

Yun Sang-won: The Knowledge in Those Eyes

By Bradley Martin

(A journalist's story about one student martyr in the Kwangju Massacre of 1980, reproduced with the author's permission, for class use only. See the note at the end.)

In a quarter-century as a journalist, I have covered such stories as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the trial of China's Gang of Four and the rioting and murder following the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. But when anyone asks which story most stands out in my memory, I answer with a single word: "Kwangju." I spent only one day in Kwangju during the rebellion there, but that single day, May 26, 1980, was enough to burn into my brain permanent images of brave people for whom the struggle against tyranny was very much a matter of life or death.

Most of the martyrs of Kwangju had already died by the time I got to the city on the 26th. Relatives had identified many of the corpses. The piercing cries of grieving mothers, wailing as they embraced their children's coffins, filled the auditorium across from the provincial office building (Toch'ong). In the breezeway of the Toch'ong some 15 more corpses lay bloating, turning purple in open coffins awaiting identification. Today those Kwangju dead are buried in the May 18 Cemetery. Their graves are surmounted by portraits picturing them as their loved ones had known them in life. But I, never having known most of them in life, will picture them to the end of my days as I saw them in death. All but one of them, that is. The one Kwangju victim I can clearly see alive in my mind's eye is the student spokesman who held a press conference on the 26th. I was sitting directly across a coffee table from him in a room in the provincial capital building in Kwangju and I was thinking that this man would be dead soon. His eyes were directly on mine and I was thinking that he himself knew that he would be dead soon. I

looked at him, at his frizzy hair, unusual for a Korean, at the calm way about him that contrasted with the near hysteria of his armed, posturing, probably much younger comrades, and I had a clear sensation that he would die. His glance was friendly but, I thought, resigned. And he seldom took his eyes away from mine. I thought the spokesman was about 25. He had strong cheekbones and an intelligent look. But it was his eyes that struck me, with their gentleness, kindness in the face of what I thought must be knowledge of impending death.

That very morning, the soldiers surrounding the city had moved a bit closer to the center. The student militants obviously lacked the firepower to resist for long, once the army should make its move. The spokesman looked directly at me as he spoke. "We think the United States as an ally can exercise its influence on the Korean government. Since it hasn't done so, we suspect the U. S. might be supporting General Chun Doo Hwan. "The Americans should send their ambassador to arbitrate the Kwangju problem," he said, because "we can't trust the government authorities. In the case of the recent coal miners' strike [at Sabuk], the government promised no punishment if the rioters would stop -- but in fact they were arrested later."

The spokesman would not give his name. He said that was the policy of the student militants, although he was sure the army knew who he was. I looked at him and could not escape the knowledge of the future that I saw in those eyes. More than 100 Kwangju people had been killed in the previous week's rioting, according to news

accounts, and he was saying the real figure was about 260. Finally I asked him the question that was bothering me. It was obvious to any outsider, I said, that the army had overwhelming power to call upon whenever it might choose to strike and retake the city. Were the poorly armed student militants prepared to die in resisting or would they surrender?

He replied calmly, his eyes gently insisting that the words be believed: "We'll fight back to the last man." He said the students had enough dynamite and grenades to "blow up the city."

After the press briefing, I stayed in Kwangju a while, examining the barricades, interviewing citizens. Then, at night, I returned to Seoul and sent a story to my newspaper about what I had seen. The story never ran. Before it could be printed, word came that the army had retaken Kwangju. Casualty figures released at first were low--only two dead among the students. I was relieved it was not more. They were so young, so full of idealism and determination. Later, I heard higher figures. An Associated Press correspondent, Terry Anderson, had been at the news conference. Anderson told me he counted 16 young people dead. Among them, he said, was the spokesman, found in the same provincial capital office where he had held his first and last regularly scheduled meeting with the press. The spokesman's body was partially burned in a fire that had broken out there, Anderson told me.

