
A Not So Forgotten War

Grace Yoo

War brings violence and chaos to society. Usually, the most affected civilians—women and children—flee their homes to avoid injury and death. Many make the journey alone, without husbands and fathers. Despite previous research showing the immediate and long-term effects of war on civilians, too often the plight of these refugees, in particular mothers, is ignored. Although war memories still haunt Korea, most Americans remember very little about it. Korea's pre-war years were unstable. Koreans achieved independence from Japan in 1945. They witnessed instability in the years that followed, including the three-year occupation by the U.S. and the Soviet Union, massive uprisings throughout the peninsula, and the ultimate division of their country at the 38th parallel.

Although disputes continue to this day—on when and who started this war—this was a Korean War that involved not only South and North Korea, but also the Soviet Union, China, and the United States. Ultimately, death and destruction were the consequences of this war: four million lives were lost; over nine million people were displaced; 11 million families were separated; 300,000 women were widowed; and many children were orphaned. No Korean family was untouched by this war.

Despite the toll the Korean War had on civilians, little scholarship on its impact on civilians exists. Rather, historians, soldiers, and politicians have recorded and documented the story of the Korean War from a political, ideological, and military perspective. Among English-language publications, few illustrate a civilian's perspective. A 1999 Associated Press investigative report on the killing by U.S. troops of unarmed civilians near the village of No Gun Ri contributed to the increasing interest in these atrocities. In 1988, anthropologist Choong Son Kim published *Faithful Endurance: An Ethnography of Korean Family Dispersal*, which describes the impact of family separations during the war. Kim provides four case studies of different family separations and the psychosocial impact they had on families.

The Three Day Promise, by Korean American Donald Chung, discusses his experience as a Korean soldier during this war, plus the separation he experienced from his mothers and sisters in North Korea. His biography describes his journey to locate his family in North Korea. Another memoir published in 2001, by H.K. Shin, titled *Remembering Korea 1950: A Boy Soldier's Story*, is Shin's first-hand account of his experience as a Korean soldier and as a civilian. These few English-language publications provide some insight into the war from a civilian perspective. But little exists to describe the experience of mothers.

The importance of mothers during wartime is often invisible in the records of history, yet they play a significant role in protecting and nurturing children during wartime. Sara Ruddick, a noted feminist social theorist on war and motherhood, argues that a mother's responsibility to her child contradicts the principles of war. According to Ruddick, the mothering experience includes three demands: preservation, growth, and social acceptability. Maternal work protects and nurtures emotional and intellectual growth. A mother's role, as Ruddick discusses, involves seeing "vulnerability and respond[ing] to it with care rather than abuse, indifference, or flight." According to Ruddick, violence threatens all of women's work—sheltering, nursing, feeding, kin work, teaching of the very young, and tending the frail elderly.

Other feminist social theorists, such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, dispute these ideals of maternal thinking: that during wartime mothers operate with ideals of protection and preservation of life. Rather, she argues that the experience of mothering under extreme conditions—such as war—allows women to "let go." According to Scheper-Hughes, mothers are led to believe in time of war that there is an "acceptable death," which generates resignation and accommodation to and acceptance of such tragedy and loss. Unlike Ruddick, Scheper-Hughes argues that the situation is not merely that men cause war and women create peace. If this were the case, she says, then "mothers would raise sons to resist wars, and women would refuse to bury their war dead." Mothering in times of war is not universal and natural; rather it is socially, culturally, and materially contextual. Mothers can be active in their role for peace, but they also can be accommodating to violence, and as a result can provide legitimacy for the support of war.

Over 50 years after the war, Koreans still remain divided. Moreover, war survivors have aged or passed away. Because of the urgency of documenting maternal experiences during this time period, I initially embarked on collecting the life histories of older Korean women residing in the United States. (For a separate project, I also interviewed older Korean women in Canada and South Korea.) The 20 participants in this life history project consisted of Korean women who were mothers of young children under the age of five years during the Korean War. These women ranged in age from 75 to 91, and resided in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, or New York City. The interview questions centered around the following: their fears and concerns for their children, their life as a refugee, how they coped with losses, and how they eventually rebuilt their lives. These tape-recorded interviews were conducted in Korean, and later translated into English. A content analysis of the transcripts identified certain themes.

The project was conducted from a feminist perspective in order to counter the male-oriented perspective dominant in the telling of the history of the Korean War. This approach proved to be the most suitable, since women's voices in Korean War history records and accounts are often limited or missing. Moreover, these accounts, as essential historical material, provide the basis of feminist scholarship. Within this methodological framework, the life history method bridges both history and biography, and allows for an understanding of how social structures and events affect women.

