

International Journal of Korean Humanities and Social Sciences

vol. 7/2021

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14746/kr.2021.07.07>

RELATIONS BETWEEN ACTIVISTS AND CITIZENS, THE INTERNAL DRIVING FORCE OF THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT AS A FESTIVAL: A CASE STUDY OF THE 2016 – 2017 CANDLELIGHT VIGILS¹

DOO HYEONG LEE, PhD student

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Université Lumière Lyon 2, France
dh.lee@univ-lyon2.fr

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7643-628X>

Abstract: The 2016-2017 candlelight vigil was a very important event because it led to the impeachment of an incumbent president for the first time in South Korea's constitutional history. Above all, it was a remarkable phenomenon in that it unfolded peacefully and acted like a festival even though many citizens gathered on the streets to demand the president's impeachment, which is essentially an extreme argument under institutional democracy. Violence, which was common in previous mass movements, was impossible in the 2016-2017. Some emphasized the heightened sense of citizenship, while others

¹ This paper is based on part of the research result for my master's thesis. To see more, refer to Lee Doo Hyeong 2021: 95-106.

understand it in a historical context, but it does not see the dynamics of change that exist within the mass movement. Moreover, peaceful and festive gatherings have received a lot of attention, especially in the 2000s. And this is highlighted as a strategy for citizens who voluntarily come out on the street to keep their distance from activists. The existence of a movement dealing with various political agendas was seen as a risk of distorting the purpose of the manifestation. For citizens, distancing from them is an important strategy to preserve the purity of the movement. Therefore, the ‘flag’, which is a symbol of the movement, was excluded from the square. However, the so-called ‘Any Flag Festival’ that appeared at the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils bridges the gap between the movement represented by the flag and the general participants. The group play using flags relieved the tension between the movement’s organization and the citizens, which was an internal conflict factor in the manifestation, which coincidentally led them to be together. As a result, this formed an important social context for mass movements such as festivals, which became important in the 2000s, to be completed in 2016 and 2017.

Keywords: candlelight vigil; festival; violence; manifestation; activist; demonstrator; symbol; conflict; flag.

**운동 조직과 시민의 관계성, 사회운동 축제화의 내부 동력 :
2016 – 2017 촛불집회 중심으로²**

초록: 2016-2017 촛불집회는 헌정 사상 처음으로 현직 대통령을 탄핵으로 이끌었다는 점에서 매우 중요한 사건으로 기록됐다. 무엇보다 제도 민주주의 하에서 극단적인 주장이라 할 수 있는 대통령 탄핵을 요구하기 위해 수많은 시민들이 거리에 모였음에도 평화롭고 축제처럼 전개됐다는 점에서 한국 대중 운동사에서 눈에 띄는 현상이었다. 앞선 대중 운동에서 심심찮게 나타났던 폭력은 2016-2017 년 광장에서는 불가능했다. 이를 두고 일부에서는 높아진 시민의식을 강조하기도 하고, 또 역사적 맥락에서 이해하기도 한다. 하지만 이는 대중 운동 내부에 존재하는 변화의 동력을 보지 못한다는 점에서 한계가 있다. 평화롭고 축제로서의 집회는 특히 2000 년대 들어 크게 주목받았다. 그리고 이는 자발적으로 거리로 나온 시민들이 기존 운동권과의 거리 두기를 위한 전략으로서 부각된다. 다양한 정치적 의제를 다루는 운동권의 존재는 집회 자체의 목적을 왜곡할 위험이 있는 것으로 여겨졌기 때문이다. 시민들에게 있어 이들과 거리를 두는 것은 집회의 순수성을 지키기 위해서 중요한 전략이 된다. 그렇기 때문에 운동권의 상징과도 같은 ‘깃발’은 광장에서 배제의 대상이 되었다. 하지만 2016-2017 년 촛불집회에서 나타난 이른바 ‘아무 깃발 대잔치’는 깃발로 표상되는

² 이 글은 석사 논문의 일부 내용을 바탕으로 작성됐다. 더 자세한 것은: Lee Doo Hyeong 2021: 95-106.

운동권과 일반 참여자 사이의 간극을 해소한다. 깃발을 이용한 집단 유희는 집회 공간의 내부 갈등 요소이던 운동 조직과 시민 사이의 긴장을 해소하며 함께 할 수 있도록 이끌었다. 이는 2000 년대 들어 중요하게 대두된 축제와 같은 대중 운동이 2016 년과 2017 년에 들어 완성되는데 있어 중요한 사회 맥락을 형성했다.

주제어: 촛불집회; 축제; 폭력; 집회; 운동권; 집회 참여자; 상징; 갈등; 깃발.

