

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING THE KOREAN WAR IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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ABSTRACT

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The Korean War had no official ending and has continued in a form of Cold War since 1953, the year the cease-fire agreement was signed, and yet, during the past five decades, it appears to have faded from South Korean memory. Anti-communism became a national ideology in post-war South Korea. For a country that was endeavoring to establish a national identity that differs from communist North Korea, the establishment of an anti-communist state was inevitable. However, the collapse of the Communist Bloc and a humanitarian crisis in North Korea in the 1990s led to attitudinal changes in the South Korean public toward North Korea. The forgetting and remembering of North Korea in conjunction with the memory of the Korean War has left the South Korean people ambivalent toward North Koreans. This paper explores social encounters between North and South Koreans in the late 2000s in Seoul that illustrate the uneasy interactions that stem from past anti-communist education as well as the subsequent erasure of social memory about North Korea as part of Korean culture.

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Keywords: history, memory, migration, North Korean refugees

Who started the war and when did it end?

‘When did the Korean War end?’ I asked a class of South Korean seventh graders. Silence followed. Confused looks on students’ faces indicated their lack of knowledge. One student raised her hand and said, ‘1945?’ (This was the year Korea was liberated from Japan’s colonial rule at the end of World War II). I shook my head. Another student raised a hand and said with more confidence, ‘1953’. (The cease-fire agreement between North Korea and the United Nations Allied Force was signed on July 27th, 1953.) I could see the student thinking: ‘It has to be 1953 because that’s when the fighting stopped and the line was drawn at the 38th parallel.’ As I gave a negative answer, more perplexed and confused looks followed. ‘1954?’ Another wrong answer. After a few seconds of silent confusion, someone finally said, ‘It hasn’t ended!’ During the lecture I gave on cultural integration between North Korea and South Korea in the summer of 2008 at a public school in a southern province of South Korea, I discovered that the majority of students in public schools were not aware that the Korean War had not officially ended, nor did they realize the Cold War¹ between North Korea and South Korea continues in the present. All the

students knew the Korean War erupted on June 25th, 1950, but they did not know that the 1953 cease-fire agreement did not end the war.

As the students' answers illustrate, the continuing war on the Korean peninsula is disappearing from South Korean memories. As the country develops and continues to flourish as one of the economically advanced countries in East Asia, South Koreans—particularly the younger generations like those students I met who were busy studying for college entrance—do not consider North Korea a threat to the country. Nor do these young South Koreans think of North Korea as part of South Korea (National Unification Advisory Council 2007). In the past, the unification discourse has emphasized re-uniting the divided country and focused on the oneness of Korean people. However after sixty years of division, North Korea has simply become 'Another Country' (Cumings 2004). This view was confirmed in a short survey conducted at the beginning and end of unification education classes at public schools in seven provinces in South Korea. The question asked was: 'What word(s) comes to your mind when you hear of North Korea?' The majority of answers included: Kim Jong Il, nuclear weapons, another country (connoting a foreign nation) and poverty. The answers echoed popular themes appearing in South Korean mass media in the 2000s, yet the answer 'another country' shows how far and distant North Korea has become in South Korean minds. South Korean teenagers could not imagine North Korea as part of the 'One Korea' that their grandparents' generation had endorsed. As the number of people from the Korean War generation dwindles, the memory of the war has faded in South Korea. Or rather, the memory that the war never really ended has faded. What is remembered instead is the outbreak of a war that brought high casualties and division to the country. The history textbooks emphasize the tragedy the war had caused 'once upon a time in the 1950s' and, at least to the young students in the seventh grades, it was a thing of the distant past.

