

**Epilogue to “(De)Memorializing the Korean War: A Critical Intervention”**

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A curiosity of South Korea’s history is the way in which dictatorships incubate memory. From 1948 to 1954 the regime of Syngman Rhee was responsible for a minimum of two hundred thousand deaths through political murder and massacre, of which roughly thirty thousand were killed in the suppression of the Cheju Rebellion. There were many more massacres when the Republic of Korea military, the national police, and rampaging right-wing youth groups occupied the North in October and November 1950, but we have little evidence of those deaths. Seeking any kind of redress for the demise of loved ones—locally, nationally, through the press, or through the court system—was impossible as long as Rhee was in power. Trying to do anything about these atrocities meant jail, torture, and death. Endless blacklists put the families of victims into a kind of living purgatory. When Rhee was finally overthrown in the 1960 April Revolution, a brief window of democracy opened and victims and survivors were able, if only for a moment, to call attention to what happened, seek redress, build monuments to the dead, or send certain perpetrators—like local police—to their own early deaths. Park Chung Hee closed that window in May 1961 and immediately set about destroying whatever monuments, petitions, and shouted memories might have briefly existed.

In this manner, the personal truths of numberless victims and survivors were muted for four decades, minus a doomed interruption of a few months. What these survivors knew to be true could not be said. It could be remembered, reconnoitered in dreams, visited by ghosts, or suppressed in the unconscious, but it could never be spoken of openly. Getting along in South Korean society meant saying that a rebellious father, son, daughter, or brother was actually killed by Communists.

The *kongsandang* (Communist party) became the ubiquitous signifier for a bogeyman, a Frankenstein, the devil himself. When I taught in a boys' middle school in 1968 in the aftermath of the guerrilla attack on the Blue House and the North Korean seizure of the U.S. spy ship *Pueblo*, the Park regime was engaged in a months-long propaganda campaign described as *pan'gong p'angch'öp*—or “anti-Communism, catch spies.” The entire student body would line up in their Japanese-bequeathed black uniforms and caps, heads shaved, listening to a supposed defector tell them that North Koreans couldn't even have watches and had only thin rubber shoes to wear in the winter. My students would turn in essays about Communists sneaking into their homes in the middle of the night to rape and kill their sisters. All this was a by-product of the ways in which Japanese colonizers had intimidated and terrorized Koreans with their own fierce anti-Communism, rampant for fourteen years after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

When South Korea democratized in the 1990s, suppressed and repressed memories finally had an outlet. The truths about the actual perpetrators of mass violence that a few scholars had dug out of various foreign archives suddenly seemed scant compared to the welling up of personal and popular truths that poured out, often with a thunder of outrage and recrimination. But this outpouring was entirely nonviolent, and the Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a sober, careful venue for these truths to see the light of day. Somehow, after forty years of silence, Koreans seemed to have intuited that their country had suffered quite enough violence. But the memories were alive and burning, and they resulted in dozens of books, documentaries, commemorations, and new monuments large and small—a proper requiem for a people for whom history, personal truth, and family honor are so important. The assembled papers in this special issue detail much of that outpouring, and collectively they make for an important leap forward in our understanding of political violence in postwar Korea and the intertwining of history and memory.

In February 2015 I visited Cheju Island for the first time since 1972. I was with a group of scholars that included Kim Seong-nae, who has contributed so brilliantly to enlightening us about the memories, dreams, ghosts, and traumas that have inhabited the minds of the survivors of the Cheju massacres. I was struck by a sense of time collapsed and refigured: forty-three years is a long time to be away, so to speak, but the beautiful island with its black and obsidian volcanic rock was not terribly different than when I first saw it, on an ordinary bus circling the island. It was less developed than I had feared, and as always, it seems, the weather was perfect.

Until the last century most people were lucky to live to be forty-three; a few attained the biblical three score and ten. But the memorials we saw and the people we spoke with seemed to have a very immediate sense of events that happened almost seventy years ago, to be in close touch with a terrible history, and to have achieved a collective victory that would have been unimaginable during the long decades of dictatorship. That victory is evident in the expansive Cheju Peace Museum, where the names of more than fourteen thousand victims are etched in granite, much like at (and showing the immense influence of) Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC.

