KOREA POLICY INSTITUTE

SEEKING PEACE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

A KOREA POLICY INSTITUTE READER

2020

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THE CONTINUING KOREAN WAR

LITERATURE OF MEMORY STRUGGLE
Hyun Ki-young | April 3, 2020

Many writers have unbearably painful or tragic memories of their youth and choose to become writers as if ordained by fate. Such memories lingering in the writer's mind, as a residue of oppression and resulting chronic depression, likely had a decisive influence in their choice of occupation. Literature is freeing or liberating. The writer creates novels to liberate the oppressed self by escaping and transforming into one of the characters in the novel. If, for example, our psyche is distorted through oppressed concepts of sex, it may be liberated through the figuration of sex in novels. The memory of a tragic incident which I experienced as a child was suppressed within me. It was the memory of the Massacre which occurred in response to the April 3rd insurrection [on Jeju Island] in 1948. The brutality of the experience had made me stutter and I suffer still to this day from chronic depression. The pain of the Massacre persists among all Jeju Islanders, including myself. The collective inferiority complex suffered by most Jeju islanders and myself simply had to be relieved through literature. I felt that I had to somehow break away from the bondage of the Massacre to pursue my career in literary circles – my literary spirit could be released only when my spirit was free from all forms of subordination.

I decided to write a novel on that very subject, to relieve myself from the oppression I felt and to pay my debt to the victims of the Massacre. I had been away from my hometown since I left to attend college in Seoul. There, I was able to gain a better view of my hometown, just as one gets a better view of the forest only when away from the trees. For nearly thirty years, the Massacre was the worst taboo in Korean modern history. Only when I was able to gain distance from the source of the oppression was I able to witness my feelings surface from the obscurity of my subconscious. The Massacre, a taboo that no one dared to speak of, took the form of a gray cloud on a gloomy winter day, just like the clouds that weighed down heavily from the skies of my homeland Jeju. Sometimes, Jeju would look like a dark spot blotted out of the map, just like the 130 villages and hamlets burned to the ground and turned into ashes after being raided by the military and police. I felt sorrow and wrath stirring inside me and coming to life. I could not disassociate my homeland Jeju from the hurt that I felt. My homeland was a huge prison floating on a dark sea at the end of the world. A brutal massacre of an unseen and unheard-of scale was taking place on an island isolated from the world by the sea. Islanders were dying under the false charge of being insurgents or communists.

Those who barely survived became blinded by fear. The Massacre was a taboo no one was to speak of. Their lips froze at the mention of the incident. They were victimized so severely that the incident was internalized, taking root as second nature. The islanders

developed a sense of inferiority, defeatism, and self-deprecation as well as a blind terror towards authority and ironically an absolute envy towards the central government. I myself felt similarly oppressed. In my short story "Tale of the Sea Dragon," I write:

> The scene of the nightmare, the years of haunting dreams, those were his hometown. It represented everything he yearned to forget and discard. It was understood as the direct opposite to happiness or making his way to the world.

Once I set my mind on the subject, it seemed like a crime to write about something else. I planned to write four or five short or medium-length stories on the Massacre before I returned to "pure literature." I thus looked back to my homeland with a different perspective and I realized that it was not that different from assessing myself in an objective manner. To focus on my homeland and the tragic incident which occurred there as my subject matter was none other than to place myself, a particle of the scene, under intense scrutiny. It was a whole new way of looking at my homeland as well as myself.

I finally situated myself in the realm of taboo. Having been only a child of only six or seven years when the Massacre occurred, I had limited memory of the incident. I had my work cut out for me. I needed to conduct extensive research, which I found quite challenging. I looked for data at the National Library only to find records that were either unreliable or severely geared to the extreme right. I could not repress the sadness I felt when one day I found two years' worth of newspaper articles omitted from the *Jeju Daily* rack. It seems that the Massacre was brutally deleted from modern history. Korean modern history was written by the winners. They recorded memories that pleased them, while stifling or crossing out those of the losers.

I concentrated on collecting eyewitness accounts in search of the truth [of the April 3rd Jeju Uprising] which was distorted as a pro-communist revolt. This was not as easy as I had thought. The collective memory of the people seemed to have been ruthlessly shattered by the policy to obliterate the memory of the incident from the people's minds. Nearly three decades of policies to deliberately crush memories of the Massacre by successive dictatorships have frozen the lips of the islanders. The majority voluntarily killed the memories themselves since it was virtually impossible to live on without trying to erase the brutal scenes from mind.

I was working as a high school teacher at the time and visited Jeju Island every vacation for two years. I had such a hard time gathering information from the witnesses (survivors) who obstinately refused to recount their memories. Even my close relatives chided me for opening an old wound and hesitated to cooperate with my research. One

old lady couldn't stop shedding tears as she held my hand, telling me how I resembled her son who had died in the Massacre. However, she also would not disclose her story, keeping it buried deep in her heart until the end. I had no other choice but to go back, sharing the tears with her. As I worked on my story, I hoped that I could express the inconsolable resentment, wrath, and fear of the survivors who lowered their voices, stammered, sighed, and cried. In the process of writing their heartbeats, blood, and sweat, I had a peculiar feeling of being able to identify with them, as if the tribulations endured by the protagonist in my story were mine. Many times I sat at my desk at night alone writing with tears flowing. I realized firsthand that literature is the only way one can indirectly obtain experience.

There was a photograph taken during the Cambodian civil war in which a young boy is staring into the camera at the top of a staircase by the front door. The house is half destroyed with bodies lying on the ground. Roland Barthes annotated this photograph, stating that the look in the eyes of the boy is what the dead had endowed him with to share with outsiders who have no idea what it is like to be at the scene. Through the eyes of the boy, the outsiders are able to witness the tragedy and the dead. I was the boy. It is the obligation of the survivors to tell the story on behalf of the dead. As a survivor of the Massacre, I was obliged to look at the world with the same expression of the boy in the photograph.

To my surprise, my first work addressing the Massacre, *Sun-i Samch'on* (*Aunt Sun-i*), published in the summer of 1978, was well received. Writers are affected not only by the works of others but also by their own work. This is because the statement made through one's work cannot be taken back and thus that exerts a firm grip on the author. A writer who has made a strong impression on the reader can seldom be free of the expectations or demand of his or her readers. Readers rooted for me and my efforts, and I answered by producing three more short stories on the subject. Then came the unbearable anxiety. Would I be able to remain unscathed after having written so provocative a message? I thought I was ready to face whatever it took, but the fear became real after the stories were out. I secretly prayed that the authorities would let my writing pass just this once, and I'd never write about that topic again.

