

**Independent Documentary Film as Living History:
Casualties and Survivors of Korea's Redevelopment**

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Korean Cinema in a Global Context

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Introduction

In 2019, Korean cinema will celebrate its centennial. In 2018, Korean independent cinema, established as an official entity through The Association of Korean Independent Film & Video and the distributor INDIESTORY, celebrated 20 years. In fact, the rumblings of films outside of the mainstream Chungmuro establishment began on university campuses in the 1960-1970s, with student film clubs forming as a resistance to the socio-political crisis of the time. These groups culminated in the 1979 founding of Seoul National University's Yallasung, with members including Park Gwang-su who would go on to lead the progressive and protest-oriented Seoul Film Collective from 1982 and direct a number of seminal socially-conscious historical features (Korean Film Archive).

University of Seoul film professor Park Noh-chool thoroughly traces the particular circumstance that led Korean social documentary to rise during the 1980s democratization movement, rather than the militarized dark times of Park Chung-hee. Though the *minjung* – common people such as farmers, laborers and the urban poor – were shown in film and other cultural endeavors in the 1970s, Gwangju Video, the authorless and collectively produced reel of images from the May 1980 violent and deadly state repression of the Gwangju Uprising inspired university students to enthusiastically pursue documentary representations of the lower classes. It is quite striking then, that although the Seoul Film Collective had been operating for several years and had produced a number of works, including *Pannori Arirang* (1984), *Water Tax* (1984) and *Parangsae* (1986), it is director Kim Dong-won, not coming from a militant activist background, that put the stamp on Korean progressive filmmaking with *Sanggye-*

dong Olympics. Kim's was the first documentary to directly tackle the subject of *gangjae chelgeomindeul* – forced evictees and in 1991, it became the first Korean documentary to screen at the Yamagata International Documentary Festival.

Though Kim and successive filmmakers have strived to raise awareness through cinema, evictions and displacement of the poor have continued apace across the country, with the dreaded word *jaegaebal* – redevelopment - striking fear and rage into many communities like Sanggye-dong who could scarcely scrape together a living even before their homes were destroyed. In more recent times, an incident called the Yongsan Disaster is a kind of modern-day symbol of the often deadly human cost of this indiscriminate redevelopment. In the early morning hours of January 20, 2009, a rashly executed police-ordered anti-terror SWAT operation to bring down and arrest a diverse male group of forced evictees occupying a constructed watchtower on the roof of Yongsan district's Namildang Building ended in a sudden fire that caused the death of five of the protestors and one policeman. In a tradition set by Kim Dong-won, independent director Kim Il-ran, known through her previous documentary work that portrays female and queer life, was evidently moved enough by the Yongsan Disaster to change topic and memorialize it through a two-part sequence, the full-length documentaries *Two Doors* and *The Remnants*. (진선민)

Another part of Seoul that from the late 2000s has undergone major redevelopment and gentrification is the area around Hongik University (Hongdae), historical birthplace of the modern independent Korean rock scene. In a *Sanggye-dong Olympics* style of building close relationships with participants over a long period,

filmmaker Jung Yong-taek's feature documentary *Party 51* follows the occupation struggle against the eviction of noodle shop Duriban that transformed into a gathering spot for legions of Hongdae musicians and supporters. Ultimately, the film becomes a celebration of the music itself and the communal spirit of the people in the scene, something that adds a different kind of color and energy to the documentary genre. In the case of Jung, he worked in eviction broadcast documentation in the past and later became personally affected by the redevelopment issue in his own neighborhood of Yeonnam-dong. However, as with directors Kim Dong-won and Kim Il-ran, the exploration of the immediate topic – in this case, the diverse musical talents of Hongdae – became a new world for the director. (Dunbar)

The aim of this paper is to highlight the Korean independent documentary's crucial place within the larger social-conscious film community, with a special focus on the representation of the urban poor's struggle with redevelopment. Considering the diverse techniques employed within the one genre of documentary, the pioneering *Sanggye-dong Olympics* and its contemporary counterparts *Two Doors*, *The Remnants* and *Party 51* will be analyzed through their individual successes and limitations. Particular attention will be paid to documentary narrative form, briefly referring to its traditions in the West and its effects on the audience. Given the current political climate of lifting the government blacklist threat for artists, as well as new urban redevelopment schemes on the horizon, this paper will also attempt to present possibilities for the future of independent documentary in Korea.

