

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

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

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Speaking to veterans on July 27, 2013, at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, President Obama declared the Korean War a victory for the United States in an effort to challenge its status in American memory as a forgotten war. It is worth quoting his remarks at length to appreciate the change in emphasis on the war’s “victory” from what had previously been a focus on the hardships of an unknown war:

That July day, when the fighting finally ended, not far from where it began, some suggested this sacrifice had been for naught, and they summed it up with a phrase —“die for a tie.” . . . But here, today, we can say with confidence that war was no tie. Korea was a victory. When fifty million South Koreans live in freedom—a vibrant democracy, one of the world’s most dynamic economies, in stark contrast to the repression and poverty of the North—that’s a victory; that’s your legacy.

When our soldiers stand firm along the DMZ; when our South Korean friends can go about their lives, knowing that the commitment of the United States to the security of the Republic of Korea will never waver—that is a victory, and that is your legacy.

When our allies across the Asia Pacific know—as we have proven in Korea for sixty straight years—that the United States will remain a force for peace and security and prosperity—that’s a victory; that’s your legacy.

And for generations to come, when history recalls how free nations banded together in a long Cold War, and how we won that war, let it be said that Korea was the first battle—where freedom held its ground and free peoples refused to yield; that, too, is your victory, your legacy.¹

The Korean War does not stand alone in this renewed effort to valorize American interventions during the Cold War. The last several years have seen milestone anniversaries of two American wars in Asia—the Korean War and the Vietnam War—that have generated a grandiose rhetoric of victory for two of the deadliest wars of the twentieth century outside the

two world wars. The sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War Armistice Agreement in 2013 prompted the president to claim victory in his speech at the Korean War Veterans Memorial. In the previous year, the administration issued a presidential proclamation for an unusually long thirteen-year program to commemorate the Vietnam War, designating the period from May 28, 2012, through November 11, 2025, as the official tribute to the fiftieth anniversary of the war, at a cost of five million dollars per year.² Observing March 8, 1965, as the date when thirty-five hundred marines were deployed to start the American ground war in Vietnam, formal events are planned throughout 2015.

The year 2015 also marks the seventieth anniversary of the division of the Korean peninsula, an action proposed by the United States (and accepted by the Soviets) at the end of the Asia-Pacific War in 1945. Indeed, American involvement in Vietnam must also be traced back to 1945, when the United States threw its support behind France in its bid to recolonize Vietnam. How can we explain the turn of perspective toward such triumphalist rhetoric at this point in time? Similar to the Vietnam War, but in a much shorter span of only three years, the Korean War resulted in an estimated three million civilian deaths, and the unended Korean War continues to elicit tensions along the demilitarized zone dividing the two Koreas, and throughout the Asia-Pacific region today. But unlike Vietnam, where American veterans have engaged in projects for peace and reconciliation with Vietnamese partners, peace in Korea seems like a distant dream at best.³

The purpose of this special issue is twofold: first, to engage in a *critical intervention* into the memorialization of the Korean War among the chief participants—the two Koreas, the United States, and China—to disrupt monolithic understandings of its origins, consequences, and experiences; and second, to do so as a necessary step toward *reconciliation* by placing divergent public memorials in conversation with one another. The collection of articles presented here pursues a comparative study of Korean War memorials and museums through a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, from sociology and history to ethnic studies and comparative literature, and brings together scholars in North America and South Korea. Not only does it incorporate the different positionalities from which scholars located across the Pacific think through the memorialization of the Korean War, but the different disciplinary strengths highlight the importance of connecting the macro with the micro, visibility with narrativity, and Asia with America. The collection also deliberately challenges the contained history of the Korean War

that limits it to a three-year period between 1950 and 1953 by including the five years leading up to the war and explicitly exploring the way in which the unended war continues today.

