

BROTHER ENEMY

Paradoxes of the Korean War

By Suh Ji-moon

On June 25, 2002, the fifty-second anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, seven million South Koreans (total population 47 million) poured onto city squares all over Korea to watch the World Cup semifinal soccer match between South Korea and Germany on huge electronic screens, and to cheer the Korean players "with one heart." The series of triumphs of the Korean soccer team in the 2002 World Cup competition meant more to the Koreans than simply an exciting, exhilarating sports event. It was one of the first events since national liberation in 1945 in which all Koreans could unite in pride and joy.

While most young generation Koreans have no first-hand experience of grinding poverty and hardship, they are aware of the country's tragic and humiliating past. And they cannot help perceiving that the legacies of the past create seemingly endless hurdles for the present. So, it was truly heartening that they could set aside all thoughts of the trammels of the past and feel genuine pride in and love for their country, activated by young athletes.

Korea was hit hard by a series of disasters when forced to open its doors to the big powers late in the nineteenth century, culminating in the Korean War. The wound of war was caused not only by loss of lives and material ruin, catastrophic as these were; the material damage was overcome in a couple of decades. But the psychological wound persisted, and has not completely healed after half a century. The war started with a surprise attack launched by North Korea at dawn on June 25, 1950. While South Korea was unprepared for the undeclared invasion that shattered the peace of a bright Sunday morning, it was not a wholly unexpected war. The mood of hostility between the Communist-controlled north and the U.S.-bolstered south was such that a collision hung in the air.

That it was to some degree a foreseen disaster did not make the war more bearable. It was the worst calamity to happen to a country whose "constant sole companion/ Has been calamity" (Ku Sang, "Poetry on Burnt Ground 9"). War is always a disaster for everyone involved, but the fact that "the enemy" one had to crush was not some foreign devil but one's own countrymen—and not seldom one's cousin or brother—made it a horror beyond description. Koreans have always taken great pride in being a homogeneous nation descended from common ancestors; repeated ordeals at the hands of foreign powers had always strengthened their nationhood.

North Korean troops did not consist only of communist followers, nor were the South Korean soldiers all liberal democrats

by conviction. Many young men were conscripted into either the South or North Korean army simply by reason of their residence in the region, regardless of ideological leaning. Many South Korean youths, unable to flee before the Communists took over their region in the early months of the war, were "volunteered" to fight in the North Korean "Righteous and Valiant army." Similarly, North Korean youths were inducted into the South Korean army while South Korea occupied the North, from October to December of 1950. Brothers, uncles and nephews, even fathers and sons ended up fighting on opposite sides—some from conviction, many from compulsion. Many such "volunteers" were pulled right out of paddies and fishing boats and were thrown into battlefields with a few days'—sometimes only a few hours'—military training. Though both sides suffered from a lack of supplies throughout the war, there was never a shortage of tragic irony.

Therefore, there was little sense of rallying around the banner of justice and fighting a war to exterminate an evil, as had marked the beginning of the First World War. There was instead the fratricidal guilt like that preyed on the hearts of some American Civil War poets, only more intensely, as Koreans had a stronger sense of kinship and nationhood.

Few poems written during the war remain, perhaps because the dire poverty that pervaded Korean society during the immediate postwar years gave people little leisure for reading and savoring poetry. It is true that there were poets inducted by the South Korean Defense Ministry into the "war writer's corps" to write morale-raising propaganda, but of these only Cho Chi-hun and Yu Ch'i-hwan left substantial numbers of poems; and these are not "patriotic" in the crude sense at all. Some poems written by actual combatants (who were not professional poets at the time) at the scene of battle have survived. In 1999, Yu Ch'un-do's *Unforgettable People*, which deals with her experiences as an army doctor to the North Koreans, was published. The poems of this successful medical doctor, wife, and mother, who lived with her nightmare for half a century, forcibly brought home the tragic paradoxes of the Korean War.

