



The Unknown Korean War: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea and Excavation of the Remains of Mass-murdered Victims

Akira Kobayashi

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Translation by Nobuko Adachi

Prologue

This is the sixtieth anniversary of the start of the Korean War. We are now just starting to learn about the mass murder of civilians by both Korean armies and the United States, and the policies that made this possible. In South Korea, little by little the remains of some of these victims are being uncovered through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Korean citizens.

One of the most popular books in South Korea in the 1980s was *T'aebaek Mountain Range*,¹ by one of the country's most famous authors, Cho Chong-rae (b.1943). Despite political pressure from the Chun Doo-hwan military regime, it sold over five million copies. It was also translated into Japanese and published by Shūei-sha Press in Tokyo. The novel is about the suffering of the people of P'ölgyo—a seaport town in the Ch'öllanam-do area of South Korea—during the Korean War. It tells of efforts to build a new nation after finally being free of Japanese rule after World War II.

For the most part, the Korean people were little informed about their own history by the military government, but through this novel they finally read some of the truth of their recent past. I think this book was instrumental in helping South Korea become a democratic nation. From this long novel, I learned about mass killing in both South and North Korea. After finishing this book, I decided to leave for Kyöngsan City, in Kyöngbuk, South Korea.

The Closed Cobalt Mine: the Killing Fields

In the spring of 2009 I heard rumors that some acts of genocide during the Korean War occurred at P'yöngsan-dong in Kyöngsan City. I visit there in early July. A week before I arrived, official excavation of the site began, though the surviving family members of the victims had already previously excavated in the area several times. Kyöngsan City is located at about twenty kilometers south of Daegu, one of the three largest cities in South Korea. The excavated site—P'yöngsan-dong—is located on a hill in the suburbs. Lee Tae-jun, president of the Association of the Kyöngbuk Cobalt Mine Survivors, showed me around the site. He was 71 years old at the time.



Exhumation site at Kyöngbuk Cobalt Mine

Lee told me that about 3,500 people were killed by the South Korean police and military here between July and September, 1950. This was around the time when the Korean War was just starting. The majority were murdered at the site of a former mine owned by the Japanese Cobalt Mine and Munitions Company during the Japanese colonial period. This is in the Daewon Valley, located right next to the hill. The cobalt was used for making munitions, including aviation ammunition.

Those who were killed here were 2,500 political prisoners from Daegu Prison and 1,000 members of the National Guard Alliance. The National Guard Alliance consisted of some 330,000 people, and was actually organized by the Rhee Syngman regime, in order to allow the government to better control former left-wingers and partisans. According to Lee Tae-jun, they were killed because of government fears of their Communist sympathies and North Korea leanings.

The local people and prisoners were brought in chains to the mine by truck. It is said that everyday about five trucks arrived at the site. Eight or so people at a time were lined up and shot at the entrance of the mine each time a truck arrived. If a person did not die by bullet, he or she was

clubbed or stabbed. The bodies were thrown into the mine. Some of the bodies were doused in oil and burned. The shaft is about 70 to 80 meters deep. It is said some that 2,300 people were thrown down at the spot I was standing. When I stood where they were shot, I felt the fear and hopeless the victims must have experienced just before they died.

Thigh bones Glowing in the Water

Mr. Lee put on a helmet and took me down to the site. The entrance of the area of



Remains unearthed at Kyŏngbuk Cobalt Mine

excavation is a tunnel about fifty-meters long. The tunnel area is granite, a very hard stone. So I also wore a helmet. Water was dripping from the granite, because of abundant groundwater. Neighbors told me that in those days they saw the victims' blood running from the shaft into the outside river for several months. They blew open the airway of the entrance in 2001 to make excavation possible. We walked about 150 meters down the shaft to the excavation site.

I saw hundreds of pails of plastic bags all around the area. Mr. Lee explained that there were bones and sand in the bags, waiting to be classified. Some bones, which were dug up as recently as a week ago, were lying in a yellow polyurethane box. The box contained ten thigh bones. Assuming two thigh bones per person, it was estimated that about 400 bodies—out of the alleged 2,300 victims—had been discovered.