Although there is still much controversy surrounding who started the Korean War and when, for most South Koreans it began on June 25, 1950 when North

Korean forces exploded across the 38th parallel in a coordinated attack against South Korea. To prevent North Korean forces from moving further south, the South Korean army destroyed the Han River bridge. As a result, over one-and-a-half million residents of Seoul were trapped. A United Nations force entered Pusan in July. Even with the presence of UN soldiers, North Korean troops were able to advance further south. In late July, the city of Taejon became controlled by North Korean troops. By August 1950, the Korean People's Army had taken over 90 percent of Korea. The only part of Korea not captured by the North Koreans was Pusan. According to Hastings, approximately 26,000 South Korean civilians were murdered during the North Korean reign over South Korea between July and September 1950. During this time, many families were separated, injured, or killed.

Between July and August 1950, North Korean informants inhabited many regions of South Korea, identifying reactionary elements, members of the South Korean armed forces, police, anti-communist leaders, politicians, leaders of various organizations, landowners, and public officials. Men involved in the South Korean government, such as the police or government employees, were particularly targeted. Those identified by the North Koreans, as the Korean Red Cross reports, were subject to arrest, imprisonment, abduction, and persecution. In addition, the standing committee of the North Korean Supreme People's Committee issued an ordinance to draft volunteers for the North Korean People's Army on July 1, 1950. As many as 200,000 individuals were recruited to serve in the North Korean People's Army. As a result of these tumultuous times, many women became separated from male family members. Males as young as high school students were recruited into the military, while more established male members of a family were subjected to arrest, imprisonment, abduction, and removal to North Korea, or, worse, execution. Many men during this time period went into hiding for fear of being subjected to harassment by the North Koreans.

Seungshil Park, who was 40 years old at the time, remembers a North Korean soldier looking for her husband. He and several of her children had already fled Kaesong, but she remained in Kaesong with her mother-in-law and young daughter out of respect for the land on which her ancestors had lived for so many generations. In her husband's absence, Park remained tough even though soldiers periodically came through her town looking for men to interrogate or recruit for military purposes. On one visit, a soldier put a gun to her chest as he searched her house for her husband. She recalls how she felt:

I wasn't worried about dying but was afraid of being raped. I mean once you were dead there was not much else they could do to you. I still remember the soldier. He was tall and handsome. He asked me, "What do you think about North Korea's policies?" I said to him how would I know anything about this? We are people who live day-by-day and just struggle to survive and it does not matter whether the government changes or not. If people live well, that is all we care. Anyways the soldier went on his way and told me to be careful of the bombing and to stay in the basement.

In Hee Kim, 34 years old at the time, recalls the day her husband disappeared. On July 26, 1950, Kim frantically tried to hide her husband in the attic. She had made him soup and was keeping watch for the soldiers outside. Kim's

neighbors identified her husband as the village police chief. At 4 a.m. that morning seven soldiers carrying guns burst into her house and searched everywhere for her husband. They found him crouching in the attic. She remembers the details of that morning:

They shouted at my husband to put his hands up and come out. They took him to a police station in Dong Ja Dong. I was vigilant every day and came every day to give him food. I saw many intelligent people like the governor, officers, and professors. But after three days later, I couldn't find him in the police station. To this day, I do not know if he was killed or whether he was kidnapped by the North Koreans.

Kim was overwhelmed by the prospect that her husband could have been killed. Moreover, having been a homemaker, she now had to face the future as the sole financial provider and caregiver for her three children. She was in a state of desperation to find out what had happened to her husband:

I think they killed my husband. I was desperate to search for him and was told that I might find him at Chung Bu police station. I went there, but the guards wouldn't let me in. Someone who came out from there told me that they had a lot of dead bodies in the back yard of the station. I was hoping I could find my husband's dead body. I went everywhere and looked in every valley where dead bodies were decomposing. I can't describe how I felt. I was so desperate to find my husband, dead or alive. I can't describe how I felt. I was incredibly desperate. I can't describe it in words. I was so distraught. I wondered whether I could handle raising my children, let alone deal with the circumstances of my husband's disappearance.

Despite her desperate attempt to locate her husband's body, she never did find it. Not knowing if her husband was dead, alive, or had been kidnapped to North Korea intensified the stresses she faced during the war. She now had to raise her three children alone, not knowing what had happened to her husband, but needing to provide food and shelter during such a chaotic time. Kim was not alone; during the Korean War approximately 300,000 women became widows.

