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A Small Town Caught in the Cross-fire of the Korean War

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Asia Erupts in East-West Confrontation

Japan's defeat in World War II transformed East Asia into a Cold War arena of East-West confrontation. With China's involvement, the bitter rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union flared during the Korean War and the Vietnam War. This article explores the impact of these wars on the people of East Asia.

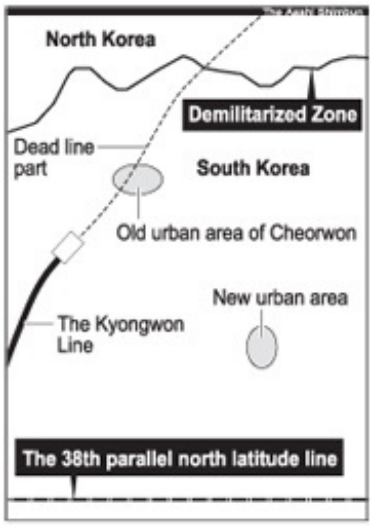
Two lines drawn on the map of the Korean Peninsula irrevocably changed the fate of the small town of Cheorwon and its citizens.

In September 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union established the 38th parallel to demarcate their respective zones of control on the Korean Peninsula. The 38th parallel became the de facto North-South border when Korea was officially split in 1948.

A Divided Korea and the Chinese border

The bloody Korean War, which erupted in June 1950, raged for three years. The cease-fire of July 1953 resulted in the creation of a strip of buffer zone, now known as the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Cheorwon lay north of the 38th parallel, but after the fighting in the Korean War, it became incorporated into South Korea. As such, the town was very much a symbol of Korea's division.



Map showing Cheorwon, the railroad and the DMZ

I headed for South Korea to see how the town was faring today.

Located in the dead center of the Korean Peninsula, Cheorwon can be called its "navel." With a vast, fertile plain stretching around it, Cheorwon used to be a major transportation hub.

In 1914, when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, the Kyongwon Railway Line was laid through Cheorwon to connect present-day Seoul and the city of Wonsan on the east coast. Cheorwon also became the starting point of another railway line extending to the scenic mountain resort of Kumgangsan.

Banks and shops lined the front of Cheorwon Station, and the town boasted theaters and hospitals. And with its good water and sewage services for its 20,000 residents, Cheorwon prospered as an inland town.

I toured this once-thriving town with Kim Young Kyu, 45, a scholar of local history. About 30 kilometers north of the 38 parallel, I spotted red-crested white cranes and white-naped cranes resting their wings on a wide expanse of farmland with low shrubs and dead grass, dotted with patches of snow.

The scene was idyllic, but the nearby presence of South Korean soldiers at a border checkpoint, as well as barbed wire fencing with red notice boards proclaiming "land mine," reminded me of my proximity to the DMZ.

A few kilometers to the north, I could see North Korean mountains.

In what was once the town's busiest street in front of the train station, there stood the ruins of a building, its walls charred black and scarred with numerous bullet holes.

"The town was destroyed in intense street battles and bombings during the Korean War," Kim told me. "Since this area is off-limits to civilians, the war's scars have been left as you can see."

Kim Song Il, 77, was born during the Japanese colonial era and lived in Cheorwon's busy downtown section in front of the train station until the Korean War broke out. The story he told me of his adult life was typical of the fate suffered by those whose lives were directly affected by the establishment of the 38th parallel and the DMZ.

Kim Song Il with a photograph of prewar Cheorwon in front of the ruins of North Korean Labor Party Building

Before Kim could really begin to appreciate the absence of Japanese soldiers from Cheorwon following Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, Soviet soldiers arrived. Unbeknown to its citizens, Cheorwon had become a tense border town on the north side of the 38th parallel, the "front line" of the incipient Cold War.

The following year, Cheorwon citizens were mobilized for the construction of a city hall to house the North Korean Labor Party, and portraits of Kim Il Sung were hung all over town. The North Korean People's Army guarded the 38th parallel, blocking traffic to and from South Korea.

"We'd been made to learn Japanese (under Japanese occupation), and then we were told to embrace communism," Kim Song Il said. "We had no choice but to obey."

In June 1950, Kim recalled, he noticed a daily massing of North Korean troops and tanks at the 38th parallel. Before the month was over, the Korean War had begun. Kim was in high school at the time, and his classmates and older students were conscripted into military service. Kim became a draft-dodger and laid low for a while, but he gave himself up to authorities when he heard his father had been detained.

Serving with a tank unit of the People's Army, Kim advanced south. But the unit was driven back by the U.S. Army after crossing the Han River in Seoul. Back in Cheorwon after an absence of about 100 days, Kim became a deserter and fled to the mountains. The following year, he found a job as a bartender at a U.S. Air Force base where he had sought asylum.

One day, Kim overheard an Air Force officer--one of his regular customers--boasting of his successful bombing mission in the "Triangle." The plains of Cheorwon, where fierce battles were being fought every day, were known then as the Iron Triangle.

Kim did not want to believe his ears. "The U.S. military, on whom I depended for my livelihood, was bombarding my hometown," Kim reminisced. "I was struck then by the sobering reality of life's uncertainty."

South Korea and North Korea came into being in 1948, supported, respectively, by the United States and the Soviet Union. With both President Syngman Rhee of South Korea and Prime Minister Kim Il Sung of North Korea considering invading each another, their armed forces clashed from time to time across the 38th parallel.

Among those who lived through that period, everyone I spoke with in Cheorwon said to the effect, "The atmosphere back then left no doubt that war was inevitable."