During the military dictatorships and repressive regimes of President Rhee Syngman,² General Chun Doo-hwan, and President Park Chung-hee, these atrocities were kept secret. Thus, when bereaved families finally organized an association in the 1960s, the instigators were imprisoned. In South Korea until the 1980s, guilt-by-association was commonplace, and relatives of supposed leftists were prohibited from traveling overseas and could not get positions in public service. As a result, many victims and relatives of the Kyŏngbuk cobalt mine incident did not come forward to add their names to the organization. They simply kept silent.

It took great courage, then, for Mr. Lee to finally stand up and organize this group. Regardless of the consequences, he finally acted. He was motivated by the fact that his cousin was accused of being a North Korean partisan and was executed. Furthermore, because of his cousin, Mr. Lee himself could not become an officer in the army. Since then, he has dedicated himself to learning the truth behind the massacre and restoring the reputation of the victims.

Throughout the years of the dictatorship, the incident was kept secret, and the site at P'yŏngsan-dong was often pillaged and looted. One poor youth took the gold-fillings of a victim's teeth to pay some bills. One looter who entered the shaft died by suffocation. After this, rumors spread that he was killed by a demon. I also heard that local children long ago had played a bone-matching game with the bones they found the mine.

Today the excavated bones are categorized by body-part into polyurethane boxes temporarily stored in a prefabricated building near the mine. They are to be shipped to Yeungnam University in Pusan therefore study. Some skulls had bullet holes in them, while others were of a dark color. According to Mr. Lee the dark-colored skulls were those of people killed by flame-throwers. I saw a bullet, which had become aquamarine, between some bones.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Was Established in 2005

During the Kim Dae-jung administration, a special law was passed concerning the Cheju Uprising³ of 1948, and another special law was also passed under Kim Young-Sam concerning the Kwangju Massacre⁴ of 1980. Through such democratization processes, the reputations of the victims are slowly being restored.

There were, however, many other unrecognized innocent deaths caused by official acts during the early years of the South Korean government. For example, many civilian mass murders occurred during the political struggles between Koreans after the Japanese colonial occupation, World War II, and the Korean War. People who were suspected of being Communists were executed by the Park Chung-hee regime (these incidents are collectively known as the People's Revolutionary Party Incidents⁵). For these cases, finding the truth and restoring the reputations of the victims had to wait until the Truth and Reconciliation in History Law passed in May, 2005 during the presidency of Roh Moo-hyun. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was organized in December, 2005 and research on the past began as a national public project.

In an effort to find out the historical facts about civilian genocide during the Korean War, the Committee has been studying all kinds of data, including testimonies of surviving family members of deceased persons, forensic evidence, examination of victims' bones, and excavating remains. The excavation of the Kyŏngbuk Cobalt Mine site is one of the Committee's projects. At this site the excavation of bones has been undertaken under the guidance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission since 2008. However, after the Lee Myung-bak presidency, the project got behind schedule and the Committee requested a larger budget to hire more people to complete the research in a timely way. Furthermore, the committee requested:⁶

- (1) appropriate maintenance of the bones after they have been gathered, and respect paid to honor the victims, including cremation, interring of ashes, and burial.
- (2) permission to excavate a golf course and rehabilitation facility near P'yŏngsan-dong.
- (3) designation of the mine as an historical site, and construction of a memorial monument for peace.

The Moving Battlefields that Caused the Genocides

The Korean War started when the People's Army of North Korea attacked on June 25, 1950. Within a month the allied forces of the South Korean army and the United States were pushed south down the Pusan peninsula, establishing a line of defense east of Naktong-gang. However, when the American military landed on the west coast at Inch'ŏn in mid-September, the front line of the People's Army of North Korea was cut off, and they were pushed back toward the Yalu River. However, when the Chinese People's Volunteer Army joined the North Korean forces at the end of October, the battle line was again pushed south, crossing the 38th parallel. In January, 1951, the Allies pushed back North Korean and Chinese forces, and by April crossed north of the 38th parallel. As a result, much of Korea became a battlefield, and each time power changed hands, locals were punished, at times massacred. The capital city of South Korea— Seoul—was occupied four different times during the war. Each time when power changed, mass murder of civilians occurred.

