions and concerns about identity, and uncovers how subordinated cultures are dissimilated from the “mainstream” and become marginalized in society.

In doing so, what these critics highlight is how Lee makes “surprisingly flawless physical transformation[s],” looks “completely at ease in each milieu,” and “visually blends into divergent subcultures, pointing out the constructed nature of identity to amusing, as well as sober, effect.” (Fig 4.4) An anecdote in The Seniors Project about how the old women Lee worked with did not buy that Lee was an artist in disguise and

---

32 Godfrey, Ibid.
33 Ahn, Ibid., 93.
34 Ibid.
35 Godfrey, Ibid.
36 Dalton, Ibid., 47.
thought that she was “off her trolley” supposedly proves her ability to demonstrate the fluid and permeable nature of identity.\textsuperscript{37} As her makeovers enable her to look similar to people around her, to step inside the border, and to establish a personal affinity with them, her metamorphous body is a site where different cultures intersect and a new identity emerges each time.

Art critic Ben Davis, on the other hand, criticized that her work shows the cursory appropriation of subcultures and creates “a simplified, cardboard picture of social reality, not an exploration of its richness.”\textsuperscript{38} Art historian Miwon Kwon also made a similar point that Lee’s work abstracts subcultural communities as fashion tableaux and reduces the crisis of identity to a game of costume changes, in the end, refusing the other. In a chapter on ethnographic turns in recent art,\textsuperscript{39} Kwon addressed the difference between ethnographic authority and artistic authorship. According to her, what is traced in the


\textsuperscript{39} The way Lee carried out her performances has often been associated with the participant observation method. According to Barbara B. Kawulich, whose article provides an overview about the methodology of participant observation, this is a tool for collecting data in qualitative research in anthropological and sociological studies. Researchers observe and participate in the day-to-day or routine activities of the people under investigation in their natural setting and learn about them. The research is performed systematically, with extensive observation, natural conversations, informal interviews, field notes, checklists and questionnaires during their fieldwork. Yet scholars still warn that this method can produce biased data. First of all, the researcher’s individual interest or identity – gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and theoretical approach – can affect the data, possibly misrepresenting the culture or the community or distorting factual understanding. Also, as anthropologist Russell H. Bernard articulated, participant observation involves the process of establishing rapport with a community and learning to act to blend in with them, while the researcher is required to keep a distance and to have a sense of objectivity for nonjudgmental, unbiased analysis. Russell Ferguson, “Let’s Be Nikki,” in \textit{Projects} (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 8, Louis Kaplan, “Performing Community,” in \textit{American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 173, RoseLee Goldberg, “Only Part of the Story: Nikki S. Lee In Conversation with RoseLee Goldberg,” in \textit{Parts} (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2006)), 49, Barbara B. Kawulich, “Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method,” \textit{Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research} \textbf{6}, no.2, art. 43 (May 2005), n.p. http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.2.466.
work are the signs of experience, such as her extreme makeovers and casual snapshots with intimate poses. However, she argued Lee’s personal experience is over-evaluated as “the basis of true and reliable knowledge about culture and the self.”

What Kwon pointed out in analyzing Lee’s erroneous authority is Lee’s own membership in a subcultural group. According to Kwon, rather than problematizing existing representations, Lee provides “an extended encounter with the ‘other’” like the modern ethnographic research that showed exotic, faraway cultures to the civilized West. As a native tour guide, Kwon criticized, Lee fulfills voyeuristic desires and primitivist expectations by objectifying herself and collapsing herself into the other as an other. As she pointed out, Lee’s work certainly displays stereotypes of groups and communities, and the extent to which doing blackface and wearing sleazy accessories can provide critical analysis on hip hop culture beyond making a spectacle is questionable. Also, its legitimation as a critical analysis of various cultures and identity construction has to do with the artist’s personal history of moving from Asia, observing American culture, and adjusting to a foreign country, though the mere fact that Lee, an Asian immigrant, explored diverse cultural communities does not guarantee that the artist actually produced reliable knowledge that is unmediated by historical and social determinants.

What is often dismissed in these discussions is that despite Lee’s elaborate construction, her Asian identity – such as her bone structure, skin color, and eye shape – lingers on amidst her crossing of myriad cultural borders in New York and the United States and is the core of the entire project. (Fig 4.5) In The Hispanic Project, for example,

it is quite obvious that Lee in a white top and a bronze ponytail hair extension is the only Asian amid several dark-skinned girls with curly hair, who are waving flags at the National Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City. (Fig 4.6) In *The Hip-Hop Project*, despite her physical transformation, her Asian features stand out in contrast to her African-American friends.

She sometimes looks awkward and isolated. In *The Yuppie Project*, the artist does not appear totally absorbed into the surroundings, nor is she showing psychological intimacy with people. (Fig 4.7-4.8) She is having everyday moments, either eating lunch with colleagues at a park, or having a romantic dinner at a restaurant with her date. Her co-workers display awkward smiles as Lee looks at the camera with a blank face. It is hard to find intimacy between her and the men in the photos, and the staged nature of the photographs is clear. In a later image, the artist leans her body towards a man, but the gesture between them is unnatural and they look nervous. This contrasts with aforementioned images such as *The Schoolgirl Project*, in which Lee looks confident and less self-conscious about striking a pose. In viewing these photographs, what determines membership to a community becomes confusing. The different responses that Lee exhibits reveal that at the center of every performance is always the artist, who willingly changes her appearance, but whose essence is not affected.41

From these observations, I would like to focus on Lee’s subjectivity as a Korean artist, which does not necessarily conform to the reception of her work in the American context that associates it with identity politics. In differentiating her Korean and Korean-

---

American identities, I refer to Stuart Hall’s discussion of cultural identities. Hall argued that cultural identities are framed by two vectors in dialogue, similarity/continuity and difference/rupture. Like Caribbean people are from different countries in Africa and Asia, and there is a profound difference in culture and history between Martinique and Jamaica, there exists a serious discontinuity in Caribbean identities as well as a continuity. Hall mentioned that, as the boundaries of difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference, they are effaced from the perspective of the West regardless of their different distances to the metropolitan center.

Expanding on Hall’s idea, when different Korean identities are bound together, they are very much the same from the perspective of the West, despite discontinuities between them. Borrowing from Hall, belonging to the periphery of the metropolitan world, “we [Koreans] are very much ‘the same’.” 42 Focusing on the discontinuities and ruptures in Korean identities and the way that Lee’s Korean identity is enacted, I argue, not only helps illuminate the core of the work but also is linked to the broader status of contemporary Korean art and photography in transition.

To address Lee’s identity more specifically: she is a Korean artist who was born and raised in Korea, finished a college education there, and moved to the US at the age of 24 to continue studying. 43 When Lee created this project since 1997, it was only a few years after she arrived in the US. Thus, her subjectivity is more Korean than Korean American, referring to those who were born in and grew up in America or moved to America at an early age. Also, the time that Lee moved to the US was only a few years

---

43 She graduated from Department of Photography, Chung-Ang University in Seoul, Korea, in 1993.
after Korea opened up to the world and regulations for ordinary Koreans to travel and study were alleviated. It was also just after the government initiated its globalization project and fundamental changes in contemporary Korean art were beginning to be seen.

As discussed earlier, when the Whitney Biennial traveled in 1993, Korean art and academia still lagged behind in understanding and relating to the on-going discourses on multiculturalism and identity politics in the US. Reviews of the exhibition in Korea that dismissed the core concepts of identity politics and debates on political correctness, as Jina Kim argued, reflect a limited understanding of the Biennial in Korea and represent the status of Korean art in terms of its reception of American art.  

Considering these backgrounds, I suggest that Lee’s work presumably bears little consciousness of the contentious issue of identity and its representation. First, she clearly identifies herself as Asian or Korean, but hardly displays consciousness as an ethnic minority. Instead, she claims that she has a global personality and remains undecided about her perception of racial identity, saying “It would be the same thing if I was raised in Paris and then came here and did this work,” and “I don’t think about race or nationality.” Lee’s disinterest in this sensitive issue and what constitutes various identities in her project likely explain why her photographs frequently carry stereotypical representations and sometimes a lack of political correctness.

For her, identity construction is the process of adapting oneself and making friends. As the artist emphasizes, she does not analyze the different costume styles but depends on her instincts. A large part of her identity construction is realized through

---

44 Kim, Ibid., 116.
46 Ferguson, Ibid., 13.
shopping, since “the whole culture comes out” when shopping.\textsuperscript{47} The project is completed with the repeated process of transforming herself to blend into her surroundings, building affinity with the community, and gaining access to intimate activities that an outsider cannot participate in. From her photographs – the end products of her projects – one cannot recognize the process of her preparation or her getting close to the group members. Thus, what catch one’s eyes are the easily recognizable signifiers of culture that one can instantly think of. (Fig 4.9) For \textit{The Hip Hop Project}, she darkened her skin, braided her hair, wore heavy make-up and dark eyeliner and is hanging out with her African American hip hop friends. (Fig 4.10) For \textit{The Lesbian Project}, she shortened her hair and wears glasses and masculine clothes, and makes masculine gestures towards her partner. (Fig 4.11) \textit{The Yuppie Project}, on the other hand, is composed of Lee in black suits, neat short hair, and a blue Tiffany bag.

In this way, Lee’s process of the construction and representation of identities is characterized by its apolitical stance. She defines the process of constructing identities in a personal dimension as following:

\begin{quote}
“I’m also interested in how people's identities are changed by relationships. I realize that my own identity changes depending on whom I’m going out with or who becomes my boyfriend. One person might make me feel very bossy and independent, another might make me feel really feminine and fragile. (...) A person’s identity can be very fluid from one relationship to the next.”\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

These remarks reveal her disinterest in the politics of representation and her privatized perception of identity. With little consciousness of the politically sensitive matter, her photographs are full of clichés, and sometimes satisfy voyeurism and

\textsuperscript{47} Hamilton, Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{48} Goldberg, Ibid., 50.
exoticism. (Fig 4.12) Photographs from *The Lesbian Project*, for instance, depict private space as if peeking into someone’s apartment. The couple appears to be unaware of the presence of the camera and are seen in romantic scenes, laughing in the kitchen or watching television lying on the couch together. (Fig 4.13) In *The Exotic Dancers Project*, Lee presents herself and fellow dancers almost naked as objects of the male gaze. In those projects, Lee makes subcultures into spectacles.

