

Beyond Collective Action: Identifying Institutional, Political, and Discursive Limitations in the 2016 Candlelight Movement

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Abstract: *Since the late 1990s, candlelight demonstrations have emerged as a distinctive mode of democratic protest in South Korea, most notably exemplified by the 2016 Candlelight Demonstration. This movement mobilized a broad civic coalition in support of presidential impeachment and successfully achieved a change of government, becoming emblematic of democratic agency in contemporary Korean political history. Six years after the conclusion of this civic movement, the present study employs documentary analysis to critically reassess its substantive outcomes, political advancements, and inherent limitations. Addressing key research questions—including the distinctive characteristics of the 2016 demonstration and its role in fostering democratic revolutionary change—this paper concludes that the movement established a model of light-touch social mobilization, yet one characterized by limited replicability and scalability. Its enduring impact on South Korea’s democratic governance structure remains marginal.*

Keywords: 2016 Candlelight Demonstration, Citizen Movement, South Korean Democracy.

1. Introduction

Candlelight demonstrations are collective acts in which demonstrators gather outdoors with candles to protest against government policies or resolutions. This form of demonstration does not have a long and frequent history in Korea, but it has had a profound impact on the recent form of democracy in South Korea. There were four large-scale candlelight demonstrations in Korea in recent times: 1) the 1992 gathering of internet users against Kotel online service fees [1], 2) the 2002 anti-US rally (Two teenage girls were run over by a U.S. armored vehicle during military training in Yangju, Gyeonggi Province, but the U.S. soldiers were acquitted in a U.S. military court, sparking protests in South Korea[2]), 3) the 2008 gathering against the Lee Myung-bak administration for the importation of U.S. mad cow disease beef [3], and 4) the 2016 candlelight rally to impeach President Park Geun-hye. The emergence of candlelight demonstrations has completely changed the way the Korean people demonstrate, with the main force of demonstrations expanding from groups of university students in the past to universal participation, and its form shifting from violent to peaceful.

According to statistics from the Ministry of the Interior and Safety of Korea in Figure 1, more than 10,000 people participated in illegal and violent demonstrations in nine years between 2007 and 2020, while the average number of people participating in illegal and violent demonstrations was more than 10,000 per year among the 14 years. The enthusiasm for demonstrations is a special manifestation of South Korean citizens’ participation in public politics. The most representative demonstration in contemporary South Korea was the candlelight demonstration against the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye that took place in 2016. In this demonstration, around 2.32 million people per day and about 17 million people overall participated in the rallies [4]. It was the largest demonstration in modern South Korea, and with

the arrest of Park Geun-Hye in March 2017, the civic demonstration won a huge victory, and the movement itself was praised for its significance and value. The 2016 candlelight demonstration was hailed as a landmark event in South Korea’s modern democracy. And this paper takes the 2016 candlelight demonstration as the object of study, focuses on the limitations of this movement, and uses the method of literary analysis to answer the questions: What was unique about the 2016 candlelight demonstration compared to the previous candlelight demonstrations? What was the reason for the formation of such a large scale? How did it surpass or complement the existing social movement formations? What are its limitations and shortcomings?

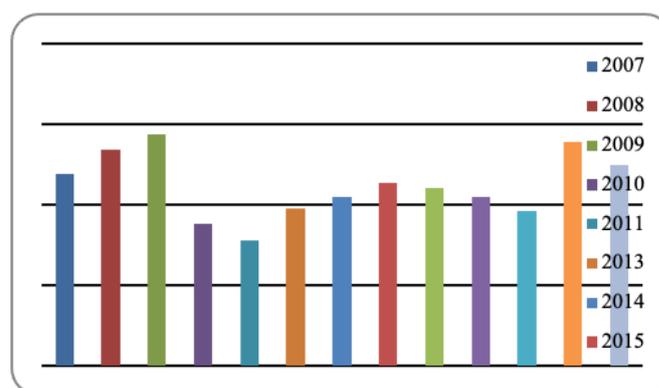


Figure 1: Status for illegal extreme and violence demonstrations (2007-2020)

Source: Ministry of the Interior and Safety (2020).

2. Previous Studies

Using “2016 candlelight” as a keyword searching in Korean Citation Index, 127 study papers can be found. The main themes of the studies focus on Civic politics; Citizen protests; Social Movement Space; Facebook/mass media/SNS; Non-violent resistance; Politics of Corruption and so on. The number of studies also showed an overall decreasing trend by year.