A consistent thread running through this interdisciplinary framework is the effect of the Cold War and its neoliberal aftermath on our perceptions of historical time and the geometries of space. Key geopolitical turning points in the 1970s *détente* and again in the 1990s dissolution of the Soviet bloc structured a specific sense of historical time—as either the apogee or the demise of the socialist project—made visible through memorialization projects in all four states, but particularly noticeable in China and North Korea, as illustrated in the articles by Keun-Sik Jung and Suzy Kim. Meanwhile, the dramatic expansion of globalization in the post-Cold War world required mediations between the global and the local in discourses about peace and justice in the neoliberal era. In South Korea and the United States, public spaces, including memorials and museums, have been increasingly privatized, leading to charges of “Disneyfication,” while state violence and war have been justified as the necessary price of (economic) freedom, as dramatically depicted in the articles by Daniel Kim and Seunghei Clara Hong.

Even while the “hot” wars during the Cold War in places like Korea and Vietnam have been critically examined, the uneven effects of the incomplete dissolution of the Cold War are often overlooked. As Brendan Wright’s article demonstrates, the “politicide” committed during the Korean War continues into the present in the way civilian massacres are memorialized to exclude those labeled as “Communist.” Using two of the best-known cases of civilian massacres in South Korean history perpetrated by South Korean armed forces in the lead-up to and during the war—Cheju and Kōch’ang—Wright takes the collection back to the civil origins of the war in his examination of the Cheju 4.3 Incident, named after the April 3, 1948, armed rebellion of Cheju residents against state violence before all-out war in 1950. The South Korean Constitutional Court’s December 2014 ruling disbanding the Unified Progressive Party, which it deemed a threat to national security, is a sobering reminder of the continuation of forms of politicide even after the so-called democratic transition. Meanwhile, Sunghoon Han shows in vivid detail just how anti-Americanism is continuously fostered in North Korea through its own contested history of civilian massacre in Sinch’ŏn, so that the Korean War is very much an ongoing war in the North. The Korean peninsula is thus at the center of the vortex where the Cold War lingers in various guises, most directly as a result of the unended Korean War. In that sense, this special issue calls into question the “end” of the Cold War, and opens up for critique

what the “post” in the post–Cold War is meant to signify. What specifically ended with the onset of the post–Cold War, and what was inaugurated by the declaration of the Cold War’s end?

Inescapably, the unended Cold War is embedded in this collection, too. Sunghoon Han, as a South Korean scholar, could not visit the Sinch’ŏn Museum in North Korea and had to rely on secondhand photos and publications for his article, while I, the guest editor, failed to include scholars from China and North Korea for the special issue. Also, the essays collected here should make plainly visible the Cold War politics surrounding the naming of the Korean War. While the use of English may bypass the burden of staking a claim, the competing references to the 6.25 War, the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War, and the War to Resist America and Aid Korea do not fully capture how fraught the process of naming is in the original languages. In South Korea, the use of “6.25” (*yugio*) to name the war with the official “start” date “expunges the war of its social context and political causes to isolate the timing, and the North’s action on that day, as the most salient feature that defines the nature of the war,” as Jae-Jung Suh points out (Suh 2012, 4). But one could also argue that many events of political significance in South Korea are denoted by dates, such as “4.19” to refer to the 1960 April Revolution and “5.18” to denote the 1980 Kwangju Uprising. In fact, “6.25” avoids having to refer to Korea in the Korean language, which would necessarily invoke the difference between the North and South. While the official respective state names use “Korea” in the English translation, North Korea uses “Chosŏn” in its Korean rendering of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (Chosŏn minjujuŭi inmin konghwaguk), whereas South Korea uses “Hanguk” as a shortened form of the Republic of Korea (Taehanminguk).⁴ Faithful to its allied status with North Korea and its own role in the Korean War, China uses the character from Chosŏn (朝鮮) for its rendering of the war as the War to Resist America and Aid Korea (抗美援朝), in which Korea implicitly refers to North Korea.