Taking place on a personal and privatized level, the common criteria of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender are deprived of political implications and their boundaries become porous in Lee’s projects. Just like she can join a skateboarding community by getting proper equipment, learning and practicing skills, and spending time with the group members, she decides to be part of an African-American community that enjoys hip hop culture or to adopt a sexual identity and to become a lesbian by imitating their looks and activities. Thus, though she is referred to as a “cultural chameleon” or said to indicate the arrival of a “trans-identity moment” or post-identity politics that celebrate the fluidity of identity, I assert that, by adopting a shallow awareness of how identity forms and functions, she avoids taking a minority position and questioning what constitutes identities, but chooses instead to remain a privileged artist.

The emphasis on Lee’s Korean identity engenders a different analysis of the work: her photographs are not critical cultural knowledge that an artist of minority ethnicity produced in efforts to “transcend her own persona” and to seamlessly blend into

---

49 Godfrey, Ibid.

her surroundings.\textsuperscript{51} Instead, with no confrontation of stereotypical representations subcultures, they are more a series of performances in which an artist from Korea explores various cultural landscapes of her newly adopted country. While her notion of identity does not necessarily correspond with ongoing Western discourse, she refers to the Korean notion of identity in a traditional sense. According to her, there is a binary opposition of the East versus the West as follows, which is a notion that she applied her work: “In Western culture, identity is always ‘me.’… in Eastern culture, the identity is ‘we.’ Identity is awareness of others,”\textsuperscript{52} and “this is a Korean characteristic. In Asian culture, we are taught to empathize with people (…) Western culture is very much about the individual, while Eastern culture is more about identity in the context of society.”\textsuperscript{53}

Lee’s photographs exemplify this idea. They are about how her identity is affected by the people around and their culture, and how she becomes part of a community. She looks more comfortable when she is with Korean high school girls or tourists in New York, and some projects display a constructed nature and her discomfort, such as The Seniors Project and The Yuppie Project. However, this neither affects success of the projects nor questions what constitutes identities, because it is not about erasing herself to achieve perfect assimilation but rather artistic exploration of various cultures and making friends for photographs.

The sympathetic notion of identity that Lee refers to has its roots in Confucianism. In the Confucian worldview, a universe is linked through the operation of tao (the way), which is the ultimate origin of everything and has power to rule

\textsuperscript{51} Ferguson, Ibid., 12, Vicario, Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{52} Kaplan, Ibid, 176.
\textsuperscript{53} Goldberg, Ibid., 49.
incompatible opposing forces, the *yin* and the *yang*. To conform to *tao* is to keep a perfectly ordered arrangement of virtuous rule and universal harmony.\(^{54}\) What corresponds with Lee’s work is the basic interpersonal principle: order, balance, and harmony between the five basic relationships. These five basic relationships are those between Prince and Minister, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, and friends. In the operation of *tao*, the universe and the individual are organically connected, and human beings are expected to fit together as necessary parts of a society.\(^{55}\) In this emphasis of relationships and harmony, egoistic, rationally self-interested, competitive individualism was anathematized.\(^{56}\)

In principle, the philosophy *per se* implies respectful relationships for each other. Its influence in modern and contemporary Korea, which relates to Lee’s work, is more traced directly from how political leaders exploited Confucianism. As a state ideology of the Joseon Dynasty, Confucianism lost influence after the fall of the dynasty. However, it was reinvented after the foundation of Republic of Korea, causing the nation to remain the “most Confucian part of the world.”\(^{57}\) The autocratic presidents, from the first president Syng-man Rhee to the military presidents Chung-hee Park and Doo-hwan Chun, consistently reinvented Korea’s traditional Confucian heritage.\(^{58}\) By invoking the Confucian legacy, each newly established regime claimed to be the heir of the Joseon

---


\(^{56}\) David Martin Jones, Ibid., 41-77.


\(^{58}\) David Martin Jones, Ibid., 69-70.
Dynasty.\textsuperscript{59} In particular, a Confucian concern with hierarchy facilitated their political legitimacy and regime stability. As the Confucian notion of leadership highlighted social conformity and obedience, it was an appropriate tool for governments to justify their dictatorial practices and the technocratic management of a few elites ruling the entire nation.\textsuperscript{60} Though its contribution to the rapid recovery and development of South Korea after the Korean War is acknowledged, what is also important is that its emphasis on harmony and balance did not allow the pluralistic consultation of a multiplicity of interests in society.

With these ideas in mind, what does Lee employing these Confucian ideas imply about the condition of contemporary Korean art and photography? The influence of Confucianism permeated every part of South Korea under the rule of the military regimes, and the collective-oriented notion of Korean identity prevailed in ethnically homogenous Korea. Korean photography was also under the influence of collective ideas of identity, as the culture highlighted what people with a same history and ancestry share in common over individuality. In the 1970s and 1980s, photographers documented vanishing but worthy-of-preserving traditional cultural objects such as totem poles, Buddhist statues, and country houses from the Joseon Dynasty.

The transition in Korean photography in the late 1980s represented in \textit{The New Wave of Photography} (\textit{Sajin Sae Sijwa}) had continued. Many of the photographers who led the movement studied photography abroad, and so had exposure to international

\textsuperscript{60} David Martin Jones, “Democracy and Identity,” 69-70.
Based on the knowledge acquired from professional education, they made stylistic and technical experiments to expand the medium’s expression. However, photographer Suejin Shin wrote that, in terms of subject matter, the photography of the 1990s was not much different than that of the previous generation. Korean photographers still preferred photographing Korean landscape and human figures, and the photographs that I dealt with at the end of Chapter 1 dominated current trends. Specific subjects such as pine trees, traditional ceremonies, and porcelains from the middle ages were linked to the Koreanness that symbolizes what Koreans have shared over thousands of years.

Lee’s notion of identity shares ideas with these traditional approaches. As a Korean who had grown up in the influence of Confucian culture, Lee had adopted the collective notion in searching for ways to negotiate her identity with a newly encountered culture. This is seen in how she prepared for identity construction mostly through shopping and developed her performances through building affinity rather than conducting thorough research. Her appropriation of Korean culture went through a similar process. Instead of considering the fundamental societal changes happening in Korea or analyzing the relationship between traditional culture and Korean identity, she reiterated what the military regimes called the “community consciousness” as the essence of Korean identity, in contradiction to the “Western identity” based on individualism.

---

63 Koo, “Contemporary Korean Photographers.”
What the artist regarded as specific characteristics that every Korean shares, such as understanding other people by synchronizing emotions with each other and communicating in an emotional way, is rooted in the community-based nature of Korean identity.

[Photography as a Means of Exploring Korean Identity]

In conveying her notion of Korean identity, Lee adopted a photographic style that was uncommon in Korean art photography. For her exploration of the American cultural landscape realized through synchronized appearances and gestures, the artist used the conventions of snapshot photography. Though studies about Lee’s work rarely focus on its utilization of photography, her use of the medium relates to specific photographic practices. First, Lee’s casual photographs look similar to Nan Goldin’s “insider documentary” of her close friends belonging to subcultural communities. (Fig 4.14) Creating imprints of reality, they are relationship-focused, autobiographical photographs between vernacular and artistic styles. Due to their straightforward method, the works are often related to documentary photography practices. For instance, Liz Kotz wrote that Goldin re-legitimizes the codes and conventions of social documentary. Citing critics and artists such as Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, Kotz argued that socially oriented photographic practices – Photo League and the Farm Security Administration photography and illustrated magazines such as Life as the classic – have always been enmeshed in histories of social surveillance and coercion. In the postwar context, in which documentary photography became part of museum system and depoliticized, new

---

65 Goldeberg, Ibid., 49.
practices of “insider documentary” that succeeded social voyeurism emerged. Goldin’s subcultural photography is a prime example, but her naturalizing the camera as a bodily extension of human sight and touch (“It’s as if my hand were a camera… The camera is as much a part of my everyday life as talking or eating or sex.”⁶⁶) exempts her work from debates on voyeurism and makes it an insider’s naive and honest documentations.⁶⁷

Similarly, Lee’s photographs affirm the direct connection to reality with the date stamp, deliberately raw quality, and banal composition. That she hands the camera over to her friends or other group members is another device to guarantee the veracity of the photographs as “real memory” that “come[s] directly from life.”⁶⁸ Like Goldin’s photographs, there are certain moments that Lee as an insider allows the viewer greater access to – voyeuristic peeks into subcultural communities, as obvious from such as The Lesbian Project and The Exotic Dancers Project.

At the same time, there are fundamental differences between the two that distances Lee from what ties Goldin to documentary photography. Conflicting with the confessional mode of her photographs, Lee’s memberships to the groups are temporary ones that lasted just for several weeks. As discussed earlier, the photographs thus do not go deep and reiterate stereotypical representations of subcultural communities. The realism of her photography, which is accentuated by the impromptu process of photo-taking, is said to play an evidentiary role in disguising the fake documentary project.

Sometimes, however, the photographs disclose the constructedness of the projects. In *The Senior Project* and *The Hip Hop Project*, her make-up and wig look obviously fake. Differences that cannot be overcome, either age, race, or class, display that Lee does not fit in and looks detached from the group members. With Lee’s shallow involvement and the resulting end products, the projects do not fulfill the task of social voyeurism. Most of all, the artist has a predetermined list of what she wants to get, chooses when to take a photograph, and picks which images are suitable for exhibitions, reflecting the artistic agency running through the entire process.69

In a similar context, one of the few scholars who analyze Lee’s use of the photographic medium, Cherise Smith compared Lee’s work to documentary photography. Smith looked back to the early practices of Jacob Riss and Lewis Hine and the later critiques of the objectivity and realism of documentary photography in the 1960s and discussed “two of documentary photography’s best-known offshoots” – snapshot photography and street photography. Though Lee’s photography shares the realistic appearance of social documentary photography, Smith concluded, with no political motivation, conformity to the gallery-museum system, and the prioritization of documents over the performative process, Lee’s images signal a distance from documentary tradition. Also, Smith asserted that Lee’s images play off of street and snapshot photography with their candidness, instantaneousness, and casualness, so that they obtain the feeling of immediacy.70

I would like to expand these ideas to see how Lee’s personalized, apolitical exploration of identity relates to snapshot conventions. Is the genre utilized only to judge

---

69 Ferguson, Ibid., 9, Smith, Ibid., 216.
70 Smith, Ibid., 212-217.
and prove the artist’s acceptance into each group with the depiction of spontaneous, informal moments and to make convincing works of art, as generally assumed?71 In my view, Lee’s images are closely associated with the social and ideological implications of snapshot photography as well as its style. As the term refers to a gunshot fired quickly with little or no aim, snapshot photography is usually known as untrained amateurs’ casual documentation of personal histories with automated portable cameras and has a distinct history that began with the invention of the Kodak camera in 1888.

