

THE SEOUL GUARDIANS

서울의 밤



OFFICIAL
SELECTION
INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL
ROTTERDAM
2026



A film by

Jong-Woo KIM, Shin-Wan KIM, Chul-Young CHO

2026 | South Korea | 72' | DCP 2K | Korean | 24fps | 1.85:1 | Color + Black & White | Dolby 5.1



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LOGLINE

“Everyone speaks of democracy, but is it truly an attainable dream?”. The feature documentary film **THE SEOUL GUARDIANS** follows six tense hours in and out the National Assembly in Seoul after the sudden declaration of martial law by the South Korean President, on December 3rd, 2024.

SYNOPSIS (short)

At 10:28 p.m. on December 3rd, 2024, in Seoul, the President of South Korea Yoon Suk Yeol declares the martial law. It is a self-coup carried out in an attempt to break through a political crisis. A decree banning all political activities and public assemblies is announced, and martial law troops move toward the National Assembly to seize control. Meanwhile, citizens rush to the National Assembly to block the troops, while lawmakers break through police’s barricades at the main gate, climb over the walls to attend the session that lifts the martial law. Large numbers of elite troops are deployed by helicopter and armored vehicles, launching a sudden assault on the National Assembly building. People begin to block the troops’ advance, instinctively invoking the memory of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising 45 years earlier—one of the deepest traumas in South Korea’s history.

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SYNOPSIS

At 10:28 p.m. on December 3rd, 2024, in Seoul, Yoon Suk Yeol the then President of South Korea declares the martial law. It is a self-coup carried out in an attempt to break through a political crisis. A decree banning all political activities and public assemblies is announced, and martial law troops move toward the National Assembly to seize control. Meanwhile, citizens who hear the news rush to the National Assembly to block the troops, while lawmakers break through barricades at the main gate and climb over the walls.

Late at night, journalists from MBC's PD NOTEBOOK, who had been monitoring broadcasts at their office, see the news of the martial law declaration and immediately head to the National Assembly. Large numbers of elite troops are deployed by helicopter and armored vehicles, launching a sudden assault on the National Assembly building. Citizens, journalists, YouTubers, lawmakers, and aides who gather there spontaneously begin to block the troops' advance, instinctively invoking the memory of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising 45 years earlier—one of the deepest traumas in South Korea's history.

“Everyone speaks of democracy, but is it truly an attainable dream?”

President Yoon Suk Yeol is impeached, and South Korea welcomes a new President, Lee Jae Myung. The global media hails this as a victory for democracy. Yet after the declaration of martial law, political polarization only deepens, and hatred between opposing camps continues to grow.

In a world where political polarization and animosity toward the other side have become routine, can the past truly save the present?

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DIRECTORS' COLLECTIVE NOTE

Jong-Woo KIM, Shin-Wan KIM, Chul-Young CHO

On the night martial law was declared, we had no idea what would happen next. Fortunately, one of the directors, Jongwoo was in our office. He quickly packed the camera with other colleagues and rushed to the National Assembly.

As journalists at MBC, a progressive-leaning broadcaster, we had faced government repression many times before, but the threat of direct physical violence was something we had rarely imagined. The full text of the martial law decree explicitly addressed such violence, stating: "All media and publications are subject to the control of the Martial Law Command." Its language brought back memories of past authoritarian regimes in 1980s Korea, when the press was violently suppressed, adding a chilling historical weight to the events of that night.



When we arrived at the Assembly, crowds of citizens were already gathered. They were shouting, fighting, and crying at the shocking news. Before the police could fully establish control, we broke through the barricade and reached the main building. A few minutes later, martial law troops stormed the Assembly, where aides, journalists, and ordinary citizens fought desperately to hold them back. We filmed with our cameras, but we also used our own bodies to resist. The citizens were not only brave but also remarkably focused, finding ways to resist together and putting them into action.

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Around the world, democracy is being challenged every day. Many live with the fate of defending fragile political systems. That night, we witnessed a rare spectacle: how democracy reveals its vulnerability, yet can also be restored dramatically. We wanted to portray, with depth and texture, the wide range of reactions, unexpected actions, and the chemistry among citizens that together created resistance, believing that this remarkable unison went beyond the rhetoric: “brave citizens defended democracy.”

It felt as if an invisible hand guided the people that night. In every desperate moment, people invoked—often shouting—the memory of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, when citizens were slaughtered under martial law. We realized that shared historical memory was moving people, reminding us how urgent, determined, and orderly we needed to be. When martial law was finally lifted, we felt compelled to reflect on the event through the lens of memory. In the film, we want to uncover the link between present and past that we experienced so vividly, and ultimately visualize the moments when the dead gave strength to the living.



Today, Korean society remains suspended between relief and anxiety. The public square—the symbol of Korea’s democracy—is split in two. Beyond the heated memories of what happened inside the Assembly, we felt the need for deeper reflection. Just as we remember the past without claiming easy victories or surrendering to despair, we wanted to ask: what kind of present must be remembered by the future? We hope this film can spark conversation and serve as a starting point for discussion.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE By Jong-Woo KIM

On the night of December 3rd, 2024, after finishing work on PD Notebook, an investigative journalism program, I was monitoring the broadcast on television to check for any errors when I saw the President declare martial law. I grabbed my 6mm camera and ran to the National Assembly with colleagues. When we arrived, there was confusion in the chain of command. In that gap, along with a few others, we managed to enter the Assembly's main building. We could not turn off the camera. Nothing was predictable that night.

Carrying sofas to build barricades and standing with others to block armed soldiers was both chaotic and astonishing. I had never seen a scene so radically open to one another. While filming, I also helped move tables with my own hands. Before long, the sound of helicopters landing grew louder and louder. A chill ran through me. Everything began to feel unreal. As people blocked the soldiers, they shouted—asking whether they remembered martial law of 1980, whether they knew of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising. That night, it felt as if everyone had been transported back 44 years.

“What if even a single gunshot had been fired that night?”

“What if the power to the National Assembly had been cut and the building isolated?”

“What, exactly, did we overcome that night?”

As I gathered and examined footage from the 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising, I came to realize anew that, across the span of 44 years, something like “the dead saving the living” had truly occurred—and that it was acting according to one's conscience, at the most dangerous moment, that ultimately saved us. I wanted to make a film that shows the faces of those who willingly held their ground, both in Gwangju in 1980 and in Seoul in 2024.