But they did not. The publication of *Sun-i Samch'on*, a compilation of short stories on the subject seemed to have been the last straw and I was snatched away by the military secret service and taken to the basement of their headquarters. I was treated no different from a dog. The caning turned my body black and blue. My heart still beats at the haunting memory of torture. My body still recalls the fear and pain. The torture made it clear that the Massacre which took place thirty years before was still an important issue

and I felt like the last victim of the incident. The bruise from the caning disappeared about two weeks later but the mental scar still lives on, victimizing me until this day.

I was tortured for three days, day and night, incarcerated, and released after 25 days. I was arrested again several months later, this time by the police. About twenty days before the arrest, I knew I was being watched. Until the arrest, I felt like a sitting duck waiting to be caught. I was so anxious and fearful that I lost almost 8 kilograms. It seemed the police originally planned to press formal charges against me. However, the Massacre was no small issue and they feared they might attract unwanted attention by presenting the case in front of the court. So I was released and my book was banned from circulation.

After the incident, I became depressed and unsure of myself. I stopped writing for more than a year, relying on alcohol to soothe my pain and despair. Then one night I had a dream. A woman in mourning clothes appeared, admonishing me to get up and rise above the weight of my despair and continue the mission I was ordained to complete. The woman was none other than the protagonist in my own creation, *Sun-i Samch'on*.I realized that this fictional figure was alive within me. She had already been transformed into an entity in reality. Amazingly I was able to regain the strength to write again after I awoke from that dream.

The Massacre was not limited to the armed uprising which took place on April 3, 1948 in protest of the establishment of a separate government in South Korea, excluding the north. It included the process of suppressing the uprising and the resulting massacre of at least 30,000 civilians by the military police. The foremost and imminent goal of the nation, at the time, was the abolishment of the demarcation line (separating Korea into north and south) and the clearing away of the evil legacies of Japanese colonial rule. Liberation from the Japanese, however, brought about another kind of occupation. The general sentiment among the people was that a new nation should be established by a united government, not by separate governments founded in South and North Korea. If Jeju Island was ever in any way culpable, it was perhaps that it was the most aggressive in expressing its opposition to a separate government.

One year before the Massacre struck, the islanders held a March First protest. This was, in a way, a precursor to the Massacre. On March 1, 1947, people organized an outdoor rally demanding the pull-out of American and Russian troops from the peninsula in order to achieve true independence. The (Korean) police under U.S. control fired at the protesters, killing six people and hurting ten others. The general strike subsequently launched by the islanders in protest of this atrocity was met not by an apology, but by brutal oppression. The entire island was accused of being pro-communist. It is well

known that the police roundups, terror, and torture committed by the police under the auspices of the American Military Government resulted in many deaths, triggering the April 3, 1948 uprising.

The general strike in which almost all islanders joined speaks volumes of the communal nature of the island. The cohesiveness of the island community stems from a long history of fighting against outside forces that harmed the community. Jeju is a rocky island formed in the middle of the ocean from the ashes of volcanic eruptions. Its inhabitants are as strong and willful as the deep root of the weeds. Its barren soil forced all residents, including the upper class and the literate to labor in the fields in order to have three square meals a day. It was a poor community but the members were equal. This is how the islanders had developed a strong sense of community: their consciousness that they were in the same boat. The islanders who lived in a tight-knit society like the weeds intertwined in the barren soil faced two kinds of outside intrusions. One was the foreigners that invaded the island — the Mongolians, Japanese pirate raiders, Imperial France, and Japan. The other was the central government which had nothing to provide the islanders, but seized every opportunity to take away from the island. The politicians in exile, banished from the central government also played a role in this anti-central government sentiment. The Island was the disposal site for fallen politicians whom the central government wished to banish. So the island has had a long history of small and large-scale resistance against the central royal government which exercised severe discriminatory policies against the island while exacting an inordinate amount of tribute and harsh military obligations from the islanders.

Those who are oppressed and exploited tend to resort to Messianism. They long for a savior or a hero who will come to their rescue with a vision of new life and save them from misery. Islanders referred to such a hero as Jin-in, or “true man.” The crying lips of at least 10,000 aggrieved subjects were thought to be necessary for the far-away royal government to hear them out. This required extraordinary bravery since leaders of such insurgencies were invariably decapitated. The birth of a hero in the remote island suffering from discrimination amounted to nothing more than an insurrection that always ended in the execution of the hero accused of treason. The heroes whose lives ended in death were “true men” (Jin-in, 眞人) who sought to save the people by sacrificing themselves.

The uprising, therefore, was an extension of a tradition of resistance characteristic of the island’s history, not, as the ultra-rightists claim, a communist proletariat insurrection. The island, painted red by the extreme right-wingers, became the stage of indiscriminate massacre. What the islanders thought of as resistance in the traditional sense produced a totally different result from what it had in the past. Unlike the past in

which the heroes' lives were sacrificed in return for the deliverance of the people, the leaders in the April 3rd uprising faced a tragic situation in which they not only found themselves but also the people killed. The islanders were in a state of total shock as they unsuccessfully tried to make sense of the unfamiliar scene of massacre unfolding before them. At the time the Massacre was under way, the president of the United States was Truman and Korea's ruling elite tried to deceive the people into thinking of Truman as the Messiah by translating literally his name as Jin-in (眞人).

The impact of the incident seemed as grave as the atomic bomb explosions on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The magnitude of the violence was such that at least 30,000 civilians, or one-ninth of the total population, were brutally murdered and 130 villages scorched. The Massacre took place as part of the strategic framework of U.S. policy. Can the United States profess innocence simply because it didn't bloody its hands? The fact that the scene of genocide was void of U.S. presence and committed by Korean soldiers in American military uniforms and boots does not excuse the United States of the crime. War inevitably makes humans act more impulsively and instinctively. The United States took full advantage of such human nature and granted a so-called 'license to kill' even to the lowest-ranking snipers, bringing out human savageness to its maximum. Under the cloak of the Military Advisory Council, the United States remained invisible throughout the Massacre, hidden inside the warships that formed a blockade around the island, inside the landing ship tanks, and the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) offices in Jeju County. They understood perfectly well that the most efficient way for the occupiers to quell an insurrection is to create a war among those under subjugation and to refrain from direct involvement in the bloodshed. The following is an excerpt from my short story "Steel and Flesh":

> Whose crime is this? The machine gun? The shooter pulling the trigger? The officer making the orders? The battalion commander who handed down the decision through the walkie-talkie? The regimental commander? Or the U.S. Military Advisory Council? Someone in the higher ranks? Who stands at the top of the commanding pyramid? Was Truman really a "True man"?

Orders from the top were mechanically delivered to the lowest level. Mechanical thinking was void of any human element and everything was alarmingly simple — the mid-mountain areas were the base camp for the human and resource flow for the guerrillas. Therefore, everything, including human lives, had to be completely destroyed. Cold harsh steel machines automatically moved at the press of a button. The fingers that press the button need not bloody their hands. To them, the death toll is merely a statistic with hardly any scent of blood involved.