That young man's life and death for me encapsulated the tragedy of South Korea under military rule. After I confirmed his death, I wrote an article focusing on him for the newspaper I worked for at the time, The Baltimore Sun. I described what I had seen and heard, more or less as I have written above, and ended the article with the words: "If I knew the student's name, I would write it here." As soon as I had sent the article to

Baltimore via the Chosun Hotel's telex operator on the evening of the 27th, I went out with some other correspondents and got drunker than I had ever been before. I don't recall most of the places we went to that night in downtown Seoul. My drinking companions told me later they had tried to hold me up to keep me from falling, as I stumbled screaming from bar to bar, cursing Chun Doo Hwan and the other new military rulers of South Korea. My strong feelings reflected the fact that, having covered Korea for three years, I had grown to love the country and its people. I suppose I reacted to Kwangju more as a Korean than as an American.

My editors found the article moving and they believed readers would, too, so they placed it at the top of the front page of the paper for the morning of May 28. Certainly it is one of the most passionate pieces I have ever written. Perhaps subconsciously I had intended that passion to exorcize the disturbing ghost of the young spokesman from my mind, but he was a persistent ghost. I wondered how his life had led him to that moment. For more than a decade I was left to wonder even who he was--for I still did not know his name or anything else about him except that he had been spokesman for the rebel students.

From time to time I asked friends in Seoul, but it seemed the young man had not been famous enough for his name to become widely known. He had told us the army knew who he was, but in reality it seemed neither the soldiers nor most other Koreans knew his name. Terry Anderson, the Associated Press correspondent, later achieved unwanted fame while covering another story, the Middle East. Working in Beirut, Terry was taken hostage by Arab kidnappers and held for seven long years. In 1992, shortly after he had been released, I wrote to Terry and asked if he knew the spokesman's name. He wrote back to say that he did not. It seemed I would have to

go to Kwangju and ask around in order to fill out my knowledge of the student spokesman, so I put that on my list of things to do some day.

Then in 1993, while I was in Seoul doing research for a book, I got a call from a man I had not met. He identified himself as Eugene Suh, a Korean-born American citizen from Columbia, Maryland, a town between Baltimore and Washington, D. C. Mr. Suh asked to meet me. When we met in the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club, I found a smiling man of my own age (born in 1942), wearing casual clothing. He told me that he had been looking for me, hoping to meet me, ever since 1980 when he had read my article in The Baltimore Sun about the Kwangju spokesman.

Suh explained that he had moved from Korea to the United States in 1970. For many years after that, he had lobbied in Washington on behalf of the United Movement for Democracy and Reunification. In 1980, Suh had distributed copies of my Kwangju article to influential people in Washington. He had translated the article and sent it back to Korea to boost the morale of members of the pro-democracy movement. He said he had always hoped to meet me, so he could tell me that the article had had major impact in bucking up pro-democracy forces in those fearful post-Kwangju days. Naturally it pleased me to hear that. But it pleased me even more to be able to ask Suh the question that had haunted me: Who was that student spokesman? "Oh, you mean Yun Sang Won," he replied. "I was born in Honam and I know his friends and family. Would you like to go to Kwangju and meet them?" Of course I would, I replied. Within a few days Suh and I were on an airplane.

When we arrived in Kwangju we met my host, Park Song Hyon, former organizer of the National Democratic Students' League. Now sporting a Rotarian's badge on the lapel

of his business suit, Park had metamorphosed into a high-powered businessman--he had started a software company and was president of Koryo Cement, a company in which his family were the largest shareholders. A student activist in 1980, he had left Kwangju before the uprising because the authorities were looking for him in connection with his activism in Seoul.

"I admired Mr. Yun so much because he was a very intelligent and great person and very brave," Park told me. He explained that Yun had been far more than just the spokesman for the student rebels. From midway through the rebellion, Yun was actually the man in charge in Kwangju, although his central role was not widely known, Park said.