**RELACJE AKTYWISCI-OBYWATELE – WEWNĘTRZNA SIŁA
NAPĘDOWA RUCHÓW SPOŁECZNYCH W FORMIE FESTIWALI:
NA PRZYKŁADZIE ‘RUCHU CZUWANIA PRZY ŚWIECACH’ LAT
2016 – 2017**

Abstrakt: Ruch protestacyjny czuwania przy świecach lat 2016-2017 był znaczący dla Korei Południowej, gdyż po raz pierwszy w historii południowokoreańskiego państwa konstytucyjnego doprowadził do usunięcia z urzędu prezydenta. Był jednak przede wszystkim niezapomnianym zjawiskiem, które przebiegało w sposób pokojowy i w formie obchodów, mimo, że na ulice wyległy rzesze ludzi, domagających się usunięcia urzędującej ówczesnej prezydent i stanowiących poważny czynnik w warunkach demokracji instytucjonalnej. Przemoc, tak wszechobecna w poprzednich ruchach masowych, nie miała miejsca w latach 2016-2017. Niektórzy podkreślali zwiększone poczucie przynależności obywatelskiej, zaś inni skupiali się na kontekście historycznym, z pominięciem dynamik zmiany obecnych w ruchach powszechnych. Co więcej, szczególnie w latach 2000. pokojowe i radosne zgromadzenia przykuwały uwagę, stanowiąc element podkreślany jako rodzaj strategii dla obywateli, którzy wylegli na ulicę, zachowując jednocześnie dystans wobec aktywistów. Istnienie ruchów, powiązanych z różnymi agendami politycznymi, postrzegano jako zagrożenie dla wypaczenia celu demonstracji. Dla obywateli, zdystansowanie się względem tychże jest ważną strategią zachowania ‘czystości’ ruchu. Sprawilo to, że na placu manifestacji nie było flagi – symbolu ruchu. Jednakże tak zwany ‘Festiwal Każdej Flagi’, który zaobserwowano podczas czuwania przy świecach lat 2016-2017 wypełnił lukę między ruchami demonstrującymi się flagą, a uczestnikami pozostałych. Zbiorowe występy z flagami rozluźniły napięcie na linii organizatorzy ruchów – obywatele, co paradoksalnie stało się czynnikiem scalającym mimo, że było czynnikiem konfliktu wewnętrznego w demonstracjach. W efekcie ukształtował się ważny kontekst społeczny dla takich masowych demonstracji jak festiwale, które zyskiwały na uwadze w latach 2000., aż do ich zakończenia w latach 2016-2017.

Słowa kluczowe: czuwanie przy świecach; festiwal; przemoc; aktywista; demonstrant; symbol; konflikt; flaga.

1. Introduction

South Korea witnessed an amazing event where the people gathered in masses to silently protest through a candlelight vigil for the potential outcome of an impeachment for the former President Park Geun-hye (hereinafter referred to as ‘2016-2017 candlelight vigil’), which took place for nearly half a year from 2016 to 2017. Thus, this event became a milestone for Korean society in many aspects.

First, the collective power of the citizens led to the institutional impeachment of the incumbent president. This is the restoration of the power granted by citizens under the institutional democracy established after democratization in 1987 through the method of impeachment rather than elections. The impeachment of former President Park proved that sovereignty comes from the people, and therefore citizens’ judgments about power that have lost their legitimacy can intervene immediately. In other words, it reaffirmed the basic core of democracy: sovereign citizens. If democratization in 1987 solidified – institutionally – the position of citizens as a power-giver the social movements in 2016-2017 showed that citizens are the subjects who recover power in cases of an emergency. Also, although there are already countless analyses, the peaceful and festival-like assembly culture has been clearly established in 2016-2017. In general, the ‘Memorial Rally for Hyo-sun and Mi-seon’³, which took place in 2002, is mentioned as an important inflection point for the peaceful and festive assembly culture represented by the ‘candlelight vigil’ to take root in Korean society (Lee, Lee and Seo 2017). Citizens gathered on

³ The accident, which was caused on June 13, 2002, by an armored vehicle of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea since the Korean War (1950-1953), was the subject of a military trial in the U.S. court under the SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement). After an acquittal in November 2002, the anger of South Korean civil society exploded. Since late November 2002, candlelight vigils have been held to commemorate the victims. In addition, citizens have demanded a complete revision of the SOFA and the transfer of jurisdiction to the South Korean government. This has led to widespread awareness of the status issue between South Korea and the United States, and candlelight vigils have become a major mode of protest in South Korea (Lee, Lee and Seo 2017).

the street holding candles to commemorate the two middle school girls who were brutally killed by American armored vehicles. In a space where ordinary citizens gathered to commemorate the victims of violence, violence as an antithesis of violence was difficult to achieve. And in the 2000s, candlelight vigils became the mainstay of organizing mass rallies.

