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Fulton & Fulton, trans./The Red Room

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Foreword

Bruce Cumings

The Korean War was clearly a war, but what kind? The official view insists it was a war of aggression, with all blame going to the Russians and the North Koreans. According to this point of view, the war began on June 25, 1950, when the North invaded the South, an open-and-shut case of aggression. Still, there is a nagging point: Koreans invaded Korea. What do we make of that? A different view, expressed as early as 1950, holds that the unilateral American decision in 1945 to divide Korea at the 38th parallel was “the invitation to such a conflict as has in fact arisen”:

In the American Civil War the Americans would never have tolerated for a single moment the setting up of an imaginary line between the forces of North and South, and there can be no doubt as to what would have been their reaction if the British had intervened in force on behalf of the South. This parallel is a close one because in America the conflict was not merely between two groups of Americans, but was between two conflicting economic systems as is the case in Korea.¹

I agree: the essential nature of this war, the thing we need to know first, is that it was a civil war, a war fought by Koreans, for Korean
goals. Koreans know this war in their bones as a fratricidal conflict, something that is etched into the stories that they tell in this wonderful collection.

**War Is a Stern Teacher**
The Korean War, like the U.S. Civil War, had a long gestation and occurred primarily because of issues internal to Korea. That is the basic reason it has never ended. The civil conflict began not in 1950 but in 1945 with the partition of this ancient nation as World War II ended. Only this conception can account for the one hundred thousand lives lost in the South before June 1950 and the continuance of the conflict down to the present, in spite of assumptions that Moscow’s puppets in Pyongyang would surely collapse after the USSR itself met oblivion in 1991. It is therefore instructive to see what Thucydides, the first philosopher of war, had to say about civil war. “War is a stern teacher,” perhaps the most famous line from his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, comes from the civil war in Corcyra:

> War is a stern teacher. So revolutions broke out in city after city. . . . What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one’s unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defense. Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became a suspect.²

This passage is a mnemonic for “Korea.” It fits the Korean civil war with no necessity to dot “i’s” or cross “t’s,” and it explains the continuing blight from that war on the Korean mind. To understand the Korean War “from all sides” is still to go to jail in the North and to risk
oblivion in the now (and finally) democratic South. The passage also fits the American Civil War, by far the most devastating of all American wars to Americans, but one that happened long enough ago that most Americans have no idea what it means to have warfare sweeping back and forth across the national territory or to have brother pitted against brother.

Now that South Koreans are free to write about this war—its origins, its nature, its consequences—we see that an entire population was traumatized by one of the most violent and intense wars of the twentieth century. No one knows for sure how many Koreans died from 1950 to 1953, but most experts accept a figure of about 2 million for the North, which had a prewar population of about 8 million, and around 1 million for the South, which had about 15 million. (Another 1 million Chinese died.) This makes Korean suffering comparable to the other two worst-case situations of the last century, Poland and the Soviet Union in World War II (the Soviet side lost about 27 million people). These are extraordinary figures, but much of the loss came from the U.S. aerial bombardment of North Korea. All told the North lost perhaps one-quarter of its population.

This episode of bombardment, now very well documented, left barely a modern building standing in the cities, which were much more urban and industrial than comparable cities in, say, North Vietnam. I think many of the odd and repellent aspects of contemporary North Korea bear some relationship to this nation’s suffering from a terrible collective form of war trauma. When I first visited there in 1981, the bombing was the first thing my guides and handlers brought up to me. Is it possible for an entire nation to have post-traumatic stress disorder?

South Korean fiction seems to suggest that it is. Just about every Korean lost a family member in the war, and some 10 million Koreans still have kinfolk in either the North or the South that they have not seen since 1953. Pak Wan-sō’s brilliant career, as Bruce Fulton points out, is a matter of working through war trauma for the rest of her life. Im Ch’ōr-u comes from a region of Korea doubly and triply trauma-
tized: the Cholla provinces in the southwest. Here in the early 1890s a major peasant rebellion broke out that the old Korean regime and the Japanese put down with ruthless force. A second major rebellion erupted under the U.S. Occupation in the fall of 1946, an unknown number died when the North’s army swept through in July 1950, and tens of thousands more died when the South Korean forces of order retook this region and lashed out in retribution against real or imagined collaborators with the North. Thirty years later came the Kwangju Massacre, which shook the nation to its roots and spawned an entire generation of young people who not only hated and rebelled against the military dictatorship, but also reviled the United States for its continuing support of these same militarists.

For Pak Wan-so, it goes without saying that this long-running conflict was a civil war, an internecine struggle between brethren. “The eyes that had seen” that war later averted their gaze from it; forgetting was salutary; living was in the here and now—better grab up some real estate bargains and get on with life. But this forgetting is also a result of trauma, and Americans, too, need to ask themselves why they call this major war “forgotten.” Was it ever really known? Most Americans know nothing about the horrific civilian losses in the North and would bridle even at the suggestion that somehow they victimized North Korea. Is it not symbolic that in the late David Halberstam’s recent book about the war, *The Coldest Winter*, he can name only two South Koreans in the entire book? A wife wanders away from her husband in O Chŏng-hŭi’s story, searching for something—herself, her past—for she was one of Korea’s hundreds of thousands of war orphans (fully one hundred thousand of them were adopted by Americans). She feels rootless, a vagrant, even though she is ensconced within a family. What would crack her “hard shell of oblivion”? Truths suddenly emerge from an unknown past to unnerve a child. Im Chŏr-u’s character remembers the experience of water torture, and today we Americans read this with a new recognition: that’s what we do, too, to prisoners held in Guantanamo. There, ironically, Americans even read North Korean torture manuals from a
sixty-year-old war for pointers. No one really escapes a cataclysm like this, Pak suggests. All have bloody faces in their dreams and cold sweats when they wake in the wee hours of the morning—even Americans.

Restorative Truths
What is truth? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa defined that vexing term in four ways: factual or forensic truth, personal or narrative truth, social or “dialogue” truth, and healing or restorative truth. Book after book has appeared in South Korea in the past two decades, full of revelations about the nature of the Korean War and the horrible suffering of the Korean people. Survivors have pressed their case against all odds for years.³ Forensic evidence has also turned up with nauseating regularity, as the Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission (established during President Roh Moo-hyun’s term) disinter the bodies of thousands of political massacre victims. These forensic and eyewitness truths establish lies and misrepresentations at all levels, perpetrated for half a century, especially by officials in Washington.⁴ But they also (in the South African commission’s words) “reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse.”

The stories in this collection, the restorative truths told by the courageous survivors and living victims of the Korean War, and the many new articles and books examining this war from all sides that have appeared in South Korea, are fruits of the popular struggle for democracy in Korea; this surge of civil society is also a surge of suppressed information and would never have been possible during the long decades of dictatorship before 1988. This Korean outpouring is also, however, akin to what writers like Ambrose Bierce did for Americans in the aftermath of their own civil conflict, penning poignant stories that captured the terrible truths of fratricidal war. Now it is high time to take the personal truths of the victims and survivors and turn them into a restorative truth, a requiem for the “forgotten war” that might finally achieve the peaceful reconciliation that the two
Koreas have been denied since we first etched a line at the 38th parallel in August 1945.

Notes

4. The massacre of some four thousand political prisoners by South Korean police in July 1950 in Taejŏn was blamed entirely on North Koreans in the official U.S. military history of the war authored by the late Roy Appleman: South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1961).