As Diane Waggoner described, the history of snapshot photography began when the average person was able to take photographs and is intertwined with industrialization and modernization and the rise of consumerism in the late 19th century. With the overall technological innovations in the Western society— the harnessing of electricity, the invention of the telephone, and the betterment of vehicles and transportation systems that led to a faster-paced society – technologies of the photographic medium also developed and its business became industrialized.72

Emerging with this essential social change, snapshot photography is rooted in the lifestyle of the growing middle class who had more time for leisure, recreation, and travel. The hand camera was not only a means to document newfound family life, domestic happiness, and pleasant events such as weddings and holidays, but also a form of self-expression and leisure with which to express the personal desire for representation.73 Closely enmeshed with the mundane, it is a visual culture of everyday life that was primarily intended for private consumption and had a distinctive set of

71 Ibid, 216.
73 Ibid.
criteria. The subject itself and the act of capturing a moment are more important than traditional standards of art photography such as composition, focus, framing, and lighting to create specific impacts.\textsuperscript{74}

The genre’s association with middle-class personal life implies its apolitical nature. As part of middle-class family life, the banal images in many snapshot photographs confirmed domestic and social norms. Depicting carefree moments, it idealized a bourgeois sphere free from gender, class, and racial conditions as the ideal of everyday life. However, due to its immediate connection to the mundane and concreteness, there was a belief that the genre was inherently innocent or naïve. The simple routine of making and viewing photographs, represented with the slogan “you press the button, we do the rest,” further contributed to the naturalization of the genre of snapshot photography as the purest form of photography, free of cultural conventions.\textsuperscript{75}

Nikki S. Lee’s depoliticized approach on the very political issue of identity is well coordinated with this casual format and the private contents of snapshots. One hardly expects from photographs developed at a drug store a serious confrontation of social positions in society. This is especially true when the images repeatedly depict a group of people doing an activity together. The people depicted, who are in fact temporary friends or colleagues, create the illusion of close relationships. The attenuated agency of the artist as she hands over her camera to anyone around results in amateur-quality images and accompanies commonplace errors in snapshot practice, and also contributes to enhancing the sense of closeness. Furthermore, similar to how snapshots are usually accumulated in


\textsuperscript{75} Zuromskis, “Intimate Exposures,” Ibid., 19-65
boxes or arranged in albums, Lee’s photographs of unitary formats are displayed as a group, dissipating the meaning of individual images. Eventually, they look too personal and too trivial to critically analyze. Informed viewers with the knowledge of snapshot practice, thus, would conclude that the casual photographs are documenting the artist’s personal history – which is the core of her exploration of various cultural communities – rather than making up a comparative cultural project.

The snapshot genre is well established in frank depictions of personal history. Its general subject matter deals with apolitical sides of society, far from confronting differences or describing conflicts. Its banality in style also builds familiarity among photographs. These qualities of snapshots coincide with Lee’s notion of identity that depends on the personal relationship, which has a lot to do with everyday life. Her appropriation of Korean culture in that she claims to expect people to emphasize with others and become part of an “us” also corresponds to the conformity inherent in the snapshot practice.

Lee’s work is a good example to see how a Korean artist incorporates his/her cultural background with newly adopted photographic languages abroad. Thus, while her work fits well into the discourse on identity politics in the American context, it also can demonstrate how Korean art/photography was reacting to the rapid globalization of its culture. In particular, exploration of Korean identity is one of the best themes through which to look at the transition of the nation and its people. In many cases, its exploration involves cultural tradition seen from various viewpoints.

As an emphasis on collective identity that gives priority to continuity with others is a crucial part of Korean culture, and it is not only Lee who incorporated her cultural
background into her work. Multi-media artist Do Ho Suh also addressed this issue, but from a different perspective. Contrary to Lee, Suh’s stance is critical to reveal that “oneness” invalidates diversity and the militarized Korean history behind it. (Fig 4.17) For instance, the grammatical incongruity of the title, *Who Am We?* (2000) suggests tension between individual and collective identities. The wallpaper looks abstract with dappled patterns from a distance, but a closer look reveals that it is made of portrait photographs. The offset prints of the scanned Korean high school yearbook portraits, however, do not clearly identify individuals. The blurred faces look similar to each other, and the architectural scale of the installation further subsumes individual identity. Suh questions Korean society that perceives “I” and “we” as interchangeable in this and many other works.

(Fig 4.18-4.19) *High School Uni-Face: Boy,* and *High School Uni-Face: Girl* (1997) are composite photographs of Suh’s classmates. In the process being compiled into a single image, the specificity of each individual face fades. Suh’s work brings to mind the composite photography that was popular during the 19th century in the West, and is an interesting comparison with this counterpart. When eugenicist, statistician, and criminologist Francis Galton invented a method of composite portraiture, it was to prove the connection between a group’s physical attributes and its perceived intelligence, talents, and deviant inclinations, and to reduce the numbers of the “unfit.” Ignoring non-recurring traits, a compositied image draws stable macroscopic patterns out of the multiplicity of shifting evidence.

---

In that this method makes an “average” out of different samples, Suh’s work shares a desire with Galton’s method to create an imaginary referent that represents a group. At the same time, they are rooted in different assumptions. Galton’s method was based on hierarchies among groups and was used to codify differences between groups and to weed out the “unfit” in pursuit of a “better” average human. On the other hand, Suh’s photographs refer to Korean culture that homogenizes differences and compels its people to conform to the average. (Fig 4.20) In the 100 Countries/100 Men, Self-Portrait series that Korean photographer Atta Kim created, the artist digitally superimposed photographs of 100 individuals from different nations. Overlapping the photographs collapses differences that exist in various races and ethnicities, such as skin tones and facial structures, and reveal common denominators among people. As the core concept of the series is “every single being in the universe will eventually disappear,” reflecting Zen Buddhism that the artist practiced, the Self-Portrait series is closely connected to traditional Asian culture rather than confronting it as Suh does. As Kim intended to remind viewers of that disagreements among people come from the inability to acknowledge and overcome differences in races, cultures, and ideologies, the photographs are more about revealing the common denominator, making the differences to disappear, and finding oneself in relation to them than about differentiation.

*Who Am We?* and High School Uni-Face suggest that the uniformity of Korean culture is cultivated through the educational system. (Fig 4.21) On the other hand, Suh’s

---

High School Uniform (1997) emphasizes that it relates to Korea’s Japanese colonial history and militarized national identity. The installation is made of 300 Korean high school uniform jackets, made in Japan, that are modeled after what the artist wore in high school. The grid format recalls disciplined students or soldiers, and the lack of faces and the jackets connected as a single unity enhance their uniformity and the depersonalized status imposed on them. This work, in particular, makes a sharp contrast with Lee’s The Schoolgirls Project in the way that represents this specific social group in South Korea. (Fig 4.22-4.23) The girls and Lee in school uniforms are picking plush animals at a toy store or eating snacks and making shy smiles towards the camera. Giving a glimpse of Korean high school girls’ after school activities, the way Lee approaches her native culture is not so different from how she explores the multicultural American society that she had newly encountered. Even though their native culture provided a crucial standpoint from which to explore Korean identity, Lee and Suh demonstrate that the way it can be utilized can be very different from case to case.

Globalization of Contemporary Korean Art/Photography and Korean Culture

What ties Suh, Kim, and Lee together is the integration of their cultural backgrounds, which represents an important trend in contemporary Korean art around the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Their interests in Korean culture come not only from their personal expressions but they also embody contemporary Korean art and photography in transition. From the different stances found in their work, one can spot a changing atmosphere in Korean culture. The relaxed mood in the society allowed questioning of

---

the collective nature of Korean culture that took advantage of Confucian order and began to search for diversities in the society.

Also, Suh, Kim, and Lee demonstrate expanded use of photography in contemporary art. As discussed earlier, a younger generation of photographers initiated a movement to innovate Korean photography from the long-lasting documentary mode in the late 1980s. Though I point out that these photographs conveyed the notion of the essence of Korean culture and identity in the late 1980s and 1990s, they made achievements in exploring various expressions of the medium beyond simple documentation. Also, Koreans’ exposure to international photography through education contributed to the development of academic programs in photography and ended the long-lasting separation between contemporary art and photography. Bringing photography exhibitions to the spaces of art museums and art galleries, contemporary artists combined various genres such as video, installation, painting, sculpture, and so on with photography, which were unprecedented photographic practices in Korea.81

In contrast to one-sided efforts by photographers in the past, the corresponding responses from fine arts institutions and the government-led globalization project accelerated crucial innovations in contemporary photography. As well as photography

exhibitions at major museums such as the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, international exhibitions encouraged the Korean audience and artists to reconsider the medium and to recognize the enhanced position of photography in global contemporary art. Discussing photography in that era, photo critic Dongsun Jin listed two exhibitions in 1995, which the state declared as “the year of the arts (Misurui Hae),” as crucial opportunities that helped make the change: *Sajin Oneurui Wisang (Photography, Its Status Today)* at Sonje Museum of Contemporary Art and the 1st Gwangju Biennial. *Photography, Its Status Today* introduced internationally renowned photographers, such as Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, Sandy Skoglund along with the Korean photographers Daesoo Kim, Bohnchang Koo, and Bien-U Bae, pioneers of Korean photography in the late 1980s and 1990s. By putting these artists together, the exhibition showed the latest trends in contemporary art and presented photography’s abilities beyond a means of documentation. Also, as Jin accentuated, the Gwangju exhibition, having established artists such as Sherman, Jeff Wall, Serrano, Tracy Moffat,

---


83 *Sajin Oneurui Wisang (사진, 오늘의 위상, Photography, Its Status Today)* at Sonje Museum of Contemporary Art (March 31 - May 31, 1995) introduced internationally renowned photographers to a Korean audience – Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, Sandy Skoglund, Doug Starn and Mike Starn, and Emmet Gowin – along with Korean photographers, which included the new generation of photographers who were leading the reformist movements, such as Bohnchang Koo, Daesoo Kim, and Bien-U Bae. Jin, “Hyeondae Misulloseou Sajin 95 Sajin Oneurui Wisangjeon (현대미술로서의 사진, <95 사진, 오늘의 위상>전, Photography as Contemporary Art, <95 Photography, Its Status Today>), in *The Passage of Contemporary Korean Photography 1980-2000*, 116-124.
and Chuck Close who primarily utilized photography, presented the heightened status of photography as an established fact after the 1993 Whitney.\textsuperscript{84}