This does not mean that violence has disappeared from social movements in the 2000s. The so-called 명박산성 *Myeongbaksanseong* (Myung-bak Castle), which appeared at the 2008 protest against US mad cow diseased beef⁴, clearly shows the perspective of how the government and public authorities at the time looked at the crowd gathered in the square. Attempts to physically block the will of the crowd gathered in the square who went beyond the installation of the barricades showed that violent means such as the use of force to disband the crowds were used. Hence, violence against violence was advocated in the square, and the violence from the authorities trying to subdue it again was repeated. Violence itself, whether as a means of active political expression or as a response to the violence of power, has never completely disappeared in mass gatherings in the 2000s.

In contrast, during the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils, the most radical slogan under institutional democracy, the impeachment of the incumbent president, echoed in the streets, but there was no forced arrest by the police for violent acts. Of course, tensions between the two factions were heightened as the impeachment rallies and support rallies were held at the same time, but it did not lead to a major physical clash. There have also been cases of self-inflicted suicide or accidents. However, the slogan of the so-called ‘violence struggle’ was practically not heard at the candlelight vigil for the impeachment of the former President Park.

In that sense, the 2016-2017 candlelight vigil is viewed essentially as a complete form of the ‘candlelight vigil’, which is connected to the realization of the complete non-violence festival. Of course, as mentioned earlier, the police’s assembly management tactics are very important. During this time, the police had a conflict with the organizers of the rally over the march route and the access distance to

⁴ The South Korean government decided to import U.S. beef on April 14, 2008, even though it was considered a potential mediator of mad cow disease – bovine spongiform encephalopathy. The first demonstration against this decision took place on May 2, 2008, and other demonstrations followed until August 15, 2008 (Hong 2008).

the Blue House. However, the basic principle at the time was not to stimulate the assembly crowd as much as possible. The core of the police strategy at the time was not ‘repression’ but ‘management’. And this was an important variable for the 2016-2017 candlelight vigil to proceed peacefully.

However, if we simply understand the non-violence of the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils as a result of a variable called police response, we will miss the dynamism of the Korean mass movement. In the past, there was a camp for nonviolent struggles in the June protests in 1987, and in the 2000s, the principle began to be heard more clearly within the mass movement. That is why it is important to understand the changes in the Korean mass movement to see how the mass movement as a peace and festival has adopted and developed overtime.

Regarding the festive characteristics of the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils, some analyses see them as a social historical consequence of South Korea. They highlight the 난장 (*Nan-Jang*) as a contextual cause that generates the festive social movements. The Nan-Jang is the traditional market irregularly organized in the cities. The market, which traditionally took place every 5 days, is regularly held 6 times a month, and it was open for one day – from morning to evening. On the contrary, Nan-Jang was organized irregularly, and the opening period was also irregular – from 10 days to 2 months⁵. Since the Nan-Jang provided an opportunity for unexpected meetings and gatherings amongst the people, the atmosphere in this market was livelier. In addition, many entertainments such as games and sports were also organized. This also brought a festive atmosphere. Considering this, some analyses find the origins of the festive characteristics of ‘candlelight vigils’ in the social context of South Korea as the traditional irregular market (Lee 2017).

This approach risks falling into the result-based hypothesis, as it cannot explain why this phenomenon appeared so prominently at that time. It is obvious that not all social movements or previous demonstrations were violent. However, serious clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement were frequent, at worst, it is not

⁵ <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/SearchNavi?keyword=%EB%82%9C%EC%9E%A5&ridx=0&tot=5>, accessed November 11, 2021.

difficult to find some cases of death during the demonstrations⁶. Since Nan-jang already existed throughout the history of this country, this approach cannot explain why the festive atmosphere could particularly dominate the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils.

This paper seeks to understand the internal driving force that made the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils both peaceful and festive. For this work, we want to analyze not only the characteristics revealed at the candlelight vigil at the time, but also on the continuity with the protest against the import of US mad cow diseased beef in 2008. This paper was conducted by referring to video interviews in February 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, via Facebook and KakaoTalk, which is the most popular messenger service in South Korea, with participants (n=3) who directly participated in the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils, media reports, and online data such as individual or group pages in social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter. All translations from Korean are mine.

2. ‘Put down the flag’

Charles Tilly insists that social movements are a social phenomenon, and he refines the notion of ‘repertoire’. According to him, it explains a set of practices available to organize social movements in order to achieve a collective goal. The repertoire thus consists of the selection of choices made by protesters during social movements. In other words, participants organize protests or petitions because the social context or environment provides the opportunity to organize these forms of engagement (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). From this perspective, it can be understood that social movements are affected by the existing social context.

Moreover, demonstrations help shape collective cultures and identities that in turn condition the way individuals behave (Neveu

⁶ For example, 백남기 (Baek Nam-ki), a peasant activist, was attacked by a police water cannon within a nationwide protest on November 14, 2015, which was organized by a grouping of activist organizations with the aim of fighting against the government’s industrial policy. For the activists, the government’s measures at that time were worsening working conditions, labor’s and peasant’s rights. Baek died on September 25, 2016 (Ko 2020).