Sanggye-dong Olympics: The Breakthrough Minjung Documentary

In 1988, the year of the highly-anticipated Seoul Olympics that would open South Korea to the world, emerged Kim Dong-won's short and powerful independent documentary *Sanggye-dong Olympics*, an antidote to all the excitement and anticipation of the sports event. Three years prior, Kim, a Catholic graduate of Sogang University who had previously assisted on commercial films and was not directly involved with politics or social movements, accepted an assignment from former Sogang professor, American Jesuit priest and longtime social activist Friar Jung Il-woo (John V. Daly). After the fateful accident of failing to capture sound during the first shoot, Kim came back the next day and began to film the brewing struggle in the poor northern Seoul neighborhood Sanggye-dong, whose slum residents were being evicted to make way for high-rise apartment construction that would look better for visitors during the Olympics. One day stretched into a live-in recording project that lasted throughout the eviction process of 1986-1988 and resulted in a 27-minute tribute to the struggle. (Park)

Sanggye-dong Olympics is a clear polemic in support of the community, a carefully chosen collection of unfiltered real-life footage, with a female Sanggye-dong resident narrator threading together the chronological narrative arc. Continuing the 1980s collective tradition, Kim left his name off the final film and instead credited the people from the neighborhood, including scenes that he had taught them to shoot themselves. The audiovisual story of the Sanggye-dong evictees situates their fight to keep their homes within the then-familiar Korean social context of the mid to late 1980s, employing a powerful opening montage sequence showing colorful and happy Seoul residents preparing for the Olympics. The government propaganda is cut with the dark flip side:

scenes of the 1987 democracy demonstrations that came from and resulted in the deaths of university students, followed by the lesser-known elderly protests of evictions and violent encounters with the police and hired thugs. Common wisdom says that most people will not care about social justice until something happens to directly affect them and their communities. That seems to apply to Sanggye-dong, as in the beginning the narrator tells the audience that after news of the impending eviction came down, the residents finally understood why the students had been fighting in the streets throughout the 1980s. After witnessing the shocking violent nature of the evictions, the audience has presumably been jolted into awareness and empathy for this community and is then led to their post-eviction encampment outside of downtown's Myeongdong Cathedral, itself a known site of social movement support and refuge. Through the temporary makeshift living quarters, director Kim shows the Sanggye-dong evictees at their most quietly resilient: mundane scenes of cooking and children sleeping and playing. The narrator tells viewers of her community's profound embarrassment yet fierce determination in having no choice but to display their poverty to passersby.

Viewers feel that perhaps the residents' problems may be resolved with help from the church, but alas we soon learn that they are forced to look elsewhere for their next home. Pushed all the way out to an open piece of land in Gyeonggi-do's Bucheon, director Kim's final scenes show the space near a big road where the evictees begin the noble process of building new homes from scratch. The narrator tells of the pride that they feel, finally taking their fate quite literally into their own hands and even receiving the green light from the Bucheon city hall. Having invested ourselves in this community's story, we reserve hope that it might work out this time, with the former

evictees living poorly but peacefully in their new space. Again, injustice thwarts their success, as city hall suddenly reverses permission to build the homes, due to the Olympic torch running ceremony to pass through the area.

It is in Bucheon that the audience witnesses the most poignant representation of state violence against an undesirable group of people, with a resisting teenager severely beaten into near-insanity by thugs in front of the parents as the evictees' new house foundations are torn down. The narrator reveals their hopelessness and despair at this continuous and shocking malicious treatment. For Korean and international viewers alike, it is especially interesting to see the almost nonchalant inclusion of Fr. Woo, smiling and joking among the evictees. Though director Kim is also an outsider in this community, his voice and presence are deliberately left out, yet the even more obviously out-of-place bearded Western foreigner is prominently displayed as an actor of social justice. While Fr. Woo is an intrinsic and inevitable part of the Sanggye-dong struggle, his appearance also manages to subtly signal an international dimension to this local Korean struggle, as redevelopment affects urban poor around the world. After taking the viewers on a twist-and-turn journey of unrelenting injustice, *Sanggye-dong Olympics* finishes in an unresolved state, with an implication that the ultimate fate of the evictees may even lie with the help and support of the audience.