On the battlefield, it is impossible to disobey orders from the top. Under the circumstances that even innocent people such as children, old men, and women were the target of indiscriminate killing, the solders might console their guilty consciences by saying to themselves: “Exactly so, they are reds. They are but reds.”

It was actually quite simple — the Massacre, which killed at least 30,000 innocent civilians, erupted in the process of eliminating 200 or so young men who revolted (on April 3, 1948) without any proper weapons, armed only with their insuppressible wrath. There was at the time a saying “kill a hundred with one culprit” which meant if you killed one hundred civilians, there was bound to be at least one guerrilla among them. So is it the case that 30,000 civilians were brutally murdered to get rid of 200 guerrillas?

The United States and the ruling government colored eighty percent of the island red and called it the “Red Island.” Red at the time meant death. When I was tortured by the military secret service, they too called me a “red writer,” trying to frame me as pro-communist. But the only red they saw was the blood clot in my middle finger crushed by their torture. Had such an incident taken place in 1948, I would surely have been shot.

So many civilians were killed, branded as pro-communist during the Massacre which was dubbed the “Red Hunt.” This wasn’t necessarily limited to “hunting down the communist.” As was the case in the Massacre, “Red Hunt” is a somewhat ironic term which refers to the historical practice of framing innocent people as communists. The term borrows its form from the “witch hunt” of medieval times during which a huge number of women were branded as evil witches or deemed to have communicated with witches and were sacrificed in the name of religion. Modern times saw history repeating itself by once again sacrificing numerous civilians in name of ideology, falsely charging innocent people as communists.

Truman was head of the U.S. administration both in 1948, the year of the Massacre, and in 1950, the year of 6.25 War (Korean War). It was also in 1950 that “McCarthy’s tornado” took place in the United States. It seems that the term “Red Hunt” was frequently mentioned during the period of intense anticommunism called McCarthyism. Hundreds of government servants lost their jobs, while writers, artists and intellectuals were branded as communist sympathizers by ultra-rightists. But how different the “Red Hunt” in the United States was from that which had unfolded in Jeju — indiscriminate massacre of innocent lives.

"Hunt" is a term used for animals not for humans. "Rabbit hunt" or even "witch hunt" might make sense because a witch is not human. "Red hunt" must operate under the premise that communists are not human. When Spaniards ruined Mayan civilization in the 16th century and slaughtered the Mayan people, the Catholics granted themselves an indulgence in the heinous killings by deciding that the indigenous peoples were non-human — that they were closer to animals than humankind. To kill without any sense of guilt, the target must be either an animal or an inferior human, in other words, a savage. Such logic was behind the carnage perpetrated against Native Americans by the pioneers during the westward expansion of the United States to the Pacific coast.

The equation that communists were non-human was behind the Massacre. Communists were not "people of leftist ideology," but inferior beings, or savages. Those who killed such "savages" were exonerated of any sin. The problem was, however, that out of the 30,000 victims, only a small number were pro-Communists while the majority were innocent civilians. Atrocity was committed under the name of civilization. In my short story "Steel and Flesh," the following appears:

> Oh, how mysterious, unbelievable, incomprehensible. It is truly a tragedy, unseen and unheard of. How can humans so brutally crush fellow humans? Animals are rarely slaughtered in such manner…. To destroy evidence, they poured gasoline and burned the bodies which, they said, smelled much like burning pork. So did the murderers, through the familiar scent of burning meat, confirm once again that what they had slaughtered were indeed not human but animal? No, not at all. They left the scene in haste, covering their noses with queasiness.

I had employed harsh terms to describe the cruelty of the Massacre. The beauty of camellias fallen upon the snow, for example, is used, in a distorted manner, to portray the image of decapitated heads soaked in blood tossed on the snow. Narratives used in documentaries were used instead of traditional methods of writing novels. I hoped to share with my readers the utmost sense of urgency of the indirect experience I acquired while conducting research and during the compilation process.

I continued my exploration of the Massacre, which started with the production of literary works, by participating in organizations and campaigns. The quest for truth with regard to the Massacre was part of the democratization movement during the 1980s. The quest, which continued under intense fear [of repression], was a struggle against the conspiracy of concealment, denial, and distortion committed by the ruling government, and against indifference and cynicism by the general public. The democratization movement finally claimed victory in the 1990s after a long and difficult struggle. The campaign to shed light on the truth of the Massacre also bore fruit — the

Special Law on the April 3rd Massacre was ratified by the National Assembly five years ago [on December 16, 1999]. It was truly a feat, a miracle for Jeju residents.

This is, however, just the beginning. Although discussing the memory of the losers and victims is now to some extent allowed, it will take much longer to quell opposition from the ultra-rightists and to replace the official memory with the truth. It is one thing to accommodate the memory of the innocent victim, but quite another to reinstate the memory of the loser [as the prevailing social memory]. It is perhaps impossible for the time being. This is precisely why the struggle to remember the Massacre must continue. Unfortunately, the Massacre is too quickly fading away from the psyche of the general public. No sooner had the incident recovered its shine from the darkness than it lost its glitter. Just as the buzzwords of the 1980s such as "history," "the people," and "the populace" faded away, the Massacre also faces the danger of disappearing from people's minds, caught up in a short-circuited materialistic society. The atrocity committed during the incident has yet to be identified before fading into oblivion.

The entrance at Auschwitz still bears the following message: "There is one thing more fearful than Auschwitz. It is that mankind might forget." It is an epigram warning of the possibility of history repeating itself, whether it be for individuals or for the entire society that chooses to forget. In *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the term "rememory" appears. Rememory is a word to emphasize the meaning of memory, or the behavior of continuously trying to remember. Sethe, an escaped slave and mother, lives with the ghost of her dead baby daughter. *Beloved* signifies the importance of re-remembering the painful past, racial discrimination, and cruelty. The ghost and its character enable such an intense subject matter to be presented in artistic form. I remain envious of Morrison for possessing such extraordinary powers of artistry.

In retrospect, the sorrow of the Massacre was far from the delicate and profound sadness often expressed through "pure literature," but rather a fierce and painful sorrow amid heaps of bodies, blood, and crying. One can easily understand why Theodor Adorno argued that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Literature has a bad tendency of evading social issues and harsh reality in favor of fantasy, romance, and fiction. Literature favors melancholic sadness which humans can tolerate. It is therefore difficult to find literature that deals with dead bodies, blood, screaming, cries, or formidable pain. Readers also instinctively shun such novels. Sorrow and misfortune are allowed only when they are part of overall happiness in a novel. Daniel Defoe shied away from the plague and the dead bodies he witnessed and wrote fictional tales such as *Robinson Crusoe*, as did Montaigne who was able to concentrate on his *Essais* without uttering a word on the religious wars which entailed merciless slaughter. Then again isn't it human nature to try to look at the bright side? Who wants

to deal with a world of dead bodies anyway? Isn't it a fact that the survivors of the Massacre themselves keep trying to forget the dreadful memory?