153 farmers executed

What had started out effectively as a civil war evolved into a major international conflict when United Nations forces led by Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Chinese forces joined the Korean War. The front line moved back and forth, north and south, forcing the local populace to flee every time with nothing but the clothes they wore; or they had to do the bidding of the occupying forces for their own survival.

Goyang is a city in suburban Seoul. A deep, dark pit that looks like an old well can be found on a small hill along a trunk highway. In 1995, the remains of 153 people were recovered from the pit.

The area around Goyang fell under North Korean control within a few days of the outbreak of the Korean War, but South Korea seized it back in less than three months. Police and right-wing organizations rounded up 153 farmers, accusing them of "cooperating with the North." All were taken to the pit on the hill and shot dead. Some of the younger men and women were no more than children.

At the insistence of the victims' surviving families, this mass execution was investigated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an independent organ appointed by the government. The commission concluded last year that the government should make an official apology for the mass execution by the police.

The ideological confrontation that formed the backdrop of this "hot war" in the Cold War invited countless tragedies. Massacres were committed by the U.S. military, too. According to various advocacy groups, about 1 million civilians were killed before and during the Korean War.

However, until the early 1990s, the bereaved families were forced to remain silent under generations of South Korean administrations that were led by former military officers.

Kim Dong Choon, a SungKongHoe University professor who researched the mass execution as a full-time member of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, pointed out that the massacres represented the war itself for the Korean common folk.

"Among the police officers and members of the right-wing groups that participated in the mass execution, many were active supporters of Japanese colonialism," Kim noted. "Disarming the Japanese military was the U.S. and Soviet purpose for establishing the 38th parallel. The tragedy of the ethnic division and war was a legacy of Japan's colonialism."

China enters the war

More than 200,000 foreign soldiers died in the Korean War, fighting for either the North or South. Of these people, Chinese nationals were by far the most numerous. Their toll, including those who went missing in action, was close to 180,000. Why did China send so many of its own to the Korean Peninsula?

A 14-hour ride on a Beijing-Pyongyang night train took me to the Chinese city of Dandong in Liaoning province on the North Korean border. From Dandong Station, it was a five-minute drive to the Yalu River, which forms the China-North Korea border. I got a close look at North Korea on the other side.

Trucks rumbled across the China-Korea Friendship Bridge spanning the river. About 70 percent of trade between the two countries is said to move through Dandong.

The China-Korea Friendship Bridge

The bridge was built by Japan in 1943, 11 years after the establishment of Manchukuo in northeastern China.

Parallel to this bridge was the Short Bridge, so called because its North Korean end is missing--destroyed in a bombing raid during the Korean War. This bridge, too, was built by Japan in 1911, the year after the Japanese annexation of Korea, in order to connect a railway vertically traversing the Korean Peninsula with another that ran across the Chinese continent.

Formerly called Andong, the little border town of Dandong was once of crucial strategic importance to Japan's military ambitions on the continent.

Atop the hill overlooking the town, I visited a cenotaph dedicated to the Korean War--or "The War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea," as it is called locally. On display were rusted firearms and hand grenades, an army bugle, and fragments of shot-down U.S. military aircraft.

Other exhibits included a letter written by Kim Il Sung to Mao Zedong, appealing for aid and declaring that "Korea should never be allowed to become a colony of the American Empire," and a bust of Mao's elder son, Mao Anying, who died a Korean War hero.

Zhao Yejun, the cenotaph's curator, said: "Dandong was not only close to the battleground, but it also suffered heavy civilian casualties from repeated bombings. The Korean War was a war to protect China and Dandong."

When South Korean and United Nations forces advanced north across the 38th parallel in October 1950, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army crossed the Yalu River, and Dandong became a munitions supply base. A command headquarters facility stood atop the hill where the museum stands today, according to Zhao.

Sun Jingkun, an 84-year-old Dandong native I met, is a Korean War veteran. After the departure of the Kwantung Army upon Japan's defeat in World War II, Sun, a tenant farmer, became a landowner thanks to the Chinese Communist Party's agrarian reforms.

I asked him how he felt when he crossed the Yalu River on his way to the front. Sun replied: "It was hard to be separated from my wife for a long time, but we all knew at the time that U.S. troops could attack the town any day. I was determined to fight with my life to protect the land that was finally mine."

He claimed to have killed 21 U.S. soldiers, all in hand-to-hand combat. Of the 120 men from his unit, only five survived. When Sun returned home to his wife, he had fragments of a bomb lodged in his hip, and his shoulder bore a scar from a bullet wound.

The People's Republic of China was only a year old when it entered the Korean War. The new state still did not have its entire territory

under control, and rebuilding the country after the devastating civil war with the Kuomintang was an urgent task.

The Korean War raised China's influence on North Korea and America's influence on South Korea. The fact that the fate of the Korean Peninsula is inseparably tied to the interests of these two major powers remains unchanged to this day.

After the cease-fire, a new downtown area in Cheorwon sprang up about 10 km south of the old downtown that had fallen into ruins. A number of residents of the new town are "displaced persons" originally from North Korea. And many South Korean residents have family members living in the North.

In 2004, the 90th anniversary of the completion of the Kyongwon railway line, Cheorwon citizens gathered at the former site of the train station and prayed for a peaceful reunification of Korea as well as for the restoration of the railway tracks severed by the Korean War.

A piece of good news recently reached Cheorwon. A project will start in March to partially restore the tracks.

Chong Ho Jo, head of Cheorwon County, voiced his dream: "North and South merge in the town of Cheorwon. When Korea is reunified, there's a good chance that Cheorwon will become the new capital. We don't know when that will be, though."

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