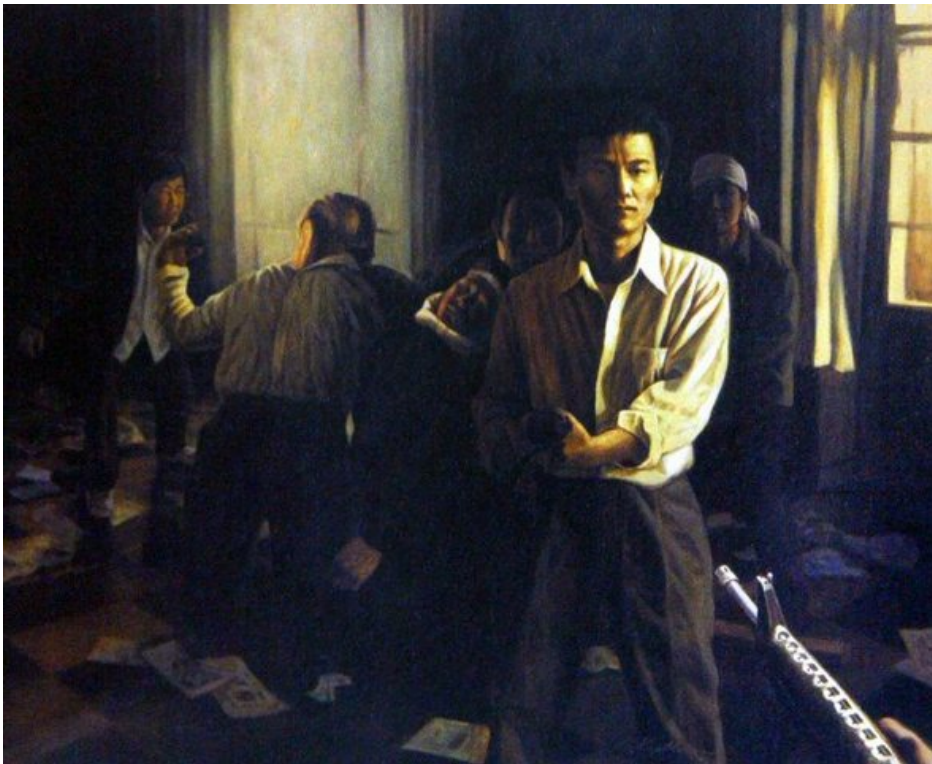


[Column] Remembering Yoon Sang-won

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43

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A painting by artist Seo Gi-mun, depicting resistance forces Yoon Sang-won, who was a spokesperson during the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement, on the last dawn before they were killed

One of the main symbols today of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, Yoon Sang-won is rightly remembered for his courage, for his tenacious organizing ability, for his dedication and selflessness, and especially for his willingness to fight until the end. Sadly, when only 29-years-old, he was killed on the morning of May 27, 1980 during the final assault of the army on Province Hall in Gwangju. He resisted the military dictatorship to his last breath.

Today his place in Mangwoldong cemetery is an honored gravesite where many visitors pause to remember him. After his death, he is far bigger than in life. The movement's signature song, "March for the Beloved" was written for Yoon's symbolic, posthumous marriage to Park Gi-sun.

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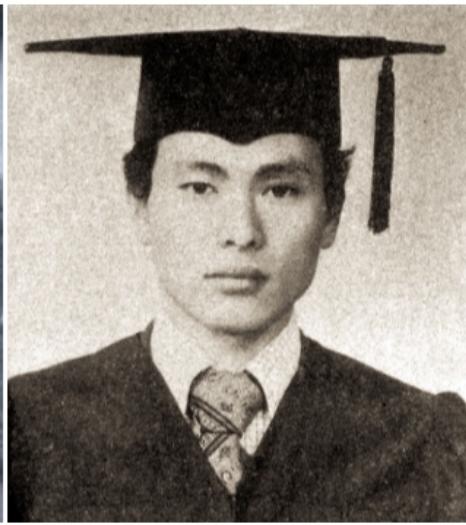
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Left, deceased labor activist Park Gi-sun who died in 1978, and, right, Yoon Sang-won, who was a spokesperson during the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement. The two of them were married in a posthumous wedding. The song "March for the Beloved" is dedicated to them

No matter how much he may be idealized, it is incumbent upon us today to be critical of even the most glorious elements of our past in order to better prepare our future. I wish to ask an important question about Yoon's actions, one that also bears upon the late president Noh Moo-hyun.

