

Teaching “Our Side” and the “Other Side” in the Korean War (1950–1953)

BY PHILIP WEST

THE HARDEST THING FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS looking at war in history is to be evenhanded. The dominant narratives that we teach from American textbooks and that students learn from entertainment favor the stories of “our side” while largely ignoring the stories of those of the “other side.” This bias is just as evident in dominant Korean and Chinese narratives of the Korean War.

As American citizens we are proud of the freedoms fought for and defended since the days of our founding fathers. We also know that Korean and Chinese teachers use freedom and independence in their narratives of the war, but with different meanings. Objectivity and evenhandedness are particularly challenging for Americans because from the outset we are confronted with lack of interest in and knowledge about Korea among the generations who grew up after the war.¹ North and South Korea are officially still at war, the Korean War remains embedded in the continuing Asian Cold War, and the governments of our two major enemies in the war, China and North Korea, are communist and still in power. American mistrust of communist versions of history is understandable and makes listening to the dominant narratives on their side of the war doubly difficult. Compounding the challenge are the South Korean people’s memories and stories of the war. Their stories are from our side, and yet they often sound as if they come from the other.

The exercise of teaching both sides can begin with a look at two national icons of the Korean War, two strategies representing two very different voices on the same side of the conflict. One is the Korean War Veterans Memorial that forms a triangle with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. The other is a statue in Seoul, Korea, located at the front gate of the larger War Memorial of Korea. Both statues are images of soldiers admired for their bravery and sacrifice—familiar themes in war memorials throughout history. The American and South Korean soldiers represented in these statues fought together to turn back the



Eighteen statues, similar to the one shown here, occupy the central space in the Korean War Memorial in Washington D.C.

Photo source: Brochure, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington D.C.

North Korean invasion on June 25, 1950, and to contain the wider spread of communist influence in Asia, Vietnam and Taiwan in particular. But the vision and design of the statues could hardly be more different in the stories they tell and in the second-hand memories they create.²

On a granite wall separate from the statues, the Washington memorial gives recognition to American allies—in the etched lines of 2,500 faces taken from archival photographs, faces representing the twenty-two nations that fought under the banner of the United Nations. But the statues themselves are of American soldiers only. Their faces are gaunt and determined. They had put themselves in harm’s way and were prepared to sacrifice their lives in a war that was never popular at home and that many did not understand. Inscribed at the focal point of the memorial below the American flag is the message: “Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met.” In his commemoration of the memorial on the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war, President William Clinton said: “We all know that Korea isn’t about Hawkeye and Hoolihan, but about honor and heroes—young men and women willing to pay the price to keep a people whom they had never met free.”



Another view of the Two Brothers statue in Seoul, Korea.

Photo source: *Life in Korea* Web site: www.lifeinkorea.com/Images/Seoul/Warmemorial009.jpg

In striking contrast is the message of the Korean statue in Seoul. It features two brothers, fighting on opposite sides of the war, the older brother from the South and the younger from the North. They are enemies, and yet they embrace each other. The explanation in English for the statue reads: “Based on the dramatic true story of two brothers who met each other on the battlefield, this statue symbolizes brotherly love transcending ideology The statue reflects the people’s wishes for peace and unification by overcoming the present division and confrontation.”³

The overall Korean War exhibit takes up much of the space in a memorial that is devoted to all of the wars in Korean history and acknowledges the sacrifice of American and United Nations troops. But it also includes pictures and dioramas of Korean refugees, the physical devastation of the Korean landscape, and other objects that outline the historical context of the war, starting with the division of the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel by the United States and the Soviet Union following the Japanese surrender in 1945. Charts and graphs in the exhibit document the human cost of war, the millions of casualties and deaths, many of them civilians, in both North and South. Many of those casualties and deaths came from