The Gwangju Biennial is worth further note in that it provides crucial clues to understand the photographs that I focus on in this chapter. The establishment and identity formation of the Gwangju Biennial is closely intertwined with the socio-political climate of Korea in the 1990s, mirroring the nation’s cultural shift in that era. Like the Whitney Biennial, the state was the leading power in the Gwangju Biennial. This was related to Young-sam Kim’s civilian government, which saw culture as part of political maneuvering – just as how the regime commemorated the Gwangju Uprising and performed the memorial project demonstrate it.\textsuperscript{85} The Gwangju Biennial was a great chance to overcome Korea’s tragic history and to confirm its new identity as a city of culture, and furthermore, to propel the nation’s art towards an international status.\textsuperscript{86} With state funding, Asia’s first biennial added to the spread of so-called “Global South Biennials” that started in the 1990s, joining the likes of Havana (1984), Istanbul (1987), Dakar (1990), Sharja (1993), and Shanghai (1994). It introduced global trends to a Korean audience and presented Korean art to an international audience. As a means of fulfilling the political exigency to achieve globalization and reestablishing the identity of a city with a traumatic history, the foundation of the biennial was closely associated with

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} As I discussed in Chapter 2, the government led a large-scale project to memorialize the uprising with a newly invented narrative full of heroic struggles towards democracy and inserted itself within that history. The process of overcoming the city’s identity as victimized in the massacre also used the city’s emphasis on its rich history of regional art (예향, Ye Hyang, translates as a hometown of the arts) at the time.
the state-driven globalization process that retained the nationalistic trait of emphasizing a unique Koreanness.

Under the title of *Gyeonggyereul Neomeoseo* (경계를 넘어서, Beyond the Borders), the first exhibition used the 1993 Whitney Biennial as a model. The 1993 Biennial’s genre-crossing practices, utilization of non-traditional genres, and ongoing discourses in contemporary art such as identity politics all affected to the formation of the Gwangju exhibition. That the same people who took major roles in the Whitney Biennial in Seoul – the director of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary art, Youngbang Im; the exhibition coordinator, Young Woo Lee; and Nam June Paik – assumed similar positions in the Gwangju Biennial is not unrelated to the resemblance of the two exhibitions.87

What is interesting about the Gwangju Biennial is that though it took the core concept of “differences” from the 1993 Whitney, its emphasis was on the harmonious order that transcends all differences. Each nation’s cultural identities and histories are reflected in biennials all over the world. Overall, biennales strive for a balance between localism and globalism, artistic and cultural agency and cross-cultural differences, whilst asserting cultural prowess and soft power on the international stage.88 While the Whitney museum focuses on 20th and 21st century American Art and the biennial deals with the latest discourses in American society, the Gwangju Biennial appropriated traditional ideas of harmonious order and used them strategically to elevate Korean art into a globalized status. Incorporating Korean/Asian ideas on differences, for example, the 1st

87 Kim, Ibid., 128-29.
exhibition aimed to “convey a message of global citizenship that transcended divisions between ideologies, territories, religion, race, culture, humanity, and the arts. Aesthetically, it manifested itself in art’s ability to overcome meaningless pluralism and intended to establish new orders and relationships between the arts and mankind”\(^8^9\) under the title “Beyond the Borders.”

As this case reveals, even when Korean art was aiming at achieving a global identity, it still retained persisting tradition and cultural traits. In case of the Gwangju Biennial, Korean culture was appropriated to frame individual artistic productions. Similarly, Korean artists incorporated their cultural background to express their current artistic concerns. Lee and Suh's work demonstrates how Korean culture can be an artistic source, though they saw the issue from various perspectives. It is especially important to keep this in mind when analyzing the works of contemporary Korean artists, who increasingly leave where they were born and grown up to study and work abroad, negotiating their identities in different cultures. Since the opening of the country in the late 1980s, the way Korean people perceive their identity has expanded to consider their existence from outside the country. Exposed to foreign cultures, Korean artists frequently explored their identities involving the Korean culture that they carry regardless of where they are. When this phenomenon was actively occurring, as discussed with Lee’s case, identity politics flourished. Also, biennial culture that focused on the issues of diaspora and nomadism and gave attention to artists from non-Western cultures and benefited Korean artists who worked abroad.\(^9^0\)

Kimsooja, one of the first generation of Korean women artists to reside outside the country and made artistic careers aboard, is a recipient of the so-called “biennial boom.”\(^1\) (Fig 4.24-4.25) Utilizing various media, she explores themes of nomadism and the relationship between the self and the other, actively incorporating traditional Korean culture. *Bottari* (a Korean term for “bundle”) for instance, one of Kim’s frequent motifs, symbolizes moving to another place in Korea.\(^2\) Due to this cultural meaning, Bottari speaks both of the artist’s status as an immigrant, a nomad, or an Asian woman in Western culture, and of the globalization of the world in which everything can be easily gathered for departure.\(^3\)

Her persisting motifs and materials such as a needle, fabric, and the action of sewing, imply that the cultural relevance of traditional Korean clothes is an integral aspect of Kimsooja’s work. As curator Selene Wendt wrote, the act of sewing fabric has far more metaphoric meanings beyond the needle physically having a silent conversation with the fabric and connecting separate fabrics. It translates to one’s interactions with various spaces and environments; the melding of time and space; the past, present and future; and the ultimate interconnectedness of all humanity.\(^4\) This idea of an interdependent relationship among everything, in fact, reminds one of Taoism or the Confucian idea of *yin* and *yang* – the complimentary relationship between seemingly opposite or contrary forces – that constitutes the foundation of traditional Korean culture.

---

\(^1\) She participated in numerous biennials since the 1990s, such as the Gwangju Biennial (1995), the Istanbul Biennial (1995), the San Paolo Biennial (1998), the Sydney Biennial (1998), the Venice Biennial (1999), the Asia Pacific Triennial (1999), and so on, throughout the 2010s.

\(^2\) Bottari – tied bundles of clothes – are used as ordinary containers for the safe-keeping or transportation of a family’s worldly goods. It is one of the most elementary household goods with which to make a start in another place.


While traditional Korean culture for Kimsooja remains at an abstract level, Do Ho Suh integrates his personal memories and critical analysis of Korean culture in his work. As another Korean artist who spent his first 30 years in his own country and then left to study and work, Do Ho Suh’s work also carries elements of Buddhism and Eastern philosophies ingrained in Korean culture. Works like Karma and the Paratrooper series are influenced by the notions of interconnectedness and the relationship between the individual and the whole. (Fig 4.26-4.28) Instead of presenting conceptual ideas, however, Paratrooper displays how a small paratrooper is connected to numerous individuals, represented by their signatures stitched onto a think linen. The paratrooper, at the same time, is isolated from others and is struggling to keep holding the long, pink thread – his personal relationships and memories – and to survive in a new environment. Similarly, small figures running under the shadow of the big figure in Karma suggests oppression imposed on the small figures or tension between the large and small figures, but all are still running in the same direction to reveal their interdependence.

(Fig 4.29-4.30) Overall, having an itinerant life of moving from one place to another and from one culture to another, Suh’s work is deeply rooted in ideas such as home, homesickness, memory, travel, and migration. Like other artists and photographers who travel and work outside the country, "who am I?" is his main concern, and sense of place takes the center of his work. In 1994, he began making “fabric architecture,” with filmy materials such as silk and nylon, utilizing traditional Korean sewing techniques to

96 More than 3,000 different signatures, including the names of friends and acquaintances as well as strangers’ names from personal journals and exhibition guest books, have been hand-stitched.
create full renditions of his traditional Korean childhood home. With his migration, his home moved as well, both physically and psychologically, carrying memories that are fragile and easy to lose. Soon, this work was followed by recreations of his other homes, such as his New York and Berlin apartments, to connect the memories of his home country and those of the other countries in which he lived. Transparent or translucent buildings installed in exhibitions blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside, the personal and the public. His traveling homes are re-contextualized into different sites, just as the artist renegotiates his life here and there and builds a new life and creates his own spaces and memories under a new context.

With the increased mobility and the changes in the domain of art that were created by the globalization project and democratization, Korean artists eagerly explored the new subject of Korean identity in order to position themselves in a broader international context. Lee, Kim, and Suh represent this trend in contemporary Korean art, utilizing various mediums of video, performance, installation, and architecture. Photography took part in this important transition in Korean art as well. Korean culture and traditional thoughts often provided major references that the artists either embraced or questioned. Photography, with its unique ability of realistic depiction, was an effective medium to address the immediacy of the issue of identity. In many cases, photographers included themselves and performed for the camera, so as to illustrate the lived reality of living as a Korean in other cultures. At the same time, the medium’s expressive qualities had so much potential to develop after the stasis of Korean photography. Thus, the medium

played a crucial role in dealing with one of the most pressing issues in contemporary Korean art.

**Challenged Korean Masculinity and Its Resistance: Chan-hyo Bae’s *Existing in Costumes***

Just as the interpretations and perspectives on Korean identity are different from each other, the topic has so many levels that could be expanded into a more general discussion. Chan-hyo Bae’s work is another case that exemplifies this. His *Existing in Costume* series (2003) consists of large-scale portrait photographs that resemble traditional Western portrait paintings. For the project, the artist dressed up as upper-class British women and constructed himself as the other in front of the camera. His meticulous construction is well-documented in the resulting photographs, with composition and fine details that, in the end, disclose the incongruity between his actual identity and the look he has adopted. What do his dramatic makeovers suggest about his Korean identity in relation to its perception in his newly adopted country?

This chapter closes with a case that discusses Korean identity in the Western context through the issue of the masculinity of Korean men. On the contrary to Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects*, which displays little consciousness about the marginalization of specific cultural groups, this project directly addresses the issue of race and the artist’s position within that context. As discussed in the previous chapter, Korea has a long history of militarization and the patriarchal social structure that has guaranteed the hegemonic position of men over women. Intertwined with the nation’s opening up and the increased mobility of ordinary people, Bae’s imposing performances reflect the crisis of Korean masculinity in a different culture, and endeavor to resist this crisis. His striking,
sometimes even tawdry makeovers, I will argue, visualize the shock that he and his nation went through and his desires to claim masculine agency at the same time.