The separation of husbands from wives was quite commonplace during the war, especially if the husbands were affiliated with the government or involved in a civic organization. Wives of such husbands were on alert and in fear that their husbands would not return. Thirty-four-year-old Ok Jin Goo, mother of six children and the wife of a policeman, describes her feelings at the time:

I was afraid. At night the North Korean soldiers carried bamboo spears looking for policemen to kill. We couldn't sleep at night and constantly had to hide my husband here and there. One day he went to work at the police station and didn't come home. I went down to the police station to find out what happened. Inside the police station, it looked like I heard much commotion. I went in and I thought I saw what looked like my husband. I saw bodies and blood everywhere. The North Koreans had thrown explosive grenades directed at the police. There were nine policemen in his station. Somehow only my husband survived.

Kum Ok Kim, who was 28 years old at the time and had three young children, also experienced a separation from her husband. Her husband was a South Korean government employee. She describes the agony of not knowing her husband's whereabouts:

He went into hiding and I didn't hear from him for this length of time. I was so anxious and scared because he did not tell me where he was going. And in the midst of worrying about my husband, I had four children I needed to take care of. I was so worried that he would be caught by the North Korean soldiers, or worse yet, be killed.

On September 15, 1950, UN forces landed in Inchon. One month later, the Chinese entered the Korean War. American troops continued to attack cities and installations on their retreat within both the North and South. Although January 4, 1951 is known as the date Seoul was captured by the Chinese, and the date many fled south, the displacement of Koreans occurred as early as late November and early December 1950. The withdrawal of United Nations forces from Pyongyang on December 4, 1950 created mayhem. Even though the bridge over the Taedong River had been destroyed earlier by a bomb, thousands of refugees were crawling through the steel supports and girds. Over 50,000 Koreans crossed the Taedong River. Moreover several evacuations of civilians coordinated by UN forces were also occurring in northern seaports.

By the end of December, the Communist forces took over Pyongyang and were moving south. On January 4, 1951, the UN forces and South Korean soldiers pulled out of Seoul. Whether by ship, boat, train, or walking, Koreans everywhere flocked to the South for safety, shelter, and food. This time period was characterized by extreme panic, fear, and desperation. Both North and South Korean civilians were displaced and millions of people left their homes to find safety in refugee camps. Amidst the continual bombings, Halliday and Cumings explain, the only place civilians could feel safe was behind the bombing lines, regardless of which side attacked.

Many of the women recalled the ensuing panic from rumors that the war was drawing near. Moreover, many saw fires and exploding bombs. According to these interviewees, as bombs flew across the sky many women would abandon their children. "People in the crowd would yell, 'move faster,'" said Jung Soon Park. "They went crazy at that time. Thinking to themselves, 'why do I need this child? It's only a burden.' And then they would throw away their baby. During such a time your life is the first one to save. Not a bag of rice, not a child, and not a thing you are carrying." She elaborated further, "War brings out the most evil in humans. There is no value of human life."

On the other hand, surrounded by the horror of death, Kyung Suk Paek, 20 years old at the time, recounted her experience as the young mother of a newborn baby:

I heard this big BOOM. So I bent down as much as I could, but I got hit. The bombshell penetrated my back to my chest. At that time, I had my baby on my back. She was wrapped with thick blankets. I didn't know I was hit but saw blood coming from my father-in-law's hand. So I tried to say something to him but couldn't speak. I tapped him on his shoulder. But right then, I saw blood pouring out of my chest like flowing water. It was a miracle that my baby on my back had not been hit. But I was badly hit. I was bleeding profusely. My body got colder. I thought I was going to die.

After her injury, Kyung Suk Paek entered a hospital, but later got an infection caused by her injuries. She recalled, "I lived day by day. I could not think of any other than the day I lived. You can't think about the future. If you lived one day

that was enough to say ‘thank you, God.’ But I was so determined that I had to live, and that everyone must survive. I kept saying to myself, ‘I have to survive because I have my baby.’ ”

Displacement forced many women to deliver babies in the midst of bombing. Twenty-four-year-old Myung Soon Han was nine months pregnant. Like every family in Korea, she, her children, and parents-in-law walked south with the other refugees to seek shelter from the war. As they stopped in vacant houses, barns, or old sheds alongside the road to rest, seeing dead bodies was commonplace. However, one image of a man being hit by a bomb has troubled her even to this day:

I still remember the image of a man burned alive. We were behind the soldiers on the frontline. The soldiers were shooting at each other and the people were in the middle, and B-29 bombs were dropping. When it exploded, and when people were hit, their bodies would go up into flames. Some people did survive from the bombing but their faces and bodies shriveled because of their burns. I saw a man who was on fire and pleading for help. His body was covered with flames, but he was still alive. Everyone was so busy fleeing the bombs, even his own family could not do anything. They just kept running away from the bombs, but they kept going. It was terrible, and I tried to close my eyes.