collateral damage, to a large extent the result of American bombing. The Seoul exhibit includes visual aids that tell parts of the Chinese story as well—the things carried by Chinese soldiers and samples of children’s stories, literature, and even cigarette cases.⁴ Inscriptions in the Korean exhibit echo the words of the Washington Memorial, “freedom is never free”. But the story is as much about the sorrow and sadness of a people as it is about stopping aggression from the north. Much of the literature, poetry, film, and art of writers and artists expresses the deeply ambivalent feelings held by many South Korean people today.⁵ It is a kind and degree of ambivalence clearly absent in American-dominant narratives of the war. Most would agree that life in the North for much of the past half century has been harsh, even brutal, compared to the openness and remarkable prosperity of life in the South. The cost of freedom may be high, but one hardly knows where to begin when trying to compare American costs with those of the people of South Korea. Thanks to American intervention and influence, freedom flourishes in the South. But freedom, American style, has also dramatically changed Korean values and society. Individualism has eroded the warmth and stability of family relations, and the questions of historical and cultural identity permeate films, literature, and public discourse. Even as Korean young people welcome American influence, there lingers within them the pride of patriotism, aspiring for the day when the ideological cold war ends and the Korean peninsula will once again be reunified.

The oil painting by Shin Hak-chol, *History of Modern Korea, Division of the Nation* (1993), gives visual form to this widely-shared ambivalence. In Shin’s painting the reality of life in Korea is represented by the distorted figure of a human being. It may be strong and able to walk, but it is ugly. The body-parts in Shin’s painting are recognizable and in other contexts might have some meaning and useful function. But the whole of these parts, stuck together in the way they are, is ugly. Shin’s voice in the painting is that of the grassroots movement of Korean artists in the 1980s called Minjung or “the people.” The widely-shared belief among the Minjung artists is that Korea’s modernization is distorted and that its prosperity is empty of meaning. The distortions are the result of mimicking the West, in particular the United States. Although some Minjung artists were born after the Korean War, the staples of subject matter in their art are the obscenities of war itself, the separation of families and the division between North and South.⁶ These South Korean writers and artists appear ungrateful for, even resentful of, the American intervention in the war. They pose a special challenge in teaching the stories from our side.

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The enemy in most American textbooks is portrayed in abstract military



History of Modern Korea, Division of the Nation, 1993, by Shin Hak-chol. Photo source: *Remembering the War: The Korean War Through Literature and Art*.



An American soldier seen with his family and about to embark for Korea. Photo source: National Archives.

and diplomatic language as the face of evil. Indeed, without such a face, it would be impossible to mobilize for war, to struggle and fight against him, and to kill. American newspaper headlines and stories—and even television—at the time portrayed the North Korean and Chinese soldiers as enemies of freedom. In justifying the bombing of Chinese territory north of the Yalu River, even before the major Chinese offensive in the war in late November 1950, General Douglas MacArthur warned that giving up any “portion of North Korea to the aggression of the Chinese Communists would be the greatest defeat of the free world in recent times.”⁷ Understandably the Chinese government portrayed the American bombing at the time and MacArthur’s decision, with Washington backing, to cross the 38th parallel in early October and march north, as aggression into Chinese territory.

Teaching the Korean War with an even hand requires us to confront the realities of enemy aggression and brutality to soldiers and civilians. But evenhandedness also requires us to recognize the brutalities carried out by “our” side. In some Asian memories of the war, the extensive American bombing of the

Korean peninsula between 1950 and 1953 is the greater brutality. While it’s hard to listen to the war stories of North Korea because they read as propaganda, we have something to learn from our South Korean allies, who certainly know the brutalities of the North. But because the North and South are on the same side in language and culture and aspire to reunification, the North is also portrayed with empathy, even friendliness, as the statue of the two brothers reminds us. In recent years, South Korean representations of the Chinese enemy have become multi-dimensional, as the hostility between these two former enemies is softened by the impact of thriving trade and cultural exchange programs.

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American images of the Chinese enemy in the Korean War—clearly the larger enemy in terms of battles won the winter of 1950 and casualties inflicted on the United Nations side—are also gradually changing. One root of this welcome change can be traced back to the special friendship between China and the United States, beginning nearly a century ago, and the alliance in their struggle against Japan in World War II. As the Chinese government since the 1980s has opened up to the outside world, Chinese people, through television, the internet, books, and films (including popular Hollywood films), are open to American narratives and perspectives as never before. When it comes to the Korean War, however, American curiosity about how Chinese people view the war has hardly begun.

