

The Korean War Mass Graves

Heonik Kwon

The Korean War Mass Graves

Heonik Kwon

On a gentle hillside on Jeju, a communal graveyard has a unique name and history. Surrounded by the reed fields that abound on this beautiful island near the southern maritime border of Korea, the gravesite consists of a large stone-walled compound, where one hundred and thirty-two modest, well-tended grave mounds lie in neat lines, and a tall stone-made memorial stands in the middle of the compound. Visitors can easily recognize that it is no ordinary graveyard. The site is distinct from the stone-walled individual or family tombs familiar to the island population, or from the traditional family ancestral graves commonly found on the hills of mainland Korea. There are simply too many graves concentrated in one place in this graveyard, and moreover, none is marked by the usual gravestone or a stone tablet, where visiting relatives can place offerings of food and alcohol for the dead according to the traditional custom of commemoration. The graves here are nameless, and they stand in a strangely ordered fashion, in tidily organized rows—an organization that people would expect to see in a military cemetery, not in a village graveyard.



Miryang communal graveyard

The graveyard is called, according to the inscription written on the memorial stone in Chinese script, “One Hundred Ancestors and A Single Descendent.” On the memorial stone’s pitch-black surface, on the back, the purpose of the stone is explained. It is a community ancestral shrine built in the hope of consoling the spirits of the dead buried on the premises. The name of the site is surprising: it goes against the conventional image of genealogical continuity in Korea’s traditional mortuary and commemorative culture. In ordinary circumstances, this continuity should be expressed in the language of reproductive prosperity and family expansion from one ancestor to many descendants. Here the order is reversed. The site’s name does not fit with the form of genealogical order familiar to anthropologists, which usually takes a pyramid shape, with a single apical ancestral figure on the top (or on the right) followed by increasingly numerous members in descending lines. How is it possible that a lone descendent survives the historical community of one

hundred ancestors? What happened in their genealogical history that their lineage has fallen to the current anomalous situation of minimal existence?



Miryang graveyard closeup

The gravesite is in possession of another object, which, on closer examination, offers small clues to the history of the place. Near the black memorial stone is a large glass sachet that contains several broken fragments of what appears to have been a sizeable tombstone or a memorial stone. According to the annals compiled by the One Hundred Ancestors and One Single Descendent Association of Bereaved Families, the fragments of the broken stone originate from an ancestral memorial erected in 1959. The old memorial stone “died” in 1961 and was brought back to life in 1993, the year the current memorial stone was erected. The annals also describe the circumstance of the stone’s death. In June 1961, the district’s gendarmerie ordered the families related to those buried in the graveyard to remove the memorial stone and, when they protested against the order, sent a police convoy to destroy it. The gendarmerie also intended to clear the graves from the premises, but failed to do so in the face of vigorous protests from the families and local villagers. The police justified these measures on the grounds that the construction of the graveyard and the memorial was an “act of treason—colluding

with communism.” After the stone was broken and buried, the police took on a distinctive identity among the locals—as the desecrator of family ancestral graves.

The confrontation between the political authority and the families over the question of burial was not unique to this place on Jeju but is known elsewhere in postwar South Korea. On 28 July 1960, thousands of women in traditional white dresses assembled at the public square in front of Daegu’s central railway station. This is where, ten years previously, daily large assemblies of students and other youth groups had protested the aggression by North Korea and called for patriotic unity against the communist aggressors’ “treacherous ambition to turn the Korean peninsula into a red territory.” In the summer of 1950, the environs of the Daegu station had turned into a gigantic slum and shelter for war refugees, and on the outskirts of the city, the United States and South Korean armies had built trenches along the river, determined to defend this city in southeastern Korea in order to halt the rapid southward advance of the North Korean army. The women in white dresses who gathered in the square in July 1960 came from all over the town and many from the near and distant countryside, having seen in the newspaper or heard the rumor that bereaved families of the casualties of war like them were invited to join a public gathering that day. This crowd of thousands of bereaved women shook the town center with their cries, according to the newspaper report of the day’s event, when they heard the memorial address that ended with the remark: “You the grievous spirits of the dead who are deprived of resting places—we shall cry for you for next thousand years!” Someone in the crowd began a loud lamentation, which soon developed to deafening simultaneous lamentations by thousands of participants. The gathering at the station was one of the first public assemblies in postwar Korea, outside Jeju, of the families of the victims of the Korean War civilian

massacres.