On May 26, 1980, Yoon was the press spokesperson in besieged Gwangju representing the insurgents as the military was poised to overwhelm the liberated city. He used the occasion to send a message to US ambassador William Gleysteen (via Bradley Martin, a US journalist then writing for The Baltimore Sun). Yoon asked the ambassador to intervene with Chun Doo-hwan and help negotiate a peaceful settlement to the uprising. Martin has verified that he passed along Yoon's request to the ambassador but that Gleysteen refused to do anything about it.

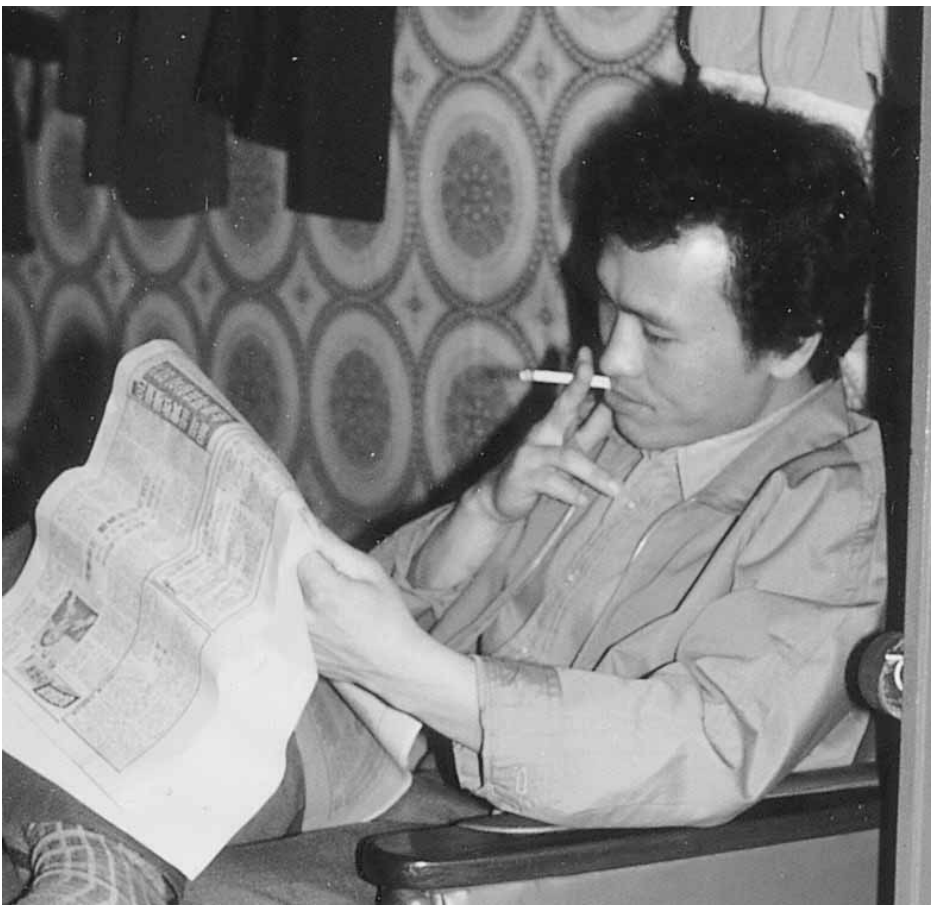
Earlier that day, it had been rumored in Gwangju (correctly as it turned out) that the aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea had entered Korean waters. Whatever Yoon truly thought, he said that the aircraft carrier was coming to help fighters for democracy. Whether he was trying to lift the spirits of the insurgents or naïvely believed the United States would aid the insurgents, he was heard to say the carrier came to help the uprising.

