

No Place for Neutrality: A Korean War Story

Heonik Kwon

How do we imagine and actualize the space of neutrality in the radically bipolarizing environment of modern politics such as those that prevailed in the early Cold War? We can pursue this question in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement, or the politics of the Third World more broadly, the early initiative of which took shape at the Bandung Conference of 1955 and in the precarious time in Asia immediately after the Korean War. Alternatively, we may explore the same question more squarely within the 1950-1953 crisis in the Korean peninsula; in particular, in relation to the intervention of the politics of neutrality into the resolution of the Korean conflict, a formative episode in the early Cold War international politics. This essay looks at the latter aspect of alternative space-making to the global bipolar politics of the mid-twentieth century, with reference to the idea of neutrality that was embedded in the grassroots experience of Korea’s civil-and-international war.

In the celebrated South Korean film, *JSA* (Joint Security Area, 2000), the Swiss army officer Sophie Jean arrives at the ironically named (and heavily fortified) Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that divides the two Koreas. Her mission is to investigate a shooting incident that occurred in the Joint Security Area within the DMZ, managed jointly by the Northern and Southern forces. In the incident two northern security personnel were killed allegedly by a South Korean conscript. Unconvinced by the briefings about the incident provided by the two Korean parties, Major Jean is determined to get to the real truth—against the advice of

her own superior officer at the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC). The last was an international taskforce established by the Korean War Armistice Agreement signed on July 27, 1953, which, consisting of delegates from four “neutral” nations of East and West (i.e. non-participants in the 1950-1953 war; Sweden, Switzerland, Poland, and Czechoslovakia), was to “supervise, observe, inspect, and investigate” the adherence to the Armistice agreement by the two Korean counterparts. The NNSC officer (an anthropologist in his civilian life!) reminds Jean of the volatile condition in the Korean peninsula that is still in a state of war many decades after the heavy gun went silent in July 1953, while gently protesting Jean’s pursuit of impartial truth in the given condition, a Winterwald (winter forest) according to him.



Figure 1. NNSC member states meeting in Panmunjŏm, Military Armistice Commission Joint Security Area

The investigation progresses slowly and undergoes unexpected turns. It turns out that two northern JSA sentries and two of their southern adversaries had developed a secretive friendship, which led to a tragic incident when their amicable relationship was discovered by a jealous northern security officer. Jean is sympathetic to the four soldiers who dared to cross the formidable line of enmity to develop informal friendship, as well as to the survivors of the shooting incident who refuse to convey what really happened. Nevertheless, she still believes that truth must be found and that it is her job as an agent of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission to do so. At the closing phase of the investigation, however, she also begins to wonder whether some truths wouldn't better remain undisclosed. To her chagrin, Jean hears from a survivor a farewell remark that "there is no place for neutrality" in his world.

The story of JSA pits the formal, legal-institutional idea of neutrality (represented by the NNSC) against the reality of mutual hostility within which the idea is depicted as an untenable ideal. However, it also shows that even in this condition of a radical and enduring friend/enemy contrast, there may exist certain space in which humble historical actors can be free from the prevailing political conflict, however momentarily. This space is a precarious one, teeming with uncertainties and dangers. The story is about people who forgot which side they belonged to, viewed from the privileged position of Neutral Nations that takes the right not to take sides as its mandate.



Figure 2. Film Joint Security Area (2000)

