

“The Unforgotten War”  
By Elaine Kim (University of California, Berkeley)

Frequently characterized as “the forgotten war” in the United States, the 1950-53 war in Korea took an estimated four million lives and resulted in uncountable injuries, separated ten million families behind a historically unprecedented U.S.-imposed partition, and literally flattened northern and central Korea with air strikes that destroyed not only buildings and houses but also dams, irrigation, roads, bridges, and farms, exceeding the total bombings in Europe during World War II. For the most part, Americans think that the Korean War is over, although it was never resolved by a peace treaty and has thus never ended. And the Korean War lives on in terms of psychic and material effects on the lives of millions in North and South Korea as well as in Korean diasporic communities all over the world. Indeed, although it has been more than six decades since the armistice, the reverberations have passed from generation to generation, like the after-effects of a traumatic injury or death that affects to one degree or another not only the injured and dead but also whatever and whomever that person’s life touched. Even descendants who were born and grew up on the other side of the globe long afterwards can be profoundly affected in diverse ways by this ancestral trauma. Thus, Korean Americans like me might feel angry and resentful when we hear the war, which was perpetrated by the United States, described in this country as “forgotten.” Forgotten by whom? By Americans who’d never heard of Korea and came to know it as a dirty, poor, nonwhite, God-forsaken little country at the ends of the earth?<sup>1</sup> Forgotten for what reason? Because the United States didn’t emerge as the heroic winner of the Cold War battle?

I will never forget the morning of June 25, 1950. I was eight years old and living with my parents and brother in the Washington, DC. area. My parents stayed in bed much later than usual, speaking to each other in hushed and fearful tones. They told us that war had broken out in Korea, but I could not fully understand what that meant. I knew something had changed when children who used to hold up the corners of their eyes chanting “Ching Chong Chinaman” began to recognize our answer whenever they demanded to know whether we were Chinese or Japanese. Now they had heard of Koreans. People started to feel sorry for us for being connected to such a terrible place, since the news media carried many stories about starving, ragged refugees and later about orphans and prostitutes in desperate need of American help. Back then, everyone assumed that Asians could not be Americans but were always foreigners on a sojourn in the United States. By the time I was in college, they routinely asked if I was from North or South Korea. Just as they had no idea there could be Asian Americans, they did not know that until 1945, there had been no such thing as a division and no such thing as a North and a South Korea.

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<sup>1</sup> As Christine Hong has pointed out, the term “forgotten war” has most often been used by U.S. veterans seeking recognition for their service, pointing to “how war commemoration in this country tends to privilege the perspective of ‘heroic’ veterans while almost entirely disregarding the experiences of, in the case of the Korean War, immigrant survivors of that war and their descendants” [Christine Hong commentary, 15 September 2015].

Since I learned only a little more about Korea and Korean history than my American college peers, when I first visited South Korea as a twenty-year-old in 1966, I had no idea that the extreme poverty and lack of modern infrastructure was largely due to that destructive war. The mountains were virtually treeless from Japanese colonial deforestation. I saw ramshackle buildings, dusty unpaved roads, beggars and peddlers of pathetic wares everywhere, women and children in patched clothing, obviously literate day laborers with A-frames strapped to their backs reading newspapers posted on the walls as they waited for work, young women wearing bright red lipstick clustered around the U.S. military base gate. I just assumed that Korea was poor because Korean people, just like people everywhere in the Third World were backward because of their own ineptitude and cultural predisposition. It took a long time for me to understand the dialectical relationship between empire and under/development.

When I was in my early twenties, I returned to Korea to work for a year in the English Department at Ewha Womans University. I had just finished an MA in English and wanted to take a break before going on to a PhD program. Everything was a struggle for me: I couldn't speak much Korean, and at the time Korean people were not familiar with Korean Americans. I knew little about traditional gender roles, as my mother had grown up in the United States and my father only knew the men's world. Although living in South Korea was very difficult for me, it forced me to think of things in new ways and helped shape the person I eventually became. I met many young Korean men who were eager to fight in the ROK army in Vietnam. Not only did they want the U.S.-level military wages and benefits, including death insurance to be paid to their families, but also they wanted to know what it might be like to be on the giving as opposed to receiving end of "help" from a powerful protector against communism. Their ideas were in stark contrast to those of many young people I knew in the United States, who were protesting vigorously against U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. Outraged by the carnage that was being beamed nightly into American homes by television news media at that time, they revolted against the idea of young Americans being drafted to fight and die in that "immoral war."

I slowly awakened to some of the reasons for and historical contexts of the enormous gap between the political ideas of progressive young people in South Korea and the United States. In 1966, then-President Lyndon Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson, who were regularly vilified by college youth in America, came to Korea for a state visit. They were treated like royalty. It felt like all of South Korea was being prepared for months: photos of LBJ and South Korean dictator Park Chung Hee shaking hands were plastered on buses and cigarette packages; a "Texas-sized" bed was being prepared for LBJ at Walker Hill Resort; and plans were made to set up walls of corrugated steel to hide the slums along the road from Kimpo Airport to downtown Seoul so as not to offend LBJ as he rode by in his limousine. On the day LBJ arrived, offices and schools were closed, and buses weren't even running. Everyone was encouraged to line the streets waving American flags and tossing flowers as his caravan passed by.