Deliberately paying attention to such fissures, this project takes a cue from James Young’s comparative study of Holocaust memorials across Germany, Poland, Israel, and the United States, which notes how “in every nation’s memorials and museums, a different Holocaust is remembered, often to conflicting political and religious ends” (Young 1993, ix). In the same way that Young sought to challenge processes of memorialization through comparative analyses of memorials as sites of political articulation, this collection of articles seeks to highlight the consequences that the unended Korean War carries in the present in its memorial

representations.⁵ In addition to detailing how the memorials distinctly reflect on the past, each of the essays is concerned with how the memorialization projects act as obstacles toward reconciliation in the present. In other words, the purpose of the special issue goes beyond simply evaluating the memorials for their historical accuracy in representing the Korean War (an important issue in its own right) to critically assess the process of memorialization: to what end have the memorials been constructed, how do they influence contemporary politics, and how can we reimagine and reinvent the memorialization process itself toward reconciliation?

In pursuing such questions, the present issue addresses past histories, present impacts, and future expectations that the memorialization projects communicate through memorials and museums dedicated to the events of the Korean War. Foregrounding the interconnections between visual form and narrative content, the articles in this volume attend to both the visual discourse and historical narrative to offer new ways of understanding the Korean War that complement, yet are distinct from, written texts in the construction of social meaning surrounding the war. Rather than pitting visibility and culture against politics and history, we integrate the two to consider the sites of memorialization as sites of mass participation in the reproduction and resignification of the Korean War. Building on studies that have shown that museums are never as stable as they may seem, even while acknowledging the powerful medium that these institutions provide as ideological sites for the modern state, the essays in this volume have the common task of sifting through the minutiae in each of the sites to highlight the fissures and fractures embedded within them that contest any facile understanding of the war, even from an official standpoint. By pointing to the disjuncture *within* official memorial sites, the essays cautiously contest the disciplinary function of such public institutions (pace Foucault), adopting Andreas Huyssen's conceptualization of museums as spaces that include excesses beyond purported aims. As he states, "No matter how much the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and affirms the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory" (Huyssen 1995, 15).

While the power of state ideology may seem most acute in the museums and memorials of China and North Korea, the common juxtaposition between official memorialization with vernacular memory (as domains of "state" versus "society") simplifies the process of memorialization that in fact implicates both sides and the extent to which public and vernacular

projects constitute each other through negotiations among government officials, scholars, curators, and the viewing public—even under state socialism. Rather than indicting the memorials for how they “indoctrinate” the masses through subtle mechanisms of governmentality, the present approach reveals ruptures, controversies, disputes, alterations, and challenges even in the physical forms of memorialization that would seem fixed. Architecture can be remodeled, sites can be relocated, and narratives can be refashioned, but most importantly for our purposes, the comparative study of Korean War memorials can resignify the process of (de)memorializing the war as one method of reconciliation.

Discussing the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of Korea (TRCK) and the contested narratives about the Korean War within South Korea, Jae-Jung Suh argues that the “war is not just an epistemological object of historical inquiry, but also a site of contestation where different epistemological projects clash” (Suh 2012, 1). In that sense, Korean War memorials directly embody these contestations around what is worth knowing about the war: how do we understand the origins of the war; what were the primary events of the war; what were its major effects; and whose experiences are worth remembering? As a civil war that was also an international conflict and that continues to divide the two Koreas and directly affect relations among them, the United States, and China, looking specifically at Korean War memorials and museums side by side can destabilize official narratives as a method by which divergent views can communicate, even if political leaders are far from doing so.