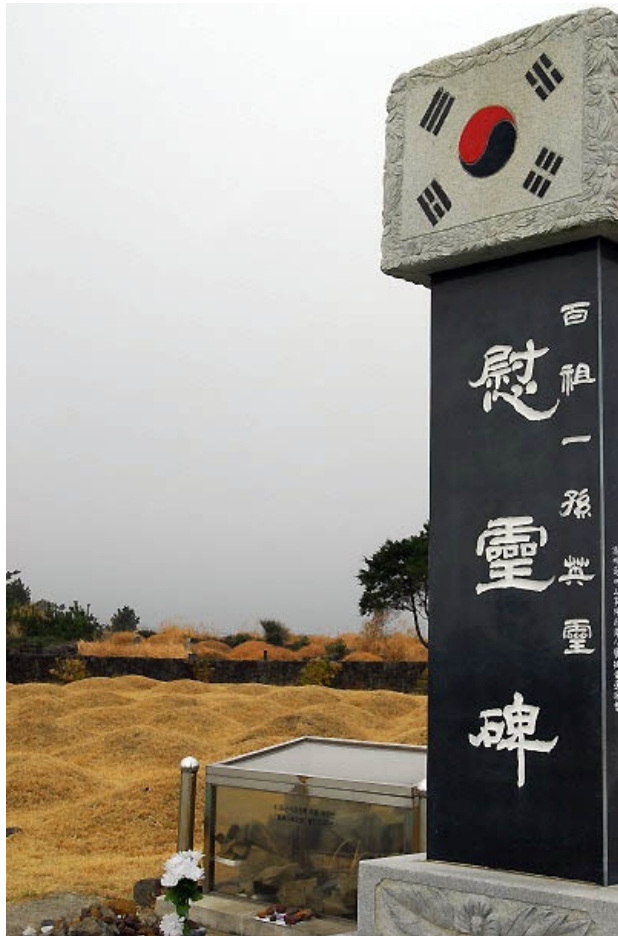


Daegu railway station, 1950

This event was part of a momentous development in postwar Korea, in which villagers and townspeople across South Korea began assembling in public spaces to demand justice for their relatives killed unlawfully before and during the Korean War. In 1960, South Koreans experienced a brief period of political democracy after student-led protests brought down the US-backed postwar regime of Syngman Rhee. Immediately after the democratic revolution, a number of local associations of bereaved families were established, which soon expanded to a national assembly of the families of the victims of the Korean War civilian killings. Some of these local associations took the initiative to open the mass graves of the victims. The associations reburied the remains of their relatives and held collective death-commemorative rites at the new collective tombs. The National Assembly of Bereaved Families hoped that the parliamentary inquiry would change the status of their relatives from collaborators with communism to victims of state violence.

The families' aspirations were thwarted in the following year, however, when a group of army officers staged a coup and subsequently

reestablished anticommunist authoritarian political rule. Some members of the family associations were subsequently brought before military courts, and many more were later subjected to strict surveillance by the state's security apparatus. The collective tombs and the memorials prepared earlier by the local associations were desecrated and destroyed. These included the original stone of the "One Hundred Ancestors and A Single Descendent" in Jeju and the temporary collective tomb prepared by the association of bereaved families in Daegu. During this turbulent time, human remains became the object of radical conflicts between the postwar state authority and the bereaved families of the Korean War. The families collaborated to unearth the bones from a site where a mass killing took place in the early days of the Korean War; the political authority seized the exhumed objects and reinterred them en masse. For those who had participated in the opening of the mass graves in the Daegu area, it remains unanswered how an act of exhumation could become a threat to national security and how their private wish to provide a decent burial to their husbands, brothers and sons was judged a public crime.



One hundred ancestors and a single descendant

The politically plagued commemorative efforts described above concerned casualties of the Korean War who belonged to a specific category of war dead. The memorial stone on Jeju island was dedicated to the victims of a tragic incident that took place immediately after the Korean War broke out in June 1950, when the island’s police and military forces, under orders from a higher authority, arrested several hundred islanders and executed them en masse, without trial, in several remote locations. Similar orders were carried out throughout the central and southern regions of mainland South Korea, as the country’s military forces failed to stop the advance of the North Korean invasion and the South Korean government was forced to flee southward, having abandoned the capital Seoul. These atrocious actions targeted mainly those whom

the government had earmarked before the war as communist sympathizers or potential collaborators with North Korea. An estimated one hundred thousand civilians are believed to have been killed by this extraordinary state-of-emergency measure taken in the first few weeks of the Korean War. The dead included inmates of national and provincial prisons, who were held there on charges of political crimes relating to the social unrest and political conflicts of postcolonial Korea since the nation’s liberation from Japan’s colonial rule in August 1945 at the end of the Pacific War and the subsequent division of the nation between the Soviet-occupied north and the US-occupied south.



