PHOTOGRAPHY, MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA

A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE DOCUMENTARY TRADITION IN KOREA

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Abstract

Based on the photographs of Ki-chan Kim, this essay examines how the tradition of documentary photography in Korea evolved in terms of subject, style, and ways of seeing. It emerged as a humanistic response to the harsh social reality of the 1940s in an oppressive political atmosphere for photographers dealing with socially sensitive subjects. Hence, a compromise between roles of the arts and social muckraking characterised the evolving documentary tradition. In documenting the back streets of Seoul, Kim tends to reduce a subject with broad social implications to an introspective story of personal memory, thus representing the Korean documentary tradition.

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Introduction

Due to its technical capability to reproduce images of reality, the "documentary" has been closely associated with the essential nature of photography itself. However, in photography, the myth of "representation" as a copycat of reality has encountered serious challenges not only in technological but also in socio-cultural aspects. For instance, Tuchman (1978, 108) notes, the "representational" refers merely to "codes, conventions, and social schemata, identified as representational by members of a specific culture." In other words, it is necessary to understand documentary photography in connection with its social use, or the complex conjunctures, in which the photographic genre takes on specific characteristics. Indeed, the term has acquired various dimensions of meaning, contingent upon the pragmatic context; "Documentary has been described as a form, a genre, a tradition, a style, a movement and a practice". Accordingly, Price suggests, "we need to look at the contexts, practices, institutional forms within which the [documentary] work is set"(Price, 2004, 69).

This essay investigates how documentary has been conceived as a distinctive type of visual expression in Korea. The specific feature of the Korean documentary may be attributed to the peculiarity of historical experience as photographic subjects, as well as the way photographers approach their work. The tumultuous history of Korea furnished fertile sources for documentary works. Just in a few decades, Koreans have witnessed a series of dramatic historic events and changes, such as Japanese colonialism, the liberation (1945), the Korean war (1950), civil revolutions (1960, 1987), military *coup d'etats* (1961, 1979), and massive urbanisation. It was almost impossible for documentary photographers to ignore the impact of such experience in their images. Their chronicles of historical events became a part of visual memory among common Korean people. Consequently, collective or historical memory has been a keyword which characterises documentary photography.

Another distinctive feature may be found in the way professional photographers come to terms with the social use of cameras in the cultural-historical milieu of Korea. Documentary photographers have struggled with ways of grappling with historical subjects, and developed particular notions of the documentary. I would like to discuss especially how, in the face of harsh life at the grassroots, photographers have produced a distinctive version of what William Stott (1973) calls "social documentary," which in turn has established itself as one of the prevailing documentary traditions. To illustrate the extent to which this legacy has pervaded and helped formulate the characteristics of contemporary photographic understanding, the essay examines Ki-chan Kim's photographs of the back alleys of Seoul, with which he documented the changing topography of ordinary life in the modern Korean metropolis.

Context and Tradition: Documentary Photography in Korea

A search for the origins of documentary photography may turn into an illuminating and yet illusive project. Even a modest venture to construct a genealogical tree may entail theoretical problems. Nevertheless, the distinctive way in which the documentary has emerged may provide a useful historical setting for understand-

ing the specific configuration of Korean documentary photography. Accordingly, this essay reviews the early days of documentary photography for a background briefing regarding a discussion of contemporary photographs.

It is not clear when the term, "documentary," began to be circulated among Korean photographers. Eung-Sik Lim (1998, 103), one of the forerunners in the field, locates its first use in 1970, while someone else points to 1957 (Lee 1998, 60). Realism was a more familiar expression to denote the documentary function of photography, hence the words, "documentary" and "realist," are used interchangeably here.

As in many non-Western countries, photography first emerged as an imported, exotic tool during Japanese colonial rule and gradually established itself as a mode of cultural expression in Korea. While cameras were widely used among wealthy classes, photography was gradually acknowledged as an artistic genre in the late 1920s.