Even if this is the case, it would be impossible not to mention such horrific incidents in literature. As Roland Barthes put it, this is because the living are endowed with the inevitable responsibility to reveal the truth for the dead, no matter how painful and fearsome the experience is. The living owe it to the dead to enable the dead to declare their bitter grief. The responsibility lies especially heavy on writers. Literature should not look the other way from blood, crying, dead bodies, or sheer hell simply because they represent a world totally different from that which we call art and beauty. So what if our work becomes non-literature, even anti-literature? If we as writers embrace the view that the pen is an obligation as well as a right, the survivor of a horrible incident and outsiders observing the scene alike shall not hesitate to speak their minds and show interest in the hidden truth.

Hyun Ki-young is a Korean novelist who was born in Jeju Island. He made his literary debut in 1975 when his short story "Father" received the top award in the Dong-a-Ilbo Spring Literary Contest. His works include his celebrated story Sun-i Samch'on, originally published in 1978 and republished in a new English translation as Aunt Suni by Asia Publishers in 2012; Byeonbang-e Woojineun Sae (Howling Crows on the Border, 1983); Majimak Taewoori (The Last Horse Herder, 1994), a collection of short stories that was awarded the Oh Yeong-su Literary Prize in 1994; Asphalt, a collection of short stories that received the Shin Dong-yeop Literary Award in 1986; Baram-taneun Seom (Windy Island, 1989), a novel that received the Manhae Prize in 1990; and Jisang-e Sootgarak Hana (One Spoon on this Earth, 1999), a novel that was distinguished with the Hankook Ilbo Literature Prize in 1999. He served as the chairperson of the National Literary Writers Association and as the president of the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation. He was the first director of the Jeju 4.3 Institute and a representative on the committees that organized the fiftieth, sixtieth, and seventieth anniversaries of the 4.3 incident. In recognition of his critical and courageous role in unveiling the truth about the 4.3 incident through his fiction during the military dictatorship era as well as his tireless efforts to ensure that this history is not forgotten, he was awarded the third Jeju 4.3 Peace Prize in 2019.

EXCAVATING THE HIDDEN TRUTHS OF THE KOREAN WAR

The Korea Policy Institute | April 5, 2020

A KPI Interview with physical anthropologist Park Sun-joo.

On December 27, 2019, the Korea Policy Institute (KPI) executive board spoke with Park Sun-joo, a physical anthropologist who has spent the past two decades excavating the remains of the Korean War dead, including unarmed civilians massacred by the South Korean police, military, and right-wing villagers. Since the establishment of South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2005 and its shutdown by the Lee Myung-bak administration five years later, Park, as one of the sole osteologists in South Korea, has continuously been at the forefront of efforts, both government-driven and nongovernmental, to illuminate the truth of wartime atrocities perpetrated against civilians, weathering the shifts from liberal to conservative administrations and back again. His current archival work is almost entirely donor-driven.

KPI: Could you tell us about the kinds of projects you are working on now?

Park Sun-joo (PSJ): To answer this question, I feel that you need to understand what projects have been worked on. Things started in 2000 when the government actually gave us funds to excavate the remains of soldiers. In South Korea, these soldiers are described as having been "killed in action" whereas in the United States, I believe the term used to describe them is "missing in action." I was the investigation committee leader from 2000 to 2008, and this project is still ongoing. In 2008, the South Korean president authorized a nongovernmental noncombatant excavation project.

The second project started in 2005 when a truth-and-reconciliation law was passed. After that law passed, from 2007 to 2010, the government conducted an initial survey to register all the victims of massacres or civilian victims. During the initial registration period, 168 [massacre] sites were identified, and the government selected 30 sites to investigate the mass killings that occurred there. During that three-year period, however, they only investigated 11 sites. They were able to identify about 1,700 remains.

The law then expired and did not get extended. Although people repeatedly petitioned and undertook actions to get the timeline extended or make it permanent, these efforts were not successful. In 2014, many civil-society organizations gathered to organize support for a second phase of the truth-and-reconciliation process. But the Legislation and Judiciary Committee of the National Assembly hasn't passed the law authorizing a second phase yet. The National Assembly right now is a bit chaotic. The law was supposed to be passed or examined this year [2019], but this year is almost over.

So, in the meantime, until this gets nationally funded, civil-society organizations have formed joint investigative teams, with volunteers coming from all fields. These teams have conducted the seventh investigation at the sites. The findings from these investigations were used to put more public pressure on the National Assembly to pass a law that would formalize it as a national project.

Each local government has its own legislative body and ordinance-making power. Locally, Asan City and North Chungcheong Province have funded three separate excavation projects. Last year, in 2018, in Asan City, as you might have seen in The New York Times article, 208 people's remains were discovered at an abandoned gold mine site. They were able to identify 58 victims between the ages 2 and 12, and 85% of the remains were identified as female. They are guessing that these were families of "communist sympathizers" who worked for the People's Army at the time of the great retreat on January 4, 1951. During the Korean War, some of the most excruciatingly painful incidents occurred during the January 4 retreat. But these incidents are not broadly known by the public. Based on findings from the Asan investigation, I presented at a public event in January 2019 in New York.

The New York Times article mentioned another excavation in Asan City. Although investigators didn't find many remains, the bones yielded a lot of DNA, which they were able to match to family members.

In North Chungcheong Province, with funding of this project continuing until 2022, they are hoping in March to excavate remains from another site.

The government has a plan to create a facility for memorial services. In and around Daejon City, they are trying to create a public park for all the civilian victims. There will be a contest for the park design, under the title, "Memory and Remembrance." They plan to move all the remains to this memorial park, which is supposed to be finished by 2022.

My third project focuses on Korean conscripted labor in Japan and in the Pacific during the Japanese colonial period. Geographically this extends beyond Japan to the Pacific, including sites like Saipan. From 1997 to 2005, people from civil-society organizations volunteered at an excavation in Hokkaido where they found 150 people's remains. In 2016, they moved these remains first to Shimonoseki and then to Seoul. They were able to inter all of the remains in Baekje Public Cemetery. The Korean government, by the end of the Moon Jae-in administration, intends to repatriate between 700 and 800 remains.