So many faces I encountered while making this film: faces of ordinary people who watch, think, and worry rather than rush to assert or condemn; faces of those who left their homes in the middle of the night; faces of exhausted Constitutional Court justices; faces of young soldiers who hesitated to carry out their mission with force. In these faces, I believe, lie the clues to what we overcame.

Nearly a year has passed since the declaration of martial law, political polarization remains unresolved. In a time when hatred—ideas that those who are different cannot coexist and must be “eradicated all at once”—spread even widely. I find myself returning to those faces. Through this film, I hope we can speak more about the quiet, everyday power of ordinary people.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE By Shin-Wan KIM

On the night of December 3rd, 2024, after learning that martial law had been declared, I left my home and headed for the National Assembly. By the time I arrived, police had already blocked access to the Assembly, and I began filming from outside. At the scene, police were blocking lawmakers and their aides from entering, while citizens resisted and confronted them.

The citizens were striking to observe. They raised their voices—chanting slogans, protesting against soldiers and police, and at times physically pressing against them. Yet they also showed remarkable restraint, careful not to escalate the situation into a large-scale physical clash. No one acted recklessly.

In some sense, I felt they were more disciplined than the martial law troops themselves. At times, it even felt as if they had been preparing for this moment all along. The scene was chaotic, yet order emerged without any single leader. Their precise movements felt instinctive, as if guided by something deeply ingrained.

As I watched them, I kept asking myself where that instinct came from, and I came to believe that it was a memory carried and shared over many years. Inside and outside the National Assembly, citizens shouted at the soldiers and police, urging them to remember the Gwangju Democratic Uprising.

Even after martial law was lifted and the soldiers and armored vehicles began to withdraw, people continued to block their path. These were not simply expressions of anger or resentment toward the military. I felt in their actions a determination to leave nothing unchallenged in this moment, so as not to burden the future with consequences. Standing in the street, I felt as though the past, the present, and the future were in conversation.

While producing a PD NOTEBOOK program focused on delivering urgent developments as quickly as possible, I carried on with me a desire to one day speak about the citizens I witnessed that night. I felt compelled to speak about the memory that lived in the citizens' hearts that night.

Through this film, I sincerely hope that the conversation I witnessed that night will reach audiences and continue, so that many more conversations may follow.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE By Cheol-Young CHO

On the night of December 3rd, 2024, although I lived very close to the National Assembly, I could not bring myself to leave my home. Would the regime erase everything within a few kilometers of the Assembly? In a wartime situation, could my vehicle be requisitioned? I was gripped by fear. Martial law is the immediate prelude to war, and precisely because I lived so close to the National Assembly, I felt compelled to make deeply personal calculations first—about my family's safety, survival, and security. It was a moment of very real terror.

Later, as I received footage gathered by colleagues at the office and rapidly assembled and edited it, I began asking more fundamental questions:

“Why did not a single soldier pull the trigger?”

“What, exactly, was the fear that we all felt?”

Across the various pieces of footage, the images that lingered with me were those of soldiers and police at a loss in the face of citizens' unarmed resistance. In their face at that moment—the wavering eyes, the gestures carefully calibrated to avoid provoking the crowd—I could read the memories left behind by the past.

Including the most recent prior instance of martial law, the “Night of Gwangju Democratic Uprising” in 1980, martial law has been declared nine times in South Korea over the past eighty years. The night of 2024 was the tenth repetition of that history. For Koreans, “martial law” is not an unfamiliar shock, but the reenactment of an old fear etched deep into the collective memory.

Yet the memory of the Gwangju—where countless citizens were killed by soldiers' guns—did not belong only to civilians. In 2024, Gwangju also lived among the soldiers. The fear that being recorded in history as martial law troops could mark them as tragic and dishonorable, and the determination not to be remembered that way, seemed to persist as a quiet refusal.

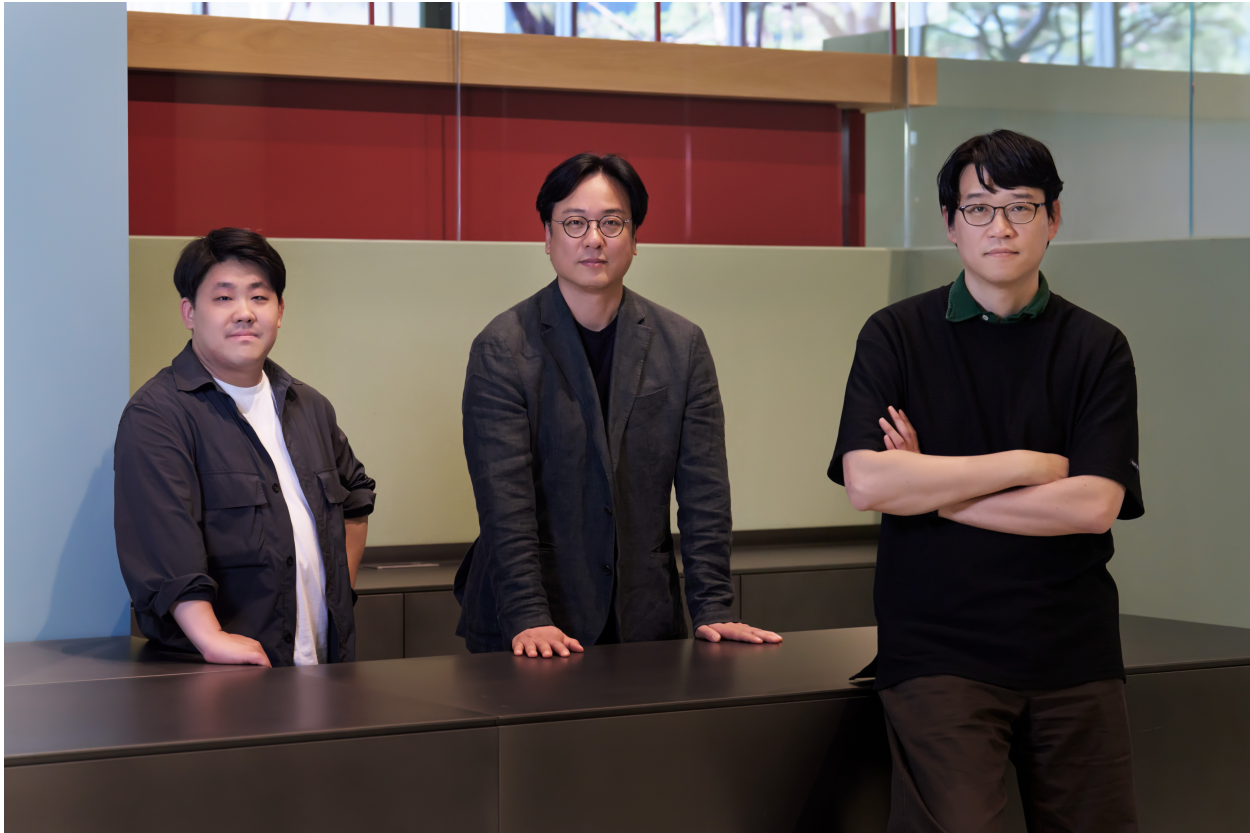
For this reason, I have come to believe that within the category of “citizens” who protected democracy, we must also include the soldiers who, through silence and non-action, refused orders and prevented tragedy that night.