The prevailing research approach can be roughly divided into two directions, one is to place demonstrations in the larger context of social movements for historical tracing and socio-behavioral analysis studies. Charles R. Kim's *Youth for Nation: Culture and Protest in Cold War South Korea* focuses on the student movement of April 19, 1960 and explains the background and reasons for the student movement in the context of the social situation after the Korean War. Sun-Chul Kim's *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea: Defiant Institutionalization* focuses on the development of democratic protest in Korea after 1987. C. Kim's book is a study of the origins of protest, whereas SC Kim's book is an exposition of the consequences of dissent [5]. Classical literature studies are mostly based on historical sources and logically analyze the occurrence of events and the individual influencing factors. The other direction is the study conducted for a single demonstration event. José Alemán uses database analysis to examine the history of protests and repression in South Korea and concludes that the candlelight revolution while creating a model of peaceful protest, reflects the public's demand for quality democracy in Korea. The analysis of trends in the number and intensity of protests also leads to the conclusion that Korea is still in a state of a healthy democracy. Through logit analysis and structural equation modeling, Woo Jin KANG makes a multi-layered structural analysis of people's intention to participate in the 2017 candlelight demonstrations and concludes that injustice, identity, efficacy, and anger significantly influenced citizen intentions to participate in the candlelight protests [6]. Ji-Whan YUN and Hee MIN compared the 2016 protests to the 2008 protests and concluded that "the 2016 candlelight protests must be interpreted not only as the culmination of Korea's decades-long democratic movement but also as a successful struggle of precarious people against the growing neoliberal threats to their livelihoods" [7]. Through my limited literature analysis, the main body of the analysis of the demonstration movement in recent years is more focused on the candlelight demonstration in 2017, covering topics from historical reasons, and political reality, to demonstration intentions, to impact and significance. The research approach also reflects the characteristics of disciplinary integration, mainly in the form of database analysis and data modeling, and the research objectives and conclusions are more specific. There is a clear lack of research on the limitations of candlelight demonstrations. This paper would like to summarize the model of the citizen movement of the 2016 candlelight demonstration based on the analysis of the above literature while reconsidering the overly positive evaluation of the 2016 candlelight demonstration in the literature in the context of the real political and social situation and summarize the limitations of the 2016 candlelight demonstration in terms of model and impact in three aspects: the dependence on scale effect, hate, and anti-progressivism among young Koreans continue to grow and new presidency and duplication of old issues.

3. The Light Social Movement

As a social phenomenon that emerged around the late 18th century and took shape in the 19th century, social movements are unique for their organization, scale, and typicality of resistance methods, and have become one of the mainstream forms of current social resistance. There are many different

classifications of social group behaviors. Depending on the level of intensity, it can be roughly classified as collective acts, social movements, and revolutions. By examining the organization of the candlelight demonstration, we can find it can be identified as a new mode between collective behavior and social movement.

First, in terms of organization, the candlelight demonstrations are not vertical organizations led by social activists, but horizontal organizations formed by a gathering of netizens and ordinary people [8]. In the 2016 candlelight demonstrations, over 1,500 citizen groups in more than 70 cities across the country joined together to form Emergency Citizen Action for Park Geun-Hye's Resignation to coordinate the campaign, rather than organize and lead it [4]. Candlelight organizations are typically loose and spontaneous, with a low degree of organization and a clear tendency toward everydayness. It was manifested as a spontaneous association of civic-minded members triggered by public events and eventually develops into a political act with a large number of citizens participating.

Secondly, in terms of behavior, José Alemán has studied the historical protests and crackdowns in South Korea through database analysis and concludes that the candlelight demonstration is innovative in the model of peaceful demonstrations with fewer anti-government connotations and reflected more demand for the quality of democracy in South Korea [9]. The peaceful spirit conveyed by candlelight demonstrations is a research result that can now form a consensus. It is a new mode conducted moderately without against the law or impacting the regime. Meanwhile, during this candlelight demonstration, singers and entertainers performed on the street to show their support, and participants played traditional Korean musical instruments. It showed a reduction of tension and violence among the participants, and also indicated the everydayness and solidarity of the social movement.

Thirdly, in terms of pursuing goals, the 2016 candlelight demonstration appears to possess a clear and unified goal. However, according to Young-Gil Chae's research, it is clear that the issues raised not only the impeachment of Park Geun-hye and the re-investigation of the Sinking of MV Sewol, but deeply rooted issues like constitutional reform and the elimination of economic inequality fostered by the chaebol and so on [4]. Meanwhile, according to Woo-Jin Kang's research, injustice, identity efficacy, and anger significantly influenced citizens' intentions to participate in the candlelight protests [6]. These two findings are mutually corroborative, suggesting that the goals pursued by participants in candlelight demonstrations are diverse. However, the radical goal did not evolve into radical activities as it used to be but revised social and governmental management in a gradual rather than convergent manner.