In an interview on the release of his 2017 tribute to Fr. Woo called *Jung Il-woo, My Friend*, Kim repeats what he has asserted since the beginning: "The Sanggye-dong people and my time in Sanggye-dong completely changed my view of life, my view of film, my view of religion" (D.-w. Kim). Indeed, the film was a breakthrough in direct

representation of the *minjung*, an accidental work that made Kim Dong-won the father of Korean documentary. While cinema itself has its origins in documentary, the cinema verité tradition began in the 1950s and 1960s in France with the likes of Chris Marker and Jean Rouch and in the United States with Richard Leacock, D.E. Pennebaker, and Albert and David Maysles (Axmaker). Due to years of technological and political restrictions, it has taken much longer for the Korean documentary tradition to take off, but it has done so in earnest, with Kim Dong-won forming Purn Productions in 1991 alongside Byeon Young-joo, a then-burgeoning and now renowned female documentarian deeply inspired by *Sanggye-dong Olympics*. Under the opening mission statement of “people who want to make a healthy world through camera,” Purn has produced over twenty socially conscious works to date, including more on forced eviction in Kim’s *The Haengdangdong People* (Purn Production). Subsequent independent documentary production companies have formed, including Pinks: Solidarity for Sexually Minor Cultures and Human Rights, started in 2004 and focusing on showing female and LGBTQ life on film (연분홍치마). Through the sudden tragic Yongsan Disaster, this group would be the next to portray *gangjae cheolgeomindeul*.

Kim Il-ran and the Legacy of Yongsan: *Two Doors* and *The Remnants*

The 2009.01.20 Yongsan Disaster took place under heightened general political circumstances: the conservative former Seoul mayor and first-year president Lee Myeong-bak had campaigned on the premise of reigning in labor strikes that he alleged to be hurting the economy, and had recently nominated Seoul Metropolitan Police Chief Agency chief Kim Seok-gi to step up as the head of the National Police Agency. Adding to these higher-level factors, the redevelopment plan of Yongsan District Zone 4 started

in late 2008, with residents and businesspeople receiving eviction notices. A mere twenty-five hours before the deadly fire, a group of over thirty neighborhood evictees and supporters from the National Association of Evicted Residents erected a visibly arresting blue container watchtower that would serve as their protest and occupation from the roof of the Namildang building in Hangang 2-ro. Police Chief Kim, seemingly eager to please his boss president Lee, quickly ordered a private anti-terror unit to assist in driving out and arresting the protesters from the watchtower. The result was six unexpected deaths and Kim's quick resignation, though he would later return as a political candidate.

The police action and its consequences are the setting of the first Yongsan Disaster film made by Pinks collective filmmaker Kim Il-ran and co-director Hong Ji-you, the 2012 documentary *Two Doors*. Since it was released with former president Lee Myeong-bak still in office, as with Kim Dong-won's work, the film initially reads as a polemic against that administration and its relationship with police chief Kim. However, the filmmakers eventually explore the incident from two sides, making the title even more relevant. *Two Doors* refers to the two entrance points of the watchtower erected by the protesting evictees that became the scene of the final battle with the SWAT police. While *Sanggye-dong Olympics* is a mix of narration and verité that tells the story as it unfolds, *Two Doors* could only pick up the post-incident pieces, especially given that direct participants were serving prison sentences for their protest.