The fourth project I am working on is identifying the remains of the people who were killed during the colonial-era independence movement. We have been trying to find Ahn Jung-geun, the martyr who killed the Resident-General of Korea, Ito Hirobumi. We now know the whereabouts of his burial. From 2006 to 2008, we collaborated with North Korea on an excavation in Yosoon (Lüshun District, Dalian), China. We did not succeed in identifying Ahn's remains, but we were able to narrow down where he might be buried. The South Korean government continues to support this project. One of the one hundred promises Moon Jae-in made was to find Ahn Jung-geun's remains.

One of my most recent projects is locating the remains of the Sewol Ferry victims. In Mokpo, they were only able to find 5 people's remains out of 9.

I have briefly gone over the five major excavation projects, both national and private, that have taken place after the liberation [Korea's 1945 liberation from Japan].

People ask why we do these excavations. Our answer is that it is really important, first of all, to establish national identity and, second of all, to uplift human rights within the country. In my personal opinion, I believe that without the firm establishment of national identity and human rights, Korea cannot become a developed country. In Korean society, civilian deaths during the Korean War are not well known. In fact, these deaths have been subjected to the greatest historical distortion. Because Korean history, especially around the Korean War, has been distorted so much, we are trying to correct what has been distorted with truth. The remains that have been excavated are proof of what happened. They testify to past wrongs. They also hold meaning for rites for the dead. For the surviving families, the excavation of massacred civilians begins to redress the mistreatment they suffered. For the last 70 years, they have been treated by the entire community as families of "Reds," or similar labels.

A separate issue is what the government should do for the families of the massacred. First of all, the truth has to be investigated and illuminated. Secondly, what has been lost must be restored. Thirdly, the dead must be memorialized. Fourthly, there must be compensation. Fifth and last of all, there must be broad education about human rights. These are what we demand from the government.

What's absolutely necessary is a specialist, an expert who can oversee excavations, forensic testing, and memorial services. Because I have expertise and experience in these three areas, I have been at the forefront of these activities for the last 20 years. I am also the chairperson of the preparatory committee for memorial services. Regrettably, not too many young scholars are interested in this kind of work, but the continuation of these projects requires young blood.

The biggest problem is that there are no professors who can teach forensic anthropology in college. This is why new scholars are not emerging. Culturally, Koreans regard it as a taboo to touch a dead person's bones and remains. However, there are too many surviving families in the Korean population, and too much unresolved han remains. For this reason, this discipline really needs great attention and support.

KPI: How do you organize memorial services, especially in situations in which surviving families have been living side by side for the last 70 years in the same communities with those who perpetrated the massacres?

PSJ: For the last 70 years, the families of the massacred have been labeled as communists or communist sympathizers and thus were not able to participate in public life or assume any public position. Guilt by association precluded them from becoming officers in the army, municipal employees, national government officials, or judges. They could not serve in any legislative body, and they were regularly surveilled by the police. Members of these families were not able to get a better education, and even if they were educated properly, they were not able to get good jobs. As a result, they became disgruntled or voices of dissent against the government.

Furthermore, most of these people were not able to get out of Korea, go overseas, or travel. Given their similar situation, these people got together often, and then created family associations of the victims of massacre during the Korean War. There are about twenty such associations throughout South Korea, and they are housed under an umbrella organization, the management of which is, of course, very hard. There's a lot of infighting within these associations. Financially speaking, they are not very well off either, so they represent a really unhappy demographic in Korean society. Conservative administrations found it difficult to embrace these people. Yet even the Moon Jae-in

administration has similarly struggled to satisfy survivors and families of massacred civilians.

People who were living—and still live—in the same villages, often in rural, under-developed areas, know who the aggressors and victims were. Because the sense of victimization is still very strong and persists into the present, reconciliation won't be easy. Ten years ago, when we were conducting an investigation in Asan City, we relied on the testimony of people who perpetrated the massacre. Our hope was to narrow down the possible burial ground so we inquired with people who were still alive. When we returned, they refused to answer our questions. They were saying, "I don't remember," or "I don't know." Most refused to talk because after they first testified, they were given the cold shoulder by the rest of the village. During the Korean War, four Hong families were killed by the rest of the village, and no one really talked about it for 70 years.

In another instance, when I came to the United States, I learned there was a survivor of a massacre at an abandoned gold mine who was 6 years old at the time. The survivor was later able to immigrate to the United States and now is living in the DC area, yet he still regards Asan City as his hometown. He came to the excavation site at Asan City, and when we found the bones of a one-and-a-half year old, he actively participated in a DNA test. It wasn't a match, but what this survivor shared of his recollections was illuminating. As a child survivor, he was struck by the fact that the wealth and property of the people who were killed were taken away and shared among the villagers. That's why no one wanted to talk—why no one came forward to talk about these cases.

It's well-known that in 1996, the U.S. government released a trove of declassified documents, some of which were about Daejeon Sanrae Village. During the Korean War, about 1,800 to 7,000 people were estimated to have been executed in that city. One of the declassified photographs showed an ROK army officer whom people were able to identify. In 1996, this person was a really famous conservative figure. He was the chairperson of the board of directors of a private university, his daughter was a dean of a college of the university, and his son in-law was a three-star general in the ROK army. In South Korea, there are still aggressors in society. Some of these war criminals are still in power. This makes it hard to find the truth.

KPI: How much national media coverage has there been about the kind of work you're doing and related to this, how much popular awareness? Is your work beginning to make an impact on public thinking about the Korean War? Or is the violence of the war still an issue neglected by big media, even as it remains important to communities and those most affected?

PSJ: The major media outlets are The Choson Daily, The Joongang Daily, and The Dong A Daily. Unless the story concerns ROK army forces or Ahn Jung-keun, the independence fighter, these newspapers do not cover our excavation work. Their indifference is intentional. Only small papers like The Kyong-an Daily, Hankyoreh, or The Seoul Daily cover the massacres, and they only reach a certain target audience, not the general population. This is not a popular topic that most people are keenly aware of.

Among those people who are reading about this, though, there is a generational gap in understanding and looking at this issue. Older people usually say, "It was inevitable—all the communists were executed" or "Because it was during the war, executions without due process were justified." The more democracy-minded younger people usually state, "These massacres were not inevitable. They could have been avoided, and now must be revisited. The truth has to come out." However, since the excavations are not covered by the national media, popular media, or major media, few people are aware of these projects. Maybe one day popular major media outlets will cover these projects.

KPI: In talking to villagers, have you uncovered any evidence of U.S. involvement in these atrocities or at least knowledge by the U.S. government of what was going on?

PSJ: I offer a cautious answer. People on the left tend to believe that everyone in the ROK army knew that the police and ROK army killed civilians. I would rather say that there were a few political soldiers or a few special agencies within the ROK army that were responsible for these massacres.