Park Song Hyon introduced me to one of Yun's closest colleagues, Chun Yong Ho, a Chonnam National student at the time of the uprising. After finding himself in and out of prison cells for years, Chun like Park and many of the other aging rebels had found a niche in business. Recently he had started an advertising and communications company in Kwangju. Chun and Suh took me to the May 18 Cemetery, where I paid respects at Yun's tomb. The tombstone gave the bare outlines of his life: Yun Sang-won, born August 19, 1950. Struggle Committee spokesman in the Toch'ong. Shot at dawn on May 27, 1980, when the military advanced into the city.

Yun's photograph affixed to the tomb showed the man I remembered: older than most of the student rebels, frizzy-haired, with strong cheekbones. Someone had placed a cigarette on the tomb as an offering.

That evening, my hosts took me to a meeting of Yun's colleagues and family members. Among them, I had no difficulty at all picking out Yun's father, Yun Sok

Dong: the same strong cheekbones and frizzy hair, although the hair had turned white and there remained only a fringe of it around his bald dome. I explained my connections with Korea and Kwangju and my interest in learning and writing more about Yun Sang Won. Kwangju had been the most emotional experience of my career, I told the group. The brutality had been so great I had feared it would take many years for the Korean democracy movement to regroup and stand up to the military regime again. Reassigned to open a bureau in India in the summer of 1980, right after Kwangju, I had felt relieved in a way that I would be giving up the Korea story, for I wondered if I still had the heart to cover the country now that its future looked so bleak.

When I returned to the Korea story in 1986, as anti-government demonstrations raged once again, I was glad to see that Koreans had regained their courage. When Roh Tae Woo gave in to the demonstrators and issued his democracy proclamation, I felt as happy as any Korean. And when the Chinese in 1989 at Tiananmen Square suffered their own version of Kwangju, I felt that I knew something about indomitable fighting spirit. With some confidence -- misplaced, perhaps, as it is already 1997 -- I predicted that the Chinese, like the Koreans, would take only seven years or so to spring back with a systematic opposition to tyranny and force the institution of a more democratic system.

If I had anticipated before that evening began that I would encounter a certain coolness in Kwangju on account of my nationality, the reality of my meeting with the people close to Yun was just the opposite. When I finished talking, I was welcomed warmly. The elder Yun, a sunburned farmer and the chairman of the association of families bereaved by the Kwangju massacre, spoke generously and movingly: "Because of people like you, my son can live forever. Thank you. "

From talking with people at the meeting and later with others--especially his close comrade, Lee Tae Bok, who had become publisher of Weekly Labor News--I pieced together an account of Yun's life and death. Yun Sang Won was raised in the village of Imgok, which was about an hour's drive from Kwangju before the roads were improved. There his family farmed 3,000 pyong of rice paddy. The family struggled to provide their eldest son a good education. Yun Sang Won went to a Catholic secondary school in Kwangju (where he converted to Catholicism--although his enthusiasm for religion later waned).

At Chonnam National University in Kwangju he was involved in the democratic student movement of the time. He was a political science major. Also active in the theater group, he got involved in the Korean masked-dance movement, which was becoming popular among anti-government students. In describing his first two years of college to Lee Tae Bok, years later in 1979, Yun said he had been a simple and naive democrat with a zeal for social justice. The student slogans of the early 1970's opposed Park Chung Hee's determination to remain indefinitely in power and opposed the corruption inevitably accompanying his near-absolute power.

After his sophomore year in college, Yun was conscripted into the army. Completing his military service, he returned to the university. There he found a new mood in the student movement. Simply opposing Park Chung Hee was not enough. Students were searching for a more all-encompassing, progressive world-view. South Koreans were not yet reading the original Marxist texts--which were still largely unavailable in the country--but it was possible to nibble around the edges of the canon. Yun and others devoured Hegelian philosophy, Third World radical texts and Western books on economic history and capitalist

development.

Living with his younger brother in a rented room in the Kwangchon-dong slum, Yun watched the wretched daily life of the slum-dwellers and agonized over what sort of career he should pursue: Would he become a well-paid, white-collar salaried man and help put his younger siblings through school, as his family hoped? Or would he perhaps go in an entirely different direction, organizing a social movement among poor people?