The film's opening sequence is progressive Internet broadcast Color TV's early winter morning dark footage of the relentless police water cannons aimed at the watchtower holding the evictees and the erupting fire, a scene returned to repeatedly,

reminding viewers of the closed-in life-and-death situation for all participants. With an ominously somber piano music soundtrack, Kim and Hong tell the story of the Yongsan Disaster as an unsolved case. They situate the incident within the context of a long line of social struggles, echoing *Sanggye-dong Olympics* by showing evictions during the Seoul Olympics, followed by the 10th Asia Games, leading into the 2005 Osan Air Base fight against the eviction of local farmers, and eventually including the 2008 US-Korea FTA protests. Beyond these on-location images, the film presents as an extended television documentary, primarily through broadcast and newspaper reports, audio and text recordings of the post-operation trial proceedings, interviews with the engaged social justice lawyers and journalists, and notably, faceless reenactment of the SWAT team's movements. In fact, the representative policeman's close-up helmeted face on the film poster sets an unprecedented tone for a social documentary: since one of their members also perished in the fire, rank-and-file police become sympathetic characters that suffer the abuse of government power alongside the protesters that they are ordered to arrest. At the same time, through selected snippets of the trial in which the SWAT policeman repeatedly says that he "did not think about it and was just doing his job," Kim inserts a critique of the police acting as foot soldiers for the establishment. The emphasis on factual evidence brought by existing footage and legal proceedings, notably the shocking inability of bereaved family members to receive access to their loved ones' bodies, leaves viewers somewhat in the dark as to the story behind the meaning of the protest and its tragic result. The bigger picture is wrapped up in the end, when the journalist who provided the original footage finally admits that it doesn't so much matter who was to

blame for the fire, but understanding why the evictees felt they had no choice but to build and occupy the watchtower in the first place.

In the spirit of collective filmmaking from the 1980s, and since major funding for such a project was unthinkable, Pinks' *Two Doors* production relied on crowd-funding by a large group of credited citizens concerned with the repercussions of Yongsan. Through promotion within the activist community and towards the general public, the film attracted over 72,000 viewers, a remarkable achievement for a low-budget independent work. Ultimately, due to early stages of the investigation at the time, the film poses more questions than answers. This seems to have left director Kim with no choice but to follow the story further and make the far more survivor-oriented *The Remnants*. The original longer version of the second film was screened at festivals in 2016, with the official release date following January 25, 2018, in the middle of preparations for the coming tenth anniversary of the Yongsan Disaster. Interestingly, the Korean title *Gongdong Jeongbum* can be directly translated as "joint offenders," which arguably does not have the same impact in the English language. At the same time, the joint offender label given to the participants of the Namildang building watchtower occupation reminds of its criminalization, and choosing this as the documentary's name provokes the important question: "Who are they?"

The Remnants directly introduces viewers to five of the survivors who had been convicted and served prison sentences under an early amnesty January 2013. The men come from five different regions of Seoul: outspoken Rhea bar owner Lee Chung-yeon as a representative Yongsan Zone 4 evictee who lost his father in the fire, Seongnam

Dandae-dong evictee Kim Chang-soo, Singye-dong evictee Kim Joo-hwan, Sangdo 4-dong evictee Cheon Joo-seok, and Sunhwa-dong evictee Ji Seok-joon. Using similarly dark piano music and still returning to the scene of the fire, the second film nevertheless seeks to draw attention beyond the cold hard facts and onto the human remainders of the incident. Though they are forever bound together through Yongsan, viewers are let in on their individual internal conflicts, as they continue to struggle with the state violence they suffered and rebuild their lives after the incomprehensible branding as criminals rather than victims in the eyes of the nation. A poignant and nearly violent scene towards the end in their first meeting room after five years shows the survivors' arguments and misunderstandings as they still try to piece together who climbed out the watchtower window first – rather, who rescued or died for whom during the fire – whom to blame and how to describe the full truth of the incident. While the filmmakers make their allegiance known, as with *Two Doors*, they show an imperfect group of people who do not always live up to the idealist versions of activists that viewers may come to expect. Simply by allowing them to talk directly to the camera, whether at Lee Chung-yeon's bar or at their houses, the filmmakers attempt to change the sad reality described by Lee, that “no one remembers the Yongsan Disaster.”

