

State-approved Revolution

Malangchism

May 23, 2022

They who have visited the New Cemetery -the 18th of May National Cemetery- will know: the dignity and grandness a place can have. Even from car park one can hear the “March for the Beloved”¹ resonating from a distance. Beyond the massive entrance built in a traditional Korean style, on which the sign “Door of Democracy” hangs, lies the cemetery that, with its size alone, imposes solemnity onto its visitors. In the middle of said cemetery lies a tall stone gate, and behind it, two even taller pillars extending towards the sky, supporting between them a large stone scaly egg. The minds of all that keep walking will be stirred by the illusion of the seemingly shrinking stone gate and the growing egg-brooding pillars.

To commemorate the 18th of May Uprising, Mutual Aid of Ours “Malangchism” and Seoul National

University’s Anarchist Study Group “Black Crane” visited Gwangju last 14th and 15th of May, and so decided to also pay the New Cemetery a visit. There, like everyone else, we also followed the instructions and lit the incense, bowed our heads, and held a minute of silence to honour those who fell on the 18th of May. However, though we did honour those reposed in the New Cemetery, we did not reveal our organizations’ names, nor fly our flags, nor celebrate “our fatherland’s proud democracy attained through painful struggle.” We had visited Gwangju to commemorate the 18th of May “Uprising”, not to celebrate 18th of May “Democratization Movement.”

After exiting the New Cemetery, we visited the Old Cemetery -the Mangwol Park Cemetery- not too far. Someone once said that the Old Cemetery is kept in such conditions to preserve the looks of the mass grave it used to be in 1980. Yet by comparing the Old Cemetery to the impressive New Cemetery the Republic of Korea built so that we wouldn’t forget the 18th of May, it was quite easy to realize that the 18th of May the State wishes we remember is but a very specific, “approved” fraction. The Old Cemetery does not have the grandness of the New. The Old Cemetery does not have massive commemorative monuments. The Old Cemetery does not have “atmosphere-setting” music playing all day on a loop. The Old Cemetery does not have a worker explaining the “correct way” to pay respects. The grass there has thick and sharp blades. The tombs in there were dug right next to each other with little space between them. There are lots of “does not have’s” in the Old Cemetery that the New Cemetery does. But the Old Cemetery

¹ “March for the Beloved ㅁㅁㅁㅁㅁ” is a protest song written by Paik Ki-Wan and composed by Kim Jong-Yul to remember the Uprising.

has one thing more abundant than the New: the number of those that were reposed here because the State so graciously rejected them for refusing to carry out their struggles inside the pen it approves.

Before visiting the Old Cemetery, we had visited many other places. We first visited the Gwangcheon church where the Wildfire night school used to be. A nun saw us group getting off our car and immediately recognized us as visitors commemorating the 18th of May. After approaching us, she offered kind explanations about the night school building of which only the entranceway remained. But the nun's kindness exceeded all our expectations, as she even gave us frozen water bottles and bags of goodies from an icebox that had been prepared for visitors like us.

Next we visited the Democracy Square and the Jeon-il Building in front. In the Jeon-il Building, we were guided by a lady who had partaken in the 18th of May Uprising protesting younger brother's disappearance in the hands of the Chun Doo-Hwan regime. We had visited the Jeon-il Building thinking that one of our comrades would guide us, never expecting someone of her calibre would approach us.

Lastly, before visiting the cemeteries, we visited the Military School. Like at the Wildfire night school and at the Jeon-il Building, there too we felt the desire of the people of Gwangju to tell the memories of the 18th of May Uprising to all who would listen. Receiving visitors at the entrance of the park built on the old Military School were the survivors of the tortures that were carried out there 42 years ago. They who had survived the violence of the military were wearing militaristic uniforms, facing their wounds of those days, and giving detailed recollections to the visitors from the entrance, where a sign inscribed with Chun Doo-Hwan's name was fixed on the ground to be stepped upon, to the guardhouse.

We felt it throughout our two-day tour of Gwangju and confirmed it through the seminar we held in the inn with everyone who had come with us: the Gwangju Uprising did not end back in 1980. Just like we saw, the breath of those who lived the Uprising still blows among us. The State will never approve all of those who can no longer breathe this air nor those who still can. Yet this State called the Republic of Korea still tries to justify itself through means such as the New Cemetery's exaggerated splendour. But what the people of the 18th of May fought was precisely the Republic of Korea. It was the people who shared rice and took up arms. It was this mass of people that, through pain unimaginable to us today, fought without compromise against the violence of the state. It was this same mass that tore the sign with Chun Doo-Hwan's name and fixed it on the entrance floor of the Old Cemetery.²

Mutual Aid of Ours "Malangchism" does not remember the democratization of Korea from the events of the 18th of May. We instead remember the distribution according to need in the stores that resumed business in Liberated Gwangju, mutual aid in all those who volunteered their blood to the hospitals that requested it, self-governance in the general assemblies that took place without leaders at the Democracy Square, and autonomous organization in "Our Forces"³ that freely formed to carry on with the fight.

² Though there is a sign with Chun's name stuck on the ground for people to step on at the Military School too, the one at the Old Cemetery is much more famous. So famous in fact, that Korean politicians have grown a taste of showing off their patriotism by televising themselves stepping on the sign every time they visit Gwangju.

³ "Our Forces" (우리 힘) is the name with which the insurgents at Gwangju called their militia as an opposition to "The Enemy" (적).

Instead of the Gwangju “Democratization Movement” we remember the Gwangju “Uprising,” nay! the Gwangju “Revolution.” We remember those fallen that day and step on Chun’s name not at the New but at the Old Cemetery.

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Retrieved on July 9, 2022 from <https://libcom.org/article/state-approved-revolution>
Originally published on the Malangchism blog. Translated by Malangchism

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