2019). In relation to this, the demonstration is also seen as a moment where the concrete and symbolic interactions of different actors coexist (Fillieule and Tartakowsky 2008). To organize a demonstration, lots of actors must participate and interact with each other in order to achieve their political goals. The demonstration is both a social outcome and a space for social relations.

During the manifestations in 2008, individual participants asked us to put down union or organizational flags. In fact, there was a tension between the ordinary participants and the participants affiliated with an organization. The ordinary participants did not want it to look like there was someone behind of them⁷ (Park, interviewed by the author on February 17, 2021).

Park is a professional activist of *공공운수노동조합 Gonggongunsu nodongjohap* (Public Transport Unions) which is a subgroup of one of the largest unions in South Korea called *전국민주노동조합총연맹 Jeonguk minju nodongjohap chongyeonmaeng* (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions). He has been working in the unions for more than 20 years, so he participated in the protests in the 2000s as a union activist.

According to him, the existence of flags, including those of activists, in the protests at the time was seen as a potential risk of distorting the demands of citizens. In the 2008 protests, individual participants spontaneously mobilized to oppose the import of U.S. beef that posed a risk of mad cow disease. However, it is natural that unions or activist organizations would at the same time demand better working conditions and higher minimum wages, etc. The problem was apparent that individual participants were not united in making these demands. Thus, for the citizens, these different demands degraded the purity of the demonstrations.

The exclusion of activists or antipathy towards activism within protests was clearly presented in the slogan ‘Put down the flag’ during the commemorative manifestations in 2002 (Park 2016). Indeed, the flags present at the demonstrations were seen as a militant symbol,

⁷ “2008년도에는 노동조합이나 단체의 깃발을 들고 가면 개별로 참여한 시민들이 깃발 내리라고 했어요. 서로 이질감이 생길 수도 있고 무언가의 배후가 있는 것 같은 걸 드러내기 싫은 시민들이 깃발을 내리면 좋겠다고 하는, 소위 조직적 참여 대오와 일반 참여자들 사이에 충돌까지는 아닌 약간의 갈등이 있었어요” (박 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021년 2월 17일).

because unions, university student councils, and even political groups hold their flags to show their collective identity and their political messages. For the ordinary participants, the flags could distort their goals and the general atmosphere of the demonstration. They spontaneously went down to oppose the decision of the American beef import and to pay tribute to the two victims killed by the American armored vehicle. They didn't come out on the streets because they sympathize with activist organizations. From this perspective, the flags stigmatize the activist and are a symbol of rupture between activists and ordinary participants (Kim 2005).

During the protests in 2008, I was a target of the police, because I was only holding a flag. At that time, the meaning of the flag was very negative⁸ (Sim, interviewed by the author on February 14, 2021).

Sim is a participant in the manifestations in 2008. Indeed, he never joined any activist organization or group. Despite this, he took to the streets to fight against the South Korean government's decision to import American beef. He thought that the decision was not made in a democratic way, even though it threatened the daily lives of citizens.

According to Park, people holding a flag were considered 'radical activists' not only to police, but also to ordinary participants.

During the protests in 2008, the participants asked us for help when the police cracked down on the demonstration. They told me "why don't you do something! You hold a flag, that means you have to fight the police in the lead, right?". They thought we should do something to break the violent repression of the police, because we were holding a flag. I didn't know what to do. They didn't want the flags in the demonstrations, but at the same time they needed them to fight the police⁹ (Park, interviewed by the author on February 17, 2021).

⁸ “진짜 광우병 집회 같은 경우에는 제가 깃발을 들고 있다는 사실만으로 경찰 연행의 표적이 된 적이 종종 있었요. 그때만 해도 깃발의 이미지가 좀 안 좋았어요” (심 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021년 2월 14일).

⁹ “광우병 때 그런 게 있었는데, 예를 들어 경찰이 공권력을 쓸 때 시민들이 깃발을 찾아요. ‘왜 깃발이 앞에 가서 싸우지 않느냐?’, ‘제대로 안 하나’. 일부 시민들이 ‘왜 깃발이 물러서냐’. 넘어서지 못한다고 뭐라고 하고 정말 그때 당시 깃발을 끝까지 들고 있어야 하나 어려움이 있었어요. 누구는 깃발을 내리라고 하고 누구는 들고 앞에 가라고 하는 그런 거였죠” (박 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021년 2월 17일).

Thus, people holding the flags, which is called the 깃발부대 *Gitbalbuda*e (Flags unity) in South Korea, was practically and strategically necessary to resist the governmental authority during the protests in 2008. As Park explains, the tendency to push Flag unity to resist the suppression manifests a social image of flags within the protests. Specifically, the people holding the flags were seen as those who are used to reacting violently, and their role in the demonstrations is to fight in the front row.

