THE NEW KOREAN CINEMA LOOKS BACK TO KWANGJU:
THE OLD GARDEN AND MAY 18

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ABSTRACT

In 2007, two South Korean films appeared which place the May 1980 Kwangju uprising at the heart of their stories: The Old Garden (Oraedoen chŏngwŏn), an adaptation of the novel of that name by Hwang Sŏk-yŏng; and May 18 (Hwaryŏhan hyuga), the first big-budget narrative film to propose tackling the May uprising head-on. Mixing elements of romance and comedy, the latter film tries to recreate in the form of a docu-drama the extraordinary period of 18-27 May 1980. This essay will look in some detail at the two films to consider the artistic and commercial choices made by these two very different productions. It will set the films alongside earlier cinematic treatment of the Kwangju uprising and will briefly take into account two other film visions of insurrection: Luo Ye’s Summer Palace and Paul Greengrass’s Bloody Sunday. Finally, the article will attempt to assess what significance the films may have beyond the context of the South Korean film industry.

1 THE KWANGJU UPRISING

The assassination of Park Chung-hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi) in October 1979 was followed by a coup d’état engineered by another military figure, Chun Doo-hwan (Chŏn Tu-hwan), in December of the same year. Yet the forces for change and democratisation which had been building through the long years of Park’s regime, one characterised by its mix of forced economic development and suppression of political and human rights, carried on organising and protesting. By the time university campuses reopened in March 1980, the situation was still volatile, despite waves of arrests of students and their teachers. After mass demonstrations in the capital on 15 May brought out some 150,000 people, leaders of the Seoul protests decided to pull back temporarily and see how the new regime would respond to such a
massive show of solidarity on the part of ordinary citizens. The new regime chose Kwangju to show its intentions.

Protests had continued after 15 May in Kwangju. As news of the hardening of current martial law restrictions became known by the morning of 18 May, students protesting outside the gates of Chŏnnam University challenged the soldiers occupying the university. Troops like these had been sent to occupy university campuses elsewhere, but the students and citizens of Kwangju found themselves facing shock troops especially trained for combat against North Korea, not civilian crowd control. The soldiers waded into the students with long-handled clubs, boots and bayonets. When protestors reassembled closer to the city centre, the troops went after them there. The unprovoked violence continued over the next two days, leading to a confrontation before Province Hall on 21 May. Although it has never been made clear who gave the order, on this occasion the soldiers opened fire on the crowd massed in front of them, then hunted down survivors. Some people, students but also significant numbers of young working-class men, seized arms where they could and began to fight back. Troops were pulled out of the city centre to its outer perimeter, from where they continued to snipe at individuals while sealing Kwangju off from the outside world.

From 22 to 25 May the battered citizens of Kwangju engaged in an exhilarating if frantic experiment in grass-roots political and defensive organising, while senior members of the community tried to negotiate a settlement with the military. It was clear after a few days the new regime had no intention of making deals with people labelled hooligans and reds by the media it controlled. A small group of young men from the hastily organised citizens’ militia defiantly remained in Province Hall when the troops returned in the early hours of 27 May to retake the city. Gi-Wook Shin has called the ten days between 18 and 27 May ‘the single most important event that shaped the political landscape of South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s’ (Shin and Hwang 2003: xi).

In 2007, two South Korean films were released which place the May 1980 Kwangju uprising at the heart of their stories. *The Old Garden* (*Oraedoen chŏngwŏn*) appeared in January. It is a rather free adaptation of one of the most significant works of fiction to appear in the last decade, the novel of that name by Hwang Sŏk-yŏng. The sec-