Although the Japanese dominated photographic scenes, even in the Korean territory, a few Koreans, such as Hae-Chang Chung, Il-Young Hyun, and Hae-Sun Lee, initiated photographic careers. Except for photojournalists and studio photographers, most practitioners tended to understand their craft as an extension of or as a new form of painting. With emphasis upon aesthetic values of photographs, they considered cameras primarily as an excellent means of grasping natural "moments" of beauty created by light. Many photographers sought to imitate visual styles of painting, especially French impressionism. A few followed an indigenous path and attended to the beauty of traditional objects, such as rural landscape and people. Despite such divergence, aestheticism constituted the *Zeitgeist* among colonial photographers. The artistic approach, often called salon photography, permeated the "habitus" (to use Pierre Bourdieu's [1993] term) of Korean photographers. With the liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, photographers had to re-invent the identity and cultural role of their craft. They had to confront the post-war political turmoil, such as the fierce ideological struggle between the left and the right in the process of nation building.

Korea was soon divided by 1948 into the pro-Soviet North and the pro-American South, and a civil war ensued in 1950. As some photographers observed or experienced vividly the daily suffering of ordinary people, they increasingly diverted attention to the material reality as photographic subjects. They re-defined their role in terms of documenting social life, instead of creating art for art itself. While they often preferred other terms, such as realism, or worked without any label, their approach incorporated many features of documentary photography. They shifted their ideal of photography from an artistic step child of painting to a realistic documentation of the social reality.

During the post-liberation period (1945-1948), Seok-jae Lim coined the notion of social-documentary in a contemporary sense. He photographed diverse subjects in the world of working people, including dock workers and miners. He is, indeed, regarded as the pioneer of indigenous realism in the history of Korean photography (Cho 1998, 96). The photo of dock workers at Inchon harbour in 1947 illustrates his typical approach (Picture 1). Taken from a slightly low angle against a cloudy sky, this photo gives a feeling of dynamism and implicitly emphasises the sacred nature of labour rather than merely chronicling the fateful suffering of the working poor (Cho 1988, 92).

Not surprisingly, Lim's realism had a close affinity to socialist realism among the left, who employed art as a means of political mobilisation. However, it was a tough time for intellectuals and artists who adhered to ideas and beliefs. After a brief period of political freedom (1945-1948), most leftists either fled to the socialist North or sacrificed themselves. Especially during the Korean War (1950-1953), a bloody purge of communist suspects took place throughout the Southern part of Korea. Those lucky few who survived the ordeal had to endure the watchful eyes of the police. Lim might have felt the chilling effect of the nationwide red scare as well. Soon he identified himself with mountains' photography. Lim's retreat (Cho 1998, 96) into nature photography exemplifies the typical fate of photographers, who took the social uses of photography seriously in these years.

The legacy of realism was partially resuscitated by Eung-Sik Lim in the early 1950s. Lim proposed that photography should "express the human life and their dilapidated conditions with a humanistic eye" (Lim 1999, 287). He called his approach "life-centrist," but it was almost reminiscent of what Seok-Jae Lim had pursued in the name of realism. His revival of realism demonstrated that the traditional emphasis on an aesthetic approach was losing its appeal to young photographers in the social circumstances of the 1950s. Although Lim had tinkered broadly with the aesthetic potential of photography in the 1930s, his personal experience of the Korean War as a combat photographer helped his disillusionment with a mainstream adherence to aestheticism (Lim 1999, 81). A new generation of photographers, including Lim, might have felt it imperative to figure out ways of grappling with the harsh reality of the common people in a war-torn society. Nevertheless, in the political atmosphere of McCarthyism in the wake of the war, they had to distance themselves from any association with socialism. In a sense, Lim's obscure neologism, i.e., "life centrism," illustrates the terminological compromise between an emerging need for a redefined role of photography and the unconscious psyche of self-censorship (Cho 1998, 130).

Lim's most famous photo taken in 1953 corroborates this point well. Lim attempted to document the fate of ordinary people vulnerable to overwhelming social forces; the young man was probably among numerous poor people who lost their jobs in the war-torn society. Yet, at the same time, the photograph constructs the posture of the subject in a quite stylistic way and to an extent that it often invokes the atmosphere of an artistic photograph of the previous decades. The man seems to be engrossed in philosophical musing of an intellectual rather than in the suffering of deprived working people. In some way, this photo represents an expedient blend of salon photography and the emerging realist trend. In this respect, Lim's photo lacks in "a critical perspective of realism which pursues social muckraking" (Cho 1998, 129).