Through this film, I hope we can discover together how the invisible, universal force of human conscience operates. Beyond the specificity of a Korean historical moment, I hope we can engage with the most fundamental ethical questions that sustain democracy itself.

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IN CONVERSATION WITH THE DIRECTORS

Chul-Young CHO, Jong-Woo KIM, Shin-Wan KIM



How would you define *The Seoul Guardians*? Is it a documentary?

The Seoul Guardians is best defined as documentary cinema. While it is grounded in real events and real people, our focus is on creating a cinematic experience in the theater. As filmmakers, we want audiences to vividly experience those moments as if they were present. Within the shared space of the cinema, we hope viewers can return to that time and experience what it felt like to be an ordinary citizen during a period when democracy was under threat.

The Seoul Guardians follows 6 tense hours in and out the National Assembly in Seoul after the declaration of martial law on December 3rd, 2024. It could have been a 6 hours' film. Which images, footage, moments you chose not to include in the final cut?

As filmmakers, we kept asking ourselves how we could capture the power of ordinary people on screen. We believed that the faces of those who contributed to the lifting of

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martial law in Seoul on December 3rd were something we all needed to look at closely and reflect on.

Ultimately, being cinematic is not about reproducing time in a literal sense, but about re-constructing the density of that time through the filmmaker's perspective. Outside the National Assembly, after the soldiers had arrived and citizens were blocked from entering by the police, much of those hours consisted of anxious silence, murmuring crowds, people searching for information on their smartphones, and making phone calls. If we had reproduced the six hours in real time, these moments would have made up a large part of the film. But we did not want to preserve time mechanically.

Instead, we chose to focus on moments when ordinary people found courage and came together: chants scolding the police and soldiers, voices encouraging one another to “block that side,” an 18-year-old student passionately explaining why martial law was unjust, and heated discussions about whether citizens should occupy the National Assembly.

For us, these moments go beyond simply conveying information about what happened. They function as emotional texts that carry the suffocating tension we felt at the time, the confusion of not knowing what to do, and, at the same time, the shared will to change the situation together. Rather than depicting six hours of physical time, we tried to reveal the presence and inner states of the Seoul Guardians—their faces, emotions, and collective resolve—within the film.

The editing work in recreating the atmosphere, the tension and the chaos of those 6 intense hours must have been challenging. What was your priority in the editing work? How was the process to reach the narrative you wanted for your film?

In South Korea, the political landscape changed drastically in the aftermath of the declaration of martial law. What was most striking was that immediately after martial law was lifted, the president who had declared it—and his supporters—began to describe it as merely an “enlightenment decree” or a performative gesture. They argued that the fact that martial law was lifted within six hours was not the result of citizens' resistance, but rather a deliberate decision to implement it in order to expose the opposition party's alleged wrongdoing.

We saw these claims as deeply damaging to democratic values. At the same time, witnessing how such narratives began to resonate with a portion of the public led us to

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feel a stronger urgency. Beyond the fragmented “information” conveyed through short news clips and reports, we felt that more people needed to connect with what was actually happening inside and around the National Assembly in Seoul that night. As filmmakers, we wanted to translate into cinema the tangible fear, confusion, and moments of solidarity we experienced there.

In South Korea, the vast majority of men are required to complete mandatory military service. We have served in the military ourselves, and we still remember the chilling sensation of firing a rifle for the first time. After shooting at a target we could barely see and then discovering the bullet embedded in it, we came to understand that a firearm is not a metaphor or a symbol—it is not a toy.

On the night martial law was declared, as a film crew at the National Assembly, encountering armed soldiers in everyday civic spaces, knowing their lethal capacity, trying to block weapons designed to kill, and watching military helicopters continuously circling overhead, produced a level of fear that is difficult to imagine from a distance.

We wanted to bridge the gap between the lived reality and the claim that it was all “just a performative gesture.” We want to show that the emotions we felt that night—the horrifying scenarios we imagined while staring down rifle barrels, the fear of soldiers advancing toward the National Assembly chamber through gaps in the barricades under commands we could not hear, and the dread of what would happen if lawmakers failed to reach a quorum and were unable to vote—are, in many ways, closer to the truth than the dismissive explanations that followed.

The original footage of May 1980’s Gwangju Democratic Uprising. How was the process in selecting those images?

Fortunately, we were able to access a wide range of footage that had been preserved over many years by people who wished to gather the memories of the Gwangju Democratic Movement and prevent them from being forgotten. Among them were works by senior producers within MBC as well. However, the process of selecting images from this material was both difficult and painful.

There were countless photographs and videos soaked in blood. There were images of people who would be dead just a few frames later, and photographs of bodies. There were scenes of citizens coming together, encouraging one another, and believing that things would somehow be resolved, alongside the faces of the martial law troops at the time and the intense conflicts unfolding between them. We felt that if we were to

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repeatedly select only certain kinds of images from this material, audiences would be led to experience the events of the Gwangju Democratic Movement through a narrowly fixed emotional lens—whether that be sheer horror, deep sorrow, or overwhelming rage.

For this reason, we began searching for the ordinary faces of the Gwangju Democratic Movement. A university student in jeans persuading others to join. A neighbor holding someone’s hand after a family member had been killed. A single soldier, head lowered and refusing to sing, standing among fellow soldiers chanting military songs after the suppression of the citizens’ resistance. We sought out the faces of ordinary people whose names were never recorded, whose lives after that day remain unknown—faces that history did not fully document, yet quietly carry its weight.

Comparing the images of that May 1980 and the images of that December 2024, what do you think, or feel, or see stronger and deeper: the contrasts or the similarities?