At that time in my life, I had been questioning anticommunism as a rationale for these American wars in first Korea and then Vietnam, noticing how anticommunism in South Korea was considered a legitimate excuse for governmental abuse of citizenry. South

Koreans weren't even permitted to listen to Russian music composed after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and South Korean writers and filmmakers who presented North Koreans as being capable of human emotion or Americans as anything but benevolent were subject to arrest and imprisonment under the National Security Law. My very American education, which assumed the intellectual and cultural superiority of the West but taught me little about world history and nothing about Korean history, had led me to associate postwar economic devastation with Korean incapacities. The same education, rooted as it was in the principles of the Enlightenment and the so-called "stages of development," led me to think of South Koreans as ideologically backward and underdeveloped and provided me with absolutely no understanding of how ideologies might develop differently in different societies. I knew some of the facts of South Korean history, but I had no understanding of what it might be like to live in a U.S. client-state under a right-wing dictator. Nor did I know anything at all about partisan struggles and the strands of political thought that undergirded what I now see as one of the world's longest and most courageous struggles for democracy, from the partisan struggles of the 1940s and 1950s to the student activism that overthrew Syngman Rhee in 1960, to the spectacular labor movements of the 1970s and the nationwide movement for constitutional governance in the 1980s.

I was also slow to understand the relationship between anticommunism and U.S. wars in Asia and slow to come to awareness about the connections between U.S. wars in Vietnam and Korea. In the late 1960s, it was finally beginning to dawn on me that as one U.S. war was being waged against communism in Vietnam, another was still being prosecuted on the Korean peninsula. Indeed, at the time few people in the United States, even those active in anti-war, radical, and Third Worldist struggles, recognized the connections between an unfinished U.S. war in Korea and the ongoing U.S. war in Vietnam.

After starting graduate school at Berkeley, I was hired as a graduate student instructor in freshman Reading and Composition. While searching for curriculum material, I came across some military recruitment films in the ROTC curriculum showing Ho Chi Minh as an Asiatic villain. Ominous music played in the background as the narrator recounted how Ho was an evil communist manipulator. This propagandistic portrait of the yellow red peril felt all too familiar. I also saw films representing Mao Zedong and Kim Il-Sung in exactly the same way, down to the scary music and scripted narration. In these films, Vietnamese—or Chinese and Korean—civilians were represented as mindless obedient hordes. Then, by chance, I saw some footage in one of these films of the Korean War. I have not forgotten those images: an old man with a long white beard in a white *durumagi* (traditional overcoat) and a horsehair hat scurrying to escape U.S. aerial bombings. Generally at that time, Korean people didn't think it was dignified, especially for the elderly, to run, which is part of the reason that image is burned into my memory. But what really struck me back then was that the Americans who bombed that village thought of the villagers as being more like insects than as equal human beings, while to me that old man could have been my own grandfather. That's how I began thinking about the combination of U.S. imperialism in Asia and domestic racism against Asian Americans as well as other people of color in the United States.

After being recruited in 1969 by the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) to support the student strike for Ethnic Studies, I learned about the connection between empire and racism through reading and discussions. AAPA organizers asked me to prepare a lecture about Korea for their new class in Asian American history. I spent almost a whole semester reading books and articles about Korea and Korean history just for that one-hour lecture. In my lecture, I highlighted the contrast between North Korea's notion of *juche*, or self-reliance, and South Korea's acceptance of *sadaesasang*, or loyalty to superior power, described successful deployments of guerrilla strategies to overcome the powerful in Korean history, such as Admiral Lee Sun-sin's tactics during Japan's Hideoyoshi invasions at the turn of the sixteenth century. Students could see that there were points of affinity between Korean and Vietnamese history and Japanese colonial rule of Korea and the operations of white supremacy in the United States. During a historical juncture in which the Black Panthers and radical Asian American movement activists were traveling to North Korea in the interest of international solidarity, the students in the AAPA class could also see North Korea in a light other than one of enmity.

Why is remembering the Korean War important to Asian American Studies? From the early days of Asian American Studies to the present, the Korean War has not ended. It must not be buried and forgotten. Learning about the Korean War helps Korean Americans, in particular, understand how important it is for us to work towards the peaceful reunification of Korea. It can also help everyone develop a complex understanding of the Cold War and U.S. imperialism in Asia. But even more, understanding the Korean War—that it has never ended, that the almost universal demonization of North Korea is rarely called into question, and that U.S. wars in Asia and domestic racism are closely linked—helps us grasp today's supposedly post-Cold War, post-race moment in which the United States is locked into another war without end, a war against "terror" while continuing a shameful and often murderous assault against black people and immigrants of color. Now, almost five decades later, anti-war, anti-racist politics are as important today as they were in Asian American Studies' inaugural moment.