Brendan Wright's excellent article in this issue expresses a different kind of reckoning with time. In the 1970s, scholars looking into the Cheju Rebellion had access, for the first time, to declassified American documents that were primary evidence of the unrestrained repression that Cheju people suffered, and *zainichi* (ethnic Korean residents of Japan) also had the freedom to write books and articles about it. But no South Koreans could speak openly about what had happened; to bring attention to these terrible events was to invite a jail term, if not death. Few sources existed in Korean, and scholars in the South avoided the subject altogether. Now we know in gritty detail what happened in Cheju from 1945 to 1954: we know the names of the victims; we can touch those names on granite walls; we can see the leaders of the suppression forces on horseback in vintage film from the period. The very recent reckoning with these events collapses the four decades of dictatorship into a malevolent but ultimately meaningless black hole; what went before and what came after gets brought together with an immediacy that seems to erase time, because all of this is *new* to everyone—including scholars—except for the surviving victims themselves. The victims' truths are now general ones, documented and accepted, a true elegy that is all the stronger for being so unexpected.

A scholar in an archive has many ways to imagine the events she is plumbing, but there is always a nagging sense that one cannot fully know what happened. In this case, what happened in Cheju (a massacre of more than three hundred men, women, and children in Punch'ŏn in January 1949) is denied there (a few Communists were shot, say the authorities). On whose evidence do we place the weight of history? But to have individuals step out of those documents and tell their own stories, decades after the fact, is stunning and deeply gratifying to those individuals, and to anyone who sincerely cares about their experience. John Merrill was the first American scholar to write about these events, and it must be wonderfully rewarding to him that

in the Cheju Peace Museum, the first page of his article—“The Cheju Rebellion” (1980)—is framed and mounted on a wall. I felt humbled and also proud that the museum displayed a photo of me speaking at an event in Osaka commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of 4.3. It is a lucky historian indeed who gets this kind of validation, regardless of the many decades separating the events, and a triumph for victims finally getting to tell their story.

The North Korean memorials and monuments to the Korean War also collapse time, in a different way. As Suzy Kim, the guest editor of this special issue of *Cross-Currents*, writes, to a North Korean professor it isn't a matter of commemorating this war, because the war never ended; they are still fighting it, preparing for it to resume, castigating the same enemy with which no reconciliation has ever happened—American imperialism. When I was with a Thames Television crew in North Korea in 1987, preparatory to the documentary *Korea: The Unknown War*, I was amazed at the immediacy of this war that had occurred nearly forty years earlier. When I told one grizzled woman, a former soldier, that American pilots we had interviewed had denied that they randomly shot peasants in the fields, she exploded: “That's a complete lie! I saw them do it with my own eyes.” My two guides told me how their immediate family members had been lost to the saturation bombing. So there they are, remembering everything and forgetting nothing; and here we are, in the land of “the forgotten war,” where well-informed people can barely get two sentences out about the Korean War without misconstruing its truths. In this way, Americans erase time, memory—and responsibility.

Seunghei Clara Hong writes of “the ironic and troublesome effect of positioning the United States as the authority of truth” about what happened at just one site of massacre and memory, Nogŭnri. Hong's article reminded me of the evening I stayed up late to watch a Pentagon spokesman present and disseminate the final American report on this massacre, which concluded that it was an unfortunate episode in the fog of war, but that there was no evidence of direct American orders to fire on civilians. This was an appalling denouement to the one instance of massacre during the Korean War that ever got serious press attention in the United States (when the Associated Press first broke the story in 1999, the *New York Times* put it on the front page). Many years earlier I had found in declassified U.S. records direct orders to fire on civilians around the same time, but the hair the Pentagon split was to say they couldn't find such records for this particular incident—even though Nogŭnri was just one of many instances of American soldiers firing on civilians. A late-night news conference took place at the Pentagon

with a handful of reporters and a hefty, balding spokesman, who seemed almost to gloat at releasing the “news” that, when all was said and done, nothing serious had happened in this remote village—just some American soldiers violating orders (like at My Lai in Vietnam).

Sunghoon Han’s essay reminded me of the day in 1987 when I interviewed Kim Myong Ja, one of the only survivors of the Sinch’ŏn Massacre, at the site of the crime. She was wearing a silk *hanbok*, her hair nicely coiffed, and she struck me as the solid, reliable mother of four that she said she was, now working in the Revolutionary History Research Center. She had the polite, firm manner and nurturing self-confidence that is so charming in middle-aged Korean women, and before the interview commenced she was happy to answer my questions about her life and family, which I held to a minimum. (She didn’t send many in my direction, which was fine with me since I hoped she thought I was an Englishman.)<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Kim said she was nine years old at the time of the atrocity, and that her father, an official in the local People’s Committee, had been imprisoned shortly after the area was occupied by American and South Korean forces. Her parents and most of her six brothers and sisters died in the war. She attended one of the many schools set up for orphans, eventually graduating from college.