The lived histories of the Korean War abound with stories of such precarious spaces and how people enabled some "place for neutrality" in them. Kim Sung-chil, a history professor, kept a record of North-occupied Seoul from June 28 to September 28, 1950. In his diary, Kim writes about a neighbor who joined the occupying power as a local recruit. The neighbor's wife was worried about her husband's pro-communist activity and what this might bring to her family if the world changed hands. She was tormented about disputing with her husband over his lack of sympathy for her brother who was accused of being a counterrevolutionary. She confided these predicaments in the historian's wife, the one person in the neighborhood she genuinely trusted. The historian's wife wished to comfort her but didn't know how. She knew that if she said the wrong things to her neighbor and the woman's husband heard about what she had said, it might bring calamity to her family. After South Korean troops recovered Seoul, the historian was shocked to discover that the townspeople of Seoul as a whole, not merely those who collaborated with the North, became tainted and impure in the eyes of the new authority—for the simple reason that they had breathed the air of the communist occupation. Everyone was deemed guilty, and the only way to assert innocence seemed to be joining the machinery of accusation. Lamenting the

situation, Kim writes: “How impossible it is to perform the business of citizenship in this land!”



Figure 3. Kim Seong-chil with his family.

The war-generation Koreans would remember a poignant idiom to depict the particular state of emergency amid an ideologically charged civil war: wuwang jwawang (meaning roughly, “moving to the right and then to the left and back again”—that is, without knowing which way to go). People in the central and southern regions of Vietnam experienced a similar precarious condition of life during the long Vietnam War, and they remember xoi dau. Xoi dau is a ceremonial delicacy made of white rice flour and black beans. When used as a metaphor, the term refers to the turbulent conditions of communal life during the war, when the rural inhabitants were confronted with successive occupations by conflicting political and military forces. At night, the village was under the control of the revolutionary forces; during the day, the opposing forces took control. Life in these villages oscillated between two different political worlds governed by two mutually hostile military forces and people had to cope with their separate, yet equally absolute

demands for loyalty and with the world changing politically so frequently that sometimes this anomaly almost seemed normal. Xoi dau conveys the simple fact that when you eat this food, you must swallow both the white and black parts. This is how xoi dau is supposed to be eaten, and this is what it was like living the tumultuous life seized by the brutally dynamic reality of Vietnam’s civil and international war.

Like the Vietnam War, the Korean War was not a single war but rather a combination of several different kinds of war. Above all, it was a civil war fought between two mutually negating postcolonial political forces, each of which, through the negation, aspired to build a common, singular, and united modern nation-state. The postcolonial dimension of the war was well understood by some key facilitators of a prominent international postcolonial initiative of the era, the Bandung conference of 1955 that later developed into the Non-Aligned Movement. For people like U Nu, the Burmese leader, neutrality and non-alignment was an imperative for the survival of the newly emerging nation-states in Asia after WWII—namely, for avoiding “the holocaust of war” that Korea and Vietnam underwent shortly ago.¹ The Korean War was part of a global conflict waged between two bifurcating international forces with different visions of modernity, commonly referred to as the Cold War, although this reference or the related idea of “imaginary war” contradict how Korea and many other postcolonial nations experienced the era. The Korean War was also an international conflict fought, among others, between two of the most powerful political entities of the contemporary world, the United States and China. Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the Sino-American dimension of the Korean War has been the subject of numerous investigations. This is in part because of the growing availability of previously inaccessible archival sources held in the former Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere

in former Eastern Bloc countries. The growing attention to the Korean War as a pivotal episode of US-Chinese relations is also because the implications of this particular dimension of the war reverberate strongly in the unfolding contemporary world politics. It is a broadly shared view among scholars of American history that the United States became a military superpower through the Korean War; China's pursuit of Great Power status, according to some historians of China, began with its active role in the Korean War (in place of the USSR).² In the growing confrontation between these two powers today, we are nervously reminded of the fact that the theatre of the Korean War is the single space in modern history where young men from the United States and not-so-young men from China took each other's lives. The end of the Cold War as a prevailing geopolitical order of the past century has made it possible to see the realities of the Korean War from yet another perspective and dimension. Hidden beneath the relatively well-known characteristics of the Korean War as a civil and international conflict, there was another kind of war being waged in postcolonial Korea.