Pierre Nora (1989: 7) once said that 'we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left', and when that happens, we are left with '*lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory'. However, in South Korea there are few sites at which to remember the war; indeed, where should stories of unfinished war be reconstructed? Exceptions are the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) where civilian access is limited; and the War Memorial, visited by war veterans and tourists. The memorial, located in Yongsan along with the Ministry of Defense building, mostly commemorates the valor of the Korean military, and its exhibits illustrate the physical fighting between the two sides. However, the site cannot offer visitors any of that sense of closure that leads to healing or forgiving. And yet nowhere in sites and memory production about the Korean War—be it in the form of films, songs, or plays—are South Koreans reminded that the war continues inconclusively. As a nation struggling to configure its present identity, remembering the war is employed by the South Korean government to create a national discourse aimed at unifying its citizens. In doing so, erasure of certain aspects of this major historical event, as much as remembrance, becomes a tool for constructing a cohesive national identity. As noted by Sturken (1997: 7–8):

All memories are 'created' in tandem with forgetting (...) Forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory. Yet the forgetting of the past in a culture is often highly organized (...) The writing of historical narrative necessarily involves the elimination of certain elements (...) A desire for coherence and continuity produces forgetting.

The South Korean narrative of the Korean War heavily focuses on the outbreak of the war rather than its continuation. Sturken (1997: 7) quotes Milan Kundera's idea of 'organized forgetting' and argues that 'cultures can (...) participate in a "strategic" forgetting of painful events that may be too dangerous to keep in active memory'. By forgetting the continuing Cold War, South Korea has focused on its economic development in the post-war era as an independent nation; it has, nonetheless, generated its identity in opposition to the community of North Korea. As Gillis (1994: 7) states, 'national memory is shared by people who have never seen or heard of one another, yet who regard themselves as having a common history. They are bound together as much by forgetting as by remembering'. South Koreans have shared the common history of being invaded by North Korea on June 25th, 1950. The outbreak of the Korean War and its subsequent destruction of the nation became the binding, culturally recognized historical fact that all South Koreans share as citizens.

One citizenship; fragmented memories

Approximately 10,000 North Korean refugees have arrived in South Korea since the 1990s (Ministry of Unification 2008) and received South Korean citizenship. Many of the North Korean-cum-South Koreans tell stories of their initial confusion upon learning about North Korea's initiation of the war; most, in fact, deny it at first hearing. One informant told me in a personal interview (07.01.2009) when I asked her about history education in North Korea, that she does not believe what is taught in schools. (She left North Korea during the 1990s and spent a few years in China before coming to South Korea. While she lived in China, her son was enrolled in a Chinese public school.) She told me: 'In North Korea we learned that South Korea started the Korean War, but in South Korea people say that North Korea invaded South Korea. It doesn't matter to me either way... My son came home one day and told me that the history he learned in China differed from what he had learned in North Korea. Then when he came to South Korea, he learned yet another kind of history.' I later discovered that in North Korea the national holidays included July 27th, which is the day the cease-fire agreement was signed, whereas in South Korea only June 25th is commemorated as the Korean War Day. Such different memories in North and South Korea become a source of confusion among North Korean refugees in the initial stage of settlement. What is significant is that North Korean refugees do not have internalized knowledge of being victims of the Korean War like other South Koreans; rather, they have to *learn* that North Korea was the aggressor in the conflict and somewhat responsible for the national tragedy.

The Korean War as a historical fact that urges citizen cohesion in South Korea can be traced in Taek Lim Yoon's (2003) ethnographic work in which she has attempted to reconstruct, through oral and personal histories, how the Korean War was experienced in a village she refers to as Ppalgaeingi Maeul, a communist community in South Korea. In her book, she argues that almost all studies of the Korean War presume that the war was experienced uniformly across the entire nation. She adds '[s]uch an assumption ignores multiple actors and war experiences among Koreans as well as multiple perspectives on their interpretation' (2003: 21; my translation). Her book does not discuss the differences

between remembering the Korean War in the North and South. Rather she focuses more on how individuals and small villages experienced the war in South Korea. However, the underlying assumption here is that while the Korean War was undeniably experienced by all South Koreans, the growing fear of potential outbreak of another war more or less led to fragmented experiences of different peoples in the post-Korean War era in South Korea.