We felt that the people who appear in the footage from May 1980 and December 2024 were, in a sense, speaking to us. It is difficult to define exactly what those voices were saying, but at times they felt like comfort, at other times like a reprimand, and at still other moments like something offered in advance—as if we were being warned, or protected, and perhaps owed a kind of gratitude.

In that sense, what resonated with us more deeply was not the idea of similarity or contrast, but the sense of dialogue and connection across time. As shown in the film, there is a scene in which the memory of the Gwangju Democratic Movement and the present moment seem to connect through the national anthem, sung in a call-and-response form. Although we do not usually sing the anthem and do not particularly think of ourselves as patriots, it remains a deeply moving moment for us as Koreans.

Because the narrative began from the idea of a conversation between the past and the present, we wanted to build toward a climax that could embody that dialogue.

The voice-over in the film. Is it a character in the film? Or is it a narrator? Why do you think the film needed it?

The voice-over in the film serves as a bridge connecting the audience to the events of December 3rd, 2024—the night when martial law was declared—and to the legacy of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising of the 1980s. The voice belongs to Jong-woo, a

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character in the film and also one of its three directors. Jong-woo is part of what is often referred to as **Korea's Generation X**, the first generation to experience political, economic, social, and cultural prosperity following democratization.

For Jong-woo, the political repression of the 1980s does not exist as a series of clearly remembered events, but rather as an emotional residue of the time. His memories of that decade include images such as his father driving with a photograph of the president displayed in the car, and an overarching sense that “everyone was living in fear.” As a journalist, he has tended to keep a distance from events, valuing objectivity and fact-based documentation, and at times maintaining a relatively cynical stance toward political narratives.

However, as he lives through December 3rd, 2024, memories of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising from his childhood repeatedly surface, and he gradually transforms from a detached recorder into an active participant at the scene. Through this character, we wanted to reveal why ordinary people gathered on that night, and what thoughts and emotions were running through their minds.

Ultimately, the film seeks to portray ordinary individuals, each carrying their own memories, who came together—often clumsily and improvising—within the vortex of a major historical moment. Jong-woo, as a character in the film, is both the director himself and the film’s narrator, and functions as a symbolic mediator linking the historical event to the audience.



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Is Jong-woo's voice, the voice of the memory looking back at that night's event? Or is it a commentary of the present? What kind of effect or experience you thought in combining images, sounds and voice over?

When we first decided to use voice-over, it came from a fundamental question about perspective. Every film is made from someone's point of view—so whose gaze does this film adopt, and who does the audience follow as they encounter these events? We ultimately concluded that the film needed to be shaped through our own perspective, as directors and journalists, rather than pretending to be neutral or omniscient.

However, once we committed to using voice-over, we found ourselves confronting a deeper question of temporality. Was this voice meant to be a retrospective reflection, or a report unfolding in the present? Through discussion, we came to feel strongly that the voice-over should not sound like a distant recollection of something that happened long ago on December 3rd. That approach risked fixing the event safely in the past, as if it were already resolved and archived. If we wanted to keep the event alive—to make it present rather than sealed off as history—then the voice-over also had to exist in the present. For that reason, we decided to place its temporality in a kind of **cinematic present**. In other words, throughout the film, **the voice-over always speaks from the present tense of that moment, as if the events are still unfolding**.

This is South Korea's first declaration of martial law in 45 years since the death of President Park Chung-hee in 1979. It means that only those ones older than 50 still have memories of those dramatic days. On December 3rd, 2024 do you think that those ones younger than 50 would have acted differently without those memories?

We don't think their response would have been very different at all.

On the night of December 3rd into the early hours of December 4th, 2024, there were many moments that did not make it into the final cut of the film. One of them shows large groups of people in their twenties—many of them K-pop fans—sitting through the night in front of the National Assembly, guarding its doors in case the martial law troops might return.

They were young people born after the end of the military dictatorship, with no direct memory of authoritarian rule, who had gathered from all over the country. What struck us was what they were holding in their hands. Unlike the citizens of 1980, who carried

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stones or guns, these young people held light sticks used to cheer for their favorite idol artists.

Watching that scene, we found ourselves asking: *isn't it a shared belief in democratic values that moves people like this?* And if acting to protect one's own values is an instinctive response of a democratic citizen, then perhaps this is something worth revisiting and reflecting on through cinema.

In the film, there is a very strong and deep reflection about the dynamics and the results of the events taking place the night on December 3rd, 2024: "The dead saved the living". Could you elaborate more about it?

The phrase "The dead saved the living" was inspired by remarks made by the Korean writer Han Kang, who was awarded the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature. In her acceptance speech on December 7th, she reflected on the ethical and emotional core of her novel dealing with the Gwangju Democratic Movement, and it was from this reflection that we drew our motif.

The Gwangju Democratic Movement of May 1980 was the deadliest tragedy in South Korea since the Korean War. In October 1979, President Park Chung-hee, a dictator who had ruled the country for nearly two decades, was assassinated, plunging the nation into political turmoil. Amid this instability, military leaders led by Chun Doo-hwan seized power through a coup and formed what became known as the "New Military Group." On the night of May 17th, 1980, they expanded martial law nationwide, citing the alleged threat of a North Korean invasion.

Under martial law, the military suspended citizens' political rights and freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association. Universities were ordered to close, and when martial law troops were deployed to campuses in Gwangju, students began protesting against the expansion of martial law. On May 18th, 1980, as troops violently and indiscriminately suppressed these demonstrations, the citizens of Gwangju rose up in resistance. Their resistance lasted for about ten days, but was brutally crushed by military force on May 27th.

During this period, 166 people were killed, 179 went missing, and more than 2,000 were injured. Citizens ranging from teenagers to elderly people in their sixties were subjected to widespread and indiscriminate violence. Yet for many years, the New Military Group systematically distorted the truth, framing the Movement as a riot led by

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pro-North Korean forces and falsely accusing Gwangju citizens of collaborating with communists. As a result, it took nearly 17 years for the truth to be officially acknowledged and for the victims' dignity to be restored.

For a long time, the Gwangju Democratic Movement remained an unresolved responsibility for Korean society—a history that demanded truth, correction, and justice. In this sense, efforts by the living to uncover the truth and restore the honor of the victims were attempts to come to terms with the past.