The 1950s war in Korea was principally a war against society, according to an increasing number of observers, referring to the relentless assault against the civilian population during the conflict.³ For others, it was even a "village war," in which the enmity and violence of the larger political world seeped deep into the intimate communal space and tore apart the community's moral integrity. Among people to whom the Korean War was a village war, the time is often recalled as "when the heavens suddenly collapsed" or "when both the laws of heaven and the laws of humanity were no longer." These expressions speak of the extremity of the human condition and the intensity of social chaos generated by the politics of exclusive political sovereignty rooted in violence, which, when pursued by both parties to the war, characterize the civil war

dimension of the Korean War. The allusion to heavenly laws also points to a crisis of morality: how radically a modern civil war can violate our fundamental sense of human goodness, and the profound wounds it leaves behind in the normative fabric of interpersonal lives.

Even in the most impossible circumstances, however, many ordinary Koreans strove to carve out niches of mutual survival and of freedom from enmity. Stories of these human dramas have been slowly rescued from public oblivion since the end of the Cold War. The recovery of the historian's diary is one example of this recent historical development, which also shapes the narrative of the JSA.

Voices to genuinely end the Korean War are growing today, and this ending will have to involve the Armistice of 1953 being replaced with a treaty of peace. When this happens, the NNSC's long presence in the peninsular will turn into an episode of a bygone era. One hopes that by then, we will also have the privilege to encounter a feast of stories that would contradict the "no place for neutrality" statement—that is, stories of how ordinary people enabled a multitude of such places even when the heavens were collapsing on them.

In an important war story published in 1960, *Public Square*, the celebrated Korean writer Choi In-hun writes of the final moments of Myung-jun, a communist prisoner-of-war originally from South Korea. Myung-jun is on a ship to a neutral country together with other northern POWs who refused either to settle in the South or to return to the North. The ship is named after Rabindrarath Tagore.⁴ Unlike other former comrades who are anxiously imagining a place of neutrality and a new life in such a place, Myung-jun comes to a realization that there is no such place in the wide world, in his native land or elsewhere. Then he throws himself into the waves of the Indian Ocean. The soldiers in the JSA story, written many years afterwards, came to the same realization in the

end. Their despair is historically real; however, so are the arduous pursuits to find such a place.

Heonik Kwon is a Senior Research Fellow of Social Anthropology at Trinity College, University of Cambridge and an APJ contributing editor. Currently he is part of the Mega Asia research group in Seoul National University Asia Center. Author of several prizewinning books on the social history of the Vietnam War and Asia’s Cold War, his most recent work is *After the Korean War: An Intimate History* (Cambridge, 2020). The research for this work received generous support from the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2016-LAB-2250005). The early version of this article was prepared for *State Fiction: The Gaze of a Neutral Mission in the Korean DMZ*, a public exhibition and forum at the Swiss Culture Center of Paris in October 2021. I thank Denise Bertschi and Claire Hoffmann.

Notes

¹ Cited from Frank N. Trager, “Burma’s Foreign Policy, 1948-56: Neutralism, Third Force, and Rice,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1956), p. 89.

² Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³ See, for instance, Steven Hugh Lee, *The Korean War* (New York: Longman, 2001). Also Kim Dong-choon, “[The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea: Uncovering the Hidden Korean War](#),” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 8, Issue 9 (March 1, 2010).

⁴ India was an important player in the early phase of Korean War Armistice discussions, which, having started in 1951, came to last two more years. The repatriation of POWs was a centrally critical issue in the delay. Later it played a formative role in the United Nations’ initiative on behalf of the Korean War prisoners who chose neutral nations (such as India and Brazil) instead of repatriation. See Monica Kim, *Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). However, his choice of Tagore as the ship’s name may have a deeper historical background: Intellectuals in colonial Korea were well aware of the fact that Tagore was a rare, almost singularly unique scholar of South Asia at the time who saw Japan’s colonial adventure to East Asia as a mimetic act of Western empires—rather than according to its propagated ideology of greater Asian solidarity in opposition to Western imperialism.