

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE SOLIDARITY EXPERIENCED BY MYANMAR STUDENTS IN KOREA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore Myanmar students' experience of solidarity in Korean civil society and figure out the meaning of their experience. This study adopted Narrative inquiry among various qualitative methods, and in-depth interview is used for data collection. It seeks to discover the meaning of solidarity using the narratives lived and told by two research participants studying in Korea. As a result, three specific meanings embedded in the participants' narratives were founded. First, recognize the need for solidarity due to the military dictatorship. Second, experience solidarity that transcended boundaries. Third, have will for another solidarity toward others. This study expects to reaffirm the importance of solidarity in the international community for Myanmar people and suggests a desirable direction for sustainable solidarity.

Keywords: *Solidarity, Myanmar students, Korea, narrative inquiry.*

1. Introduction

In addition to being Asian countries, Myanmar and Korea have something in common that they have experienced military dictatorship. As Korean people see Myanmar people brutally suppressed by the Military, most of them think of May 18 uprising in 1980 (Um, 2021). If there is a difference between the two countries, the military dictatorship in Korea is over, but it is still going on in Myanmar. Korean civil society has long been in solidarity with Myanmar's democracy with special affection since the 1988 uprising. It has also shown solid solidarity in the current political situation compared to other countries, regardless of conservative and progressive backgrounds (Na, 2021).

According to Korean immigration, 26,096 Myanmar people reside in Korea as of December 2021. Among them, 790 are students, and they are primarily twenties. Some of them came to Korea before the military coup in 2021, and some came to Korea after the coup. Whether they came earlier or later, they have strongly resisted the military dictatorship and demanded solidarity from the international community for Myanmar's democracy and peace. A new aspect of the 21st-century civic movement is found in the democratic civic movements in Hong Kong in 2019, Thailand in 2020, and Myanmar in 2021. First, the so-called Generation Z leads the civic movements. Second, civic movements are being activated through the Internet or social networks. Third, international solidarity has been formed through real-time information sharing (Chung, 2021). In this respect, Myanmar students in Korea can be referred to as the new generation that will lead Myanmar's democracy in the future.

The pandemic reminded us that individuals cannot exist alone and how important solidarity is in overcoming the crisis. Solidarity has become a keyword in the era of Covid-19, and the global crisis has provoked the need for international solidarity (Libal & Kashwan, 2020). Even individualistic people have learned that they cannot live without solidarity with others. Although solidarity seems a very familiar concept, it is not easy to understand the concept of solidarity. Despite its frequent use, it has not been established as a scholarly concept due to its multiplicity and ambiguity (Seo, 2013). Social scientists have tried to categorize the concept of solidarity. As a representative scholar, Kurt Bayertz divided the concept of solidarity into four types: First, universal solidarity in a broad sense for the whole of humankind, Second, solidarity within a specific community. Third, solidarity which used in the context of social movements. Fourth, Welfare solidarity, as a fundamental concept of the state (Bayertz, 1999).

French sociologist Emile Durkheim discussed mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. There is a vast difference in that mechanical solidarity is related to community members, whereas organic solidarity is related to others outside the community (Zoll, 2000). Durkheim emphasized the importance of justice, which is the basis of morality in organic solidarity, and insisted on a shift from charity, the basis of morality in mechanical solidarity, to justice (Eugen & Stjepan, 1989). The universal solidarity described by Bayertz and Durkheim's organic solidarity based on justice has similarities, for they refer to

solidarity with others that goes beyond the boundaries of one's community. What is needed today is solidarity that transcends all kinds of limits and boundaries and solidarity that embraces others (Zoll, 2000).

Since the military coup occurred, Myanmar people have consistently appealed for universal and organic solidarity from the international community despite its disappointing response. The tragedy continues in Myanmar, and Myanmar students in Korea earnestly long for peace in their home country. Therefore, this study aims to explore the solidarity experience of Myanmar students in Korea and figure out the meaning of their experience.

2. Method

Human beings naturally live storied lives and tell stories of those lives, and narrative researchers describe such lives. They collect and tell stories of research participants and write narratives of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To explore the solidarity experience of Myanmar students in Korea, the solidarity experience that transcends boundaries and embraces others, this study was conducted by Narrative inquiry. Narrative inquirers relate the meaning of individual stories to theoretically important areas of the broader social sciences (William & Maureen, 2000). It expected to understand the power of solidarity and how it works for people who are harshly threatened and frustrated due to the political situation by collecting and telling their individual stories.

2.1. Participants

Narrative inquiry is a relational inquiry and is a research method suitable for revealing human experience as it is (Kim et al., 2018). In other words, narrative inquiry emphasizes the relationship between the researchers and the research participants, and it considers the participants as collaborators, not objects of the research. The researchers live their lives alongside the participants during the research process (Yeom, 2009). Thus, it is vital to invite participants who could actively and voluntarily participate in the research, understanding the research purpose plenary.