Rite of spirit consolation, Jeju

The killings were conducted in remote hill areas, in abandoned mines, or on unpopulated islands. Also reported are cases in which the victims were thrown into the coastal water, with their hands tied behind their backs and heavy objects attached to their bodies. After the killings, the massacre sites became forbidden places. For a period after the war ended in 1953, families of victims were forbidden from coming to the sites to identify and recover the bodies of their relatives from the shallow mass graves. The state authority branded the bodies in these mass graves the bodies of the traitors so, by extension, the act of touching these bodies (especially for the purpose of giving burial to the victims)

constituted treason. Despite these harsh measures, a number of families secretly recovered the bodies of their relatives; this was often done through a wider communal effort involving several bereaved families. The gravesite on Jeju was prepared in this way in 1956 based on a shared initiative of bereaved families. By that time, the corpses had decomposed, and the families found it nearly impossible to identify the remains that they had excavated from a valley where an old munitions depot of the Japanese colonial army had existed before 1945. The villagers joined hands to separate the entangled remains and to put them back together, according to a village elder who participated in the exhumation, in the hope of helping the dead have a “minimal human shape with a head, two arms, and two legs.” This communal forensic activity resulted in one hundred thirty-two more or less complete skeletal sets. The bereaved families then prepared one hundred and thirty-two graves, buried the remains separately in these nameless graves, and gave the collective of graves the name “One Hundred Ancestors and A Single Descendent.”

Considering this background of mass burial and exhumation, the graveyard’s name appears to be less extraordinary, and less about an anomalous, upside-down genealogical condition. “One Hundred Ancestors and A Single Descendent” addresses the norms of kinship to commemorate the dead and, since the commemoration concerns a mass grave, the imperative for the bereaved families to unite beyond the narrow sphere of kinship. Although the one hundred thirty-two human remains were buried in the cemetery individually, their bodies were in actuality all intertwined with one another. Likewise, the name of the graveyard denotes that the bereaved families are interconnected with one another, constituting a single community of mourners, despite their differences in genealogical identity and separate ties to the dead.

Also notable is the fact that the memorial stone is not a solitary object. The stone does not merely represent the desire of the bereaved families to commemorate their tragically dead ancestors but also testifies to the radical challenges to their commemorative effort. Standing next to the broken remains of the old memorial, the stone shows that it has a history of death and regeneration of life. The stone speaks of the fact that the rights of kinship to remember the dead can be negated by a powerful political force, and that the assertion of these rights is interlocked with the advancement of political democracy. The history of Korea’s political democracy is, in a crucial way, about the right to properly bury and commemorate the tragic dead from the Korean War. This was the case in 1960, and it continues to be so today.

The Korean War was not a single war. It was a civil war within a nation divided into two separate postcolonial states, and the first major international crisis since the end of the Second World War. Underneath the reality of a civil and international war fought between contending political forces and their armed groups, however, there was another reality of war that remains largely unknown to the outside world. Viewed in this way, the Korean War was not necessarily or primarily a violent struggle between contending armed forces, but rather involved the struggle of unarmed civilians for survival against the generalized, indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the armed political forces of all sides. The preemptive violence committed in the beginning of the war against hypothetical collaborators with the enemy set off a vicious cycle of violence against civilians in the ensuing chaos of war: it radicalized the punitive actions perpetrated under the North Korean occupation against the individuals and families who were classified as supporters of the southern regime, which again escalated the intensity of retaliatory violence directed against the so-called collaborators with the communist

occupiers when the tide of war changed.

This hidden reality of the Korean War has been slowly uncovered in recent years. The following exchange between the Vietnamese writer Do Khiem and the Korean scholar Kim Sung-soo reflects on the ongoing efforts in today's South Korea, including those of the government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to investigate the incidents of mass civilian killing committed during the Korean War and to account for the victims of these tragic events. These initiatives for historical accountability are remarkable, considering that Korea is still a partitioned nation where the understanding of the nation's civil war is not yet free from the politics of the Cold War. The initiatives are remarkable also in the broader context of northeast Asia, where the horizons of historical knowledge and accountability are still imbued with denials of historical responsibility and false truth claims about the past. The Korean War was a formative event in the making of the order of northeast Asia as we know it today. The history of this war can help us imagine a better future for the region, if there is enough

will to tell it truthfully.

Heonik Kwon is a Reader of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh and the author of the prize-winning [After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai \(2006\)](#) and [Ghosts of War in Vietnam \(2008\)](#). He is now completing a book on the commemoration of the Korean War.

Heonik Kwon wrote this article for [Japan Focus](#). Posted on August 1, 2008.

See Do Khiem and Kim Sung-soo, [Crimes, Concealment and South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#).

Bruce Cumings, [The South Korean Massacre at Taejon: New Evidence on US Responsibility and Coverup](#).

Charles J. Hanley & Jae-Soon Chang, [Summer of Terror: At least 100,000 said executed by Korean ally of US in 1950](#).