Yun divided his time--and his being--between the world represented by the social-science books popular among progressive students and the course work that would prepare him for his corporate employment examinations. Having done well in his studies and on the crucial employment examination, he graduated in 1977 and took a job with one of the largest banks in Seoul. But in the capital he lived in the Bongchan-dong slum, inhabited mainly by former peasants who had come to the city for factory work. Younger colleagues still active in the student movement, some of them on the run from the police, visited him there. Conversations often turned to an idea popular among student activists of the time: going into factories to become workers. Yun later told Lee Tae Bok that he had planned all along to stay in banking for only a token period and then take up movement organization work. His experiences in Seoul had only strengthened his resolve, he said.

After six months as a banker, he did resign. He wrote to explain to his father that he was committed to doing something for the nation. He had taken the bank job simply because his father had been working so hard to put him through college. He had wanted to prove by getting the job that he had made good use of the opportunity. He had been able to pass the examination for the prestigious job, and the father at least would have this to keep him from losing face in

front of friends. "My son was a boy of strong character and will," his father told me. "Once we had quite a dialog. I thought he was too sympathetic to the oppressed and exploited people. So I told him: 'Make a lot of money and help them.' My son answered: 'How many people could I possibly help with my money? I want to change the world.' We argued repeatedly, but I never won the arguments. "

The old man's voice dropped to a whisper. "After he quit his banking job my son went to work in a Styrofoam factory. Around that time his mother came down with a typhus infection and had to be hospitalized. My son and a friend visited her in the hospital. She was a little feverish, and told him: 'You know how hard I worked to send you to the university. And now you have become a worker.' My son answered: 'Mom, don't be too sad. Some day I will really take care of you. I'm taking care of a lot of people instead of one person. By doing so I can really take care of you some day.'"

At that stage, according to Lee Tae Bok, "Mr. Yun's ideological and theoretical background was not very sophisticated. He was moved by sympathy for poor people and a passion for democracy, and he wasn't that radical. "Still, he was ahead of his time. "People talked a lot about being a worker, but few ever went to factories," said Lee. In the Kwangju area only one intellectual had preceded Yun into factory work, and he had kept at it for only a short time.

Yun spent a few months studying the question of just what an intellectual could hope to accomplish as a worker, Lee Tae Bok said. According to Lee, there were three schools of thought on that question among progressive intellectuals. One group, probably the majority among Kwangju-area activists at the time, held that being a worker itself was the important thing. A second group held that it didn't matter whether you were a worker, a student or a white-collar

salaried person; the important thing was to immediately organize an underground resistance organization. This group's viewpoint tended toward starting an armed rebellion based on rural areas. Its adherents formed the South Korean National Liberation Front, whose activists were arrested in October of 1979.

The third point of view was that the general level of political consciousness among workers and students alike was still maturing, especially in the Honam region. Thus, the important thing was to be flexible and alert. Yun came around to this viewpoint. He decided that the trend toward industrialization in South Korea was critical. The times required a labor movement more than a peasant movement, and basically a labor movement would not be focused on armed struggle. For an intellectual merely to become a worker was not enough, he also decided; nothing would be solved by simply devoting his life to working in a factory.

"It is very important to note that for Mr. Yun, quitting the job as a banker implied his whole future course," Lee added. "After that he was searching for a more effective, scientific way to change the world. . . . At the moment he was not an ideologue, not a communist--rather just something more than a populist, searching for a more sincere solution than a populist solution. "I could see evidence for that assessment when my hosts in Kwangju drove me to Imgok and I had a chance to look over Yun's library. The family had rebuilt the main house in modern style in 1992, but it remained very much a farm house. A chicken wandered into the main room as we sat on the floor chatting with the elder Yun and his wife. Much as he resembled his father, I saw that Sang-won had looked even more like his mother. A traditional Korean farmhouse across the courtyard, in which Yun had slept and studied, remains. His room contains his photos as well as his books.