The new mode represented by the 2016 candlelight demonstration is driven by people with civic spirit, based on public events or extensive discussions on public policies, united in a decentralized form with the help of online platforms, and the claims are expressed creatively and moderately within the framework of law and regime rule and have a wide impact on society or government administration

in a wide range of ways. This is a new type of collective action that is emerging in the transition period. But the characteristics of this new mode determine the weakness of its power, like the transient life, the narrow vision, and the episodic traits. The success of the 2016 candlelight demonstrations proved the effectiveness of the mode as a tactic of protest in South Korea. But the “scale” seems to be the only powerful weapon of this peaceful demonstration without the veneer of violence, and there is still a long way to go to sustain the scale of the moderate demonstration or to find new strength points.

4. Limitations and the Unfinished Revolution

4.1 Over Dependence on Scale Effect

Peaceful demonstrations and overwhelming numbers of participants were the hallmark features of the 2016 candlelight demonstrations. Numerous studies have considered the form of candlelight demonstrations as a watershed for peaceful demonstrations, but according to Ministry of the Interior and Safety statistics, the number of violent demonstrations did not decline after the candlelight. Thus, in a way, the model of candlelight demonstrations has not been universal so far, but its peacefulness and its unprecedented scale are interrelated. First of all, the content of the protests was unanimous throughout the country. Secondly, the proliferation of self-media and communication technologies created a strong constraint on violent acts (demonstrations or repression), and at the same time, its peaceful approach made this protest a daily event, and the great decrease in violence led to a great increase in public participation. As one labor media activist reflected, “We separate action and daily life...go to a rally, then home. We have to integrate struggle into our everyday lives” [10]. The candlelight demonstrations are the product of the continuous enrichment and innovation of the demonstration culture until it is integrated into the daily life of the public. Therefore, the success of the 2016 candlelight demonstrations was fortuitous, and the event itself must have been special to trigger such a large-scale public collective protest. Small-scale peaceful candlelight demonstrations will have a very limited impact once they fail to generate large-scale crowd participation. This is one of the reasons for the lack of universality of the candlelight model.

4.2 Hate and Anti-progressivism among Young Koreans

In February 2019, a policy report titled “Analysis and Counter plan of Decreasing Approval Rating of Men in their 20s” was published. It showed that the support rate of men in their 20s to the Moon Jae-in government has been low from the start. Their approval ratings briefly rose during the inter-Korean and inter-Korean-US summits in 2018, when Moon’s approval rating soared to 81%, but fell back to previous levels shortly thereafter. The report attributes Moon’s low approval rating among this demographic to their anti-feminist and socially conservative views. How is it even possible that South Korea, the site of a string of successes that spanned several decades through the Candlelight Revolution of 2016–17, now finds its youth publicly decrying ‘Hell Choson’ and becoming snobs who take solace and pleasure in bullying the weak? [11]. The income gap between the rich and the poor

in South Korean society, and the structural stratification in economic sectors, labor markets, gender, and age groups are intensifying.

4.3 New Presidency and Duplication of Old Issues

As a vocal opponent of Park Geun-Hye, Moon Jae-in won the presidential election by a wide margin after the candlelight demonstrations. In his inauguration speech on May 10th, 2017, he promised to create a world free of privilege and disregard for the rule of law. He would make competence and suitability the principle of appointment. Most importantly, he will not try to use lies to counter unfavorable public opinion. As Moon Jae-in takes office, five major tasks need to be addressed: 1) Government of the people; 2) An economy of shared affluence; 3) A state for social welfare; 4) Shared growth of all regions; 5) Peace and prosperity for the Korean Peninsula [12]. Now that Moon’s term has long ended, these issues have never been resolved. The candlelight revolution is the fourth time in the modern history of South Korea that citizens have directly or indirectly overthrown or brought down the government. However, except for the democratization protests in June 1987, the other three have largely failed to bring about revolutionary changes. Each change of government was not followed by a refreshing change. Some elites realized that the ultimate goal of the demonstrations was not a change of president, but institutional change. While the demonstrations succeeded in changing the government, they did not evolve into institutional change. A mere change of government can only treat the symptoms but not the root cause. The livelihoods of the majority of the population remain miserable, the youth still face heavy employment pressure, and social polarization remains the same. In this sense, the 2016 candlelight demonstrations can be described as the unfinished revolution.

5. Conclusion

The new model represented by the 2016 candlelight demonstration is driven by people with civic spirit, based on public events or extensive discussions on public policies, united in a decentralized form with the help of online platforms, and the claims are expressed creatively and moderately within the framework of law and regime rule and have a wide impact on society or government administration in a wide range of ways. This is a new type of collective action that is emerging in the transition period. However, from the scale character of this citizen movement itself to its impact, there is no continuity. To this day, the optimism that pervaded South Korea in late 2016 and early 2017 seems to be only a distant memory. It is hoped that the relentless spirit of resistance in the candlelight movement will finally become the cornerstone that will lead the Korean people to the victory of democracy. Due to the limitations of the amount of literature examined in this paper, the civic event was not analyzed at the level of classical citizen movement theory, which is an area that needs to be improved in further studies.

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