A few years ago, I was involved in the No Gun Ri excavation. Many people had concluded that American soldiers killed No Gun Ri people. Yes, the killing may have been carried out by American soldiers. But it might not have been intentional because the location of the shooting suggests they were trying to prevent people from coming out of the tunnel, not trying to kill everyone in the tunnel. Further investigation might be needed. Factually speaking, I can just state that a few declassified photos indicate that U.S. officers were present at the No Gun Ri site, and there are also stories and testimonies that corroborate what these photos reveal.

KPI: Because we are in the United States, we are concerned about U.S. intervention in the Korean War.

PSJ: As a physical anthropologist, I cannot arrive at the conclusions that need to be made by other scholars and other experts. For example, at the No Gun Ri excavation,

people remember different stories and rumors—the latter mostly because they didn't really see what was happening. Let's say there was a lot of bombing or shooting targeting the people along the railroad where they were walking. During the excavation, we should have been able to find shells by the railroad. We did find one, which enabled me to conclude that there was bombing or shooting along the railroad. But was it intentional, and was it aimed at the people? My field doesn't enable me to say, "Yes" or "No." At No Gun Ri, when we were excavating, we found so many bullets around the walls of the tunnel at the entrance. This suggests that they weren't really trying to target the people inside but maybe trying to prevent them from coming out. Uncovering the truth requires the involvement of more experts.

KPI: Could you speak further about what's holding the National Assembly Legislation and Judiciary Committee up in terms of funding for excavation of these Korean War massacre sites? Is the Moon Jae-in administration supportive or are these excavations a low priority?

PSJ: Initially, we believed that after Moon Jae-in entered into office, the law extending the truth-and-reconciliation process would pass right away. The work we are doing is very important but it doesn't appear to be a priority for his administration. The current government plan is to finish the establishment of memorial service facilities on a national level by 2021. After that, the goal is to embark on major excavations at 360 identified sites. The latter, however, requires funding, manpower, and the creation of an agency that will oversee the process. For the last decade, National Assembly members have been preoccupied with the question of how to form this agency. Should it have six or nine people on the steering committee? Such matters are not of any importance to people in the field, but they constitute the main debate in the National Assembly right now. At issue seems to be some kind of political back-and-forth between the conservative and the democratic parties.

KPI: Do you know of any excavation projects taking place in North Korea? Have you collaborated on any excavation projects with North Korea?

PSJ: There are remains in South Korea of Chinese or Korean soldiers or combatants that are identified as "enemy" forces. About three years ago, there was a control room in the South Korean Ministry of Defense that communicated with the Chinese Ministry of National Defense and shipped all the remains identified as Chinese to Shenyang. However, if the remains were identified as North Korean, they are still interred in the Cemetery for North Korean and Chinese Soldiers in Paju. I have demanded that the repatriation of North Korean remains be an agenda item during the joint South and

North summits. This would enable us to ship the remains to the North and in turn to receive what North Korea has identified as South Korean soldiers to us.

This year, at the Arrowhead Mountain former combat site near the DMZ, the North and the South were supposed to embark on a joint excavation project. But when it started, the North Korea team did not show up. The South Koreans did a little work and then North Korea also did its own excavation. I'm not aware of any other collaborations between the North and the South.

If remains are identified as American, North Korea sends those to the United States because of political or financial reasons. The incentive is mostly financial. There was a rumor in the field that for each set of remains, North Korea received $50,000 or $80,000 or something like that.

KPI: How have Koreans living in the United States responded to your work? Are they drawn to it or do they want to keep distance from this history, as well? How have they responded when you've shared your work?

PSJ: I presented on my work twice in the United States, once in New York and once in Washington, DC, as well as later in Osaka and Okinawa in Japan. People who were directly impacted tend to take polarized views. Either it was all done by the government, thus sole accountability resides with the government, or they are very critical about the excavation projects, align with the wartime government, and refuse to listen to the other side. What's needed is a more balanced view, an objective perspective that concedes that atrocities in war can happen. To adhere just to one side makes it hard to hear the other side of the story. This applies not just to overseas Koreans but also to the government and people in South Korea. In light of the widespread lack of knowledge about civilian massacres during the Korean War, those of us who disclose the facts also need to have more balanced presentations so that people will believe what they are told.

KPI: What are your sabbatical plans? What will you be working on while you're here and when will you be returning to Korea?

PSJ: I retired in 2013, but I had to get back to the field, once the excavation projects started. I don't teach anymore, but I would like to retire from fieldwork, as well. It looks likely, however, that I'll be able to hand over these projects only when the governmental agency that oversees the project is installed. Until then, I have to keep working. My family lives in the United States. I'm the only one living in Korea. I'm currently in DC to visit my family during winter vacation and will be here until the end of January [2020].

Once the excavation starts in Asan City in March, I will have to be there. The law extending the truth-and-reconciliation process has to be passed very soon.

KPI: Do you have any thoughts about what an institute like ours can do to support your work?

PSJ: People in Korea and overseas Koreans really need education and information so that we can create a better society where people can live and come together as a unifying force. I ask you to join in this work.

We really need the truth-and-reconciliation extension law to pass. If overseas Koreans write or contact National Assembly members, that might draw some positive attention. Alternatively, you can send volunteers to aid in the excavations. Three-to-four days—or a week—would be good. We need a lot of people. Being there at the site and feeling what really is happening is educational and meaningful.

KPI: We can work on those things, and after you go back to Korea, we would like to follow your work and publicize it too.

THE KOREAN WAR AT 60-NOW 70: NO EXIT

Bruce Cumings | June 25, 2020

This op-ed column, originally submitted for the 60th anniversary of the Korean War start, was killed at the last minute by a prominent newspaper on June 24, 2010, despite having been commissioned by that newspaper. KPI runs it now, in 2020, on the seventieth anniversary of the start of the Korean War, as it is controversially periodized. While the incidents specified in the op-ed are now a decade old, the stalemate it laments is unfortunately current. Despite the 2018-19 burst of summits between the United States, North Korea, and South Korea that led to joint declarations of impending peace and rapprochement and despite an upsurge in citizen activism such as the 2015 visit to North Korea organized by Women Cross DMZ, peace on the Korean peninsula remains maddeningly elusive.

The Korean War at 60: No Exit

In July 1987 I arrived in London to work on a documentary film. When I went through customs the officer asked me what the film was about: "the Korean War," I said. "The old one, or the new one?" he asked, since tens of thousands of protesters had just clogged the streets of Seoul. He might ask the same question today, given the crisis over the Cheonan, the South Korean warship that was blown out of the water in March (2010). Or at one of any number of points in the past 65 years: Korea is the best example in the modern world of how easy it is to get into a war, and how desperately hard it is to get out. 25,000 American soldiers landed on this peninsula in September 1945, shortly after Dean Rusk drew a line no one had ever noticed before at 38 degrees north latitude. Today 28,000 remain, and the war has never ended. Those troops arrived, ostensibly, to hold off guerrillas under the command of Kim Il Sung; today our troops hold off his son—and his grandson. No exit might be the best epitaph for Korea, "the forgotten war."

