

Book Review

Kim Kyoung-hwa and Ito Masaaki 김경화·이토 마사
아키. 2018. 『21세기 데모론: 변화를 이끄는 유쾌하고
떠들썩한 저항의 미디어, 데모』 [Demonstrations in
the twenty-first century: Media, festival and social
change]. Seoul: Nulmin 놀민. 225 pp. ISBN
9791187750208 ₩15,000 (pbk.)

Kim Joohee*

In South Korea, a unique form of mass rally called a “candlelight protest” emerged in the early 2000s. Of course, there were also candlelight protests by large crowds in the 1980s, such as the June 1987 Democracy Movement. However, unlike the 1980s’ protests, candlelight protests in the 2000s have been promoted online and characterized by nonviolent, peaceful demonstrations of unorganized citizens. At candlelight protests in the 2000s, the public gathers in an open public space at night, with lit candles, to protest or commemorate a specific issue or event. This type of protest began in earnest in 2002 with a memorial rally for two middle-school girls, Hyo-soon and Mi-sun, who were run over and killed by an armored vehicle of the US Armed Forces in South Korea. The candlelight protests against President Roh Moo-hyun’s impeachment in 2004 and, four years later, the massive candlelight protests against US beef imports in 2008 firmly established this form of rally as a new demonstration style in South Korea. The 2008 candlelight protests were, in effect, cultural festivals that brought together people from all demographics, including teenagers, young

* Research Associate Professor, Critical Global Studies Institute, Sogang University

women, and families with children—participants who had not been seen at protest sites before. Finally, through the candlelight protests in 2016–2017, South Koreans brought about tremendous political changes. These protests, which began in anger over President Park Geun-hye’s political scandal, were held more than 20 times but proceeded peacefully, without a single incident of violence. These protests demonstrated the desire of the people for a change of government, and, on March 10, 2017, for the first time in South Korea’s constitutional history, an incumbent president was fired.

Many studies have been conducted on the candlelight protest as a new collective action driving social change in South Korea. However, while earlier studies usually focused on the “content” of political aspirations contained in candlelight protests, *Demonstrations in the twenty-first century: Media, festival and social change* by Kim Kyunghwa and Ito Masaaki focuses on the new “style” of these collective actions. This is the crucial contribution of the book. The authors argue that not only the demands of the demonstrations but also the style of practicing a demonstration are essential to the identity of these mass rallies. The authors classify the focus on a demonstration’s demands as “message theory” and on a demonstration’s style as “media theory,” and they delve into the meaning of the latter (13). For example, Kim and Ito note the excitement, openness, and festiveness of candlelight protests, observing that insisting on the “resignation of the government” is not the only objective of candlelight protests. This book also shows that the number of such “festive demonstrations started on the Internet” (86) has been increasing worldwide in the twenty-first century.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part introduces various protests that have taken place around the world in the twenty-first century, including Japan’s anti-nuclear protest; the Arab Spring, which began with Tunisia’s “Jasmine Revolution”; Spain’s anti-Gap protest, “Indignados Movement”; New York’s “Occupy Wall Street”; the UK’s anti-Gap protest; and Russia’s anti-government demonstration. These demonstrations are introduced as a new style of demonstration: fun, pleasant, and diverse, unlike severe and dark protests of the past.

The second part of the book focuses on the new media that have been used in twenty-first-century demonstrations. In addition to social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.), email, chat apps, and YouTube are the media that lead twenty-first-century demonstrations. The authors contend that the emergence of an open and flexible demonstration culture around the world

is closely related to the new media environment. Of course, the idea that new types of media influence twenty-first-century demonstrations is not novel. However, the authors go beyond this, arguing that “Demonstration is the media in itself” (11). They write, “Television and the Internet simultaneously broadcast live when citizens’ candles filled the dark square and chanted ‘Government Out!’ The candlelight protest was a successful media event that occupied multiple media, various platforms, and weekend evening prime time” (46).

The above quotation is an appropriate analysis of the cyclical relationship between demonstrations and media. People gathered in the square because of information spread by the media; they held unique forms of rallies, such as cultural festivals; and the public noticed these protests, again through the media. If an essential feature of the new media is cross-border flow, it can be predicted that twenty-first-century demonstrations will eventually spread transnationally around the world as well. That is a crucial point in the book.

The authors illustrate transnational dynamics by explaining how a series of protests in different countries influenced each other and created a knock-on effect. For example, Spanish activists from Indignados Movement moved to New York to deliver their method and techniques to the Occupy Wall Street movement. Occupy Wall Street was also imitated; within less than a month of its beginning, large- and small-scale Occupy demonstrations occurred continuously in more than 600 locations across the United States (103–4). Activists from the April 6 Youth Movement, who led demonstrations in Egypt, visited an NGO founded by Serbian activist group “Otpor!” to learn the concrete know-how of protesting; and the April 6 Youth Movement later became the stepping stone for the Arab Spring. So, it seems appropriate that the authors call Otpor! the “exporter of revolution” (172–3). As such, the book’s message, “demonstration is the media in itself,” is seen clearly through the transnational flow of demonstrations’ imitation, repetition, and influence.

However, two aspects of the argument in this book are difficult to agree with. First, the difference in the patterns of “violent old-time demonstrations” and “festive twenty-first-century demonstrations” appears to be mechanical and ahistorical. If the demonstrations of the old days had a violent aspect, the reason might have been the ruthlessness of the power that suppressed them. Therefore, is it possible to accurately analyze the differences by focusing only on the demonstration style and ignoring the types of power

“old-time” protesters were fighting?

Second, I think the conflict hidden in the open and festive appearance of twenty-first-century demonstrations should be brought more to the foreground. As Kim and Ito describe, in the course of the 2016–17 candlelight protests, female demonstrators took issue with the claim in the plaza that President Park Geun-hye’s misrule was specifically the failure and incompetence of a “female” politician. Although organizers of the protest apologized and corrected their position, it seems inadequate to seal the conflict in the book so hastily: “If the old-time demonstrations had the face of a heroic man going to war, candlelight protests have the face of a woman who is good at communication” (53).

Let us also acknowledge women-centered online communities that have been actively voicing opinions on political and social issues since the 2008 candlelight protest. They issued a collective statement in 2012 saying, “We are not cheerleaders of the progressive camp.” To prove the openness and democratic nature of a movement, the face of a woman who “just awakened to politics” has often been utilized, but the women were expected to remain in feminine roles, such as “cheerleaders.” Even in a twenty-first-century demonstration, the problems faced by women are not considered a movement’s central agenda, and when women speak about their issues, they have been criticized as encouraging division. Thus, it is still important to question which demonstrations constitute the core events of the twenty-first century and what their inclusionary and exclusionary criteria are. If “demonstration is media in itself,” we cannot help but ask the fundamental question about what is presumed to be media and who can be mediated.

Of course, this is an excellent book to start this important discussion. I want to recommend *Demonstrations in the twenty-first century: Media, festival and social change* to anyone concerned about the correlation between the uprising and “ecology of change” (Engler and Engler 2016) and the possibility of “street spirit” (Crawshaw 2017) in the twenty-first century.

References

- Crawshaw, Steve. 2017. *Street Spirit: The Power of Protest and Mischief*. London: LOM Art, an imprint of Michael O’Mara Books Limited.
- Engler, Mark and Paul Engler. 2016. *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Nation Books.