Indeed, this collection of essays offers multiple examples of subversion even within a single site. As Keun-Sik Jung demonstrates, despite normalization of relations between China and South Korea in 1992, Chinese memorialization of the Korean War expanded in the post–Cold War era with a major renovation of the localized museum in Dandong that reopened in 1993 as a national Memorial Hall of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea. In step with this trend, the once-peripheral memorialization project entered the capital, where the Military Museum of the Chinese People’s Revolution in Beijing opened a new exhibit devoted to the Korean War in 2000, on the fiftieth anniversary of Chinese entry into the war. With the renovated museum, the Korean War exhibit was singled out to portray China “as a peace-loving nation that only reluctantly entered this war to counter American and foreign imperialist aggression” (Denton 2014, 131), joining the globalized discourse of peace. Despite such awareness of China’s global reputation, Chinese memorialization of the war unsettles spectators

nonetheless, not only for those from the United States with charges of American germ warfare, but also for those from South *and* North Korea. China's war memorial displays the "white tiger" flag from the defeated South Korean military unit captured by the Chinese in July 1953, just two weeks before the armistice, as well as a North Korean letter dated October 1, 1950, requesting Chinese aid, which was signed by Kim Il Sung and Pak Hŏnyŏng. It is common knowledge by now that the relationship between North Korea and China has never been as smooth as once believed, but the flag and the letter together serve to emphasize China's dominant position vis-à-vis both Koreas, disclosing the identity of the rival to Kim Il Sung, who was purged directly as a result of his failure to reunify the country.

Although far from taking responsibility for the miscalculations in initiating an all-out war of reunification, as Sung-Hoon Han poignantly shows, even North Korea's premier site of anti-Americanism had to acknowledge the roots of the war as a civil war by including the role of the Korean rightist youth in the Sinch'ŏn Massacre. Han's examination of the Sinch'ŏn Museum reveals why North Korean historiography insists on holding American imperialism responsible for the war even while incorporating Korean complicity, differentiating between individual crimes and structural causes. This distinction led to a surprising forbearance by North Korean authorities against the individuals that committed the massacres. Unlike the localized nature of South Korean memorials dedicated to civilian massacres, the Sinch'ŏn Museum presents its massacre as the archetype of civilian massacres, not as an isolated instance of the unfortunate tragedies of war, but as the very systemic consequence of it, in this case attributed wholly to American ambitions.

On the other side of the Pacific, Daniel Kim shows how the National Museum of American History likewise betrays the less-than-triumphant reality of the war that ended in an "uneasy" truce, with no comparable depiction of the enemy, as in the nearby World War II exhibit. Despite the overarching narrative of the Korean War as a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union, a placard in the Korean War exhibit explains that Kim Il Sung launched the war and that the "Soviets supported his decision," belying its own Cold War narrative. Through a comparative analysis of the influence of private capital, modern digital technology, and neoliberal ethos found in both Washington, DC, and Seoul, Kim also exposes the unstable contradictions in South Korean memorialization of the war by pointing to the dramatic differences between the 2011 and 2013 exhibits at the War Memorial of Korea. Despite

the hard-won successes of the South Korean democracy movement, the striking narrative shift that took place in the two short years that coincided with Park Geun-hye's election to the presidency goes to show just how erratic the political landscape can be, and how quickly the national security state will coalesce to reinforce Manichean views of the war.

Ensnared within the 6.25 narrative of North Korean attack on innocent South Koreans, Seungheui Clara Hong shows the limitations of the Nogŭnri Peace Park to adequately redress civilian massacres perpetrated by American soldiers, who are simultaneously presented as South Korea's saviors from Communist domination. We see here that even the tragedies of civilian massacres cannot escape the post-Cold War narrative of triumphant neoliberalism, celebrating individual enterprise and sacrifice. Even when memorialization projects are pursued by civil society as a form of counter-memory against state-sanctioned master narratives, the Nogŭnri example shows in heartrending detail the extent to which they are constrained by the continued Cold War binary now sustained by the hegemony of neoliberalism that enables a triumphant end to the historiography of the Cold War. In this triumphant narrative, even massacres must become "consumables," as part of entrepreneurialism in generating tourist revenue for the local government. Caught between the hegemonic orders of anti-Communism and neoliberalism, it is no wonder that the victims that emanated from this dual imperative are replaced by those who can embody the entrepreneurial spirit.