Coincidentally, Han Kang's Nobel Prize acceptance speech came just days after the declaration of martial law on December 3rd, 2024. Her words resonated deeply not only with us, filmmakers, but with many people across Korean society, offering renewed insight into Korea's history and collective spirit. Through her reflection, we came to understand that the reason so many citizens were able to act together on the night of December 3rd was their connection to the suffering of those who had died in the past. It was in this sense that *the dead saved the living*—that the past protected the present.

Through this documentary, we wanted to express this idea, one that we believe many Koreans felt deeply, through the language of cinema.

“Irrevocable memories saved us”. You have irrevocable memories of the past. How about December 3rd, 2024? It's already in the past or is it still the present? What kind of irrevocable memories you have about that day? Are they collective memories? Are they deep enough to be remembered in 45 years from now?

We believe that memory is sometimes erased, and sometimes created.

The Gwangju Democratic Movement saved us not only because of the citizens' resistance at the time and their determination to defend democracy, but also because countless people have continuously recalled, spoken about, and retold what happened there. We believe the same is true for the memory of the declaration of martial law on December 3rd, 2024. If we do not continue to ask what it was, to speak about it, and to give it meaning, it can easily fade into a past that no one remembers. At the same time, it can also become another irrevocable memory—one that may save a moment in the future. We do not think this is simply a matter of time. Ultimately, we believe that the power to turn an event into the past, the present, or the future lies with us, here and now.

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We believe that **the will to remember is what records history**, and the will to record is what gives birth to documentary cinema. We sincerely hope that this film can serve as one small catalyst for that process.

In the film, we see what happened on December 3rd, 2024 in Seoul, the capital of South Korea. What was the reaction that night in the rest of South Korea?

In Seoul, key sites such as the National Assembly and the presidential residence in Yongsan are located close to one another. As a result, SNS posts from citizens who witnessed troop movements spread rapidly, heightening a sense of crisis, and some people even rushed to the plaza in front of the National Assembly. However, in most regions that were physically distant from these locations, people had no choice but to follow the situation through news broadcasts and YouTube.

Gwangju, however, was slightly different. Within just ten minutes of the declaration of martial law, a ground-level response system centered around the mayor was activated, and shortly thereafter representatives from various sectors of the Gwangju community gathered to declare the martial law invalid. Gwangju was the only city in the country to mount such a swift response.

In the chaotic images at the beginning of the film, many lawmakers struggle to access the National Assembly where they were running to in order to open a session to vote. According to the Law in South Korea, within how many hours after the declaration of a martial law, would the lawmakers have time to vote for lifting it?

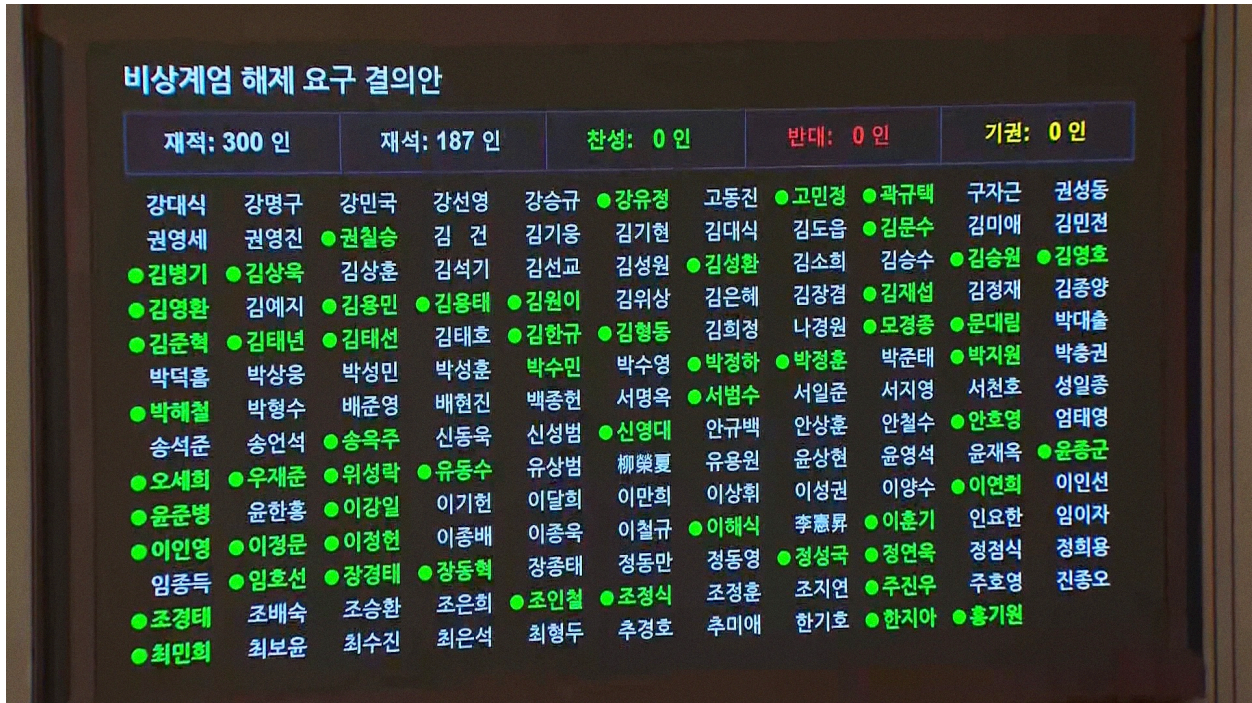
According to the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, if a majority of the incumbent members of the National Assembly vote in favor of lifting martial law, the Assembly may formally demand its termination, and the President is required to lift the martial law and proclaim it “without delay” (Article 77, Clause 5). In practical terms, this means that at least 151 out of the 300 lawmakers must approve the motion. While this is a very high threshold, the Constitution itself does not impose a specific time limit on when such a vote must take place.

However, the night of December 3rd, 2024 was an exception. The urgency of preventing martial law troops from entering the National Assembly and successfully holding the vote created a kind of “golden time” of roughly two hours—time that felt literally life-

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threatening. With all entrances to the Assembly sealed by police, lawmakers had to climb walls and crawl their way inside in order to convene.

In the film, we wanted to capture this period of approximately two hours—out of the total six hours during which martial law remained in effect—until more than 150 lawmakers finally gathered and voted to lift it. It was one of the longest and most intensely charged moments of tension in the history of South Korea’s constitutional democracy.



After the declaration of the martial law on December 3rd, 2024, in the President Yoon Suk Yeol's words "to defend our liberal democratic constitutional order", why do you think the supporters of President Yoon were not shocked or afraid of that declaration itself and its consequences? How were they justifying the decision of President Yoon?