Today (in 2010) is the 60th anniversary of the conventional start of this war, and in August (2010) will come the centennial of Japan's colonization of Korea. Both events are inextricably related; the Kim regime traces its legitimacy back to guerrilla struggles that began when Japan established its third major colony in 1932, the puppet state of Manchukuo. Surviving guerrillas and their offspring formed the core leadership of North Korea in 1948, and ever since. Meanwhile 80,000 U.S. troops in Japan and Korea stand in for the strong Japanese military that existed before 1945, so even today we don't know what an independent Japan would look like, and our occupation of Okinawa still rankles enough to have brought down the Hatoyama government earlier this month (June 2010).

The North inhabits its own time machine, beating against a strong tide they call American imperialism. Its generals prepare not just to fight the last war, but structure their entire society as a fighting machine determined, sooner or later, to win a victory that was palpable for a moment in 1950 but has exceeded their grasp ever since. The result is a garrison state, perhaps the most amazing one the world has ever seen, with well over one million in the military and another six or seven million in the reserves—in a population of 23 million. They drape a totalized shroud over their people to keep them from being tainted by their American nemesis, yet in so doing they endow their eternal enemy with an enormous weight.

American diplomacy has its own recalcitrant timelessness, its own default positions that last decades and get nowhere: those nasty, incorrigible North Koreans really have to be punished for—seizing the spy ship Pueblo in 1968, trimming a poplar tree in the DMZ in 1976, blowing up the South Korean cabinet in 1983, dumping 8000 plutonium rods out of their reactor in 1994, launching a long-range missile in 1998, another one in 2006 (on *our* Independence Day), a first atomic bomb in 2006 and a second one in 2009 (on *our* Memorial Day), and finally the Cheonan. But the punishment doesn't bite or just further isolates a regime inured to seclusion. North Korean provocation is intrinsic to and perfectly situated within the unchanging logic of conflict since the armistice in 1953: they create an incident to get our attention; we can only respond haltingly and ineffectively, because to aggravate or escalate the problem might lead to a new war, and that invokes another default position: there is no military solution in Korea, a truth we learned the hard way in 1953, and still valid today.

Another default principle in Washington: North Korea stands for nothing, has no support from its people, and will soon collapse. Since the Berlin Wall fell a bipartisan consensus has adhered to the axiom that North Korea will soon "explode or implode," the current expression being Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's mantra that a power struggle is going on in Pyongyang since Kim Jong Il's alleged stroke in 2008; this has now led to the absurd proposition that the Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa must ready itself to swoop into the North and corral any and all "loose nukes" if the regime collapses. Monarchical succession is one of the few things Pyongyang does well, because Koreans have been doing it for centuries; when Kim Il Sung died in 1994 there was barely a perturbation in the top leadership. (Loose nukes, though, might be rattling around any one of the 15,000+ underground facilities in the North—and good luck to the Marines).

A third Beltway default says the U.S. is always better off with the conservatives in power in Seoul. These days American diplomats applaud the revival of a close alliance with the current administration of Lee Myong Bak, after years of estrangement under

Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyon. But those two presidents were the products of Korea's democratic revolution, whereas Lee harks back to his halcyon days as a favored businessman under dictator Park Chung Hee. Along came the June 2nd elections, on the heels of the Cheonan tragedy, and voters broadly repudiated Lee's ruling party. Presidents Kim and Roh planted the seeds of reconciliation with the North, and they have taken deep root regardless of what we may think.

The party of long memory in Pyongyang has braced itself against the pressures of past, present and future since 1945, up against the greatest military power in world history. Americans think they know this story, of a vain, feckless, profligate, cruel and dangerous leadership, symbolized by Kim Jong Il, soon to *be* history. But American leaders know neither the nature of this war nor the resilient qualities of their enemy (give the North another decade, and the regime will have been in power as long as the Soviet Union). This blindness is not a matter of forgetting; it is a never-knowing, a species of unwilled ignorance and willed incuriosity, which causes us time and again to underestimate the adversary—and thereby confer priceless advantage upon him. Finally, there is the evil, grinning specter of the war itself, reaper of millions of lives and all for naught, because it grinds on, it endures, it never ends. It returns in myriad forms —memory, repression, trauma, ghosts, the deaths of 46 more Koreans on the Cheonan— to taunt the living, as the odds-on survivor of Korea's tragedies since the thoughtless division of this ancient country.

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THE UNC'S TIME IS UP: DMZ JURISDICTION SHOULD BE TRANSFERRED TO S. KOREA

Lee Jang-hie | May 24, 2020

Originally published in *Hankyoreh*

In his New Year's address for 2020, South Korean President Moon Jae-in announced plans for an independent inter-Korean cooperation effort to usher in an era of "individual tours" to North Korea in a bid to achieve a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations amid UN Security Council sanctions against the North. This was then fully contradicted by US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris, who said in a talk with the foreign press that Seoul's policies for individual tours in the North needed to be discussed within the South Korea-US working group framework. To date, the UN Command and the US have obstructed South Korea's efforts on numerous occasions to enter the DMZ to conduct inspections for the linkage of South and North Korean railways and roads or for other non-military purposes.

These kinds of remarks from the US ambassador and obstructions of inter-Korean exchange and cooperation efforts by UNC have been enough to infuriate South Koreans. The public has begun to catch on to the fact that the main reason inter-Korean agreements have not been implemented has to do with UNC and the US.

What are the legal issues surrounding UNC, and what sort of exit strategy might be developed for the future? To answer this question, we should first consider UNC's history and legal standing.

After the Korean War broke out on June 25, 1950, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 84 (S/1588) on July 7 of that year. This resolution assigned the name of "unified command" to the unit commanding armed forces deployed from 21 countries to aid South Korea, with the US government appointing its commander and permission granted to use the UN flag alongside the flags of the participating countries. The unified command was also required to report all of its activities to the UNSC. The unified command unit was formed the following July 24 in Tokyo. Without consulting with the UN, the US government changed its name to "United Nations Command" (UNC) and appointed Douglas MacArthur as its commander. The result was to give the appearance that the unified command represented the UN's armed forces.

As the UNC headquarters were relocated to Seoul on July 1, 1957, the commander assumed the concurrent roles of USFK commander and commander of the South Korea-US Joint Chiefs of Staff Command. Seven UNC branches are currently in Tokyo, where

they are to provide logistical support alongside the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in the event of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula.