During the era after the armistice of 1953, South Korea actively mobilized anti-communism as a nation-building ideology. In this context, anti-communism required that communist North Korea be presented as a belligerent enemy state. Emphasizing the violence caused by North Korea's invasion provided the necessary platform to rationalize anti-communism as a national ideology and to maintain the bipolar structure of power within the Korean peninsula (Kim 1997). Shin (2006) elaborates on the strong anti-communist sentiment shared by the earliest political leaders of South Korea when he describes the policies of Syngman Rhee (1875–1965), the first president of the Republic of Korea—in office from 1948–1960:

Rhee established anti-Communism as the basis of a new Korea (...) He contrasted Communism to 'freedom and democracy' and maintained that 'the two can't be combined.' For Rhee, communists' support of trusteeship attested to the fact that communism was not compatible with nationalism. (Shin 2006: 155)

Thus, from the moment of South Korea's birth as a modern nation-state, an anti-communism ideology was strongly implemented, with North Korea thereby being constructed as the state in opposition to the South. As a consequence, the 'red complex' pervaded South Korean society and played an important role in controlling social order, taking stronger hold in the beginning of the 1960s (Shin 2006) and continuing until the fall of the Soviet Bloc in the early 1990s. The 'complex' worked as a mechanism to maintain administrative power and caused countless numbers of people suffering and marginalization (Kim 2004; Kim 1997; Foley 2003). Anyone who had family members in North Korea was subject to frequent questioning and was discriminated against in every aspect of social life (Foley 2003). Others who had moved from the northern part of the Korean peninsula during and after the Korean War were labeled 'anti-communist heroes' and were pressured to speak out against the North (Kim 2004). Any association with a person in North Korea was considered 'guilty' as reflected in the principle of *Yonjwaje* (guilt by association) that was practiced until the 1980s (Foley 2003). Thus state-led anti-communism became a personal agenda for every South Korean citizen thereafter until the abolition of anti-communist campaigns. During this time, therefore, it was useful to remember the Korean War: its violence and the damage it inflicted on the people.

However, the 1990s brought both external and internal changes to South Korea that transformed the ways the war and North Korea were remembered. The Soviet Union's collapse not only marked the end of long standing Cold War between the USSR and US, but it brought changes in the ways Koreans began to think of the situation on the Korean peninsula. Timed as it was with German unification in 1990, the disintegration of the Communist bloc suddenly lessened the pressure to continue anti-communist campaigns. South Koreans began to look at the possibility of unification with North Korea, with the German case as a model (Kang and Wagner [eds] 1995). In addition, North Korea's

famine in the mid-1990s instigated a rush of international humanitarian aid to ameliorate the dire situation facing ‘starving North Koreans’. A subsequent exodus of North Koreans to China in search of economic relief (Charny 2005; Chung 2008; Muico 2005) led to a more sympathetic engagement by South Koreans. Non-governmental organizations and religious institutions began to mobilize their efforts to establish refugee status for North Koreans in China. Thus North Korea became a country with internal troubles that needed South Korea’s economic and humanitarian help. Many of the North Korean refugees I met in Seoul related stories from their days spent in the underground shelters and mentioned their meetings with South Koreans who visited their shelters. One of the interviewees (S.Y.) told me in a personal interview (14.7.2008) that when she was introduced to South Koreans over the phone she ‘knew that these were people who would help me. I knew I had to get help from there. It had been a month in China at that time.’ It became possible for South Koreans to meet North Koreans, not as victims and aggressors respectively, but as benefactors and recipients.