Before long, Lim's proposal inspired the formation of the New Line Group by several young photographers, including Hyung-Lock Lee and Young-Soo Hahn. This group proclaimed realism as its official idea underlying its photographic activities, and experimented with new practices, such as collective work under a common theme. Their first collective exhibition was entitled, "The way of life in the marketplace" in April, 1957. Incidentally, "The Family of Man" exhibition organised by Edward Steichen proceeded simultaneously and helped convince the public that documentary photography could be a remarkable way of cultural

Picture 1:
Seok-jae Lim (1948),
“Importing Grains”

Source:
Cho 1998, 92

Picture 2:
Eung-sik Lim (1953),
“Job Seeker.”

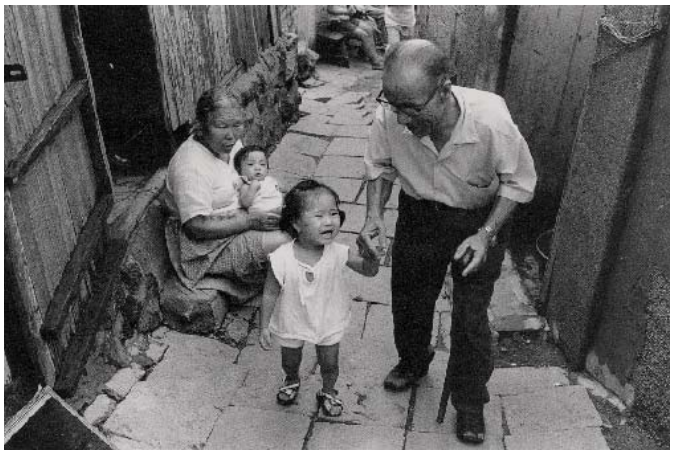
Source:
Jin 2003, 64

Picture 3:
Ki-chan Kim (1992),
“Kongduk-dong”

Source:
Kim 2003, 134

Picture 4:
Ki-chan Kim (1978),
“Joonglim-dong”

Source:
Kim 2003, 88



Picture 5:
Ki-chan Kim (1975),
“Joonglim-dong”

Source:
Kim 2003, 127

Picture 6:
Ki-chan Kim (1993),
“Dohwa-dong”

Source:
Kim 2003, 46

expression. The New Line Group was active through the late 1960s under different names and was instrumental in establishing realism as a mainstream idea in Korean photography.

While this group basically inherited the tenets of Eung-sik Lim, it also reiterated the achievements and limitations of his legacy. Although the group dealt benevolently with multifarious aspects of grassroots life and visualised a historical narrative from below, it never fully embraced the critical potential of documentary photography for the benefit of social reforms. According to Stott, "[s]ocial documentary … shows man [sic] at grips with conditions neither permanent nor necessary, conditions of a certain time and place: racial discrimination, police brutality, unemployment …[Therefore], the things to be corrected … are the staple of social documentary" (Stott 1973, 20-21).

However, such a critical awareness was absent in the social documentary of the 1950s. For instance, in *Korean Lives after the War 1956-1960*, Young-soo Hahn (1987) documented profusely the life of street vendors, e.g., junkman, chimney sweepers, shoe repairers, and merchants at open markets. He paid little attention to factory workplaces. He even tended to embellish images of poor peddlers with a bucolic and emotional touch to maximise aesthetic effect. Subsequently, he lost considerable sight of the social-structural context of poverty.

After the heyday of the 1960s, the realist movement began to lose impetus. Most members of the New Line Group moved away from realism in favour of more stable careers. While Young-soo Hahn ventured into an unexplored territory of advertising photography, Bum-tae Chung settled down to the routines of photojournalism. Min-sik Choi, who worked independently of the group, was among the few who continued documentary photography throughout their careers. The short life of the documentary movement may be attributed partly to the low social status of documentary photographers, who neither made a living with cameras nor gained adequate social respect as professionals. In addition to the censoring effect of McCarthyism, the persistence of an authoritarian government through the late 1980s might have further undermined access to subjects by documentary photographers who were sensitive to social problems (Kuwabara 2004, 137). For instance, Min-sik Choi, who photographed consistently the seamy sides of society, such as urban slums, docks and markets, was under sustained surveillance by the police and was even prohibited from travelling abroad until the 1970s (Choi 1998, 144).