After the Korean War ended, then-South Korean President Rhee Syng-man refused to sign the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953, leaving UNC as the only signatory on the South Korean side. On July 14, 1950 – 10 days before UNC was established — Rhee transferred operational control for the South Korean military to the unified command (UNC). When the South Korea-US Combined Forces Command (CFC) was established on Nov. 17, 1978, the UNC's operational command was transferred once again to the CFC, where it remains to this day.

A DMZ guard post with the UN and South Korean flags flying over it. (Republic of Korea Army website)

UNC's purpose is to cooperate toward peace agreement, not prevent it

As the only signatory from the South Korean side to the Korean Armistice Agreement on July 27, 1953, the UNC's duties involve managing that agreement, preventing military clashes and acts of hostility, and spearheading a peace agreement. This is why the UNC holds authority to approve passage over the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) and entry to the DMZ. But now these duties of the UNC are posing a major obstacle to the effort of linking inter-Korean railways and roads. Rather than cooperating toward a peace agreement — which should be its biggest responsibility following the Apr. 27 Panmunjom Declaration in 2018 — it is instead finding faults with and hamstringing inter-Korean exchange and cooperation efforts. The same is true about its overzealous micromanagement of the DMZ.

The UNC's reluctance to cooperate with inter-Korean exchange and cooperation efforts and its stringent controls on access to the region have their legal basis in the UNC and the US State Department's refusal — based on a UN resolution from Oct. 12, 1950 — to recognize South Korea's jurisdiction over the region north of the 38th parallel, and their sole recognition of the transfer of administrative authority on Nov. 17, 1954.

But in terms of the legal nature of the UNC, the official stance of the UN Secretariat is that it is unrelated to the UN, as it does not report any of its activities to the UN and is not subject to any UN controls. In an official response to a question about the UNC's legal nature in 1994, the then UN secretary-general replied that it was not a lower-level UN institution, but an institution subject to US controls. Indeed, it is US military

authorities who appoint officials in the command. This means that the US is wearing the "cap" of the UN Command, making use of it to sustain its vested interests.

The UNC is a multinational armed force under US leadership. The seven UNC branches in Japan provide an avenue for a renewed invasion of the Korean Peninsula by the JSDF in the event of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula. This is why the UNC should not be intervening excessively in inter-Korean exchange and cooperation efforts in non-military areas, even within the framework of UN sanctions.

Already, the dismantling of the UNC is being discussed at the international level. The command took a major hit to its prestige with the simultaneous passage of a North Korean resolution for its dismantling and a Western resolution opposing its dismantling at the 30th UN General Assembly on Nov. 18, 1975. Centrally, the first resolution proposing the UNC's dismantling stressed the importance of replacing the armistice agreement with a peace agreement.

The key role of the UNC now is not to deter the North, but to aid the Korean Peninsula peace progress through its preservation and management of the armistice agreement.

In that sense, some are suggesting that one way out of the complex tangle of legal issues described above would be to replace the "UN Command" with "Republic of Korea" as a signatory to the armistice agreement, in keeping with the spirit of autonomy and peace in the Apr. 27 Declaration and contingent upon adequate discussions with the North. If the UNC does continue to hamper inter-Korean exchange and cooperation in the future, the most realistic approach may be for the UNC to shut down, assigning its duties as the armistice agreement signatory to the Republic of Korea.

As a first step, South Korea and the US should officially establish a working group of experts to seriously examine this issue.

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SEA OF TEARS: THE TRAGEDY OF FAMILIES SPLIT BY THE KOREAN WAR
Simone Chun | August 22, 2018

Originally published in *Common Dreams* and *Counterpunch*

This past July marked the 65th anniversary of the armistice that halted the Korean War. In addition to leaving nearly 5 million dead, injured, or missing, this bloody conflict forcibly separated nearly 10 million Korean families on either side of the 38th parallel.

Since the 1980s, a mere 20 face-to-face reunions have been held under tightly controlled conditions, with the last such event occurring in 2015. These reunions are infrequent one-time events–no one has ever been given a second chance to see their relatives on the other side of the border. Family members who have been separated since the war are given a single opportunity to see long-lost loved ones for a few short hours, after which they must once again separate. In South Korea, the majority of the over 132,000 separated family members are 80 or older, and more than half of those applying for reunions between 1988 and 2018 have died without ever having had the chance to see their loved ones in the across the border. At this point, in order for all surviving separated family members to be able to see their relatives in the North at least once before they perish, a minimum of 7,300 reunions must occur per year.

As a result of the 2018 Panmunjom declaration, North and South Korea agreed to hold an additional reunion in August of this year. South Korea uses a lottery system to randomly select a small number of surviving family members for reunion events, and this year's event will include only 98 elderly survivors from South. A journalist who was in attendance during the public screening for the initial participant pool described the Red Cross office where the event was held as "a sea of tears" echoing with the cries of grief-stricken elderly survivors who did not make the list. One 95-year old man, recognizing this as his final opportunity to see his loved ones, begged the government to open the demilitarized zone for a single month so that all separated family members would have the chance to see their loved ones at least once. "I don't remember how many times I applied. President Moon and Chairman Kim can meet. Why can't I meet my family in the North?" A 90-year-old woman refused to leave the building, pleading to be allowed to see the 3-year old daughter she left in North Korea over 68 years ago.

When I visited South Korea in May as part of an international peace delegation, I met a female peace activist whose elderly mother, a farmer in a South Korean border town, was separated from her family during the war. She gave me a special gift: a handmade scarf upon which was inscribed a poem written by her mother. While working the fields, her mother would gaze at her hometown across the border—easily visible on a

clear day—wondering ceaselessly about the family she left behind more than six decades ago.

The Thousand-Mile River
Lee Bum-og
The narrow river separating us may as well be a thousand miles wide
I can see a home to which I cannot return
The Han River that meets the Imjin and the Yaesung flows to the ocean
It is said that humans are highest order of creation
But we are more wretched than any beast
Birds fly to their homes and return
To my eyes, birds scorn humans.

How can there be a half-century of separation between brothers and sisters, between parents and children?

Amid the rain of bombs,
I fled to save my life
The friends who fled have all dispersed here and there
With silvery hair they are soon to depart this world.
Can those who still live ever feel the soil of home beneath their feet?

Her searing poem depicts her life in a divided Korea as a state of permanent longing that is coming to a bitter end. For her and tens of thousands like her, every day counts. It is absolutely essential that we work to prioritize the regularization of North-South family reunions and the establishment of permanent venues in both North and South Korea for this purpose.

Dr. Simone Chun serves on the Steering Committee of the Alliance of Scholars Concerned About Korea and is a Korea Policy Institute Associate and a member of the Korea Peace Network.

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