In the series, he adopted the race, ethnicity, class, period – from the early Tudor to the late Victorian era – and gender of “the other,” using pictorial conventions from traditional oil portraits in carefully constructed self-portraits. (Fig 4.31) In one image, he is dressed up as an upper-class woman in a lavishly decorated green dress, and stares at the viewer in a frontal pose. White ruffles around the neck and head make a stark contrast with the dark background and echo the big dark hair and pale skin. The seemingly meticulous construction ironically reveals that the woman represented is actually an Asian man. Beneath the heavy make-up is a flat nose, Asian eyes, and an obtrusive cheekbone, which expose Bae’s Asian ethnicity. The backs of his hands, placed on his abdomen, are stretched to disclose his masculinity; the bold blue jewel ring on his right hand highlights it. Along with the rift between his bodily features and the look that he has adopted, his stiff pose, which reminds the viewer of Victorian post-mortem photography, reveals his discomfort. The visual impact of the photograph is even amplified with its large scale and fine details. Bringing constructedness to the fore, Bae makes theatrical images that capture one’s eyes.

Similar to many other Korea artists, Bae also integrated his personal history of studying and working abroad, the most common reason for which is the social change of rapid Westernization and increased exchanges between cultures and people. As an art student in the UK, Bae’s estrangement in British culture was specifically associated with his identity as an Asian man. This estrangement was more than a language barrier and cultural differences. The title, “Existing in Costumes,” suggests how his marginalized
identity was defined by preconceived stereotypes regardless of who he actually was. What he encountered was Western stereotypes that Asian men were more feminine and less masculine than their Western male counterparts.\(^9^8\) Due to the emasculated perception of Asian men, he further felt situated in a lower social class.\(^9^9\)

Based on this experience, he affiliated himself with the gender and race that he does not belong to and created self-portraits that accentuate the incongruities between his own and his adopted identity. Writings on Bae basically focus on his alienation and read his work as a desire to assimilate into British Culture. In one of the few essays about Bae, for instance, Ayelet Zohar applied the notion of mimicry and masquerade. She briefly mentioned that Bae adopts the signifiers associated with royalty, which defy personal characteristics and traits, and indicates an alienation from his own image. She concluded that Bae’s reference to the image of royalty is a reflection of “his alienation as a Korean who desires and aspires to become part of British culture, but is not readily admitted,” thus, “finding himself in the category of foreign, imported princesses that occupied British royal homes for the sake of political maneuvers.”\(^1^0^0\)

Inserting himself into the Western pictorial convention rather than taking Korean culture as a main motif, Bae’s series deals with how to situate oneself in an unfamiliar culture, just like Nikki S. Lee’s Projects. While he is interested in fitting into his newly adopted country, however, the photographs are also resisting the stereotypes that isolate him. The assumption is supported by an understanding of the perception of Korean/Asian


\(^1^0^0\) Ayelet Zohar, “The Elu[va]sive Portrait: Mimicry, Masquerade, and Camouflage,” Trans-Asia Photography Review 2, no. 1 (Fall 2011). http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0002.102
men in the West and the way that Bae composed his photographs. Before starting the analysis, it is helpful to first review masculinity as a historical concept and the assumption of Anglo-Saxon subjectivity in the discussion. In general, manhood involves qualities such as toughness, struggle, and conquest. However, it is a historical construct that depends on the way society defines it. Thus, different concepts of masculinity have constantly competed with each other to define what it means to be a man. In the process, the Western discourse of masculinity marginalized non-Anglo subjectivity for a long time. Bae’s photographs problematize this.

Lynne Segal reviewed how modern concepts of manhood in the British context changed over time in her article *Competing Masculinities (I): Manliness – The Masculine Ideal*. With British imperialist expansion in the late Victorian era, muscular and militaristic masculinity was increasingly glorified over the bourgeois Christian manhood that valued tenderness and intellectual earnestness, which itself was a replacement of the military manhood of the old aristocracy. A new aggressive masculinity, backed up by Darwin’s theory of evolution that justified the elimination of the weak by the strong, asserted the “natural” superiority of English manhood. At a time of expanding imperial conquests and defending colonial territories, in the late 18th and early 19th century Britain and North America, a new ideal of manhood was defined by physical fitness, courage, and audacity. Throughout the 20th century, Segal wrote, the Anglo-Saxon ideologies of manhood were exemplified by patriotic, all-conquering, tough white manhood, and became the “normal” stereotype of masculinity. In this structure, non-Anglo, colonized male subjectivity was considered inferior, and the effete perception of Asian men that
Bae faced and resisted is based on the standard that gave supremacy to Western masculinity.

Similarly, the 20th century took the white middle-class male subject as an ideal model of masculinity and revealed the power that men have over women, other men, their own bodies, and so on. As seen in the changing standards Segal listed, masculinity is an incomplete, contingent construct, and thus has been challenged at times. For instance, at the times of the first wave of feminism, civil rights, and the feminist and gay rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s, oppressed groups challenged hegemonic masculinity and explored alternatives to conventional masculinity. (Fig 4.32-4.33) Artistic productions participated in and were entwined with the social climate; for example, Marcel Duchamp’s *Rrose Sélavy* (1920) was produced during feminism’s first wave. Also, the art of the 1960s and 1970s focused on the contingent, sexualized nature of the identity of the embodied subject in the same context. Andy Warhol’s *Altered Ego* (c. 1960), a tribute to *Rrose Sélavy*, is an end product of the trends of the 1960s and 1970s.

Both cases, as Amelia Jone argued, problematized the artistic subjectivity that dominated art history. Throughout the 19th and the early 20th century, the model of an artist was white, male, and anti-bourgeois. As a “phallocentric substitute for God,” the male body was visible as male, and at the same time, was naturalized and de-sexed to serve the divineness of creative genius. Duchamp and Warhol subverted the idea that male artists’ masculine identities are essential features. To demonstrate this, they enacted masculinity in alternative ways from a position of femininity. Their sexualized and performative identities crossed gendered codes of artists’ subjectivities through clothing.

---

makeup, hair, and the coy gestures and made them objects of the viewer’s gaze. In this way, their naturalized bodies became visible, and the feminized masculinities exposed that the artists’ masculine identities are constructed through sartorial codes.\textsuperscript{102}

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, a major challenge continued in the West to the notion of male identity. The hegemonic concept of masculinity, what Raewyn W. Connell defined as embodying the currently most honored way of being a man, based on which all other men position themselves and women’s global subordination to men is legitimated,\textsuperscript{103} started to be reconsidered; new notions of masculinity as “sets of gender practices that are constructed and embedded in certain historical, cultural, and social contexts”\textsuperscript{104} emerged in masculinity studies. Masculinity, accordingly, was considered not a fixed entity embedded in the body but one that is realized through the interplay between bodies and social processes. The emphasis was now on the multiplicity of the concept of masculinity and its fluidity and contingency based on the surrounding circumstances.\textsuperscript{105} The boundaries of sex, gender, and race in defining masculinity have become permeable. As a socio-political construct rather than a physical embodiment, masculinities are defined relatively depending on the relationship between the larger political bodies to which they belong.

The plurality of masculinities makes visible the hierarchies among them that have long existed in history. Certain masculinities are more central and have more associations

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{103} Raewyn W. Connell, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” \textit{Gender & Society} 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 832.
\textsuperscript{105} Connell, Ibid., 846.
\end{flushleft}
with authority and social power than others, creating the subordination of non-hegemonic masculinities. An analysis of Bae’s photographs inevitably involves this hierarchal relationship between masculinities, in particular, the racist vision of the notion of masculinity. In the late 19th century when imperialist ideologies expanded, a Western-centric concept of masculinity, which defined tough white manhood as a standard, dominated the discussion of masculinity and justified the colonial rule of the West over the rest of the world. Accordingly, this view of the West as the center of masculine civilization created notions of the Other. The non-West was constructed as a feminine, primitive Other and was marginalized. During the early to mid-1900s, American and European culture reified and distributed the white standard of masculinity and marginalized men of other races and cultures.  

Despite the discourse over the rights of women, minorities, and homosexuals that emerged in the mid-1900s and a shift in the masculinity studies started in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a Western-centric concept of masculinity was still dominant as the prototypical masculinity. Asian bodies had long been considered biologically different and inferior in the Orientalist context; the differences were measured, classified, ranked hierarchically, and presented as scientific evidence. The biased notion of ideal men disempowered other subjectivities, such as Asian male masculinity. As Kam Louie argued, Asian men were racially castrated, as their masculinity was penetrated, silenced,

---


Representations of Asian men in contemporary visual culture—cinema, television, and advertising, as well as the arts—easily proves this point.

Unlike the normative white male body, which is visible in its physical prowess and invisible as it transcendentally represents humanity, Asian masculinity is located in the opposite position. Its body is invisible for its physical impotency and differences; thus, it is feminized and cannot obtain a divine position. Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura addressed this problem in the late 1980s and 1990s. With references to Western art history and visual culture, Morimura enacted alternative forms of masculinity. (Fig 4.34) Portrait (Futago) (1988) is a recreation of Édouard Manet’s Olympia (1863-1865),109 in which Morimura replaced both the white body of Olympia and the black body of the woman in the back with his non-European Asian body. As Norman Bryson pointed out, assuming the roles of the two female figures and rhyming with their bodies, Morimura placed at the foreground the feminine construction of Asia and the feminization of the Asian male.110

Morimura’s denunciation of the persistent traces of racist vision in the West goes further to destroy essentialism and erode the obvious, “natural” categories of Orient and Occident, masculine and feminine.111 (Fig 4.35) Black Marilyn (1995), for instance, presented the artist as the most famous American sex symbol, Marilyn Monroe. His seductive pose matches his black dress, and his heeled sandals, makeup, and blonde wig suggest the emasculated perception of Asian men in the West. At the same time, he

---

111 Ibid, 74.
displays an erect rubber penis beneath the dress. (Fig 4.36-4.37) Similarly, in Theater A and Theater B (1989), reconstructions of Manet’s Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère (1882), binary oppositions are eroded. The former image suggests the coexistence of white and Asian bodies in him, and the latter makes it obvious that the artist carries both races. Also, behind the dress, his gender is not specified as the vase with flowers conceals the genital area, but the vase substitutes a phallus.

While Morimura’s integration of the female gender is meant to expose and resist the emasculation of Asia and its male body in a symbolic sense, art historian Joan Kee focused specifically on the theme of the sexuality of the Asian male. In “(Re)sexualizing the Desexualized Asian Male in the Works of Ken Chu and Michael Joo,” Kee discussed two Asian American male artists whose work satirizes and subverts stereotypes around their male sexuality. According to Kee, contrary to the perception of the Asian female as “an embodiment of excessive sexuality,” Asian American men are considered inferior to their white counterparts and sexually impotent.