The supporters tended to see the declaration of martial law as a kind of political party's game changer rather than as something shocking or frightening. Many of President Yoon’s supporters perceived North Korea as a serious and ongoing threat. From their perspective, the democratic party—holding far more seats than the conservative party—was taking conciliatory positions toward North Korea and China, and it was not the President but certain forces within the opposition that were seen as threatening the liberal democratic order guaranteed by the Constitution.

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Within this logic, martial law was justified as an “inevitable exercise of defensive power to protect the system.” Among those who supported the President at the time, there was a strong belief that the large opposition block was obstructing the President’s ability to govern and steering South Korea in ways favorable to North Korea and China, thereby endangering what they understood as the nation’s security and stability.

In South Korea, isn't martial law synonym of dictatorship?

Yes, as your question suggests, in South Korea’s modern history, the perception that “martial law equals the beginning or continuation of dictatorship” is not a simple misunderstanding, but something rooted in painful historical experience.

There is a clear gap between the theoretical legal definition of martial law and the reality that Koreans have lived through. This gap is shaped by repeated historical moments—especially under past military dictatorships leading up to events such as Gwangju in 1980—when authorities defined political situations as “chaos” or “threats” and used those justifications to declare martial law. In theory, martial law is an emergency power granted to the President to maintain public order in situations such as war or internal unrest. In practice, however, in South Korea it has often functioned as a tool for a self-coup: eliminating political opponents, censoring the press, and paralyzing the National Assembly.

If viewers watch the Gwangju scenes in the film with this historical knowledge in mind, the actions of soldiers and civilians in Gwangju, and those in Seoul in 2024, may appear quite differently.

People inside and outside the National Assembly that night were The Seoul Guardians: the guardians of the values of democracy, the ones that were opposing the martial law and the ones that were supporting the President. So, it seems that even democracy is subject to interpretation. Why do you think democracy as a way of governing is so fragile?

On December 3rd, the way National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik adhered strictly to procedural principles in the process of lifting martial law felt, at the time, deeply frustrating to many. However, as we revisited that moment repeatedly while making the film, we came to realize something more abstract: **democracy is not a result, but a process.**

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Democracy requires us to do our utmost to deliberate, persuade, and make decisions through discussion with those who think differently from us. We believe that this effort itself reflects a proper understanding of, and respect for, democracy. This process can be fragile, slow, and exhausting, but it also seems to be the most basic condition for building a society in which we live together.

In that moment, the Speaker appeared to be trying to protect precisely this final line. The same can be said of why lawmakers from the Conservative Party—despite being in conflict with the Democratic Party at the time—ultimately participated in the vote. These processes may look tedious or even contradictory on the surface, but it is exactly this commitment to debate and procedure that constitutes democracy.

In that sense, everyone that night—the guardians of democratic values, those opposing martial law, and those supporting the President—was part of the same public sphere: participants in a shared democratic space, and members of the society we must continue to live in together.

The Seoul Guardians is also a recorded collection of memorable words, questions, phrases that people said, shouted, screamed that night. Words said under physical and psychological stress, pressure, fear and danger, still all those words were rational, more than emotional. They made sense. How would you explain such strong sense of rationality that night?

For Koreans, what might be called “manuals of failure and success” are deeply ingrained—almost etched into our collective memory.

From the lesson of Gwangju in 1980 came a manual of failure: “If you are isolated, you die. If you let people know, you survive.” From the first presidential impeachment in 2016 came a manual of success: “If you follow constitutional procedures, you can win peacefully.” Citizens instinctively understood that emotional explosions or the destruction of buildings were not solutions. Because the public clearly understood the legal logic—that martial law could only be lifted if the National Assembly convened—every action and every word converged toward a single rational goal: opening the Assembly and holding a vote.

At the same time, it seemed that citizens also believed that soldiers, too, were people shaped by their own “manuals.” Rather than confronting armed troops with violence, many chose to appeal to them through reason—to disarm the legitimacy of the orders

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they had been given through rational language. This is why persuasion became sharper than force that night, and why the words spoken under extreme pressure remained remarkably coherent and grounded.



The day the judges confirmed the then-President of South Korea Yoon Suk Yeol to be removed from office, many supporters of President Yoon were on the streets waving Korean and American flags. Considering the current general situation in the U.S., what's the opinion of the South Koreans today?

One tendency that seems to be shared globally is that we are **living in an age of not listening**. Within the comfortable prisons created by political polarization and algorithm-driven media environments, people see only what they want to see and actively exclude others.

While many praise South Korea's democracy for having prevented the declaration of martial law on December 3rd, the public sphere in Korea has, paradoxically, become even more polarized in its aftermath. People rarely reflect on what the flags they wave signify within the current international and geopolitical context. Instead, they are often preoccupied with attacking their opponents and justifying their own positions.

Amid this constant exchange of accusations, opportunities to pause and reflect on what we should have learned from the past are steadily disappearing. In the film, we

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show this divided state of the public square as it exists today. Ultimately, we hope that the film can serve as a space for dialogue—one that asks what our present moment in this public square will come to mean for future generations.

Since December 3rd, 2024, a little more than one year after that night in Seoul, the then-President of South Korea Yoon Suk Yeol had been removed from office. He is going to trial at the end of this year, while South Korean special prosecutors demand life imprisonment for ex-defense minister Kim Yong-hyun alongside death penalty for Yoon Suk Yeol, over his failed martial law declaration. What's going on right now?

Since the film was completed, South Korea has elected the leader of the opposition party depicted in the film as its new President. On February 19th, the first trial addressing the former President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law is scheduled to begin.

For the most part, many of those we call the “guardians” are watching the situation quietly. Despite ongoing economic difficulties—such as a high exchange rate, inflation, and a severe job market—there is a widespread desire not to experience further chaos or threats in the realm of democracy.

At the same time, polarization in the public square has not been resolved. Even if heavy sentences are ultimately handed down, it sometimes feels as though this division may never fully disappear.

Rotterdam, January 28th, 2026

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION Gwangju Democratic Uprising

The Gwangju Democratic Uprising was a series of student-led demonstrations that took place in Gwangju, South Korea, from May 18th to May 27th, 1980, in opposition to Chun Doo-hwan's military coup. Nearly a quarter of a million people participated in the protests. The uprising was violently suppressed by the South Korean military, resulting in a massacre. Although the exact number of casualties remains unknown, estimates generally range from approximately 200 to 2,000 deaths, with thousands more injured and dozens officially listed as missing.