In fact, on my flag was written ‘DP’, that means ‘DVD Prime’ to which I belonged. It’s an online community for people who watch DVDs. We needed a flag because there were too many people in the street. Since it was useful for us to find one, we did it using the logo of this community. When we travel abroad, we use a flag a lot to avoid losing people. That’s what it was. [...] Other demonstrators asked me like “what is your group? A political club?”. When I said “it’s just a club”, they asked me again “Democracy Propaganda?” Really, that was a very common question¹⁰ (Sim, interviewed by the author on February 14, 2021).

Regarding Sim’s case, he accompanied his friends in the online community called ‘DVD Prime’ during the protests in 2008. He explains that this community is a site for people who watch DVDs as a hobby, so it is not a political space. Because the protests were a large series of collective activities on a national scale, many of the members of this community paid attention to the events. Some users wrote a post proposing to participate in the mobilizations together.

The use of his flag was purely practical: to indicate his position. The flag was a sign of recognition for the members of the club. While there were many protesters, the flag painted with the online community’s logo could attract the attention of the site’s users.

On the contrary, to other demonstrators who were not familiar with this logo, it seemed to be the flag of an activist group. Indeed, the flag was the prerogative of activists during demonstrations. The existence of flags is synonymous with activism. From this point of

¹⁰ “사실 깃발에는 알파벳으로 ‘DP’라고 적혀 있었어요. DVD 동호회인 ‘DVD 프라임’이죠. 현장에는 사람들이 너무 많았고 동호회 로고 깃발을 들고 있으면 동호회 회원들끼리는 쉽게 알아볼 수 있으니까요. 해외여행 갈 때도 깃발을 많이 쓰잖아요. 그런 거였어요, [...] 깃발을 보고 ‘너희는 어느 조직이나’ 물어보곤 했어요. ‘동호회다’하면 ‘사상 동호회 쪽이냐?’ 그런 이야기도 있었고 ‘테모크라시 프로파간다?’ 그런 상황이 꽤 많이 있었어요”(심 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021년 2월 14일).

view, the flag itself was a main factor that could cause conflicts between the simple participants and the organizational participants, because it is also a sign that clearly divided them.

3. Advent of the collective game of flags

While the conflict between the two groups became more or less a visible issue in South Korean society, it was not seen as a circumstance requiring immediate action. The protesters, whether activists or citizens, were confronted with a more important social issue, such as the importation of American beef. In this context, although the conflict between the activists and the simple participants indicates an internal gap between the demonstrators and the splitting of the protest movements, this was not a primary task.

In addition, no institutional modality to mediate the conflict between the two actors, such as an organization or arbitration process, existed to resolve the conflict. Above all, one of the most important issues for the individual participants was their autonomy. Considering this, it is impossible to reach a consensus among the individual participants and to create an organization in order to find a solution with the activists. An institutional or official way to solve this internal conflict was not possible. This conflict has continued even though the demonstrations are no longer organized.

However, at the candlelight vigils in 2016 and 2017, a significant trend can be found. Participants proudly waved the flags even if they were not activists. The flags were used in a different way, in the name of 천하 제일 깃발 대회 *Cheonha jeil gitbal daehoe* (Best Flag Contest).

This was obviously not an official contest. It was considered a collective game created by the participants of the 2016-2017 candlelight vigil. According to press reports, a flag was at the origin of the collective game at that time. Indeed, some participants held a flag 장수풍뎅이 연구회 *Jangsupungdengi yeonguhoe* (Beetle Research Institute) at the manifestation on November 12, 2016. However, this institute never existed. Furthermore, the participants waving this flag had no connection to the study of the insect. This was just a friendship

group, and the members drew this flag so that individuals could easily participate in the protests (Ko 2016).

The photo of this flag was quickly spread on social networks. A lot of people responded to this image, as it was obviously different from the pre-existing flags within social movements. This flag was not the symbol of an activist group, and it also had no relation to the social issues at that time. The feature of ‘nonsense’ caught the attention of others.

I saw a tweet that said “Korean Confederation of Trade Unions” is also participating in the protest. “Should we participate by organizing the confederation of people who love the cat or the dog?”. I thought it would be fun to parody the logo of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions to make the logo of 민주묘총 *Minjumyochong* (Korean Confederation of Cat Union). My first work was just a parody using Photoshop. When I posted it on Twitter, a lot of people liked it, a TV news contacted me to report about my work. [...] Actually, the flag of the “Beetle Research Institute” inspired me too much to create a flag. We thought it would be too much fun to hold a real flag printed my work¹¹ (Yoo, interviewed by the author on February 18, 2021).