(Fig 4.38) Joo’s installation, Miss Megook (Miss America) (1993) that Kee adopted is a prime example with which discuss this issue. It depicts an Asian male with the deliberate ambiguity of a pinup girl format. The man is presented with a long black hair, a hairless nude body, and a posture that conceals the indicators of his sex. With these bodily gestures, Joo suggests a desexualization of the Asian man, satirizes the objectification of Asian woman based on a colonial fantasy, and turns the gaze to gay desire. Implying that the Asian man can be an object of desire only when being seen as an

On the other hand, Chan-hyo Bae’s performances take a different stance from both Joo and Morimura. Bae incorporates a feminine appearance to enact alternative forms of masculinity, but he is not interested in either making himself an object of desire or blurring the binary opposition between the feminine and the masculine. In fact, his bodily gesture and gaze claim conventional masculinity in sharp contrast with his female sartorial codes, which embody his perceived masculinity in relation to Western normative masculinity and make the gendered body visible.

The inconsistency between the sartorial code and the body language reflects his challenged position as a Korean man who has recently moved from his country. Masculinity as a historical construct depends on the societal context, and Asian masculinity has been defined accordingly in the West. Thus, Korean masculinity is associated with its historical condition as well. Bae’s performances, which took place in reaction to his oppressed subjectivity, are concerned with the globalization of Korea and the world in general. As I discuss in the previous chapters, South Korean governments emphasized the nation’s masculine strength in defending itself against the reality of colonial history, the Cold War, the national division, and the Korean War and used it to justify authoritarian rule. Military activities by Korean men were at the center of this self-reliant masculinity, thus, Korean men took a position of normative subjectivity and marginalized their feminine counterparts. When the nation was changing and exposed its
people to a different cultural context, Korean identity, including its masculinity, was
defined from a different perspective. In the totally different Western culture, the artist
was denied being neutrally masculine and considered to be feminine. Utilizing feminine
looks and his feminized body, Bae incorporated the shock he faced and illustrated his
marginalized position.

Bae’s theatrical performances, I assert, articulate his desire to resist this
alienation, and to retrieve his masculine power and Korean identity as well as fit in to his
new society. Basically, Bae appropriated the authority of the culture that marginalized
him and repeated its languages, which reminds one of colonial mimicry. In this way, he
positions himself in British culture and become part of it. It is, in the end, to show
difference, just as the effect of the strategy of mimicry. According to Homi Bhabha,
expanding Lacan, “The effect of mimicry is camouflage (…). It is not a question of
harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming
mottled, exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.”

Mimicry is constructed around ambivalence. To be effective, Bhabha wrote, it must
produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The uncertainty not only disrupts the
colonial subject but fixes it as partial presence. Mimicry thus is at once resemblance and
menace, with its disruption of colonial authority.

While accepting the colonial order, Bae uses differences and slippages to disrupt
the original. What creates ruptures are not only his bodily features that disclose
incongruity, but also the various elements that accentuate his Korean identity and his

113 Jacques Lacan, “The Line and Light” in Of the Gaze as object petit a, The Four Fundamental Concepts
(Spring 1984): 125-133.
masculine gestures. Most of all, taking up the center of the frame, he rules the field of vision with his dominating presence. Rather than displaying his body with elaborate, feminine gestures, he holds a steady gaze in a front-facing pose and looks directly at the viewer. Also, he intentionally exposes the back of his hands, often with no makeup, to remind viewers of the male identity that contradicts his feminine clothing and accessories. Props are another component that disrupts the seamless composition and marks Bae’s identity as a Korean man. (Fig 4.39-4.40) He holds a fan decorated with an Oriental painting; a birdcage containing a red and a blue balloon, which indicates the Korean national flag; or a green Soju bottle – Korean sake. Adopting cultural conventions that marginalize him but manipulating them, he disrupts the colonial order and challenges the idea of Asian men as effeminate and subservient. Furthermore, Chan-hyo Bae does not give up his masculine agency but retains his Korean identity. Making interesting comparisons with other contemporary practices, in which Asian masculinity is negotiated according to the Western order, Bae enacts his Korean masculinity in an aggressive manner.

With the rise of identity politics and the flourish of biennials, Asian subjectivity increasingly obtained an enhanced position in contemporary art in the West. Korean art in transition, which was facilitated by the nation’s liberalization and globalization, coincided with international trends and resulted in interesting dialogues with global contemporary art. Contemporary Korean photography finally closed the distance with contemporary art, and exemplifies this cultural change better than any other medium. In a close relationship to the nation’s fundamental changes, what is means to be Korean was one of the most compelling issues for photographers. When the nation provided an
unprecedented cultural exchange to its people on an unprecedented scale, photographers developed the expressive qualities of the medium, which had been under-explored in the past.

The itinerant lives of contemporary photographers gave them new perspectives from which to rethink Korean identity in a different way than the practices in the past. Also, newly available political freedom enabled them to question Korean culture and its identity from a critical perspective, often breaking from an essentialist view. Adopting various styles, such as snapshot, portraits, installations, and digitally manipulated images, they expanded the notion of Korean identity in the broad cultural contexts of global photography.
Epilogue

This dissertation focused on how Korean photography departed from the time when South Korea had not yet obtained democracy and a globalized status, and how it participated in the reconstruction of national identity as an essential part of this process. Unlike in the past, when there were limited choices of subject matters and stylistic languages, contemporary photographers observed what was happening both in and outside the country and made critical responses in various styles. They not only reconsidered established Korean history but also problematized the way that it had been constructed and represented as history. This sort of reconsideration of what constituted Korea identity also happened outside the country. As more and more people studied, lived, and worked abroad, they perceived Korean identity in an extended sphere. Through this, enduring Korean culture and the reminiscences of photography of the past provided a dialogue between the past and the present.

Since the military dictatorship ended in the late 1980s and the full-fledged transition of South Korea into a democratic polity was initiated in the 1990s, the democratic status of South Korea has stabilized, and the nation has become part of the globalized world. Having obtained this identity, Korean photography further diversified to embrace deeply personal expressions and to look more closely into Korean society, exploring such issues as the patriarchal family system, gender issues, North Korean expatriates and foreign workers in Korea, and rapid urbanization. It developed its languages to express ideas about these topics and incorporated technological advancements such as digital techniques. These changes enriched Korean photography, which in turn continuously uncovered and explored under-discussed episodes of Korean
history that occurred in the context of anti-communist regimes and the Cold War and expanded the notion of what constitutes Korean identity by incorporating global issues across geographical borders.

For instance, as I discussed at the beginning of this dissertation, the Jeju April 3rd Incident is currently being reassessed, going through the construction of a historical narrative, and probably will be soon be integrated into the official history of Korea. Just as the Gwangju Uprising was utilized to differentiate the first civilian government from previous military regimes, symbolic gestures acknowledging the importance of the Jeju incident and positioning it in the history of democratic struggle contribute to the identity formation of the current Moon administration. The Moon regime was inaugurated after 10 years of conservative governments, the main political agenda of which has always been anti-communism, even in the 21st century.

In response to the changed social climate, artistic activities that reassess the incident have increased, but have not necessarily provided concrete narratives and supported the government. (Fig 5.1) For example, remembering how Hein-kuhn Oh’s *Gwangju Story* represented the Gwangju Democratization Movement, Jaeuk Lee created *Red Line* (2018) by installing a red laser light at the site of the historic event that bears witness and making a straightforward documentation of the line using a long exposure in nighttime. Refusing to convey a clear narrative in a definitive tone, I suggest, the photograph embodies the absence of accumulated public memories. Depicting a dark and empty valley, cut across by a red line that implies the lingering presence of censorship towards communist thinking, the image not only signifies the unstable status of the April 3rd Incident in history, but also constitutes part of the postmemory as of 2018 that will
pass down to later generations. Located in the middle of reevaluating the repressed past, *Red Line* creates a tension that suggests the persistence of the state violence rather than recreating the event.

While *Red Line* focuses on what happened in the Korean peninsula, Lee’s work further exemplifies how Korean photographers address issues associated with the nation. His photographic series, *It’s Not Your Fault* (2015-16) addresses the relationship between a nation and its people. The photographer, a Korean living in Germany, did not confine himself to the boundary of Korea, and explored the issue in a broader context. (Fig 5.2) A photograph from the series depicts an old Korean man who holds national flags of Korea and the US, lethargically standing in the middle of a road packed with cars. It is quite probable that he attended or is about to attend a “Taegeukgi Rally” of right-wing groups to protest against the impeachment of the president Geun-hye Park in 2016-17. ¹ These rallies, organized to confront nationwide candlelight rallies urging Park to step down or her impeachment, symbolize the end of an era when anti-communism and pro-Americanism dominated, and the stabilization of democracy in South Korea. This crucial transition and the political conflicts that it involved, however, are not explicitly suggested, as the photographer focuses on depicting individuals whose lives are affected by them.

---

¹ Named after the South Korean Flag, “Taegeukgi,” the main participants in the rally were far-right groups, who mostly belonged to older generations. They experienced the Korean War and participated in the recovery from the aftermath and the modernization of Korea under the military dictatorship, during which they internalized anti-communism and pro-Americanism. The former president Geun-hye Park is Chung-hee Park’s daughter. She served as the first lady after her mother, Young-soo Yuk was assassinated at an Independence Day Ceremony on August 15, 1974, until her father, Chung-hee Park was also shot dead on October 26, 1979. Thus, she is a symbolic figure that represents the old values that Koreans shared under military rule; her impeachment embodies the end of this era.
(Fig 5.3-5.4) Furthermore, the photograph is juxtaposed with images of a woman holding a phone at a public telephone booth near a trailer home, and a woman in chador and a backpack seen from behind standing in the middle of empty lot. Taken in different countries that were undergoing economic crises, terrorism, racism, and political conflicts, including Korea, his native country; Germany, where he lived and witnessed the influx of refugees from Syria and its ramifications; Greece, which suffered an economic crisis; and Turkey, through which refugees arrived in Germany, his photographs carry the frustrations and solitudes of individuals located in the structure of a state. The urban spaces display no signifiers of specific nationality, and traces of conflicts or explicit disorder are not suggested in order to accentuate the presence of individuals and the universality of the matter. (Fig 5.5-5.6) At the same time, the Korean national flag sporadically appears in photographs taken in Korea, and anchors the series to contemporary Korea. Social issues in the nation, in this way, without precise information about the specific circumstances, are aligned with the problems of the world.