The books I saw there included these titles, all in English: George Lichtheim, *The Origins of Socialism* (a pirated edition); Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*; Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*; Jack Gray and Patrick Cavendish, *Chinese Communism in Crisis*; John M. Hertz, *Political Realism, Political Idealism*; Maurice Dobb, *Political Economy and Capitalism*; George Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness, Studies in Marxist Dialectics*; Sidney Verbin, *Small Group and Political Behavior* (this volume had been checked out of the local U. S. Information Service library and never returned); Alexander Worth, *Russia: The Postwar Years*; R. N. Carew Hunt, *The Theory and Practice of Communism*.

The titles were not restricted to the topic of communism. And, far from propaganda, the books tended to be serious scholarly analyzes. Yun Sang Won's reading list reminded me of my own list back in the innocent days of the early 1960's, when an interest in socialist ideas had been considered a normal phase for any American university student with compassion and a reasonably searching mentality. I had enrolled in courses with titles like "Analyses of Capitalism" and had struggled with Hegel's dialectic, taking tentative steps along a path very much like the one Yun appeared to have trod as he came of age in the '70's.

In 1978 Yun set up a night school, with classes for workers on labor rights and other subjects. Chun Yong Ho, then a Chonnam National student, was one of his helpers. In mid-1979 Yun became an organizer in the Kwangju area for the National Democratic Workers' League, Chonminnoryon, and its affiliated organization, the National Democratic Students' League, Chonminhakryon. Lee Tae Bok had been centrally involved in founding Chonminnoryon in 1978. When Yun joined in 1979 it was Lee who handled the interview to determine his qualifications.

Yun and Lee became close comrades in the two organizations, which the police referred to collectively as Haklim (student forest).

It was Haklim that organized a strike at YH Textile Co., owned by a Korean-American. Viewing the labor union's demands as too radical, the owner closed the company and fled overseas. When the government ignored workers' demands to save their jobs, they protested with a sit-in at the office of the New Democratic Party in August of 1979. The sit-in occurred right after the court had suspended Kim Young Sam from leadership of the party. Seeing the sit-in as collaboration between Kim's forces and the workers, the government cracked down on the sit-in participants. One worker, Miss Kim Kyong Suk, leapt to her death from the building. The YH incident helped draw public sympathy for Kim Young Sam and the democracy movement, contributing to massive turnouts for demonstrations in Pusan and Masan in mid-October of 1979. Just a few days later, on October 26, President Park Chung Hee was assassinated.

Following the 12/12 military takeover and the "Seoul Spring," at least 50,000 students demonstrated in Seoul on May 15, 1980, demanding that Chun Doo Hwan resign and martial law end. The demonstrators differed on what to do next. Lee Tae Bok's group wanted to occupy key points in the central area such as broadcasting offices. The majority, however, decided to call off the demonstrations on the 16th and wait to see the government's response. "Mr. Yun, when he heard of this, vehemently criticized the defeat in Seoul," Lee Tae Bok told me.

Lee's and Yun's organization thus was deeply involved in key events leading up to the Kwangju incident itself. "Just before Kwangju, when I met Mr. Yun, we both predicted there would be a military coup," Lee said. "We expected that Pusan, Masan and Seoul would be the hot spots for popular resistance--not Kwangju. We agreed that

when the coup happened and massive resistance developed, we would fight to the end so the movement could grow up through the 1980's." Note that phrase: "fight to the end."

On May 17, Chun extended martial law nationwide, banned political activity and closed the universities. When the Kwangju incident began the following day, the hard-core demonstrators were several hundred college students protesting Chun's moves. It was while they were demonstrating that the martial law troops, including "black beret" special forces, surrounded them, indiscriminately bayoneting and beating both demonstrators and onlookers alike. The military reign of terror continued the next day. The scores of killings ignited the rage of citizens of all ages and inspired over 100,000 to join in a demonstration on the 20th.