Yoo is a university student, and he has never joined an activist organization or political group in his life. For him, the 2016-2017 candlelight vigil was his first participation in a demonstration. He parodied the logo of the largest national labor union to create his own flag. Yoo borrowed the symbol of an activist organization, so we can assume that he had some intentions regarding this confederation of trade unions.

¹¹ “트위터를 보다가 누가 ‘이거 민주묘총도 나왔으니 집사들끼리 묘총 만들어서 나가야 하는 거 아니냐. 견주끼리 전견련으로 나가야 하는 거 아니냐’는 트윗을 봤어요. 그거 보고 로고 만들면 재밌겠다고 생각했어요. 포토샵으로 민주묘총 패러디를 만들어서 트위터에 올렸더니 반응이 되게 좋았어요. YTN 기자가 연락 와서 써도 되겠냐고 해서 출처만 남겨주면 자유롭게 사용하시라고 했죠. [...] 깃발을 만들게 된 계기가 따로 있는데 ‘장수풍뎅이 연구회’ 깃발이에요. 그게 시발점이었는데 우리도 민주묘총 깃발 만들어서 나가면 되게 재밌지 않겠나 친구랑 지인들이랑 이야기가 맞았던 거죠” (유 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021년 2월 18일).

4. Blurred boundaries among demonstrators: the ‘nonsense’ flags

Regarding the motif of individual flag holders at the 2016-2017 candlelight vigil, the characteristic of ‘nonsense’ found in the flags is a decisive element. This means that they were not related to the social issues of the time, as can be seen with the case of the flag of the ‘Beetle Research Institute’.

The demonstrations were filled with flags of which variations can be found. For example, some of them show the characteristics of ‘nonsense’ well. A flag was just written with an onomatopoeia 으어 (Oh). Another flag was only represented three times a Korean consonant ㄷㄷㄷ (DDD). The last one is a Korean Internet terminology that expresses the shivering of a body. Therefore, it can be inferred that it has allowed citizens to show their anger and express their emotions and feelings since they are shivering because of social problems.

Despite this, it is difficult to match the exact meaning of these flags with the social issues of the time. A flag best expresses this lack of legibility of claims since it contains just one drawn character.

A remarkable phenomenon is that the ‘nonsense’ presented on the flags functioned as the antithesis of the activists’ discourse. More concretely, activists generally use the flags to show their membership, identities, and specific demands on the street. Thus, they choose certain words that correspond to the expression of their objectives. In this way, people who agree with these words can only aggregate under one flag.

However, participants in the 2016-2017 candlelight vigil holding the ‘nonsense’ flags emphasized that anyone could participate in protests, as the flags do not necessarily express a specific goal. In other words, regardless of the objective or identity, the street is open to everyone. Moreover, it indicates that the demonstration is no longer the exclusive playground and priority of activists. Even if the flags apparently have no meaning, they form a very important and strong discourse at the demonstrations.

On the other hand, other flags show both a way of parodying the use of flags and making them more playful. First, they use the words ‘union’, ‘alliance’, ‘syndicate’, and ‘confederation’ which are usually applied to name traditional organizations. Yet these organizations do not exist. As a game, they borrow codes used by activists such as Yoo’s

‘Korean Confederation of Cat Unions’ flag which imitates the symbol of the ‘Korean Confederation of Trade Unions’.

However, we can say that a trend emerged and dominated the atmosphere of the manifestations in 2016 and 2017. Participants, especially individual participants, held the flags to show their own identities and waved them to enjoy a collective moment.

Actually, I chose this logo, because I thought it would be fun. [...] I had no prejudice against this union¹² (Yoo, interviewed by the author on February 18, 2021).

He insists that there was no particular intention in his parody – the Korean Confederation of Cat Unions. The joking motive was the only element he considered. Fun was an essential element that provoked this collective game. The flag written ‘Beetle Research Institute’ showed another way to use the flags and encourage people to create their own symbols.

5. Coexistence of militant and ‘nonsense’ flags

Even though ‘nonsense’ and activist flags were waved together in 2016 and 2017, this does not mean that a consensus was formed between individual and organizational participants. On the other hand, this trend could also cause tension between the two actors, as some participants parodied and distorted the flags of activist organizations. Flags have important meanings for their members as they allow them to express their identities, collective goals, and existences. From this point of view, some ‘nonsense’ flags can be seen in a negative way by activists.

The conflict between activists and individual participants was not visibly mentioned. On the contrary, positive views of the ‘nonsense’ flag can be found among traditional activists.

The reaction of the unions was very positive. When we held the flag of the “Korean Confederation of Cat Unions”, they said “you are a cat union? We are the confederation of unions! Let’s go together!”. It was

¹² “그냥 재미 삼아서 패러디했어요. [...] 노조에 대한 선입견은 없었어요”(유 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021년 2월 18일).

a good atmosphere¹³ (Yoo, interviewed by the author on February 18, 2021).