Another factor to notice from these photographs is the transformation of documentary practices. The photographer, who spent long hours of preparation selecting where and what to photograph, setting up the camera, and so on, mostly waited for the unaffected moment to arrive, but often hired models to pose for the camera.² Between the staged and the spontaneous, his impassive images faithfully capture the instability of the figures in front of the camera. In fact, this sort of documentary approach, which has a long history in Korean photography, is not uncommon in recent practices. Lee’s

---

metaphoric documentary approach is also found in another photographer that I would like to discuss, as he aptly exemplifies the status of how Korean photography has evolved.

Since the early 2000s, reflecting the eased relations with North Korea under democratic governments, Onejoon Che’s work focused on the impact of the Cold War on Korea and the traces of military dictatorship with documentations of abandoned military facilities and former buildings of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency in South Korea. A recent project by Che proposed a novel way of looking at the ongoing Cold War in the Korean peninsula from a different geographical perspective outside the nation. (Fig 5.7-5.10) In his multimedia project *Mansudae Master Class* (2015), which consists of photography, archival materials, and film, Che photographed large scale monuments, statues, and public buildings in sub-Saharan African countries, including the African Renaissance Monument, a 160 ft bronze statue built in Dakar, Senegal in 2010; the Three Dikgosi Monument in Gaborone, Botswana that depicts important figures in Botswana’s independence; and the National Hero’s Acre, an official memorial of the Republic of Namibia built in 1981.

The photographs concern the history of African countries on the surface. On the other hand, the project unfolds the history of how North Korea established strategic diplomatic relationships with African countries to cope with the ongoing Cold War with South Korea and to survive its international isolation. In the 1970s, North Korea began the Mansudae Art Studio Overseas Project, a sub-division of the Mansudae Art Studio in Pyongyang, which has produced propagandistic visual materials with aims such as idolizing its dictatorial leaders and promoting patriotism since 1959. It built public
monuments - often as donations - in African countries to win a diplomatic war with South Korea and has continuously worked there until now to earn foreign currency.  

Thus, what Che’s deadpan documentary images really describe is Korean history, involving both the North and the South, seen through the global history of the Cold War and contemporary African countries. (Fig 5.11-5.12) Not only technologies that North Korean art developed to create thousands of statues of dictators and monuments but its socialist realism style with its specific formula was also adopted. I suggest, therefore, these monuments are a sort of proxy North Korean public art with referents, which the artist, a South Korean who lives in Europe and has access to information on North Korean art but is not allowed to travel to the North, could experience to the fullest. In this sense, the photographs – South Korean art that deals with North Korean art – are signifiers of complicated inter-Korean relations and are art that could only be fashioned through the mediation of third parties. Without depicting anything obviously related to either South or North Korea, Che addresses the tragic history and ironic condition of the Korean peninsula that has lasted over 70 years.

This dissertation examined how contemporary Korean photography constantly engaged in socio-political currents and broadened its scope to embody what the country was going through. These more recent works further demonstrate the ever-changing

---

1 Due to the border issue between North and South Korea and the stationing of the US Army in South Korea, the two Koreas needed international support from the United Nations in the 1960s. While they were competing with each other, Il-Sung Kim, the then leader and the first dictator of North Korea, started to establish strategic diplomatic relationships with African countries to gain support from them. This triggered a diplomatic war between the North and the South in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. The Mansudae Master Art Studio Overseas Project was part of the effort to gain support. Since the mid-1990s, however, as the economy worsened in North Korea and the nation became more isolated from the world due to the nuclear weapon program, the Mansudae Art Studio Overseas Project became a means to earn foreign currency.

status of photographic practices integrating important issues in society. Beyond considering what it means to be Korean, photographic works position the country in an international context even when dealing with the specific problems of Korea. What constitutes Korean history has expanded to embrace North Korea-related issues such as the confrontation between two Koreas and its ramification in and out of the country. Korean photography, in this way, constitutes the nation’s identity in constant transition beyond just reflecting reality.

Having gone through a major transformation its native country, contemporary Korean photography continued to be part of the refashioning of the nation through such aspects as Korean history and identity. While it is engaged in a relentless dialogue with global issues happening outside the nation, it is still closely connected to Korean society, often addressing national issues. In this way, contemporary Korean photographers are reshaping the photography of the nation within an expanded global sphere.
Illustrations

Fig 0.1 Jaeuk Lee, *Red Line*, 2018

Fig 0.2 Eungju Kim, *Lee Im Gyu (age 97) Near the Ocean at Namwon-eup Shinrae-ri 2nd street*, 2018
Fig 0.3-0.5 Chang-Kyong Park, *Sets*, 2000
Fig 1.1 Eungsik Lim, *Namok (Bare Trees)*, 1953

Fig 1.2 Sanggyu Kang, *Seorwonjidae (Snowfield)*, 1969
Fig 1.3 Kyebok Choi, *Yeongseonmosui Bom (Spring at the Youngseon Lake)*, 1933

Fig 1.4 Shinnzo Fukuhara, *Beautiful West lake: the Light with its Harmony*, 1931

Fig 1.5 ______________, *Spring, Okutama*, 1930
Fig 1.6 Eungsik Lim, *Dukeul Gada (Walking Along the Embankment)*, 1937

Fig 1.7 Eungsik Lim, *Jeonjaeng Goah (A War Orphan)*, 1950

Fig 1.8 Eungsik Lim, *Pinangil (Fleeing from the War)*, 1950
Fig 1.9 Sukje Lim, Hayeok (Loading), Late 1940s

Fig 1.10 Ken Domon, Mr. and Mrs. Kotani: Two Who Have Suffered from The Bomb, Hiroshima series, 1957
Fig 1.11 Ken Domon, *Hands of Hibakusha Kikkawa Kiyoshi Hiroshima* series, 1957

Fig 1.12 Ken Domon, *The Children of Chikuho Japan*. 1960
Fig 1.13 Bumtae Chung, *Uyu Baegeup, Seoul Malli-dong* (Milk Rationing, Malli-dong, Seoul), 1955

Fig 1.14 Chung Bumtae, *Gyeoljeongjeok Sungan*, Seoul Gyeonggi Godeung Gunbeop Jaepanso (*The Decisive Moment, Seoul Gyeonggi Military High Court*), 1961
Fig 1.15 Hyungrok Lee, *Jintanggi, Sokye-dong (Muddy Street, Sokye-dong)*, 1954

Fig 1.16 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Behind the Gare St. Lazare*. 1932
Fig 1.17 *The Family of Man*, Installation view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955

Fig 1.18 Korea, Margaret Bourke-White, *Life*

Fig 1.19 Korea, Margaret Bourke-White, *Life*
Fig 1.20 Korea, David Duncan, *Life*

Fig 1.21 Korea. U.S. Signal Corps, Al Chang
Fig 1.22 Korea. Joseph Breitenbach, *United Nations*

Fig 1.23 Korea. Michael Rougier, *Life*
Fig 1.24 -1.25 Youngsoo Han, Salm (Life), 1958-63

Fig 1.26 Myung-Duck Joo, Gyeongju, 1972
Fig 1.27 Myung-Duck Joo, Gyeongju, 1974

Fig 1.28 Myung-Duck Joo, Gangneung, 1980
Fig 1.29 Myung-Duck Joo, *Andong*, 1970

Fig 1.30 Daesoo Kim, *Untitled*, 1986
Fig 1.31 Kyuchul Lee, *Space and Visual Perception*, 1988

Fig 1.32 Bien-U Bae, *Gyeongju, Somanu* Series, 1985
Fig 1.33 Byunghun Min, *Japcho (Weeds)*, 1996
Fig 2.1 Hein-kuhn Oh, *A Family on a Picnic, September 28, 1995*, Gwangju Story, 1995

Fig 2.2 Eungsik Lim, *Gujik (Seeking a Job)*, 1953
Fig 2.3 Hyungrok Lee, *Gangbyeon, Seoul Hangang (Riverside, Han River, Seoul)*, 1957

Fig 2.4 Hein-kuhn Oh, *An Old Man Sept.28,1995*  Gwangju Story, 1995
Fig 2.5 Hein-kuhn Oh, *A Voluntary Actress, September 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995*

Fig 2.6 ____________, *An Actor in a Role of a Leading Protester, September 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995*

Fig 2.7 Hein-kuhn Oh, *Two Policemen, September 30, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995*

Fig 2.8 ____________, *A Father, Son, and Daughter. Sept 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995*
Fig 2.9 Anne Ferran, *Lost to Worlds*, 2008

Fig 2.10 The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, *Secretes in the Open Sea*, 1994/2004

Fig 2.11 An-My Lê, *Small Wars*, 1999-2002
Fig 2.12 Changsung Lee, May 27, 1980

Fig 2.13 Changsung Lee, May 1980
Fig 2.14 Hein-kuhn Oh, *Four Actors Waving the Korean Flags, September 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995*

Fig 2.15 Hein-kuhn Oh, *Voluntary High School Student Actors in Roles of Leading Demonstrators, September 28, 1995, Gwangju Story, 1995*
Fig 2.16 Honggoo Kang, *Fugitive 4*, 1996

Fig 2.17 Honggoo Kang, *Gwangju*, 1995
Fig 2.18 Sangil Yi, *Malwongdong*, 1995

Fig 2.19 Sangil Yi, *Malwongdong*, 1988
Fig 2.20 Hein-kuhn Oh, *Two Spectators, Sept 28, 1995*  
Gwangju Story, 1995

Fig 2.21 Hein-kuhn Oh, *An Actor in a Role of a Leading Protester, September 28, 1995,*  
Gwangju Story, 1995
Fig 2.22 Old Mangwoldong cemetery

Fig 2.23 Suntag Noh, *Hwang Ho-geol, 1960.10.7-1980.5.23, Died from a Bullet Wound* Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
Fig 2.24 Suntag Noh, Ryu Young-sun, 1953. 5.9 – 1980.5.23, Died from a Bullet Wound
Taken in 2006. Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
Fig 2.25 Taken in 2011.

Fig 2.26 Maya Lin, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1982
Fig 2.27 Memorial Gate, May 18th National Cemetery, Gwangju
Fig 2.28 Memorial Tower with ten panels of bronze bas-relief that describes the Uprising Narrative behind, May 18th National cemetery, Gwangju

Fig 2.29 SunTag Noh, Ahn Byoung-bok, 1960.11.17 – 1980.5.21, Died from a Full Skull Fracture and Left Arm Mutilation, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
Fig 2.30-31 Suntag Noh, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011.