Due to the tumultuous nature of contemporary Korean history, photogenic topics were always abundant for documentary photographers, e.g., colonialism, nation building, war, poverty, social conflict, civil revolution, and modernisation. Nevertheless, many Korean photographers have failed to produce prolific images with great social impact, i.e., a Korean equivalent of FSA (Farm Security Administration) photography, such as Lewis Hine or Dorothea Lange in the Unites States during the 1930s. In Korea, the notion of realist or documentary photography took shape basically as a de-politicised mixture of salon photography and pseudo-realism at the expense of a critical sensitivity to social problems. While Korean documentary photographers gradually turned their eyes from the arts to a mundane social reality, they still viewed the latter through a filter of idyllic, romantic sentiments instead of confronting it directly. Lyricism has prevailed even in the area of social documentary.

Documentary as Grassroots Urban History

Since its peak in the 1960s, realist photography began to stagnate and photographic trends diversified to embrace modernist (e.g., Jung-sik Hahn) and surrealist (e.g., Kyu-tae Hwang) experiments (Cho 1998, 217-8, 245-6). Nonetheless, the documentary has established itself as the *de facto* mainstream ideology of Korean photography, and thus recruited numerous aspirants. These followers continued and elaborated the documentary tradition through the current decade. A humanist concern with grassroots life remained a predominant philosophy of Korean documentary photography. However, the new breed of photographers has inherited weaknesses of the past decade, like the tendency to undermine their humanist social concerns by forgoing their social-historical contexts. In that respect, they demonstrate both continuity and discontinuity with the precursors in the field.

Ki-chan Kim's (1938-2005) documentary photographs provide an appropriate example. Kim entered photography as a part time activity while working as a camera staff member at a downtown television station in Seoul. He began photographing common people, especially street peddlers, around Seoul station in 1966. Two years later, he followed them into their residence in the old town. Thereafter, he photographed people in back alleys for more than thirty years. As a native of Seoul, he witnessed for decades after the Korean War, how the old city turned rapidly into a modern megalopolis with the population of ten million. Just like the post-war realist photographers, he explored the fate and experience of people amidst radical social changes. Yet, unlike his predecessors who experimented with various topics, Kim delved into the same subject throughout his career. Just as the Chicago School and Robert Park investigated city life as a sociological problem, Kim tried to capture landscape and life in metropolitan Seoul during a process of rapid transformation. Especially against the backdrop of vanishing back alleys of the old city, Kim has delineated the daily lives of ordinary people with affectionate eyes. Kim has photographed the old and poor districts of Seoul, such as Joonglim-dong or Haengchon-dong, which are destined to disappear in the process of redevelopment. These areas show remnants of Seoul's typical vista decades earlier, with narrow and meandering alleys, steep stone stairs, and small archaic houses. To middle-aged Korean, they are snapshot images of the past or fossilised reminders of their childhood days. Without much maintenance work, houses and streets often look just as they did years ago. His photographs capture these traces of the past. By occasionally juxtaposing scenes before and after demolition for redevelopment, Kim underlines the ephemeral status of those familiar scenes. Back alleys, often identified by the names of residents, will soon be replaced by broad pavements with serial numbers. Small houses jostling with neighbours might give way to high-rise buildings with anonymous residents.

By meticulously documenting archaic scenes doomed to perish, he incorporates a sense of temporal passage in his photographs. Not surprisingly, his photo books have mostly developed out of work spanning decades. For instance, in his book, appropriately titled *Lost Landscape* (Kim, 2004), Kim assembles pictures from the 1960s through the late 1980s to illustrate dramatic shifts from predominantly idyllic rural to bustling urban sceneries. Yet, he goes beyond chronicling transformations of the landscape in a search for the subtle texture of meaning in the life of its residents. People in his photographs disclose slices of their everyday lives; families

or neighbours chat, stroll, or eat together and mothers hang laundry, while kids play in narrow alleys. These familiar images recreate and accentuate the very ordinariness of life in the back alleys. His photographs also ironically underline the familiarity and unfamiliarity of these images to contemporary viewers. Although most of them reflect commonplace fragments of family life to Koreans, some images endure only in their memories.

Rapid urbanisation has irreparably undermined traditional rural or urban community life. Kim has not only depicted changes in the physical appearance of the city, but also in more inconspicuous aspects of ordinary family life in urban communities. Thus, his chronology of photographs constitutes his own historical narrative vis-à-vis a shifting urban life. In Picture 4, for instance, Kim positions derelict old cottages against the backdrop of skyrocketing buildings in the distance. In the drizzling rain, a young girl with a baby (perhaps her brother or sister) on her back gazes in the direction of the new town. The misty contour of the modern city constitutes an almost unearthly image, hinting that the tide of modernisation would not invade the back alleys soon. Foreground and background scenes, in a sense, symbolise respectively the past and future faces of the transient city.