There was no overall leader at that stage. An outraged Yun telephoned from Kwangju on the night of May 18 to Lee in Seoul, reporting what was happening. Yun "mobilized his friends and younger colleagues to issue the Fighters' News, a leaflet," Lee said. "Also he prepared Molotov cocktails." Yun was involved in that first stage as one of a number of leaders, but he had not yet emerged as the leader. By May 21, when about 200,000 joined the demonstrations, citizens were seizing weapons from police stations and military depots. "Someone would chant the slogan, 'To the police station!' and everyone would go," recalled Chun. Yun himself led an attack on an arms depot and was involved in the offensive at the Asia Motors factory to commandeer armored personnel carriers and other vehicles, Chun said. Soon thousands of students and citizens were armed. The army retreated from the city.

The mayor called an emergency meeting of an ad hoc committee to negotiate with the military. Eventually, though, that committee

decided to persuade citizens to return all the seized weapons so they could be turned over to the military. "This ad hoc committee mainly consisted of bureaucrats from the city and provincial governments," Chun said. "Of course the bureaucrats tended to be very conservative." They appealed for calm. Most of the weapons were returned. But many citizens remained in a highly emotional state after witnessing the spillage of so much blood. "They wanted some kind of compensation," Chun said.

"From this point on, Mr. Yun's role expanded," Chun said. Disagreeing with the ad hoc committee's approach, Yun nevertheless made a deal with the committee, pretending to cooperate while he selected some more radical people to join its membership. The mayor soon found himself unable to lead the divided committee. Yun said, "Let's work together." He continued to add dissidents until, by May 22 or 23, they held the majority on the committee. "This second-phase struggle was an organized struggle," Lee Tae Bok said. "It was fully consistent with the view of our group"--the National Democratic Workers' League.

Yun called for youngsters to arm themselves in the YWCA, Chun said. "When candidates showed up, Mr. Yun held a few minutes' military drill. Then they were sent to stand guard at the provincial building. A man named Park Nam Son had already emerged as the leader of the adult fighters. Yun discussed with Park the importance of carrying out the resistance to the last, without surrendering any more weapons. Because of Park's prominent role in the uprising thus far, Yun argued, the authorities already would have targeted him so that "you're going to die anyway." Park agreed to stay on as commander of the armed struggle and cooperate with Yun. Mass rallies continued, with some 50,000 people turning out on the 24th despite rain.

Yun made a speech, with Park Nam Son and

his armed men standing behind him in impressive--perhaps, to some, intimidating--fashion. The committee's stated objective of retrieving and returning all the weapons did not accord with the consensus of the people of Kwangju, Yun told those assembled. The citizens wanted "a fundamental solution." If they just returned the weapons, what next? The committee didn't have an answer, so Yun announced that his group's approach--continued armed resistance--was the alternative to submission. Anyone unwilling to go along should leave the committee. A few people left while some among the original committee members were willing to go along with Yun for the time being. In that fashion he and his group took over the committee.

Yun did not place himself at the top of the formal organization chart of the committee. To encourage the original committee members who had stayed on, two of them were named chairman and vice-chairman. Under those titular leaders, Yun with the title of "spokesman" oversaw the departments of P. R. , planning, and supply--all the operational functions except actual armed fighting, which was Park Nam Son's responsibility. Yun personally headed the P. R. department, which included a team broadcasting announcements from vehicles on the streets; another printing literature (Chun was a member of this team); a third raising funds and encouraging citizens to donate blood, and a fourth whose job was to organize public rallies.

"Mr. Yun was maybe the only one who had a strategic view," said Chun Yong Ho. What was that strategic view? Chun and several others answered in a rush, talking for ten minutes or so. Park Song Hyon then summarized and interpreted what they had said, describing Yun's vision of "pockets of resistance." The idea was "to make the price higher" for the regime by holding out until the last, refusing to surrender. The rebels would present the regime with a dilemma:

"If you do not have the guts to kill more people, you surrender. And if you do have enough guts, then you prove yourselves barbarians. "Isn't this, asked Park Song Hyon, "the only way the oppressed can prove his dignity?" And Yun and his top lieutenants were willing to pay the price: their lives. "They wanted to complete the rebellion, put the final touch on the rebellion. But at the same time they had the hope that if they held out, other rebellions would arise. "Chun interjected to quote Jesus's words recorded in the New Testament: "If I may be spared this cup . . ."