The participants of this research are two Myanmar students currently staying in Korea. Both are from Myanmar, but their ethnicities are different. The purposive sampling was used to recruit the participants with two organizations' help¹ and they consented to participate in the research voluntarily. The characteristics of the participants are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Major	Course
A	Early 20s	Female	Burma	International Logistics & Trade	Bachelor
B	Late 20s	Male	Chin	Political Science	Master

2.2. Data collection and Analysis

The in-depth interview was conducted as a semi-structured interview, twice for each research participant, from 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours. The first interview was face-to-face, where the research participants' solidarity experiences were taking place, and the second interview was conducted via ZOOM. Artifacts such as a reflective journal written by a participant after the interview, a radio interview, newspaper articles, and a master's thesis were collected as additional data.

Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggested the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space for narrative inquirers. First, temporality, second, sociality, and third, place. Based on temporality, data was analyzed before the solidarity experience, experiencing solidarity, and after the solidarity experience. It was analyzed to see through what social relationship they experienced solidarity and the change of places of their solidarity experience.

3. Narrative of the solidarity experience

3.1. Participant A

A is a Burmese born in 1999, and her family live in Yangon. Immediately after the military coup, she joined protesting and one day knelt in front of the Korean embassy in Yangon to plead for solidarity, screaming, "Please, help our country." The video describing that day appealed to and touched

¹The May 18 memorial foundation and Korea democracy foundation.

Korean people. At last, she was invited to Korea with a university scholarship. She participated in this research because she thought it could be an opportunity to leave a record about Myanmar's situation.

3.1.1. Before the solidarity experience. A majored in political science in Yangon. She loved Korean dramas and music, which made her learn Korean earnestly, and she finally spoke Korean fluently. A said her dream was relatively simple; she wanted to work at a Korean company and take good care of her parents. As university classes stopped due to the outbreak of Corona, A volunteered to teach the Korean language to her community's youth, including elementary students at a local temple. However, while she was waiting for a job interview result with a Korean company in Myanmar, the military coup broke out.

“I asked them who studied Korean whether they were afraid of the coup, and they replied to me why they had to be. I was surprised by the courage of the youth, but I wondered what the future would be for them if the coup continued.” (1st interview, 17 Jan 2022)

As soon as she heard that a coup had taken place, she determined to join demonstrations for democracy. Of course, her father, who had witnessed people's death in the past military coup, stopped her by saying, “We tried to resist, but nothing was changed.” However, she left home with the resolution that “If we do nothing, then it will be just accepting the military.” She began to stay at her friend's house away from her home and continuously protested.

A learned about May 18 uprising through a Korean drama and a movie and thought Korea had a similar history with Myanmar. After all, she is now studying in a city where the May 18 uprising occurred.

3.1.2. Experiencing solidarity. Before coming to Korea, A has already experienced solidarity. The protests after the coup were not led by well-arranged organizations. People who came out on the street to resist the military became ‘We’ as one group. A went to the Korean embassy, for she speaks Korean well. At first, she never planned to shout with a loudspeaker in front of people nor kneel on her knees. However, she knelt on her knees with a desperate heart, and the video of that day became well known in Korea. The president of a broadcasting company in G city saw the video and the person talked to the president of a university in the same city. In the end, she was invited to Korea with warm hospitality.

“It seemed like no one was going to save us. I thought if no one saved us, we would have no choice but to die, and our democracy would die, too. It helped me a lot when the governments of Korea and other countries announced that they were not working with the Myanmar military. I thought we should continue the protests because many countries were on our side.” (1st interview, 17 Jan 2022)

She had two interviews with a Korean radio program before and after coming to Korea. She was asked if she was okay with being in danger due to the interviews, but A did not hesitate because she believed it was something she had to do and could do. We accompanied A on her second radio interview after she came to Korea. A's recorded voice, “Please save our country.” resounded in the radio booth for a while. Transcending time and place, the scene of that day was vividly revived.

A thought that she had done her job after seeing that many Koreans left comments saying they became supported Myanmar in her interview video on YouTube. She often gets moved by Korean people who ask about her parents and the situation in Myanmar.

3.1.3. After the solidarity experience. A willingly accepted our suggestion to write a reflective journal about her interview. A wrote while talking about the past in the interview she felt many emotions such as sadness, regret, guilt, and burden. In particular, she mentioned responsibility several times. A said that she has a great responsibility not to forget the people who died in the protest and work hard to achieve democratization. Also, she feels much obligation to repay the Korean people for supporting Myanmar a lot and wants to be a person who connects Korea and Myanmar.

“I think I will only dream related to democracy from now on. I feel much burden. I am usually lazy, but I want to change myself and live my life hard.” (2nd interview, 9 Feb 2022)

A had no extraordinary dreams other than to serve her parent, has a remarkable dream after experiencing the power of solidarity. Now, she strongly wants to become a person who can tell the next generation what happened to Myanmar and how the people worked for democracy. A said she would change her lazy habit, hoping the next generation would not have the same tragedy as her.