In late 1979, Chun Doo-hwan consolidated power through a military coup, imposed nationwide martial law, and established a military dictatorship. His regime arrested opposition leaders, closed universities, banned political activities, and severely restricted the press. The uprising began when university students protesting martial law were met with extreme violence by the military, including shootings, beatings, and torture. In response, some citizens of Gwangju took up arms, forming militias and raiding local police stations and armories.

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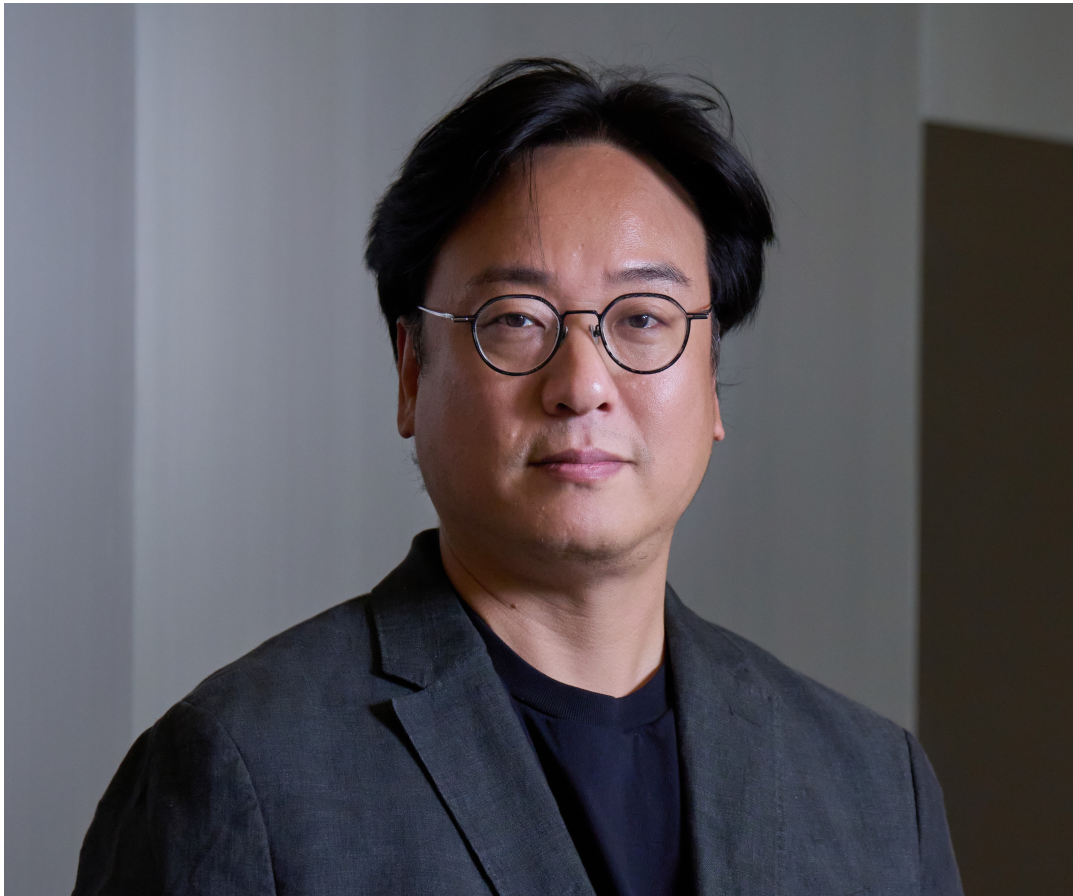
Under Chun’s dictatorship, the South Korean government labeled the uprising a “riot” and falsely claimed that it was instigated by communist sympathizers acting under North Korean influence. In 1997, May 18th was officially designated a national day of commemoration, and a national cemetery for the victims was established. Subsequent investigations confirmed numerous atrocities committed by the military. In 2011, documents related to the Gwangju Uprising were inscribed on UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register.

The Gwangju Democratic Uprising not only played a pivotal role in the democratization of South Korea but also affected other countries in East Asia by dissolving the Cold War structure and achieving democracy. After the 1980s, various democratic movements took place in the Philippines, Thailand, China, Vietnam, and elsewhere in an attempt to follow in the South Korea's footsteps.

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DIRECTORS' BIOGRAPHY & FILMOGRAPHY

Jong Woo KIM, Shin Wan KIM, Chul Young CHO



Jong Woo KIM

Jong Woo KIM is a producer at MBC who has created a wide range of nonfiction television programs and documentaries. His Meeting You series, which centers on the concept of reuniting with deceased family members in virtual space, won the ABU (Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union) Documentary Award. A spin-off of the series, Meeting Youngkyun, which uses VR to immerse viewers in the thermal power plant where a lone worker died, received a Special Mention at the Prix Italia. Kim has also produced documentaries on climate change, including Glaciers and Rebellion of the Climate. He is particularly interested in documentary work that explores near-future transformations at the intersection of technology and humanity, and in developing new, experimental forms of nonfiction storytelling.

Filmography

- VR Documentary Series <Meeting You>, 2020-2021, 60min X 3, Director
- Reality Show Series <Civilization>, 2021, 50min X 8, Director

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DIRECTORS' BIOGRAPHY & FILMOGRAPHY

Jong Woo KIM, Shin Wan KIM, Chul Young CHO



Shin Wan KIM

Shin Wan KIM has primarily produced talk shows and current-affairs documentaries at MBC, with a longstanding engagement in issues of education. Throughout his career, he has often stood at the forefront of moments that demanded innovation—launching new programs and leading major renewal of long-running ones. In times of immediate crisis, he has been committed to forging new paths forward—transforming challenges into concrete, workable solutions so that innovation becomes not just an aspiration, but a reality.

Filmography

- Documentary Series <The Ideal classroom>, 2024, 60min x 3, Director
- PD Notebook <No one can stop the parents>, 2024, 60min, Director

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DIRECTORS' BIOGRAPHY & FILMOGRAPHY

Jong Woo KIM, Shin Wan KIM, Chul Young CHO



Chul Young CHO

Chul Young CHO has produced nature documentaries and factual television programs and has long worked at the forefront of Korea's current-affairs and public-interest broadcasting. His work has addressed a wide range of subjects, including the war in Ukraine, drug issues in South Korea, and corruption in college admissions involving the children of high-ranking elites. His documentary *Bear* (2019) won an award at the Houston International Film Festival, and in 2021, *COVID-19 and Shincheonji*, which examined the COVID-19 pandemic and the Korean pseudo-religious group Shincheonji, received the Grand Prize at the New York TV Festival. He continues to work on factual television programs and documentaries to this day.