Continuing to summarize the others' remarks, Park Song Hyon said the inner circle had been resigned to accepting what would come if it could not be spared the cup, but meanwhile "purposely disseminated all the hopeful news." In particular, Yun and his lieutenants put forward the hope that the Americans would intervene and avert further bloodshed, although "in their minds they did not believe in it sincerely." The purpose was to give people outside the inner circle the courage to stay the course. For Kwangju to serve as a symbol and rallying point for future revolutionaries, surrender was out of the question.

The people assembled for the struggle were a varied lot from disparate backgrounds. A few were well known publicly--some preachers and a lawyer--but most were unknown to one another. That made it easy for military intelligence to infiltrate the dissident and radical forces. Whenever anyone spoke out at a meeting to urge a radical response, someone in the audience would shout, "You must be a North Korean agent!" On the 25th there was a "poison-needle" scare. Rumors were flying that agents from North Korea were carrying poison needles. The rebels blamed government agents for planting the rumors. "One person pretended to get stung by a poison needle," said Kim Yoon Ki, one of the armed fighters, now working as a gallery

manager in Kwangju. Kim and others took the "victim" to the hospital, where "it turned out he hadn't been stung by anything. "

Kim told me such government provocation had been a major factor in the hysteria I encountered when I arrived in Kwangju on the 26th for what was billed as the first regular press conference for the foreign media. Kim had been assigned as bodyguard to Yun. "I was one of the 'hysterical' armed people," he told me, reminding me of my 1980 description. Looking at Mr. Kim, I did recognize his face from among the young men I had seen around Yun Sang Won that day in 1980. "I remember Mr. Yun as a very sensitive, intelligent man," said Kim Yoon Ki. "His character made him so determined at the last moment."

Relatively few others shared that determination. After most of the seized weapons had been turned in in response to the original ad hoc committee's pleas, only around 200 remained, Chun said. Many of the youngsters who had gotten emotionally fired up enough to volunteer for the ten-minute military training session had then found their courage ebbing and had not shown up a second time. One who had lost his courage did visit the provincial building the last day. The young man told his erstwhile colleagues he felt guilty for abandoning the armed struggle, but he explained that he had been badly beaten by soldiers earlier and was afraid.

On the evening of May 26, family members of military men who were stationed in the Kwangju area told the resistance fighters that the military planned to move into the city early the next morning, Chun recalled. Some 300 people were in the provincial building. Yun called them together and told the women and any boys who had not yet graduated from high school to go home. That left about 150 people, who got their rifles and were assigned posts to defend.

Once the fighting began, the rebel riflemen fired many rounds, Chun said, but they had M-1s and carbines--hardly a match for the soldiers' M-16s--and their negligible training showed.

Armed fighters in the provincial building with Yun were dispatched to the front of the building, but the military approached from the rear. The soldiers ordered the rebels to throw their weapons out into the hallway and crawl out to surrender, or they would be killed. Some complied with the order and surrendered. Yun, however, carried his gun out into the hallway, where he was shot in the kidney area, Chun told me. With Yun at the time was Kim Yong Chol, who reported directly to him as head of the rebellion's planning department. Kim wrapped the bleeding but still breathing spokesman-leader in a curtain and was carrying him away when a grenade exploded and caught the curtain on fire. That explains why Yun's body had been burned by the time the AP's Terry Anderson saw it.

It sounded, I said, as if planning for the armed resistance had been terrible. Or on second thought, I asked, was effective military resistance simply not that important for what Yun saw as essentially a plan for symbolic suicide? Chun nodded his head in agreement. I pressed further, asking if Chun had understood Yun's "pockets of resistance" strategy at the time. "I'm not sure anybody understood Mr. Yun's view," he replied. He and others later came to understand and appreciate the policy, but public recognition of Yun's role has been slow to come.