Indeed, this way of playing using flags has had an impact on the way traditional organizations have behaved.

I saw many individual participants holding flags in parody of the unions. I was very interested in these flags. I thought “who are they?”. [...] It shows that a lot of people knew our union. It wasn't a criticism or a mockery. It is true that almost everyone has some prejudices about unions. For example, they are too serious or very heavy, etc. So I thought it would be great if we organized an event with these flags. It would help improve the image of unions¹⁴ (Park, interviewed by the author on February 17, 2021).

As a member of a professional union, he organized an event called 아무 깃발 대잔치 *Amu gitbal daejanchi* (Any Flag Festival). This event was held on behalf of his union and the purpose was to invite the ‘nonsense’ flags. To do this, the union sent a direct message on Twitter to individual accounts that held their own flags to ask them to participate, and this event took place on December 31, 2016. This festival is an interesting case, since the so-called ‘nonsense’ flags coexisted with the traditional flags in the same place.

The idea of this event was that “flags meet flags”. This means that the flags of traditional organizations, which are the symbol of unions, and the flags of individual participants, which are flags for fun, meet. I thought it would be important considering the antipathy towards the organizations’ flags in the 2008 demonstrations¹⁵ (Park, interviewed by the author on February 17, 2021).

¹³ “기억나는 것은 저희 깃발을 보고 민주노총 분들이 호응을 많이 해주셨어요. ‘반갑습니다! 저희는 노총인데 그쪽은 묘총이시네요’ 이라고 서로 ‘파이팅!’ 막 하고 그랬던 분위기였어요” (유 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021년 2월 18일).

¹⁴ “어느 날부터 노조나 사회단체 깃발 외에 개인들이 들고 나온 깃발들이 보였어요. 그걸 흥미롭게 보면서 ‘저 사람들은 누굴까?’ 생각했었어요. [...] 이는 노조의 이미지, 우리 노조의 위상이 알려져 있다는 거고 비판이나 조롱으로 받아들여 않았어요. 노조에 대한 선입견이 있잖아요. 어렵고 무겁고 비장하고 힘들 거 같은 이미지를 희석시킬 수 있는 좋은 기회라고 생각했어요” (박 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021년 2월 17일).

¹⁵ “‘깃발과 깃발이 만나다’는 것이 컨셉이었어요. 조직의 상징으로서의 깃발과 내 스스로가 주체가 되는 깃발, 이런 개인이 만든 깃발, 개인이 한편으로 재미로

Although this was a one-time event, it shows the changing relationship between activists and individual participants within the protest movements. Although the individual flags in this festival, organized by the traditional union, did not represent all individual participants, the fact that they accompanied the traditional unions to this event indicates that the conflict between the two actors is gradually diminishing. This means that the union officially admits flags of ‘nonsense’ that distort their symbol.

Moreover, this event was also an internal issue within the union, especially concerning the meaning of the ‘Any Flag Festival’.

It wasn't that we wanted to say that our union plays an important role in the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils, but I wanted to show an image of the union reaching out to citizens. [...] I heard some small discussions in the union about this event like “what is it? what is the meaning?”. Of course, they also understood the basic purpose, but for some, who think that the activity of the union must have some essential intentions, it was a little incomprehensible¹⁶ (Park, interviewed by the author on February 17, 2021).

While some activists have questioned this event, he points out that there has been no serious controversy among union members. Nonetheless, there is a ‘nonsense’ approach to flags among union members. Even if they were not suitable for their essential purpose – the union movement – unions saw the crowd of ‘nonsense’ flags as an opportunity to increase the social perception of the union. From this perspective, unions chose to coexist with or exploit the nonsense flags.

By articulating the characteristic of ‘nonsense’, the pleasure motif, the flags are no longer an object of exclusion and a target of attack. Moreover, by accepting the collective game that distorts their logos in the flags and by organizing a public space for the flags of

한편으로는 개인의 표상이 되는 깃발이 만난다는 게 의미 있다 생각했어요. 2008 년도 깃발에 대한 반감을 생각하면 이는 중요하다고 생각했죠” (박 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021 년 2 월 17 일).

¹⁶ “이 행사가 대단한 거창한 의미를 부여해서 ‘박근혜 퇴진 촛불’에 무슨 큰 역할을 공공운수노조가 하겠다는 것은 아니었어요. 시민들에게 다가가는 공공운수노조 딱 거기까지거든요. [...] 이 행사와 관련해 후일담으로 ‘이게 무슨 행사냐? 어떤 의미를 갖는 거냐?’ 약간의 항의가 조금 있긴 했어요. 그 분들도 기본 취지는 이해했지만 노조가 행사를 하면 뭔가 비장하고 의미 부여를 많이 해야 하는 분들 입장에서는 조금 이해가 안 되는 행사기는 했죠” (박 OO, 저자와 인터뷰, 2021 년 2 월 17 일).