It is also noteworthy that Kim displays a residue of vanishing family traditions: the young girl piggybacking a baby is presently not a common sight in a Korean metropolis; it is rather a trace of traditional life occasionally visible in the country. To those who spent their childhood in villages, the image may be a reminder of an aura of the old days and of familial love, when siblings used to take care of their youngsters. Then, in the anonymity of contemporary urban life, it may serve as a cultural icon for nostalgic memories of traditional, large families, which is just as archaic as rustic houses and back alleys.

In this way, Kim's chronicles of back alleys reproduce not only snapshots of the vanishing vista of the old city, but also some aspects of an eroding community life within the emerging metropolis. His works provide us with glimpses of a fading urban community, and with a source of a historical narrative concerning life at grassroots.

His way of inquiry into the ordinariness in the contexts of social and cultural transformation deserves further attention. Since his approach resonates with Carey's (1975) notion of culture as a ritual or Williams' (1977) concept of a whole way of life, Kim's documentary account fits neatly into a category of cultural history. His work develops out of a life-long attempt to visually construct a cultural history of the urban life and, furthermore, a historical account from below. More specifically, Kim probes into what Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 4) calls "topophilia" or "the affective bond between people and place or setting." The back alleys retain considerable significance, because they constitute part of the emotional bond between people and place, as well as among residents.

In dealing with the ordinary life of inhabitants in its spatial nexus, he demonstrates the keen sense of a cultural historian. He offers a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of the life in back alleys, striving to get as close as possible. Like an anthropologist, he endeavours to be a part of the community, instead of remaining an obtrusive observer. In a sense, he dissolves the distinction between the roles of observer and participant. For decades, he continually visited back alleys and made friends with residents; often as a guest, friend or counsellor, he penetrated into their life.

In his photographs, the camera view shifts from a lofty position of an impartial observer to the eye level of a neighbour. His photographs make the viewer feel as if looking into the private space of families and friends. In addition to the unobtrusiveness of the viewpoint, his photographs aim at recreating the ordinariness of life as it is. What is noteworthy is an absence of striking images. Instead of seizing the "decisive moment," in the words of Henri Cartier-Bresson, he portrays realistically ordinary instances of urban life in its natural setting. Instead of accentuating dramatic moments of human life, his photographs lead us to visually follow and live through the daily routines of residents.

Personalising Historical Memory?

Kim's documentary creates a strong resonance by revitalising among viewers common memories of the bygone days. His visual strategy works perfectly, because we have experienced and still remember such instances of the past. Likewise, Korean documentary photographers since the 1950s have experimented with various topics touching upon historical memories. They have often ventured into an essential part of the historical experience of Koreans, such as the traumatic memories of colonialism, liberation, war, and modernisation (Jin, 2003). Similarly, Kim's photographs offer many Koreans an influential vehicle through which historical memories, particularly regarding the experience of urbanisation, are restored.

By nature, these memories are at once social and personal. While people have exclusive realms of individual memories concerning certain events or places, they also share common experiences in the form of "collective memory" (Halbwachs 1950/1980). By manoeuvring skilfully between both types, Kim succeeds in creating an "interpretive community" (Zelizer 1993), through which we may internalise a shared memory and turn it into a personalised mode of understanding the meaning of photographs of our past. His life-long project on back alleys began with a personal moment, although such a motive is also rooted in the collective experience especially among his generation. He keeps underscoring how back alleys came to fascinate him as a visual trigger of personal, or "autobiographical" (Halbwachs 1950/1980), memories of his childhood. He once explained retrospectively:

> *Well, for instance, during holidays, no friends were around, because they all went home. Until then, I thought I had no hometown. Yet when I entered back alleys photographing them, it struck me that "This is my home." Of course, the back alleys I visited were poorer than Sahjik-dong where I used to live. But the feeling of back alleys and their atmosphere as a place of living were exactly as I experienced when I was young. So I was hooked on by the back alleys. While I was taking pictures in the alleys, I screamed to myself, "Ah, I found a home!"* (Kim & Kang 2003, 69).

Through his photographs of vanishing back alleys, he aims to corroborate physical traces of his imaginary home. In a sense, the landscape serves as a convenient visual anchor for his personal memories in reality.