These extremely stark and spare poems read like those of another era. I felt the presence of a major poet in the extreme simplicity and severity of Yu Ch'i-hwan's and Cho Chi-hun's poems. The works of the soldier-poets (mere youths at the time) lacked the sure touch of the major poets and are of uneven quality, but they moved me in another way. They gave me pictures of what went on during the Korean War on the battlefield and in the sol-

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diers’ minds. Some are unsophisticated, yet most gave me the kind of emotional experience only great literature can give—a sense of human beings rising to meet the tyrannies and cruelties of life with dignity and humility. Reading them was a profoundly painful experience, yet it gave me at the same time a solemn and chastened kind of elation.

Poetically Cho Chi-hun was an aesthete tempered by Confucian self-discipline and Buddhist spirituality. His poems in general are graceful meditations on objects that inspire a sense of spiritual beauty and nobility. His integrity and ascetic qualities are evident in many of his Korean War poems, though not much of his aesthetic sensibility is. Cho’s “Here Lies a Communist Soldier” is a gentle, poignant expression of the sorrow of losing an “enemy.” In “At Tabuwon” Cho takes sorrowful notice of the corpse of a communist soldier:

*The corpse of a Communist soldier
Prostrate in a weeping posture.*

*We were brothers under the same sky
Until a short while ago . . .*

“At Toriwon” describes the ruins of a village that was the site of a fierce and atrocious battle in the early stage of the war. Cho writes with a quiet sorrow that might look like detachment to a careless reader, but that really hides profound sorrow and fury:

*The war, which was so cruel,
Blew off like a rainstorm,*

*Leaving crumpled huts
And thatched houses with burnt roofs.*

*Today I pass this ruined and charred village
With casual steps.*

*The only thing that Heaven has spared whole
Is an old clay pot on a storage platform,*

*Reminding me that I, too, like the clay pot
Have been spared.*

*The villagers who have returned
Look up from the ruins toward the distant hills.*

*The sky is as blue as ever.
In the autumn sun of Toriwon*

*A fragile cosmos
Shivers in the breeze.*

The near-total destruction of Toriwon and many other villages in the area and incalculable military and civilian casualties were the price the ROK (Republic of Korea) paid for staying the

communist forces along the Naktong River and preventing them from overtaking the whole of South Korea. The poet, far from congratulating his luck in having survived, feels that he just happens to have been spared, “like the clay pot.” The shivering fragile cosmos of the last stanza is a fitting emblem for the whole hapless and helpless Korean people.

The ineffable sense of spirituality and refined perception of beauty that are the trademark of Cho Chi-hun are not prominent features of the poems in his *Before the Tribunal of History* collection. But the quiet, spare poems are beautiful and moving in a unique way.

Yu Ch’i-hwan is a poet of more passionate and overtly romantic temperament, so his poems tend to work more directly on our emotions. But in most war poems published in his *With the Foot Soldier* collection his expression is severely disciplined and restrained. Yu voiced his compassion for the communist soldier in “Like a Wild Flower”:

*Where the battle raged like a nightmare
Last night,
The corpse of a young enemy soldier remains
Like a lone wild flower.*

*Life’s cruel tempest that drove you here
Like a hunted animal
Has dissipated,
Leaving you this spot for your rest.*

*Now your ears are opened,
Your soul is awake.
You’ll hear the deep currents of the East Sea
Merging with eternity.*

Compassion for the communist soldiers notwithstanding, the expressions of gratitude for the valor and dedication of the South Korean soldiers are eloquent as well. Gratitude towards the American and other UN forces who crossed half the world to fight for South Korea was also genuine, in spite of the perception that Korea is a “chip on the superpowers’ bargaining table.” Yu Ch’i-hwan’s “To a Deceased United Nations Soldier” and “To Major Den Audin” are sincere tributes to those who gave their lives to save South Korea from communist dictatorship.