‘nonsense’, the activists voluntarily recognize the transformation for the meaning of the flag.

6. Conclusion

The common threshold for protests has always been seen as violent and abrupt. However, the protesters in South Korea throughout notable events have spontaneously and unconsciously found an arbitration to resolve the conflict between individual and militant protesters: to trivialize the flags at the places of demonstrations and mutually recognize the existence of the other. Of course, it is also possible to take up the conflict between the two, as their alliance was a particular phenomenon that took place during the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils. Thus, if citizens still see the existence of activists as a risk of loss to autonomy and purity, the attempt to exclude them will return.

There are two main axes of violence in Korean mass movements. One is the clash between the police force and the protesters, and the clash amongst the protesters. Whereas the former corresponds to the police’s tactics of mass gathering management, the latter is due to the atmosphere and culture that is formed within the manifestation. However, the two are reciprocal, because the police’s management depends on the atmosphere of the manifestation, and conversely, the atmosphere of the manifestation also depends on the response from the police.

The collective playing of flags at the candlelight vigils contributed to resolving the conflicting elements of both sides. This intensified the festive atmosphere of the candlelight vigils, the tension between individual and militant participants, and also the tension between demonstrators and police, was then replaced by a celebration where both actors participated together enjoying an extraordinary moment.

The activists, who were previously excluded by general protesters with the image of violence and the extreme, were able to play an important role in the social movement again by sharing the flag, which was their symbol. On the other hand, general participants strengthened the common experience of assembly as a festival through collective play, completing the festival and peaceful assembly they

advocated. In the end, the 2016-2017 candlelight vigils was a diachronic and one-off event that appeared in response to the social background of the time in the flow of the Korean mass movement. This movement not only symbolized what true democracy represents but the voice of the people can overthrow a corrupt political leader with only candles and silence.

Bibliography

- Fillieule, Olivier, and Danielle Tartakowsky. 2008. *La manifestation*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- Hong, Seong-tae (홍성태). 2008. 촛불집회와 민주주의 (Chotpul jibhui-wa minjujuui). *경제와 사회 (Gyeongje-wa sahoe)*, no 80: 10-39.
- Kim, Won (김원). 2005. 사회운동의 새로운 구성방식에 대한 연구 - 2002 년 촛불시위를 중심으로 (Sahoe undong-ui saeroun guseong bangsig-e daehan yeongu - 2002-nyeon chotbul siwi-reul jungsim-euro). *담론 (Damron)*, no 2: 131-158.
- Ko, Hee-jin (고희진). 2020. 백남기 농민 사망 5 년... 확정 못한 ‘물대포 지침’ (Baek Nam-Gi nongmin samang 5 nyeon... Hwajeong mothan ‘Muldaepo Jichim’). *경향신문 (Kyunghyang Shinmun)*. November 10, 2020. http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=202011102114015, accessed November 14, 2021.
- Ko, Joon-hyuk (고준혁). 2016. “벌레요? 만지지도 못해요” 촛불집회 등장한 장수풍뎅이 연구회 (“Beolleyo? Manjijido mothaeyo” Chotbul jibhui deungjangghan jangsu pungdengi yeongu-hoe). *이데일리 (edaily)*. November 16, 2016. <https://www.edaily.co.kr/news/read?newsId=03178326612846376&mediaCodeNo=257>, accessed November 13, 2021.
- Lee, Doo Hyeong (이두형). 2021. *L'origine des caractéristiques festives mouvements sociaux: étude de cas des « veillées aux chandelles » en 2016-2017 en Corée du Sud*. Master's thesis. Paris: Sorbonne Université.
- Lee, Sang-hoon (이상훈). 2017. La transfiguration politique et le populaire réinventé: une réflexion sociologique sur les

- manifestations aux bougies en Corée du Sud (2016-2017). *Sociétés*, 138, no 4: 85-97.
- Lee, Ji-ho (이지호), Hyun-woo Lee (이현우), and Bok-gyeong Seo (서복경). 2017. *탄핵 광장의 안과 밖: 촛불민심 경험분석 (Tanhaeg gwangjang-ui an-gwa pag: chotbul minsim gyeongheom bunseok)*. 서울 (Seoul): 책담 (Chaekdam).
- Nanjang (난장), <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/SearchNavi?keyword=%EB%82%9C%EC%9E%A5&ridx=0&tot=5>, accessed November 11, 2021.
- Neveu, Érik. 2019. *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Park, Kwon-il (박권일). 2016. ‘천하제일깃발대회’의 의미 (‘Cheonha jeil gitbal daehoe’ui uimi). *한겨레 (Hankyoreh)*, December 7, 2016. <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/column/773709.html>, accessed November 13, 2021.
- Tilly, Charles, and Sidney Tarrow. 2007. *Contentious Politics*. Colorado: Paradigm Publishers.