Filmography

- Documentary Series <The Bear>, 2019, 70min x 3, Co-director
- Variety Talk Show Series <Runaway>, 2023-4, 70min x 12, Director

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CREDITS

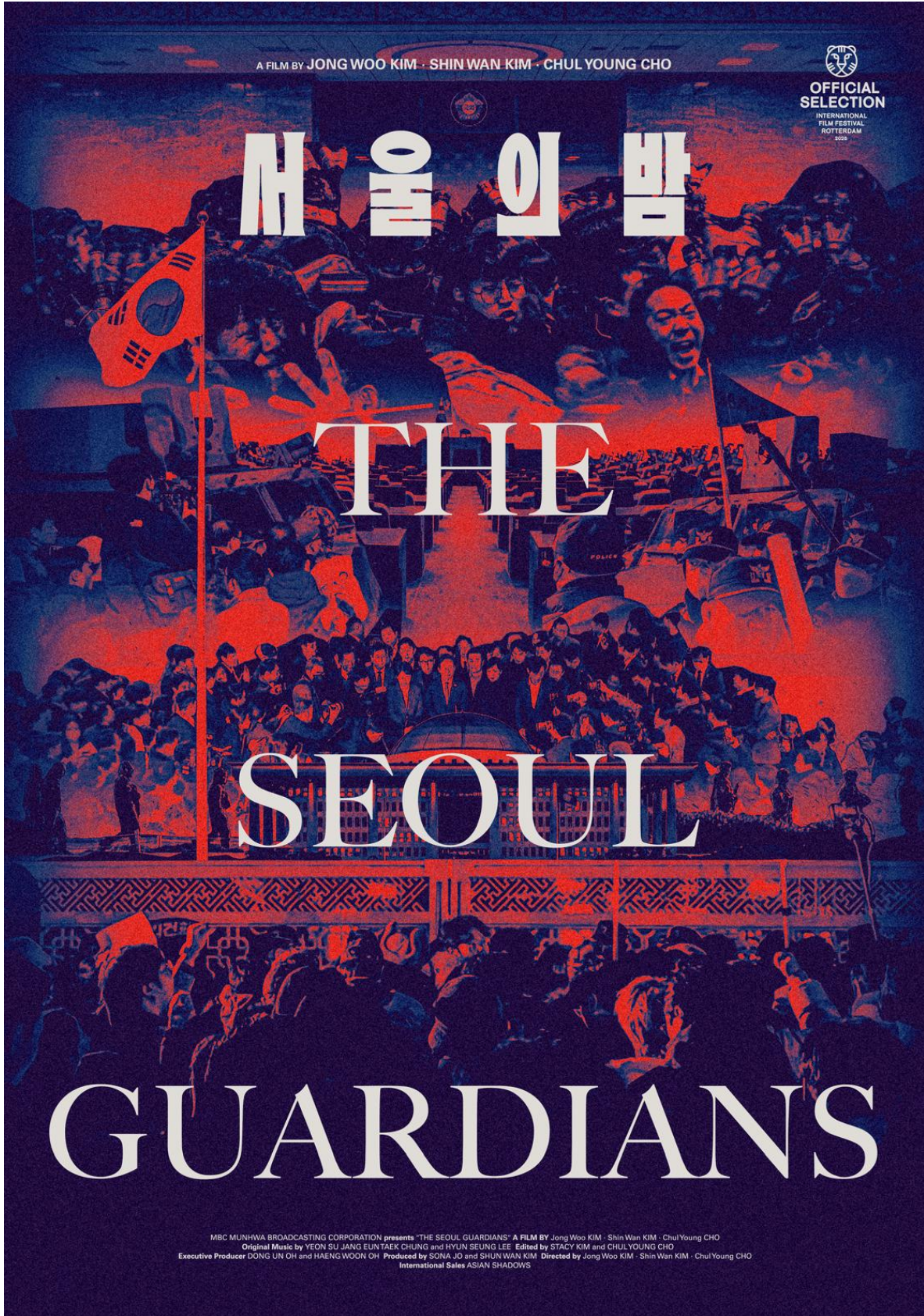
Directors	Jong Woo KIM, Shin Wan KIM, Chul Young CHO
Scriptwriters	Jong Woo KIM, Stacy KIM
Cinematographers	Myung Kyoon KIM, Sun Young LEE, Yoon Mi CHO Min Je JEON, Jong Woo KIM
Editors	Stacy KIM, Chul Young CHO
Assistant Director	Jeong Min SEO, Do Hyun LEE
Digital Intermediate	Hyoung Hee KIM
Sound Design	EunHa KO
Original Music	Yeon Su JANG, Eun Taek CHUNG, Hyun Seung LEE
Executive Producer	Dong Un OH, Haeng Woon OH
Produced by	Sona JO, Shin Wan KIM
Production Company	MBC Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation
International Sales	Asian Shadows

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TECHNICAL DETAILS

Original Title	서울의 밤 (seoul-ui bam)
English Title:	The Seoul Guardians
Duration:	72 Minutes
Format:	DCP 2K
Frame Rate:	24fps
Aspect Ratio:	1.85:1
Sound:	Dolby 5.1
Year:	2026
Original Languages:	Korean
Countries of production:	Republic Of Korea (a.k.a. South Korea)
Production Companies:	MBC
International Sales:	Asian Shadows

THE SEOUL GUARDIANS



A FILM BY JONG WOO KIM · SHIN WAN KIM · CHUL YOUNG CHO

OFFICIAL SELECTION
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
ROTTERDAM
2018

서울의 밤

THE
SEOUL

GUARDIANS

MBC MUNHWA BROADCASTING CORPORATION presents "THE SEOUL GUARDIANS" A FILM BY Jong Woo KIM · Shin Wan KIM · Chul Young CHO
Original Music by YEON SU JANG EUN TAEK CHUNG and HYUN SEUNG LEE Edited by STACY KIM and CHUL YOUNG CHO
Executive Producer DONG UN OH and HAENG WOON OH Produced by SONA JO and SHUN WAN KIM Directed by Jong Woo KIM · Shin Wan KIM · Chul Young CHO
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