Kim Sang-woo’s film “Kim-gun” approaches events of May 1980 from fresh perspective

“Huh? The guy in that picture used to live in our neighborhood!”

Ju Ok, a 60-year-old Gwangju resident, let out a cry of surprise after seeing an unexpected photograph during the opening ceremony for the May 18 Archives in May 2015. Ju, who had donated a nickel silver basin she had used to make rice balls with neighbors during the Gwangju Democratization Movement in May 18, was delighted to see the black-and-white image hanging from the center’s wall.

“That's 'Kim-gun,'” she said to herself. (‘Gun’ is a Korean title equivalent to “Mr.” that is used for young men.) Accompanying her that day was film director Kang Sang-woo, 36, who had met her while collecting documentary footage on Gwangju in 2014. Kang became curious to know more about “Kim-gun,” a member of the citizen militia during the events of May 1980.

In the faded photograph, the citizen militia member is directing a powerful stare over his shoulder at the camera while dressed in military uniform. Kang began looking into where and when the photograph had been taken.

“I hunted for clues by looking into the ‘Geobukpyo Sinks’ store shown in the picture,” he explained. He eventually learned that the picture was taken between May 22 and 23, 1980, by Lee Chang-seong, a photographer with the Joongang Ilbo. “Kim-gun” was a member of the citizen military that took up arms after dozens of people were slain a day or two earlier on May 21 as martial law forces opened fire on civilians on Geumnam Road.

But “Kim-gun” was identified by conservative commentator Ji Man-won as the first among the North Korean “special forces” that allegedly traveled to Gwangju at the time of the Democratization Movement. Kang went looking for fellow citizen militia members in order to track Kim down. He also met the militia member who wrote numbers in white paint on the military trucks the militia used. As he looked for militia members and anyone else who remembered Kim, Kang captured their stories in his documentary footage. All of them expressed concern about Kim’s eventual fate. In the film, it is learned that Kim was a junk dealer who lived under Wonji Bridge next to Gwangju’s Hak Neighborhood No. 8 Road area; the documentary also investigates whether he survived the events of May 1980.
Kang’s documentary, titled “Kim-gun” (1011 Films), opens on May 23. In December 2018, it was awarded top honor at the Seoul Independent Film Festival.

Investigating the fate and whereabouts of a member of the May 1980 citizen militia, it has been described as “offering a new perspective and approach on the May 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement by focusing in close-up on the countless ‘Kim-guns’ who were there on the ground during the carnage.” A premium screening of “Kim-gun” is being held at 7:30 pm on May 10 at the CGV Gwangju Sangmu theater, with an official preview taking place in Seoul on May 13.

A Seoul native, Kang had no knowledge of Gwangju before making the documentary. To him, the events of May 1980 were a “taxidermy democracy movement.”

“It’s true that I had difficulties really understanding the past generations’ narrative of May 18 and all of their indignation,” he admitted.

“As I made the film, those thoughts changed,” he said on May 7.

“It broke my heart to see how many of the former citizen militia members were struggling. But outside of Gwangju, people still tend to view them as ‘rebels,’ you know? I wanted to use the militia members’ own voices to help younger people like me view May 18 with an open mind.”

By Jung Dae-ha, Gwangju correspondent

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