By humanizing the participants outside of their dark masked shadows barely visible from outside of the watchtower, *The Remnants* succeeds at creating a living oral history of redevelopment. Beyond these human actors, the physical urban landscape of Seoul plays the role of a setting and a character in itself. The slum-like dwellings where evictees have been pushed to occupy mix with the contrasting visuals of the desolate forest-like space left at the former Namildang Building after its demolition, and the

creeping redevelopment that is finally taking place after all these years. The density and the lack of free-ranging space project their own voices and tempo, effortlessly putting themselves on display in front of the camera. In the short visible snippets, it is this city character that begs for more attention and recognition. By zeroing in on the human drama aspect of this incident, in some ways the landscape takes too much of a backseat and as with *Two Doors*, viewers wonder whether yet another film could do this story more justice. Still, the lack of actual development of the former site of the incident and its barren overgrown wasteland gives the sense that these six people died for nothing and adds to the urgency of the film's final message: "The remnants of the tragedy will now forever disappear if you too fail to remember."

Though somewhat outside the scope of this paper, it would be amiss not to mention the strong presence of a female gaze looking at the Yongsan Disaster, while the participants themselves were all male and the female survivors make only minor appearances in both documentaries. Not only Kim Il-ran but also women's novels such as Hwang Jung-eun's *One Hundred Shadows* and the famous *Human Acts* by Han Kang are inspired by the tragedy (Bradshaw). Han ends her novel with a reflection that seems reminiscent of the emotional impact unleashed by the visual impact of Gwangju Video footage: "In January 2009, when an illegal raid by riot police on activists and tenants protesting their forced eviction from central Seoul left six dead, I remember being glued to the television ... surprising myself with the words that sprang from my mouth: 'But that's Gwangju.'" Her ability to connect Yongsan with the tragedy that befell her own hometown is another testament to the documentary form, but it also raises the question of

why such a number of women were inspired enough to give their particular take on this story (Han).

At the end of 2017, the twenty-five convicted Yongsan Disaster participants were formally and unequivocally pardoned by the new Moon Jae-in administration. In December 2018, Kim Il-ran and co-director Lee Hyuk-sang were awarded the Busan Film Critics Association Awards Grand Prize for *The Remnants*. Kim has now dedicated over seven years of work to memorializing the struggle of the Yongsan evictees, from their comrades' sudden untimely deaths, to their subsequent prosecution and imprisonment, and finally their post-prison reflections and reckoning amongst themselves. January 2019 marks the tenth anniversary of the Yongsan Disaster, yet mini-Yongsan scenes are still visible around Seoul, with the Ahyeon neighborhood destruction and redevelopment, to the looming project in sections of Eulji-ro. Another struggle against eviction, with a special musical twist, also continued in the *Sanggye-dong Olympics* tradition and turned into a full-length documentary.

Duriban and *Party 51*: Musicians as Anti-Gentrification Activists

Nearly one year after the Yongsan Disaster, and while investigations were still well underway, the last week of 2009 saw the start of another eviction battle, this time in the western part of Seoul. Back in 2005, redevelopment plans had been laid for the Hongdae station exit 4 area, the location of a small noodle restaurant called Duriban, run by middle-aged owner Ahn Jong-nyo and her novelist husband Yoo Chae-rim. Initially offered a meager compensation of 5 million won that would prohibit her from restarting the business elsewhere after demolition, Ahn refused and continued operating Duriban. The real battle began on Christmas Eve 2009, when a group of thugs hired by the

construction company – familiar symbolic characters also present in *Sanggye-dong Olympics* – descended on the restaurant and the Duriban owners became another team in the long line of *gangjae cheolgeomindeul*. Rather than giving up and retreating, on the following Christmas Day, Ahn began immediate occupation of the building, echoing the Yongsan watchtower protest. Rather than the meager 25 hours that it had taken for the Yongsan evictees to be brought down and arrested, this occupation managed to hold out for 531 days until June 2011, when the Mapo District granted Ahn sufficient compensation for re-opening the noodle shop in a similar Hongdae location (정희완). Dubbed “Little Yongsan,” the prolonged Duriban occupation was also remarkable for the fact that it attracted the support of Hongdae’s other resident *cheolgeomin*, independent rock musicians also displaced by impending *jaegaebal* and gentrification. Over the course of those 531 days, occupied Duriban became the once-in-a-lifetime site of the meshing of two seemingly discordant *minjung* elements, artists and businesspeople, united under the banner of fighting careless and oppressive redevelopment. Jung Yong-taek’s *Party 51*, shown at film festivals and community screenings before its general release almost exactly five years after the forced eviction, captures this unique melding and living history in a poignant and energetic documentary style.