Remnants of Cold War culture: a stumbling block

The international and domestic changes seemed to suggest a possible integration with North Korea. However, the penalties of association with North Koreans during the post-war era have imprinted on the South Korean consciousness the need to excise anything or anyone from their daily experiences that is related to North Korea. Meanwhile, the social practice of forgetting earlier unity with North Korea has allowed South Koreans to imagine connections with their northern neighbor only in terms of a place where parts of divided families live—perhaps to be united in some unknown future. As North Korea could be imagined only in the context of *future* national unification, knowledge of the ‘other country’ has dwindled to the point that very little is known of it by southerners. Coupled with the long-term embargo on social contact of any kind, this cultural unfamiliarity manifests itself in encounters between North Koreans and South Koreans in everyday settings. North Koreans can be immediately identified as ‘other’ by virtue of their accents, which contrast strongly with Korean as it is spoken in the South. Furthermore, the language of North Korea is highly diverse in accent; each province has such a distinctive manner of speech that North Koreans can easily identify the origins of other speakers in their homeland. However, such linguistic characteristics are not identifiable to South Koreans, and encounters create discomfort on both sides.

In the fall of 2008, I was walking on a street in Gangnam—one of the affluent districts in Seoul—with a North Korean refugee with whom I was sharing an apartment during my fieldwork; we stopped at a small snack stall for some street food. Our conversation was about shopping for clothes and other mundane things we were going to do together that day. Under normal circumstances, snack vendors or shop owners do not strike up a conversation with unfamiliar customers and I have seldom encountered such an interruption except when with non-Korean visitors. However, suddenly the snack vendor asked my companion where she was from. The interrogation, breaking into our conversation, perplexed both of us and we suddenly became self-conscious about our identities.

Vendor: Where are you from?

Roommate: Excuse me?

Vendor: I asked you where you're from. Your accent is not from here [South Korea]. I know many ethnic Korean Chinese.

Roommate: Why do you ask?

The vendor quickly realized his queries were unwelcome and dropped the subject. The reason for his asking has to do with the large number of ethnic Korean Chinese (*dongpo*) who work in South Korea; the vendor must have been trying to tell us that he was familiar with them—obviously presuming my friend was one also. An almost identical incident happened in a taxi when I was returning home with a North Korean neighbor from dinner. She was telling a story when the taxi driver broke into our conversation and asked, 'Where are you from?' He took us both by surprise and left me speechless. He repeated his question and when we delayed replying, he also said, 'Your accent is not from here.' My companion told him that her parents were from Gangwon-do, a northeastern province of South Korea, and that she always spoke with her parents in the provincial accent. This is clearly not the case with many South Koreans since the national language has been standardized. The taxi driver then commented, 'You speak with an accent because your parents do?'

Such accounts are not isolated to incidents I personally encountered. My interviewee, S.Y., wrote in her blog one day that it made her uncomfortable when one of her patients at the hospital where she worked became more inquisitive about her identity. Her patient had asked her if she was from Gyongsang Province, a southeastern province of South Korea.

I know what the patient is thinking, but I pretend I am engrossed in work and only answer in monosyllables. Every time I am dying from anxiety. Personally I wish the patients would not ask any personal questions. I know I must be kind to my patients as a nurse, but I don't want to open up my personal life to them. But they are always troubled by my accent. (18.09.2009; my translation)

The inability to 'place' the origin of North Korean accents has resulted from the prolonged disconnection with North Korea. From this lack of knowledge springs uncomfortable ambivalence in South Koreans when they learn they are interacting with people from North Korea. Once North Koreans experience such encounters they often resolve to remove all traces of their accents. One young college student whom I met in the winter of 2008 spoke with a perfect Seoul accent and explained in response to my query: 'Of course, do you know how hard I tried to get rid of [the accent]? I practiced and practiced until it was gone.'

Job hunting in particular was complicated by admitting northern origins; owners and managers did not want to hire North Koreans. One of my research participants who came to South Korea in 2007 told me that he was increasingly discouraged from being who he was due to negative reactions he received from South Koreans. He recounted how he had applied for a position as a driver in Seoul, only to be asked where he came from. When he admitted to being North Korean, the owner of the business refused to consider him on the grounds that he would be unable to negotiate the busy streets of Seoul: that his driving skills would not be up to the task. Most South Koreans assume that North Korea is a place without modernity. Despite the fact my informant had been employed for nearly ten years as the personal driver of a police chief in North Korea, the South Korean

owner could not imagine this would qualify someone 'fresh off the boat' to successfully navigate the complex streets of the Seoul metropolitan area. It is a common response among South Koreans, stemming from a general lack of knowledge of North Korea as a place of ordinary modern practices such as operating automobiles. On another occasion, a female informant told me: 'I was told to lie and say I was ethnic Korean-Chinese when looking for a job. No one will hire North Koreans, but they hire Korean-Chinese.'