Similar kinds of contradictions are exposed by Brendan Wright in his discussion of the Cheju 4.3 Peace Park and the Kŏch'ang Memorial Park. Even as each site embodies the heroic struggles of bereaved families to bring justice for their loved ones, each site is localized and isolated from the others, unable to present a holistic counternarrative to the 6.25 discourse and to hold the South Korean national security state accountable for the politicide committed against its own citizens. It may be too much to ask that memorials dedicated to the victims of civilian massacres also carry the burden of challenging the state's master narrative. As both Hong and Wright point out, despite the limitations of memorials dedicated to civilian massacres, it was only through the Herculean efforts of the bereaved families and their supporters that the memorials exist at all. And in that sense, their very presence is a humbling reminder of our own deficiencies in completing the arduous task that the survivors courageously began. The localized victim-centric focus of each of the three civilian massacre memorials that seem to stand

disconnected, unable to reference one another, must be understood then as another casualty of the unended Korean War.

All the articles attest to the fact that the unended Korean War mutually sustains and is sustained by the Cold War in East Asia—as a “living monument to the Cold War’s deformities,” in Wright’s words. The reason why so many of the South Korean memorials marshal the now-global language of human rights and peace must be understood as part and parcel of the post-Cold War neoliberal order, in which the “victory” of liberalism over Communism is presently used to confirm that state violence against “Communists” was the right course of action all along. From this perspective, politicide is justified as mere collateral damage—unfortunate but necessary—in the fight against the evils of Communism to protect human rights and world peace. Here, Clara Hong is quite right to ask, as she does in her article, “What peace? Whose peace?” In the present post-Cold War order, the silence of these memorials on the systemic nature of civilian massacres that could hold the liberal governments in the United States and South Korea accountable to their own standards of human rights and peace, while troubling, is not surprising. Even the museums in China are not immune to this global discourse of peace. Indeed, the diametrically opposed narrative strategy embodied in the North Korean museums that centers on the structural geopolitics of America’s role in the Korean War as an extension of its Cold War falls on deaf ears today as mere propaganda, precisely because of the current post-Cold War order.

As I have tried to show in my own contribution to the collection, the multiple relocations and renovations of the memorialization project in North Korea across the last sixty years is powerful proof of the desire to obtain a sense of closure for an unended war that resists closure. From the first relocation of the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in 1974, to the addition of the war monument in 1993, and finally to the latest renovations in 2013, these spatial reconfigurations can be observed even from afar by using the technologies of Google Maps, providing geographical traces of the shifts in North Korean memorialization of the war according to the ebb and flow of the Cold War itself. Vietnam offers the perfect counterpoint to situate North Korea, not only because of the impact that the victorious end of the Vietnam War had on North Korean imaginings of the Korean War, but also because Vietnam’s war memorialization today contrasts so greatly with North Korean claims to victory and victimhood. Needless to say,

such difference must be traced to the opposing ways in which the two wars ended, and their respective status in the post–Cold War order.

The clashes in between the sites and within each site of memorialization, as illustrated by each of the essays, are just one indication of the unendedness of the Korean War. But rather than seeing them as failures—whether as failures of ideological state apparatuses, as historical inaccuracies, or as technological breakdowns—the collection underscores such “failures” as opening up the possibility to acknowledge mistakes and differences. While it is tempting to declare victory in any conflict, it is precisely the “end” of the Cold War that has foreclosed the capacity to address the unended Korean War. To return to the questions with which I began this introduction, the triumphalist turn in American memorialization of the Korean War and the Vietnam War is the very symptom of declaring the “end” of the Cold War, in which history and politics are no longer relevant in the post–Cold War era. The post–Cold War ushered in not the end of the Cold War, but the “end of history.” It thus barred any viable alternatives to challenge the limitations of the (neo)liberal present, moving us beyond time and space to a globalized, homogeneous place without history, where all aspire to a universal liberalism.⁶ Resisting this move, the conflicting narratives of each memorial examined here together enable debate over the multiple meanings and perspectives underlying the war. Although the reputed fixity of physical memorials makes reconfigurations of past and present challenging on the surface, this comparative volume breaks new ground by offering war memorials as “forums,” as sites of “experimentation and debate” toward what Martha Minow describes as a path “between vengeance and forgiveness” to open up a dialogic process in the spirit of reconciliation (Minow 1998, 21, 138).⁷