The people who killed civilians were the army, police, and gangs of youths from the northwest who had fled south. While they were fleeing

toward the south, these youths murdered political refugees and members of the National Guard Alliance.⁷ Mass murders took place all over Korea, including Sanch'ŏng, Hamgyŏng, Kŏch'ang, Pusan, Mokp'o, and Puongsan-dong. The American army killed many civilians with machine-gun fire at Nogun-ri. After North Korean forces invaded Inch'ŏn in 1949 they killed many anti-North Korean government officials and South Korean POWs in Seoul. Some North Korean government documents state that an estimated 60,000 civilians were murdered.

It is said that during the war, each time an occupier withdrew, the prisons were filled with the bodies of political and religious prisoners—in both the North and South. Since so many were killed, today few Christians remain in the North and few socialists remain in the South. The people who fled to the South became partisans in the Chiri-san and T'aebaek Mountain Range, and most died.

About 4,800,000 People Died in the Peninsula

Wada Haruki states in his book *Chōsen Sensō Zenshi* ("The Complete History of the Korean War") that the number of North Koreans lost—including dead, missing, and refugees to the South—was 2,720,000. For South Korea the number dead were about 1,330,000. Korea lost over ten percent of its population. Wada also reported the estimates given by Bruce Cumings (an historian at the University of Chicago) and Dr. John Harris (an Asian specialist in England). According to them, the dead included 500,000 soldiers and two million civilians in North Korea, and 250,000 soldiers and one million civilians in South Korea. Some of the causes of deaths in the North were bombs from aircraft that took off from American bases in Japan. They also reported that one million soldiers of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, 54,246 soldiers of the United States military, and 299 airmen of the Soviet Air Force also perished during the war. According to *Sennyō-gun Chōtatsu-shi* ("The History of the Occupation," published by Chōtatsu-chō), 56 Japanese engaged in transportation work around the Korean area of the operation were reported as dead by January 1951.

It is impossible to give exact numbers, but I estimate that at least 4,800,000 people lost their lives in the conflict. And ten million people from both South and North Korea—that is, one out of every three families—had to evacuate their homes.

If—if—we were allowed to redo our history; if Japan had been able to surrender before August, 1945—that is, before the Soviets entered World War II in the East—not only would the Korean War not have occurred, but Korea would not have been split into South and North by the forces of the United States and the Soviet Union. In this sense, the Korean War was the responsibility of the Japanese Empire. The largest civilian massacres occurred on the sites of the former Japanese occupation. This seems to symbolize the history of the Japanese Empire in Korea.

This is a slightly abbreviated translation of an article that appeared in *Shūkan Kin'yōbi* (Weekly Friday) on February 10, 2010.

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Notes

¹ This novel was published over three years, from 1983 to 1986. In all, it consists of ten volumes.

² He is generally known as Syngman Rhee in English.

³ The rebellion on Cheju Island in South Korea began on April 3, 1948 and lasted until May 1949, though in some areas of the island the fighting continued until 1953. During this period, an estimated 14,000 to 30,000 individuals were killed.

⁴ This massacre occurred in the city of Kwangju in the area of Chŏllanam-do, South Korea, from May 18 to May 27, 1980. Democratization activists and their supporters (including university students) rose against Chun Doo-hwan's military dictatorship only to be violently suppressed. This Kwangju uprising and massacre is also called the 518 Incident, referring to the date when the uprising began.

⁵ These were cases brought by the South Korean government against Communists (or suspected Communist sympathizers) according to the Anti-Communism Law of 1965 (the first incident) and the National Security Law of 1975 (the second incident).

⁶ All of these requests were denied. [editor]

⁷ For more details, go [here](#).

Sources

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