Indeed, his personal approach effectively calls up collective memories, because we all share similar memories of childhood. Such collective memories may provide a common frame of reference for understanding the meaning of the back alleys. Some viewers may identify images of certain places with their past experience, either on the grounds of collective or individual memories, whose boundary remains unclear.

For example, the piggybacking may activate the collective memory of a traditional family culture, which we share to a certain degree; it may also recall individualised memory based on unique episodic experiences of each viewer. Subsequently, an inquiry into personal memories may not be entirely separated from the collective and social side, which prepares the context for individual experiences. While Halbwachs (1950/1980) distinguishes conceptually between collective and individual memories, as well as historical and autobiographical memories, he argues that even individual memories develop out of a complex social process.

Yet, Kim tends to exploit the emotional appeal of a personal approach excessively. The problem does not necessarily lie in his emphasis on individual memory, but rather in the way in which he deals with the socio-historical implications of a personalised topic. It is quite feasible to visually take up social issues with an emphasis on personal aspects. Insofar as Kim tackles a shifting urban life deeply embedded in structural changes, his photographs hardly deviate far from what Stott (1973) calls "social documentary." Nevertheless, Kim reconstructs this kind of historical theme in a primarily personal way, thus obfuscating its social, historical nature.

As far as his personal memories provide a reference for reading the meaning of changes in urban life, they contain the seed of a socio-historical perspective. But this frame lacks a serious mode of understanding, which may help contextualise the experience of people in their specific social conditions. Consequently, his cultural perspective may degenerate easily into personal imagination; his reading of historical memory is apt to turn into a nostalgia for an idealised past as he imagines it in his own terms. Ironically, his photographs of back alleys may have tremendous significance, because of their nostalgic value to the photographer rather than of their meaning to the life of residents.

Because a fascination with the personal overrides the historical dimension of memories, his historical account de-emphasises the social context for collective memories. For instance, Kim often photographs the filthy residences of people, and poverty becomes an inevitable part of his query into urban life. Yet, he is hesitant to tackle it. Also, not surprisingly, Kim rarely takes account of labour, as a serious photographic topic. While he has inclination to idealise the life in back alleys, this utopian notion is poorly grounded in the material reality of their residents. For some people, their settlement in back alleys may result from an insurmountable predicament rather than from choice; the alleys may represent merely a mundane living space with various problems. But even so, Kim neither highlights poverty as a crucial element of social conditions nor as a broad structural context for the life of people.

Kim captures a typical moment of ordinary life in back alleys in Picture 5. Against the backdrop of shabby houses, an old man, presumably the grandfather of a crying child is trying to placate her. This subject may contain numerous potential questions, such as why she stays with her grandfather instead of her mother, and why she lives in a tattered house. A sociologically-minded photographer might underscore their material hardships.

Nonetheless, the photographer chooses to give salience to an element of human nature, such as parental love, which is universal to people regardless of their disparate social circumstances. Roland Barthes' (1957/1972) critique of *The Family of Man* exhibition offers pertinent insights: the photos underscore the "ambigu-

ous myth of the human 'community,'" or the dubious notion of a universality of human nature, at the expense of the differences of specific historical conditions, "which we shall here quite simply call 'injustices'" (101). In Picture 5, one observes a repetition of "eternal lyricism" of familial love, instead of a glimpse into concrete life stories. Poverty would not hinder people from celebrating the sacredness of love and friendship. Thus, Kim often romanticises poverty-stricken scenes as a distant backdrop for an illustration of an idealised community life rather than as traces of social suffering and misery. What the photographer conveys with his image is, in a certain respect, not a story of elders and children. Instead, he looks selectively at aspects of their life story to find an opportunity for an introspective look at himself, i.e., a self- reflection about the lost "dream" of an idealised life during his childhood.

One of his rare photographs of labour (Picture 6) demands that he incorporates the cruel reality of subsistence into the experience of the workers, which might be commonplace to the poor working class. As Barthes (1957/1972, 102) notes, "[it] is this entirely historical work which we should be told about, instead of an eternal aesthetics of laborious gestures." But Kim avoids this kind of sociological view and tends to look at work as a manifestation of abstract human nature. The man depicted has a strenuous job of roving the back streets and collecting recyclables. Despite of such toils, he probably will not make enough money to support his family. Yet, instead of any trace of mundane agonies, his expression shows a sign of happiness like the benevolent grandfather in Picture 5. This photo seems to suggest: If work is an unavoidable part of human destiny, we'd better accept it gladly. In a sense, the collector apparently extends his optimistic attitude to life from the private world of family virtues to the gloomy domain of labour.