Fig 2.32 Eunju Kim, Geumnamro, Soongeum Park, May Mothers Day series, 2011

Fig 2.33 Sunkwan Kwon, A Woman Sitting on the Fountain – A Picnic
Configurated in Accumulative Space series, 2007
Fig 2.34 Suntag Noh, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011

Fig 2.35 Press Image taken on May 17, 2006 at the 5.18 national cemetery ©Newsis

Fig 2.36 Press Image taken on May 18, 2017 at the 5.18 national cemetery ©Dailian

Fig 2.37 Suntag Noh, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
Fig 2.38 Suntag Noh, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011

Fig 2.39-40 Photographs of Suppression taken on May 1980
© The May 18 Memorial Foundation
Fig 2.41-42 Suntag Noh, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
Fig 2.43-44 Suntag Noh, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
Fig 2.45-46 Suntag Noh, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011

Fig 2.47-48 Suntag Noh, Forgetting Machines, 2005-2011
Fig 3.1 Joseub 5.16, Do Not Question, 2005

Fig 3.2 Joseub 5.16, Do Not Question, 2005

Fig 3.3 The May 16 Military Coup in 1961
Fig 3.4 Sanghee Song, *Mother A*, 2004
Fig 3.5 __________, *The First Lady A*, 2004

Fig 3.6 Hwayong Kim, *Merry Kwansun Odyssey: Return to the Motherland on the 60th Anniversary of Korea’s Independence*, 2005
Fig 3.7 Han-yeol Yi Collapsing, by Taewoon Jung ©Reuters
Fig 3.8 Gyoo Sik Kim, *Night Hawk*, 2008

Fig 3.9 Suntag Noh, *reallyGood, Murder*, 2008

Fig 3.10 Young Hoon Lee, *Paradise*, 2008
Fig 3.11-12 SungHyun Sohn, *House of Unification*, 1998-2004

Fig 3.13 SungHyun Sohn, *Chunhwa Chang (84, Internally Displaced Person Whose Hometown Is in North Korea)*, The Koreans series, 2008-2014

Fig 3.14 SungHyun Sohn *Julia Khan*, The Koreans series, 2008-2014
Fig 3.15 Joseub, *Douglas MacArthur*, Do Not Question, 2005

Fig 3.16 Douglas MacArthur
Fig 3.17 Joseub, *Douglas MacArthur*, Do Not Question, 2005

Fig 3.18 The Battle of Incheon

Fig 3.19 Reenactment of the Battle of Incheon
Fig 3.20 Statue of Douglas MacArthur at Jayu Park (Freedom Park), Incheon

Fig 3.21 Joseub, *Marilyn Monroe*, Do Not Question, 2005
Fig 3.22 Marilyn Monroe when she visited Korea in 1954
Fig 3.23 Joseub, *Marilyn Monroe*, Do Not Question, 2005

Fig 3.24 Yong Tae Kim, *DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon*, 1984
Fig 3.25-27 Yong Tae Kim, *DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon*, 1984
Fig 3.28 Atta Kim, *Jae Dong Chun 1915-2007, Dongnae Yaryu (Outdoor Performing Art of Dongnae) no. 18*, Human Cultural Asset series, 1989-90

Fig 3.29 The War Memorial of Korea

Fig 3.30 The Korean War Monument
Fig 3.31 The Statue of Brothers, The War Memorial of Korea

Fig 3.32 Joseub, I Hate Red Peanut!, 1999
Fig 3.33-34 Joseub, *I Hate Red Peanut!*, 1999

Fig 3.35 Joseub, *The Korean War*, Do Not Question, 2005
Fig 3.36 Joseub, *The Korean War*, Do Not Question, 2005
Fig 3.37 Eungsik Lim, *A War Orphan*, 1950

Fig 3.38 Joe Rosenthal, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, February 23, 1945
Fig 3.39 Joseub, *Subjugate*, Do Not Question, 2005
Fig 3.40 Hein-kuhn Oh, *A Petty Officer Standing in Front of 127mm Naval Artillery Gun, October 2010*, Middlemen

Fig 3.41 Hein-kuhn Oh, *Azaleas and Soldier, April 2011*, Middlemen

Fig 3.42 A trainee soldier, Republic of Korean Army, August 8, 2016

Fig 3.43 A cadet in training, Republic of Korean Army August 8, 2016

Fig 3.44 The Korean Army performing its duty, 2015

Fig 3.45 The Korean Army, Winter Training, 2015
Fig 3.46 Commandos in training, Republic of Korea Army August 6, 2015

Fig 3.47 Hein-kuhn Oh, *Four Soldiers Before a Mock Cavalry Battle*, May 2010, Middlemen
Fig 3.48 Chan-Kyong Park, *Black Box: Memory of the Cold War Images*, 1997

Fig 3.49 Chan-Kyong Park, *Sets*, 2000

Fig 3.50 Chan-Kyong Park, *Power Passage*, 2004-2007

Fig 3.51 Seung Woo Back, *Blow Up #085*, 2007

Fig 3.52 Suntag Noh, *Red House I*, 2002-2007
Fig 3.53 Hein-kuhn Oh, *A Corporal on Red Clay, May 2010*, Middlemen

Fig 3.54-55 Young Hoon Lee, *Paradise*, 2008
Fig 3.56-58 Young Hoon Lee, *Paradise*, 2008
Fig 3.59 Seung Woo Back, *RW02-026*, Real World II, 2008

Fig 3.60 Seung Woo Back, *RW02-035*, Real World II, 2008
Fig 3.61 Seung Woo Back, *RW02-067*, Real World II, 2008

Fig 3.64-65 David Levinthal, *Hitler Moves East*, 1972-75

Fig 3.66 Robert Capa, *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*
Fig 4.1 Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirl Project*, 2000, Projects, 1997-2001


Fig 4.5 Nikki S. Lee, *The Hispanic Project*, 1998, Projects, 1997-2001


Fig 4.14 Nan Goldin, *Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston*, 1973

Fig 4.15 Nikki S. Lee, *The Seniors Project*, 1999, Projects, 1997-2001
Fig 4.16 Nikki S. Lee, *The Hip Hop project*, 2001, Projects, 1997-2001

Fig 4.17 Do Ho Suh, *Who Am We?* 2000, Offset Wallpaper
Fig 4.18 Do Ho Suh
*High School Uni-Face: Boy, 1997*

Fig 4.19 Do Ho Suh
*High School Uni-Face: Girl, 1997*

Fig 4.20 Atta Kim, *ON-AIR Project 047-1, 100 Countries/100 Men*, Self-Portrait series, 2004
Fig 4.21 Do Ho Suh, *High School Uni-Form*, 1997

Fig 4.22-23 Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirl Project*, 2000, Projects
Fig 4.24 Kimsooja, *Bottari Truck – Migrateurs*, 1997/2009
Fig 4.25 Kimsooja, *Deductive Object VII*, 1996/2013

Fig 4.26-27 Do Ho Suh, *Paratrooper I*, 2003
Fig 4.28 Do Ho Suh, *Karma*, 2003

Fig 4.29-30 Do Ho Suh
Fig 4.31 Chan-hyo Bae, *Existing in Costume*, 2003

Fig 4.32 Man Ray, *Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy* 1920

Fig 4.33 Chris Makos, *Altered Ego (Andy Warhol in Tribute to Rrose Sélavy)* c. 1960s
Fig 4.34 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Futago)*, 1988

Fig 4.35 Yasumasa Morimura
*Black Marilyn*, 1995
Fig 4.36 Yasumasa Morimura, *Daughter of Art History, Theater A*, 1989

Fig 4.37 Yasumasa Morimura *Daughter of Art History, Theater B*, 1989
Fig 4.38 Michael Joo, *Miss Megook (Miss America)*, 1993

Fig 4.39-40 Chan-hyo Bae, *Existing in Costume*, 2003
Fig 5.1 Jaeuk Lee, *Red Line*, 2018

Fig 5.2 Jaeuk Lee, *It’s Not Your Fault*, 2015-16
Fig 5.3-4 Jaeuk Lee, *It’s Not Your Fault*, 2015-16
Fig 5.5-6 Jaeuk Lee, *It’s Not Your Fault*, 2015-16
Fig 5.7 Onejoon Che, *African Renaissance Monument, Built 2010, Dakar, Senegal, 2013* Mansudae Master Class, 2015

Fig 5.8 Onejoon Che, *Independence Hall, Under Construction, Windhoek, Namibia, 2013* Mansudae Master Class, 2015
Fig 5.9 Onejoon Che, *National Hero’s Acre, Built in 1981, Harare, Zimbabwe*, Mansudae Master Class, 2015

Fig 5.10 Onejoon Che, *Three Dikgosi Monument, Built 2005, Gaborone, Botswana, 2013*, Mansudae Master Class, 2015
Fig 5.11 Juche Tower, Pyongyang, North Korea

Fig 5.12 Mansudae Grand Monument, Pyongyang, North Korea, Bronze, 66 ft. each (Left: Kim Il-Sung’s Statue dedicated in 1972 in honor of Kim’s 60th birthday; Right: Kim Jong-il’s Statue built in 2011 upon his death)
Appendix

Map of Korea
Acknowledgement of Previous Publications

While developing this dissertation, I published an article and a book chapter:


Bibliography


Archives of Presidential Records:
http://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/policy/index0606.jsp


__________, “Rearizumu Wa Shizenshigi De Was Nai.” (Realism in no naturalism) Camera 46, no.6 (1953): 174-77.


“Family of Man Eul Malhaneun Jwadamhoe,” (Family of Man 을 말하는 좌담회 A Round Table Talk on The Family of Man), 41-45. Sajinmunhwa, May 1956.


Han, In Sup. “Kwangju and Beyond : Coping with Past Atrocities in South Korea.” *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no.3 (August 2005): 998-1045.


Jones, David Martin. “Democracy and Identity: The Paradoxical Character of Political


Oh, Kwang-su, ed. *Hanguk Chusanmisul 40nyeon* (한국 추상미술 40 년 Forty Years of


_________. Maehokaneun Sajin : Hanguk Hyeondaesajinui Saeroun Tamsaek

http://seungwooback.com/gr/board.php?id=news&articleNo=42&page=1&searchText=&clickCategory=&PHPSESSID=5dfba6e1daaa09dd97625a66b3a62a4c3&ckatempt=1


Sekula, Allan. “Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs).” October 102 (Fall 2002): 3-34.


The War Memorial of Korea. https://www.warmemo.or.kr/front/exhibition/exhibit.do?bbsId=2101


_____________. “Seung Woo Back, Real World.” http://seungwooback.com/gr/board.php?id=news&articleNo=6&page=1&searchText=&clickCategory=&PHPSESSID=b0c4879371a1ae6ae254659412a580c.