Fortunately, new Chinese books and films are appearing, even on topics as sensitive as the Chinese POWs. With the notable exception of the issue of Taiwan, the Chinese discussion, both official and public, has become less ideologically and less emotionally charged. One recently published book offers a good example and is an invitation to see the human side of the Chinese experience in the war. The book is the diary and drawings of He Kong-de, a well-known artist in China today. It was published on the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war. He served in the Korean War, not in combat but as a member of a Chinese culture troupe, *wengong tuan*, from March 1951 to November 1953. His diary is a portrait of Chinese and North Korean soldiers and of the North Korean people near the battlefield of the war.⁸ Scattered throughout his diary are over a hundred drawings of their daily life. The drawings are portraits of soldiers and Korean farmers, women, and children. Some are landscapes of North Korea. Others are scenes of the bunkers, of horses and their saddles, of oxen, of farm tools and implements, and of the many gatherings of the Chinese and North Korean soldiers, both serious and fun. His drawings are warm windows into the rhythms of daily life in the North. With He’s pen and brush the people on the other side of the war appear not as cartoons of evil but as human beings, with whom we can identify and empathize.

The Chinese volunteers honored by young and old in China today faced circumstances very different from their American enemy. In the fall of 1950, they marched on foot from the Yalu River into their first battles in the mountains of North Korea, and in the winter of 1951 to below the 38th parallel, some two hundred miles further south. On March 23 He wrote of the “forced night march by the volunteers with a heavy bundle on my back containing food, clothes, and ammunition . . . I feel so exhausted and worn out.” Many of the volunteers were illiterate peasants, whom He, artist and intellectual, portrays with affection. Fighting on the Chinese side were Nationalist soldiers, who but a year or so



The face of a Chinese soldier, painted by He Kong-de. Photo source: Diary and sketchbook, permission of He Kong-de.

before had surrendered to the Communist armies in the Chinese civil war and felt no loyalty to the new government in Beijing. Many of these soldiers chose in the summer of 1953 to repatriate not back to China but to Taiwan. The Chinese soldiers received few letters from home, which made their long tours of duty in Korea all the more difficult. On April 7, he wrote he “missed home so much but my spirits pick up whenever I run into people from my home province [Sichuan, more than 2,000 miles away].”

The experience of American bombing lies at the core of Chinese soldiers’ memories of the war, as it does for many Korean people, North and South.⁹ Throughout much of the war the Chinese soldiers, fighting outside the protected “MIG Alley” along the western end of the Yalu River, had very little effective anti-aircraft capability to protect them from bombing from the air. Mr. He writes on April 10, 1951, about his first experience of bombing: “I was scared but tried to compose myself. I managed to say a few words of comfort to those around me. Still, some of our soldiers were so frightened, they jumped into the river.” On May 27 He says the American “planes were flying so low it was as if they were driving like buses on the highway. The tanks followed, rumbling along, with a megaphone

on the top and a woman shouting through it, ‘Come on over! I’ll marry you.’”

As with all armies, discipline among the Chinese soldiers was critical, but it became more intense with the launching of political campaigns beginning in the fall of 1951, as Mao Zedong and the Communist Party consolidated their political control down

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to the village level. In his diary entry of December 8, 1951, He writes about how fellow soldiers in the political campaign criticized him. He was particularly hurt when someone accused “me of wishing to return to China because I was afraid of dying. I didn’t expect people would smear me and misunderstand me in this way. I wept bitterly. It was the worst insult of my life.” He tells about the difficulties of simply trying to find a place to sleep and to put his things. One night, writing on December 27, 1951, he succeeded in finding a place when a Korean family upon hearing his singing a Korean song invited him to stay with them. In the home “there were about ten boys, plus a young woman and a young girl. They gathered around me and insisted on my singing songs and playing music.” Later that night he discovered that the “young girl’s parents were killed in the American bombing.”

The appearance of such published materials puts a human face on the Chinese experience of war not only for the American audience (as materials become available in English translation) but also for Chinese teachers and students. Like their American counterparts who grew up after the Korean War, their curiosity about the experience of war and its impact on Chinese history has also faded.