An exploratory model for how memorials might facilitate reconciliation was provided in 2005. On August 15 of that year, the sixtieth anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule, North and South Korea held a joint ceremony, in which northern officials visited the National Cemetery in Seoul in an unprecedented move first suggested by Pyongyang (Sō 2010). While the visit purported to celebrate the anniversary of national liberation by honoring the martyrs of the independence movement buried at the National Cemetery, the vast majority of those buried there are *southern* soldiers who died during the Korean War and the Vietnam War. The unexpected visit by northern officials attests to the power of “historical reconciliation” (*yōksa ūi hwahae*) as an important step toward political rapprochement. It seems appropriate that

war memorials, as sites that honor the dead, should become sites of reconciliation. And in that sense, it is all the more fitting that Bruce Cumings dwells on his own encounters with the sites of civilian deaths in his epilogue to this special issue. He reminds us of the importance of remembering the victims and survivors of the war, remembering the “localities” and “specificities” of the war rather than “mythologizing” it, in the words of Suhi Choi (2014, 91). If reconciliation, by definition, means bringing disparate elements together, to syncretize and settle differences, it is only by comprehending and acknowledging those differences that we can begin to talk about lasting peace. Only then can the Korean War museums and memorials truly commemorate the dead and console the living—not by glorifying war, but by reminding us of what has been lost.

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Notes

- 1 “Remarks by the President at 60th Anniversary of the Korean War Armistice” (July 27, 2013), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/27/remarks-president-60th-anniversary-korean-war-armistice> (accessed July 7, 2014). Previous statements tended to take a more muted stance, valorizing American veterans who stood their ground despite harsh conditions. For example, President Clinton declared, “Korea was war at its worst” (see “Remarks by President William J. Clinton at Korean War Memorial 50th Anniversary Celebration” [June 25, 2000], <http://www.defense.gov/specials/koreanwar/clinton.html>, accessed July 7, 2014).
- 2 “Presidential Proclamation—Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War” (May 25, 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/25/presidential-proclamation-commemoration-50th-anniversary-vietnam-war> (accessed July 1, 2014).
- 3 For examples of efforts by Vietnam War veterans working for reconciliation and mutual healing, see PeaceTrees VietNam (<http://www.peacetreesvietnam.org/>), a Seattle-based

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- humanitarian organization working in Central Vietnam to assist those whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by land mines, and the Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign organized by Veterans for Peace (<http://www.veteransforpeace.org/our-work/vfp-national-projects/agent-orange/>).
- 4 Chosŏn is the name of the last dynasty (1392–1910) before Korea’s colonization by Japan, whereas Taehanminguk was used by the self-appointed exile Korean government in Shanghai during the colonial period that was led by Syngman Rhee, who was to become the first president of South Korea.
- 5 Rather than distinguishing between memorials (as “places to mourn”) and monuments (as “celebratory markers of triumphs”), this volume adopts Young’s formulation of memorials as “memory-sites” (heroic or tragic) and monuments as a kind of “plastic” memorial. See Young (1993, 3–4).
- 6 It should be obvious by now that the term “post-Cold War” can be used in two disparate ways: first, as a critique of the Cold War and its binary frame and, second, as a description of the historical period after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc as the “end” of the Cold War. My point is to challenge the latter.
- 7 For the idea of memorial as “forum,” see Cameron (1972).

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