3.2. Participant B

B was born in 1991 and is from a minority ethnic group. He has a sturdy desire for a world where people live like human beings than anyone else. For him, politics is crucial to changing the world. B was a master's student who majored in political science when the data collection was started. However, he has recently graduated with a thesis titled 'Myanmar peace process and nation-building.' He is currently a consultant of NUG² Representative to the Republic of Korea and looking for a doctoral program in Korea.

3.2.1. Before the solidarity experience. B majored in industrial chemistry at the second largest university in Myanmar. He wanted to study politics but could not because there was no political science major in Myanmar. His interest in politics was formed from a relatively early age. As he experienced much discrimination as an ethnic minority, B thought he had to save his people through politics.

“Because there is only one way. If we do not fight and do not know politics, we are bound to die. I want to make the Myanmar constitution a human right based and make our people and country where we can live like human beings.” (1st interview, 20 Jan 2022)

His youngest sister, a medical student, is helping the wounded who are resisting the military. Despite his father's advice not to join civil disobedience movement (CDM) because of enormous danger, his sister believes that it would be an honor if she died for the country. B is heartbroken for the sisters, but he supports them and says, “freedom is not free.” His hometown is one of the poorest regions in Myanmar and does not have natural resources like other regions. B had heard many stories from the political leaders of his ethnic group that “We can also be developed like Korea” and came to Korea to discover how Korea achieved democracy and rapid economic growth.

3.2.2. Experiencing solidarity. NUG, the provisional government of Myanmar, currently has representative offices in seven key countries, including Korea. B thinks it gives him a great strength to open the NUG representative offices abroad, for it shows many countries support Myanmar's democracy globally. B met many civic groups and politicians in Korea through NUG activities and gained courage when people he met said to him, “Do not give up. Let us do it together.” NUG is cooperating with the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help Myanmar people who have difficulty extending their visas due to the unstable political situation. According to B, solidarity with civic groups is being actively formed, and there are about 300 organizations in Korea cooperating with NUG. When he went to the city where the May 18 uprising occurred, he was amazed at how Koreans supported Myanmar. Through all these experiences, B came to define solidarity as working together.

“Korean civil society is helping Myanmar the most in the world. Koreans say that Myanmar's problems are ours, Myanmar's peace is Asia's peace, and Asian peace is the world's peace. Having that perspective, I can already see it as one purpose.” (2nd interview, 17 Feb 2022)

B believes that the experiences of the Korean people who fought the military dictatorship and achieved democratization led them to show much solidarity with the Myanmar people. He also thinks that Korean people understand the NUG because they have experience setting up a provisional government. In other words, experiencing similar histories made solidarity solid.

However, it does not mean he has only experienced suitable types of solidarity. In his sight, some Korean politicians pretended to help the Myanmar people and took their political interests. Furthermore, B expressed strong dissatisfaction with the Korean government for not sanctioning Korean companies collaborating with the Myanmar military.

3.2.3. After the solidarity experience. Before the coup, he had dreamed of running for a parliamentary election in about 2030. He wrote a book on democracy and articles for magazines to prepare his dream step by step. However, the coup changed everything.

“When I heard the news of the coup, I was outraged. I expected Myanmar could become a federal democratic country in about 40 years, but it failed.” (2nd interview, 17 Feb 2022)

²National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

The day the second interview was conducted was B's graduation ceremony day. He prefers to stay in Korea more than go back to Myanmar and hopes to apply for a doctoral program in Korea to study political science further. He thinks it is better to fundraise in Korea and support Myanmar than a return. The current situation in Myanmar is complicated, but he believes that because of the solidarity given to the Myanmar people, Myanmar's revolution will be fulfilled one day.

From the people who stood with Myanmar, B learned the power of solidarity and eventually came to think of solidarity with other countries' people experiencing difficulties.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the narratives on the solidarity experience and analyzed data based on the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space suggested by Clandinin & Connelly (2000). The two participants are different in many ways. However, both are dedicated to building democracy for Myanmar and desperate for solidarity from outside their groups. We figured out three specific meanings embedded in the participants' narratives.

First, recognize the need for solidarity due to the military dictatorship. The participants had the will to resist the military before as well as after the coup. Both understood the democratization process of Korea, and after the coup, they felt the need for solidarity from Korean civil society. Second, experience solidarity that transcended boundaries. They experienced solidarity transcending boundaries such as nationality, race, age. On the other hand, they also experienced incomplete solidarity that did not rise above one's interests. Nevertheless, many joined together in unconditional solidarity, and the participants had a sense of gratitude and much responsibility. Third, have will for another solidarity toward others. The experience of solidarity made them commit to another solidarity for others. It suggests how solidarity with others can be extended to another stage of solidarity.

This study is meaningful, for it shows the possibility that one solidarity can extend to another dimension of solidarity. The era of neoliberalism led humans to infinite competition; however, there is still a need for solidarity, even today.

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