At the time of my interview with Mrs. Kim, the massacre site basically consisted of two big tombs, round and grass-covered—one for mothers and one for children—plus an empty concrete storehouse and a tunnel. We observed a weathered picture of Mrs. Kim as a schoolgirl, her face round and her hair tied neatly in two pigtailed. The storehouse and tunnel became the charnel houses into which some four hundred women and children were herded in November 1950 and kept without food and water for days, while they were prevailed on to reveal the location of their husbands and older sons. According to Mrs. Kim, when the women begged for water for the children, a big American threw buckets of shit on them. After a few days they were doused with gasoline and burned to death, save Kim Myong Ja and a couple of other kids, who found themselves at the top of the heap, near a ventilation hole, when it was all over.

Our Thames Television crew asked some of the locals at this museum who the perpetrators were, and they uniformly attributed the massacre to an American officer named Harrison. When I asked his first name, they said “Dumaiden,” or something that sounded like that in Korean rendering; none of them spoke English, and the event occurred in the vast havoc and chaos of successive, back-and-forth military occupation of the area by all sides. Certainly, Americans were in command of all armed forces in the North, but Hwang Sŏk-yŏng in his novel

*The Guest* says the atrocity took place at the hands of Christians who had fled to the South before the war, as part of widespread killings by both them and their Communist antagonists.

There is no question that an atrocity occurred that day in Sinch'on, because we were later able to compare our visit against newsreel footage taken when the bodies were discovered, and that footage could not have been faked. (Thames Television experts painstakingly counted and measured the bricks in the charnel house wall to verify the authenticity of the footage.) At the time, we could verify nothing, however, about the footage's authorship.

Journalist Eli Schmetzer of the *Chicago Tribune* would dismiss what happened there. He also visited Sinch'on, misspelling it as "Chichon," and titled his account "North Korean Museum Stokes Loathing of U.S." He quoted an unnamed Eastern European: "Chichon stinks. It smells of fraud." Schmetzer went on to say that "each year 300,000 North Koreans are brainwashed at Chichon." All of this is part of the "twisted version of history that North Korea has dished up," warning people that unless they're loyal to Kim Il Sung, "the bogeyman GIs will come back to rape, torture and burn everyone alive."<sup>2</sup> I have never understood how foreigners can spend a few days in divided Korea and pay so little attention to its tragic history, but always come down on the side of truth and right: the North Koreans are to blame.

Recently, I had the opportunity to discuss the liberation period and the Korean War with a PBS team that hopes to produce a documentary on this war. When I mentioned the Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its painstaking work in documenting the myriad of massacres that occurred, they asked me, "What about North Korea? What about their massacres? Doesn't this end up making the North look better than the South?" The implication was that political massacres, like everything else about the two Koreas, had to be molded in the vice of national division—and that if the North didn't come off worse, as it always does in the American media, trouble might lie ahead. I said that the North did not have the imprimatur of the United Nations, or cardinal membership in the "free world," or the continuous support of the United States. Someday, what the North has done will see the light of day, and then we can examine its record. Until then, one should not feel responsible for North Korean behavior, which is almost universally taken to be the worst in the world (whether true or not). Whatever blood is on North Korea's hands is just that, on its hands. But as Americans we bear a deep responsibility for bringing into being and then supporting to the hilt a murderous regime. The easiest thing in the world is to denounce this or that North Korean crime. What is hard is to scrupulously examine a

sordid history, with clear eyes and sincerity. In that way, the scholars in this special issue finally pay the occluded memories of thousands of victims and survivors what is simply their due.

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**Notes**

- 1 For a longer account of our visit to Sinch'ŏn, see Cumings (1993).
- 2 Eli Schmetzer, "North Korean Museum Stokes Loathing of U.S.," *Chicago Tribune*, August 31, 1989.

**References**

- Cumings, Bruce. 1993. *War and Television*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Merrill, John. 1980. "The Cheju-do Rebellion." *Journal of Korean Studies* 2: 139–197.