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Yoon Sang-won, who was a spokesperson during the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement, at the Jeolla Provincial Office in Gwangju, which was at the time the headquarters of the resistance

My question is: was Yoon earnest in asking the United States for help? Whatever may have been in his heart, he twice asserted the possibility that the US might help Korean democracy. We know today, of course, that the US ordered the South Korean dictatorship to end the uprising and dispatched the Coral Sea to support its own nefarious “national security” interests.

What lesson can we draw for the future?

Today, South Korea has a new president who promises to lead the nation toward peace, a distinguished leader proud to state his debt to “people power.” At this very moment, the Trump administration is poised to launch a first strike on North Korea—probably a “surgical strike” designed to destroy nuclear or rocket facilities, but perhaps what would be far worse, an attack on North Korea’s leadership or its cities. Either way, the possibility of a devastating new war is undeniable. With Trump’s domestic problems mounting daily, wouldn’t a foreign “show of force” boost his standing?

Will Moon Jae-in be equal to the task of dealing with the United States realistically? Or will he follow in the footsteps of his predecessor Roh Moo-hyun, who went to the United States and bowed down to President Bush soon after he was elected? During his summit with Trump now scheduled for next month, will Moon innocently ask the US for help in solving a Korean problem, as Yoon Sang-won did?

If Moon is to protect Korea, his main message to President Trump must be not to attack Korea. To rely on Trump’s goodwill or US kindness (as both Yoon Sang-won and Roh Moo-hyun did) would be a repetition of past errors—and possibly a fatal one for millions of Koreans. Trump’s arrogant imposition of THAAD (despite the opposition of 56% of South Koreans according to the latest polls) is one indication of his respect for “people power” in Korea.

The best way for President Moon to insure peace would be for him to reach out as soon as possible to Pyongyang and deepen Koreans’ joint commitment to the loose federal/confederal agreement signed by Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il in their historic summit of 2000. That agreement validates Korean unity

and advocates a loose federal or confederal republic with two independent states. Emphasizing the predominant importance of this republic to the world could potentially make a life and death difference. An early summit with Kim Jong-un would be as important as any of Moon's upcoming meetings.

If the leaders of South and North could agree, they could jointly announce to the world that no one should attack Korea, asserting proudly that Koreans are ready for the first time in the 20th century to solve their own problems by themselves, that all outside powers should keep away and give Koreans the space to solve their problems. Moon has already dispatched special envoys to the US, Japan, Russia, China and the EU. Why not North Korea?

It is my fear that President Moon's hands may already be tied, that there is no time for him to truly break with the policies of Park Gun-hye and take on the momentous task of pacifying the aggressive designs of the United States and Japan, whose military power devastated Korea in the bloody 20th century. Have the US and Japan already resolved to attack North Korea? Soon after Xi Jinping's summit with Trump, China publicly stated it would make no military response to a so-called surgical strike on the North. Russia is too busy with wars in West Asia to play an active role in Korea.

It is in the key interests of none of these major powers to maintain peace in Korea. For the US, genuine peace in Korea would mean it would only be a Pacific power. Simultaneously, the leaders of North Korea are convinced—and not without cause, given the fates suffered by Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi—that without their weapons of mass destruction, they will overnight be attacked. The key reason the North continues to build its arsenal is precisely its isolation. That is why it is so important that President Moon boldly take the initiative to consolidate intra-Korean talks and move ahead with the Sunshine Policy's promise of peace and unification.



George Katsiaficas

By George Katsiaficas

George Katsiaficas is currently teaching at Chonnam National University. Last year he was the winner of the Hu-kwang (Kim Dae-jung) Scholar's Award. His most recent book is Asia's Unknown Uprisings, the first volume of which focuses solely on Korea.

The views presented in this column are the writer's own, and do not necessarily reflect those of The Hankyoreh.

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Dear George, I think that you also need to bring this more into context concerning Mr. Yoon, his compatriots, the citizens of Kwangju and the U.S. presidency. President Carter marketed himself as the human rights president, it was that aspect that Mr. Yoon and the citizens of Kwangju were counting on. I can affirm this statement because I was there in Kwangju and in the Provincial Office building. I had full access to the Provincial Offices, the only foreign to have that kind of access. I was at meetings of the peoples committee. I talking and interacting with Mr. Yoon, others involved and the... [See More](#)

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43 0