In war, both soldiers and civilians suffer. Yu’s “Drifters” is a tribute to the tough resiliency that enabled the Korean people to survive sub-human conditions of life in Pusan, where almost half the population of South Korea lived as refugees:

*Look at the crowd of people
Thronging like tangled heaps of rubbish
On this street almost touched by the cold waves of
winter solstice.*

*They have left behind pride and shame and attachment
And are offering for sale anything that will fetch a few pennies:
Their cherished furniture, clothes, shoes,
Even their wives' underwear . . .*

In "Port of Glory," Yu commemorates the energy generated by the refugees overcrowding Pusan, living in the most miserable and squalid of conditions, united by the will to survive. "My fatherland" is a fine statement of love for one's fatherland, not only in spite of all of its defects, but also because of them. I believe that only the people of a country that suffered one misfortune after another can understand that love. Yu's "My Fatherland," written after reading a foreign correspondent's report on Korea, runs:

*You wrote that there's no other country in the world
Whose land is so covered with festering sores
And where the stench of feces assails you everywhere you go.
And where every creature that ever plagued mankind thrives—
Fleas, bedbugs, mosquitoes, centipedes, venomous snakes, leeches.
And whose people are
Pickpockets, swindlers, beggars, corrupt officials, or scoundrels.
You say this country's worse than New Guinea,
That it's a country you'd like to hand over to your enemy as a punishment.
Then you ask,
"What crimes have we committed that we have to fight for a country like this?"
I am a beggar child of that country.
I stay by its side
And weep over it all the time.*

Ku Sang's *Poetry on Burnt Ground*, written in the rear during the war, is a meditation on the sad and absurd state of his war-devastated country. On his "burnt ground," which is what Korea was during and after the war, young women have to sell their flesh to stay alive, and children mock and persecute such young women (sarcastically dubbed "western princesses"), but the very same children in their next breath lure American soldiers to patronize them. Beyond having to cope with the immediate woes, Ku also sees the need to heal the basic rupture of the country. In section 7, subtitled "at the cemetery of enemy soldiers," Ku, a devout Catholic, muses:

*We were bound to you in life
By ties of hate.
But now, your lingering resentments
Are my tasks
And are incorporated in my prayers.*

In section 9, subtitled "at the time of the armistice negotiations," he likens his fatherland to Sim Ch'ong, the legendary filial daughter who sold herself to seamen as a human sacrifice to

appease the wrath of the sea god: a victim at the mercy of the superpowers. But Ku Sang concludes by exhorting all his compatriots to sow seeds of life on the ruin that is his fatherland, "so that they will bloom on [our] graves/ And testify to [our] resurrection."

Yu Ch'un-do, who had been a communist sympathizer and worked for and with them, has different identifications for friend and enemy, but the war reflected in her eyes is just as absolute an evil. A fifth-year medical student when the Korean War broke out, Yu was forced to function as a doctor in the absence of enough medical personnel, first for the South Korean wounded and then the occupying North Korean soldiers. Yu records the beginning of her affiliation with communists, in which she had no choice, with fine irony in "Destiny":

*I go to the outpatients' room with my assignment slip.
Yesterday's wounded ROK soldiers are nowhere to be seen
And only the doctor and the nurse are pacing the empty room.
Jeeps carrying wounded soldiers arrive
In the hospital yard.
Some are carried in on stretchers, some hobble in leaning on others,
And some hop in on one leg.
From beyond the window the sight is the same as yesterday's.
The only difference is they have red stars on their caps and a stronger odor of sweat.
The doctor and the nurse do the same things they did yesterday.
Is that the spirit of the Red Cross?
Our destiny began that day
Of partings, death, and imprisonment.
The bitterness of many decades lay in wait.*

While sharing the pains and agonies of the wounded North Koreans in a field hospital with insufficient equipment and medical supplies, she came to feel a close human bond with them and a deep respect for their ideology. Then, when the North Koreans were pushed back, she tried to follow them to the North but was prevented by the American bombing (described in "The Girl Soldier and the Moon"). Her separation from her North Korean comrades is commemorated in "Namgang River" with a reticence worth a million words:

*In the pitch darkness, the crossing to death begins.
The first batch. Then the second. Then the third.
The soldiers begin
Their journey of no return,
Holding their guns straight up to heaven.
Reconnaissance planes circle overhead.
The river gleams with a silvery sheen.
A fighter bomber appears, then another, then another.
Napalm bombs fall in a shower of flames.
Blood spreads on the river,
And the river turns the color of earth.
Bodies flow downstream.*

Pak Pong-u, in “Blooming on the Wasteland,” also dreams of the day when North and South Koreans can cross the boundary as freely as butterflies.