Furthermore, Kim's visual interpretation of traditional urban life inevitably involves a notion of community. His life-long document of back alleys indicates a quest for visual corroboration of an imaginary community, e.g., the hometown or *die Heimat.* It is an imaginary place, where interpersonal networks of mutual aid, friendship or neighbourhood prevail over efficiency and calculation which rule urban life. To some extent, this notion summarises some features of traditional, mostly rural, communities, which many Koreans have lost in the process of modernisation. Also, since this community envisions an alternative to the callous anonymity of contemporary urban life, it entails a critical-normative perspective on society and history. However, Kim figures this community mostly in terms of a sense of loss, without grasping it as a sociological entity in its specific social circumstances. Thus, that community exists only as an object of nostalgia, i.e., as a retrospective emotion toward the "good old days." Since the idealised community is vanishing and is not feasible in reality, he can only deplore its gradual decay personally and sentimentally.

An emphasis on individual experience alone does not raise profound problems for any socially-conscious documentary photographer. Problematic is only the way it is conceived. Without question, the personification of events becomes a crucial means for photographers to maximise the visual impact. But, as Stuart Hall notes, "personalisation" is different from "personification." The former is "the isolation of the person from his [sic] relevant social and institutional context, or the constitution of a personal subject exclusively as the motor force of history" (Hall 1981, 236-7). Similarly, Kim's personal memories may serve as an important moment through

which their socio-historical significance may be clarified. As Halbwachs (1950/1980) argues, individual (or private) memories are to some extent social, because they are rooted in the collective experience of intersecting social forces. Nevertheless, Kim's photographic approach to urban history goes beyond the phase of personification toward personalisation, thus de-socialising and de-historicising the social implications of documentary photography.

Concluding Remarks

Documentary as a mode of visual expression has been an open-ended notion, whose specific nature depends on the defining force of historical circumstances. The history of documentary photography in Korea demonstrates how this photographic genre came to acquire its contemporary characteristics of subject, style, or ways of seeing. The continuity of this tradition, albeit often uneven, is reflected in the case study of Ki-chan Kim's photographs.

Historically, documentary photography emerged in Korea primarily as an alternative to an aesthetic approach, which had prevailed in mainstream photography since colonial times. The rise of documentary photography was facilitated by increasing sensitivities among photographers to the harsh social reality of the post-liberation period rather than by systematic ideas or theories of photography. Seok-jae Lim's realist photography represents the earliest experiment with documentary as a potential means of a critical awareness of social problems. But the oppressive political atmosphere since the post-liberation era may have fostered a mentality of unconscious self-censorship in realist dealings with socially sensitive subjects. Thereafter, the socio-cultural role of documentary work has oscillated between models of art and social muckraking. The partial revival of realism by Eung-sik Lim and the New Line Group exemplified an awkward compromise between two competing definitions of photography, thereby paving the way for a unique mode of documentary work. Since then, documentary photographers have chronicled dramatic historical instances, which have affected the lives of ordinary people. Yet, their photographic style degenerated into a distinctive notion of social documentary, or as a de-politicised mixture of arts/poetics and muckraking. Partly a product of the social-historical context, this style established itself as part of the documentary tradition in Korea.

Similarly, Ki-chan Kim's photographs materialise as a beautiful amalgamation of artistic flair and humanistic concerns about social phenomena. Specifically focusing on the experience of ordinary people, he documented successfully the delicate texture of fleeting landscapes and ways of life in the old streets of Seoul. With his emphasis on grassroots life, he truly deserves unsparing praise as a cultural historian, who works in a visual form. However, while Kim takes up a typical issue of the social documentary, his approach tends to deplete the subject of broad social implications and reduce it to an introspective personal memoir. To this extent, his photographic style leans toward a form of artistic rather than serious social documentary. The former does not underline "the unequal social relations that bring about poverty; rather, it focuses on the beautiful stories of people who, despite poverty, get along well" (Yoon 2006, 196).

By a personalisation (Hall 1981) of social themes, he, in fact, debilitates the radical potential of the social documentary as a means of critical awareness of social issues.

In this respect, Kim follows perfectly the footsteps of the realist photographers of the 1950s, who had highlighted visual lyricism with images of ordinary people at the expense of their social and historical contexts.

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