Party 51 opens with a sad and tearful Duriban supporter, who will later be identified as one of the musicians, standing in the July 2011 monsoon rain, watching the final demolition of the building and lamenting “yesterday it was here, now it’s gone.” In the same vein as Kim Il-ran’s Yongsan documentaries, Jung chooses to begin the story by showing the raw physical ugliness of urban redevelopment, the destroyed concrete

juxtaposed with the literal human *remnants*. After that first somber scene, the viewer is taken back in time and vicariously follows the Duriban struggle from spring 2010; the rowdy punk concerts, sit-ins, social and planning gatherings, meetings with developers and policemen, and interviews with the owners and represented musicians: mastermind solo performer Hahn Vad of Yamagata Tweakster and Amateur Amplifier, blues musician Ha Heon-jin, hard rock grind band Bamseom and the Pirates, long-haired folk singer-songwriter Danpyunsun and noise artist Park Daham. The title *Party 51* refers to the May 1, 2010 Labor Day concert organized by Hahn Vad under the slogan of bringing together 51+ musicians as representatives of labor rights. As Hahn is an old friend of the filmmaker, the preparation of the event was the catalyst for the making of the documentary. This particular concert scene, with the elderly men and women workers coming to sit for the concert, covering their ears and walking away after faced with jarring and unfamiliar music is lovingly and humorously portrayed in the documentary.

Though audiences may expect to learn about the noodle shop post-occupation, it is mostly the scene of receiving compensation from the Mapo-gu office that closes that part of the narrative and does not return to the new location. Afterwards, Jung continues to focus on the musicians' subsequent scattered domestic and international tours, implicitly driving home his point that the space created during the occupation could never be recreated again (Dunbar). Out of the 51+ came the formation of the Jarip Music Collective, a seemingly incongruous meshing of Duriban musicians' styles that has lasted as a support structure for several years. Due to its popularity being limited mostly to the independent creative community and the overlapping social activist milieu that it portrays, *Party 51* is considered a cult film, along the lines of several Western rock music

documentaries. The difference in this Korean context is the wholly accidental nature of the work, in which justice for evictees as the main characters gives way to something new and different. In that sense, Jung's work is a true example of *verité*: documenting an event as it unfolds, with almost zero knowledge of the outcome. At the same time, the filmmaker's deliberate choice to focus on the lively aspects of the movement leaves space for a new documentary style in Korea.

Conclusion: The Future of Korean Documentary Film

Since Kim Dong-won and Purn Production made its debut, Korean socially conscious filmmaking has continued to shed light on injustices as they happen, even if they are not able to prevent tragic incidents. Outside of the redevelopment issue, filmmakers have been quick to highlight a number of cases and bring them to the public's attention. In a small country with a sizable mainstream commercial film industry, the production of independent documentaries that question and criticize cannot be separated from their relationship with political power. The best example in recent times is the coverage of the April 16, 2014 Sewol ferry sinking disaster. *Gobal News*' Lee Sang-ho brought controversy to premier film showcase the Busan International Film Festival with its screening of his documentary *Diving Bell*, the portrayal of the botched rescue effort and a local man's attempt to create an alternative structure (A. Kim). During the ongoing investigation of that year, the film festival was pressured and censored by the city for showing the film and the Park Geun-hye administration continued various efforts of suppressing the Sewol story. The subsequent presidential impeachment investigation revealed a complete blacklist of artists that had allegedly resisted against the government.

Now that the new government seems to take a far more open and progressive stand on social issues, at least in the public sphere, social documentaries are more likely to flourish and remain a vibrant part of the Korean cinematic landscape. However, Purn's original goal of changing the world through camera remains as an open question. Kim Dong-won has stated his belief that "there is no reason for us to make films other than the fact that our work can move the hearts of viewers" (Park 201). Park Noh-chool's historical study returns to Gwangju Video as the original spark that lit the flame, and so perhaps documentaries will continue to carry the hope of a better society.

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