*“You must live.
Return to the rear.
There will be no more wounded for you to treat,”
The young commander says to me solemnly.
Exhorting me to hold life sacred, he steps into
his own death.*

*Then
He begins to cross the river of no return,
Leading soldiers who will not return,
Who will dye the river red.*

*Oh, you grass on the banks of Namgang River!
You who will feed on the blood of these soldiers!
Remember this day forever more!*

Afterwards, while trying to find her way to her hometown, she was captured by a South Korean soldier. Rescued from a summary execution by the ROK soldier, thanks to the timely intervention of a passing American officer (as described in “Kūmgang River Ghost”), she was sent to prison as a prisoner of war, walking in a long and terrifying march delineated in “Let’s Take Our Own Lives.” In the prison for communists she witnesses the horrors of a tetanus epidemic, as sketched in “In Ch’ōngju Prison.” Released from the prison with the help of an acquaintance, she was able to join her family in her hometown but was forced to suffer several imprisonments and torture as a “collaborator” with the communists, as told in “Crickets Chirping in My Ear.” After the war Yu was able to hide that portion of her life history to go on to be a successful gynecologist and wife of an eminent scholar—an enviable woman to all outward appearance. But she says that a half-century later she still suffers nightmares and wakes up crying.

Poems written by active combatants naturally express a staunch will to fight. In Pak Il-song’s “The Eye of the Sentry,” the sentry’s eyes are so piercing that “Not even an ant/ Would dare risk entering/ Your vigilant ken.” Chang Ho-gang, a career soldier who attained the rank of a general before retirement, dug countless trenches to repulse the enemy’s approach. In his “Kansas Line”:

*We dig, build, install, and bury,
Firing trenches, shelter trenches, wire fences, and mines
In a tight network
So that even a swarm of enemies skilled in night maneuvers
Couldn’t penetrate our defense system
Even by burrowing underground like a mole.*

I find it truly remarkable that even the combatants, whose lives were constantly endangered by the enemy and who witnessed so many of their comrades being killed and wounded, regarded the enemy with sorrow and compassion once the

enemy was dead or captured, echoing the peculiar paradox and tragedy of the Korean War noted earlier. Yu Ch’un-do, contemplating a North Korean boy soldier who had his leg cut off without anaesthesia, shudders at the thought that her brother, about the same age as the boy, “might be aiming his gun at us as a soldier of the Republic” (“The Emergency Field Hospital”). And Yu Chōng, in “Brother,” has a hallucinatory sense that “Those emaciated shoulders heaving in pitch darkness/ [He] glimpsed while peering beyond the frozen 38th Parallel” are without a doubt those of his brother, who had run away from home with the family bull.

The thought of brother killing brother is too horrible to contemplate to a Korean for whom family ties traditionally preceded the needs and rights of the individual. Therefore, many imagined reconciliations have been suggested. Kim Kyu-dong’s “A Grave” is a rhapsody on the imagined brotherhood of a North Korean soldier and his South Korean counterpart achieved after death through being buried in one grave. Pak Pong-u, in “Blooming on the Wasteland,” also dreams of the day when North and South Koreans can cross the boundary as freely as butterflies.

At the time of the Korean War, the country was so torn apart and people were so battered by emotional, physical, and material suffering that there was little hope for comfort, to say nothing of prosperity, and despair was all-too-pervasive. So, the hope for a better future was something as fragile as a delicate plant, but also as tenacious as the will of the plant to bloom, as in Park Yang-kyun’s “Flower”:

*At whose request have you bloomed on this wasteland
where men slaughtered men, you nameless flower
which confronts the sky with your fragile sweetness?
How can you, a delicate plant standing on a sunny
road under the blue Heavens, try to efface, with your
ineffable smile upon your frail stalk, the deafening din
of cannon roars and bomb explosions and yells and
bloodbaths that shook the earth to its axis?*

Korea’s survival owes entirely to its people, having held on tightly to that fragile hope. ■

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