For those of us who teach history from a cross-cultural perspective and take pride in being both an American citizen and a citizen of the world, listening to the other side in the Korean War comes rather naturally. But for every one of us who listens to Chinese, North Korean (and South Korean and Russian) voices in the war, there are two or three—perhaps many more—who prefer to hear only the American stories. In teaching the histories of war with other people, defined first as human beings and only second as citizens of a particular country, we start by recognizing that soldiers and civilians in all wars share similar feelings: fear, confusion, loyalty, sacrifice, love, and loss. But stories of war by nature will sustain the divide that creates the battlefield where soldiers on our side and the other side have fought. Would that the cross-cultural study of human history be as captivating as the fighting stories of our national histories.



Portrait of a North Korean girl by He Kong-de. Photo source: Diary and sketchbook, permission of He Kong-de.



We proceed with cautious optimism. Listening to the other side is an uphill battle not only in the study of history—not unlike the challenge we face in understanding others in our daily lives. While aspiring to lead peaceful lives and to teach peace, we acknowledge the complexities of human nature and the preference for our side of a story—for our versions of sacrifice. Writing toward the end of the Vietnam War, Harold Isaacs reminded us of the “ironic, painful, and dangerous paradox” confronting the world: “the more global our science and technology, the more tribal our politics and the more it becomes apparent that human beings cannot decently survive with their separateness, the more separate they become.” When Isaacs’ classic study of American images of Asia was published soon after the Korean War, it inspired us as graduate students to examine our own assumptions about Asian peoples and cultures—and about ourselves—and to teach and write about the other side of America’s wars in Asia. Isaacs ended his distinguished career as journalist and scholar observing sagely that the “deepest holdings of our bodies and spirits keep getting in the way of our deepest hopes of coming to lead a more humane human existence.”¹⁰ That kind of hope, tempered with a dose of skepticism, maintains and spurs us on. ■

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NOTES

1. To appreciate the human dimensions of war, one of the first places for teachers and students to start is with the stories right at home, the story of “our side.” In recent years we have seen the publication of several good oral histories of American veterans, while new web sites representing veterans’ perspectives are regularly appearing on the internet. The audience for these stories, however, is small. One of the first exhibits posted in the Mansfield Center’s Digital Teaching Library on *America’s Wars in Asia: A Cultural Approach* is the Edward G. Heilman collection. Heilman, who lives in Missoula, Montana, served in the Air Force during the war. The collection includes his commentary on forty-eight color slides. See www.asiadtli.ito.umt.edu.
2. From the brochure on the “Korean War Veterans Memorial,” available from the National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, Washington D. C., n. d. For the statues in Seoul, see the catalog for *The War Memorial of Korea* (in English translation), Seoul, Korea, n.d., 42.
3. *The War Memorial of Korea*.
4. The Chinese artifacts are on loan from the large Korean War museum in Dandong. This small Chinese city that lies on the north bank of the Yalu River served as a major port of entry and exit for Chinese troops throughout the war.
5. For a discussion of this disenchantment among Korean prose writers, see Suh Ji-moon, “The Korean War in the Lives and Thoughts of Several Major Korean Writers,” in Philip West and Suh Ji-moon, eds., *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Korean War in Literature and Art*, M.E. Sharpe, 2001, 92–109.
6. Roe Jae-ryung, “The Korean War in the Visual Arts,” in West and Suh, 73–75.
7. As quoted in John Toland, *In Mortal Combat: Korea, 1950–1953*, William Morrow and Company, 1991, 273.
8. He Kong-de’s book is *Yige huajia yanzhong de chaoxian zhanzheng* (The Korean War Through the Eyes of a Painter), People’s Liberation Army Cultural Publishing House, 2000. In an interview on April 7, 2002 in Beijing, He Kong-de graciously showed me his original diary and gave me permission to quote from it and to copy the drawings for this article. I am indebted to Li Zhihua for help in the translation of excerpts from He’s diary. The excerpts that follow are taken from the published version of the diary, pages. 2, 4, 5, 13, 38, 54, and 127.
9. So extensive was the bombing that toward the end of the war it extended to “small cities and towns” as the “last currently vulnerable link in the supply and distribution system for the communist armies.” Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950–1953*, Kansas University Press, 2000, 125.
10. Harold R. Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe, Group Identity and Political Change*, Harper and Row, 1975, xii, 2. Isaacs’ *Images of Asia, American Views of China and India* is the 1962 paperback version (Capricorn Books) of *Scratches on Our Minds*, published in 1958 by Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

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