Even the government apparently was not aware of the extent of Yun's role at Kwangju. Some 400 of his colleagues in Haklim were arrested in June of 1981, then subjected to what Lee described as "very serious three-month interrogations." The authorities were told during those interrogations that the Kwangju spokesman,

killed at the end, had been the Kwangju organizer for the National Democratic Workers' League. But the interrogators did not pursue the matter, said Lee, who was one of those interrogated. "The government was not that much aware of Mr. Yun's role there or his political organizing background."

Lee's theory was that the government was too preoccupied with two other versions of just who had been in charge at Kwangju to pay attention to yet a third version. One of the government's versions, which officials did not actually believe, Lee said, was that "impure elements"--North Korean agents or sympathizers--had been calling the shots. The regime's other version, which many officials did believe, was that Kim Dae Jung and his followers had stage-managed events at Kwangju, Lee Tae Bok said. What was the relationship between Yun Sang Won and Kim Dae Jung? "Nothing," said Lee. "They never met each other." Just before the Kwangju uprising, Yun was invited to join an organization to prepare a new political party for Kim Dae Jung, but Lee said he thought the proffered post had never materialized.

In view of the "Pyongyang fever" that developed among students in the 1980's, I pressed further on whether there might be any truth to the government's allegations of a hidden North Korean hand behind events in Kwangju. Lee Tae Bok told me flatly that the Kwangju uprising "was not influenced by the North at all." As for Yun Sang Won's views of the North, Lee said he had personally interviewed Yun on the topic in 1979 as part of the vetting for Yun's membership in the National Democratic Workers' League. "Remember the three groups we talked about. The second group, as represented by the South Korean National Liberation Front, had a tendency to be pro-North. "But the third group, to which Yun belonged, had a different view. "Mr. Yun was very critical of the North. First, he felt

the North Korean regime did not understand the real situation in the South. "Yun was also critical of Kim Il Sung's personality cult and of the plans for dynastic succession by Kim Jong Il.

Recognition is finally, but still gradually, coming to Yun. Old comrades and others have set up a committee to grant annually the Yun Sang Won Award to people who have contributed to South Korea's democratization. Lim Nak Pyong, an old comrade now active in the environmental movement, wrote and published a biography of Yun. However, Lim told me, "the 'May issue' has not yet been resolved. That limits our activities for the Yun Sang Won Prize Committee even though there is a new government. "

Kim Ch'ang Joong, Kwangju bureau chief for Chugan Nodongja Shinmun (Weekly Labor News), told me of his paper's sponsorship of the first Yun Sang Won Culture Festival in Kwangju on May 16, 1993. "The background for that festival was that Mr. Yun was about the only revolutionary intellectual who fought to the death in Kwangju. He was virtually the first to lead a scientific labor movement in this area. "Ever the skeptical journalist, I asked Kim whether South Korea would have experienced the rapid economic advances of the late 1980's if labor had won its freedoms at an earlier stage, but someone else chimed in on another topic then and I never got my answer.

So how do we assess Yun Sang Won's role at Kwangju? Even if he was the leader of the final phase, of course it was in the first phase that most lives were lost and it was then that the largest number of citizens rose up against the government. Which phase was more important? "Those two phases are not separate," Lee Tae Bok replied. Park Song Hyon elaborated: "The second phase was a matter of how to complete the first phase. You chase out the army, take up

arms. Then you voluntarily put down the arms? It's just a farce. "

Some believe that it was Yun's "pocket of resistance" that gave Korean protesters the courage to resume the struggle in the 1980's and, ultimately, overturn military rule. "The reason why the Korean people could overcome that terrible violence so quickly in 1987 was because of Kwangju's resistance," said Lee Jae Ui, secretary-general of Chonnam Social Research Institute and one of those at the meeting.

Historians will sort all that out. Suffice it to say now that Yun devoted his brief life and consciously gave up his life to bring change to South Korea--and change has indeed come. As we left the Yun family's farm the day I visited there, I saw a police car stopping next door. Had the authorities come to check up on the onetime student radicals who were my hosts? Chun Yong Ho and Suh Yu Jin laughed at the notion. "It's not like the old days," said Suh.

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