It is apparent that it is not common for South Koreans to realize they may be speaking to people from North Korea, or even to acknowledge that northerners can be encountered in the course of their daily lives. On the other hand, one of the main reasons for North Korean refugees' not revealing their identity comes from the discomfiture displayed by South Koreans in social interaction with them. North Korean refugees also have an aversion to standing out among others, wanting to be just like everyone else. So when South Korean people notice differences, North Korean refugees quickly hide their place of origin.

People from 'another country'

The erasure of public memory of North Korea and its people in South Korea resulted in amnesia concerning the on-going Cold War, and much of South Korean youth does not consider North and South Korea as linked. Although many nationalists would disagree with this perception, it is the pervasive, public attitude among most South Koreans, and the continuing division heightens the level of discomfiture in social interaction between North Korean refugees and South Koreans, despite the fact that the refugees are admitted to the country as South Korean citizens.

On August 27, 2008, I was walking with a group of North Korean refugees to a cold noodle place near my neighborhood to celebrate Min's² birthday when Ji said, 'Did you hear the news?' A North Korean refugee who had been living in South Korea had been arrested on charges of spying for North Korea. According to South Korean newspapers, an alleged 34-year-old beauty, trained as a spy from childhood and disguised as a North Korean refugee, had infiltrated South Korean military circles in order to send security-related information back to North Korea. She was labeled a Korean Mata Hari and compared to the heroine of a movie, *Shiri* (1993) in which a North Korean female spy infiltrates Seoul with a mission to bomb a stadium.³ When the subject was introduced, some of group said, 'That's why my detective called me today.' Another friend said, 'One of my co-workers called and asked me if I heard the news. So I told him—yeah, I am a spy too.' They discussed the news half-jokingly though all of them declared the suspicions of espionage to be groundless, saying the arrested woman's credentials did not add up to their knowledge of a North Korean spy.

Perceptions of North Korean refugees as potential spies subside after a substantial amount of time is spent in personal interaction between two groups. But this does not change the fact that North Korean refugees are still viewed as causing discomfort to South Koreans, whose collective memory continues to remind them of North Korea as the cause of the Korean War in 1950. In the summer of 2008, South Korean students in seventh grade learned that the ideological war between North and South Korea that had started in their grandparents' time had not ended yet. In addition, they learned that

people who used to belong to ‘another country’ called North Korea are moving to live among them in South Korea. Yet, the seventh-graders are not quite sure of how to interact with incoming North Korean refugees as friends and neighbors. North Korea has been remembered as the aggressor and the enemy; then the lost half of the Korean nation; and, in more recent years, as a distant country with internal disaster which poses a global nuclear threat. The rhetoric concerning North Korea over the past sixty years has framed the northern neighbor as an ‘inorganic’ state; this erasure of memories of North Korea as a country with people and culture much like those in South Korea—in favor of continued ideological framing as an aggressor—is largely responsible for its refugees being greeted on arrival in their new home by uncomfortable and alienated attitudes in the late 2000s.

NOTES

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- ¹ During the post World War II era, the Cold War between the Communist Bloc and the rest of the capitalist world set the stage for the outbreak of the Korean War. During the post-liberation period of 1945–1948, divided occupation forces of the Soviets to the north, and the US to the south, of the 38th parallel produced the physical border that divides South Korea and North Korea today.
- ² The names of North Korean refugees used in this paper are pseudonyms.
- ³ She falls in love with a South Korean secret agent whose job it is to stop her from her crusade of terror. In the end, the spy helps the South Korean agent to find the location of the bomb and ends her own life.

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