On January 9, 1951, Myung Soon Moon delivered her baby in the midst of nearby fighting. The image of the man being hit by the bombs also stayed in her memory:

At *An Yang*, I delivered my baby and bombs and bullets were flying over the house at each side. I thought I was going to die at that time. I didn’t believe God at that time but I prayed and prayed that God would save my family. At the same time, the picture of the man on fire came to my mind and these images would not leave. After I delivered, I could not eat. My parents kept telling me I needed to eat for my newborn baby, but I could not get the image of my mind. His screams and the horror on his face still have not faded from my memories.

Although the majority of Korean women fled the war, some Korean women chose to stay at home because of their caretaking responsibilities. Seungshil Park and her young daughter did not leave Kaesong with the rest of her family. Her mother-in-law could not depart from her ancestors’ home, and Park was reluctant to make the long journey south because of her pregnancy. Rather, her daughter and mother-in-law hid in the basement of her home, especially during the UN bombing campaigns. She remembers the day a bomb hit her home and how she fought for her daughter’s survival:

I was saying to my daughter, “The airplanes are not flying today so let’s go out and get some air. We’ll feel dizzy if we stay much longer in the basement.” And suddenly my daughter said, “Mom I hear an airplane.” I said then let’s go back inside to the basement. But right then I heard a BOOOM and bombs were dropping. And it became dark and my daughter was crying. Debris and dust were everywhere. I wasn’t scared. I was just concerned about my daughter. So I said, “Don’t cry, or all the dust and debris will come into your mouth.” I asked her whether she could move, and she said, “Yes.” I told her to not move and that God would keep her alive. Even though I said this, it was so dark and I thought there was no way we would survive. I knew we were about

to die. I am still amazed at myself and what I was able to do at that time. When I think back, I realized I was so calm. I am sure God was with me.

Many of these women knew many individuals who lost their lives during these bombing campaigns. The women who survived the bombings felt that God was watching over them, and that a higher force had protected them.

The process of millions of people seeking safety in the refugee camps was complicated by their having to travel during the cold winter months. Jun Ki Park and her five children left Seoul on January 4, 1951. The police forced Park's family out of her sister's house, even though it was one of the snowiest days in January. They moved south along with other refugees. Park recalled how difficult this was in freezing weather:

At around midnight, we were on the Han River. We were told could not travel further because of the enforced curfew of 12 midnight. My children and I were forced to stay on top of the frozen river over night. People now wear good shoes, but we had rubber shoes at that time so the cold air from the ice came through our shoes' thin bottoms to our feet. My children were crying and shivering because of the extreme cold. They could not go to the restroom and so they urinated in their pants. Because they now had wet pants, their pants were frozen. We stood all night on top of the frozen Han River ... My children cried silently. They were so patient though young.

Bong Dang Park recalled the train ride to Seoul with her newborn baby. It was raining and snowing, and she and her infant were on top of a train with other huddled refugees.

As it snowed and rained, people tried to push me off the edge of train. I couldn't do anything. I didn't have anybody who seemed willing to help me. I was so close to the edge of this train that if I had fallen, my baby and I would have died immediately. I was so scared that I would fall off that I shouted and screamed at those pushing me to stop and that I had a baby with me. Everyone was so concerned about their own family and not others. I felt I had no way of surviving the mayhem that was taking place just for a space on top of this train. I shouted and cried at the crowd to stop pushing me. I was thinking if the train slowed down that I could jump off the train. Miraculously, someone from inside the train compartment heard what was occurring and persuaded me not to jump. He yelled at everyone to stop pushing a mother with a small child and he pulled me into his compartment.

She later recalls that other mothers lost their lives by jumping off the crowded train. Death could have been her fate as well if it were not for the generosity of this older man willing to provide her space. Other mothers were also concerned about the possibility of losing their children. Kum Ok Kim remembers fleeing south while keeping track of her four young children:

I can't tell you how I felt. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night for fear of losing my children. Many people during the war became separated from their children. If you were carrying your child on your back and walking in a very crowded street, if you did not hold him tight, you could lose your child. And older children would hold an adult's hand mistakenly thinking that that person was his mother or father, and realize it was not.

The death of immediate family members was a reality for many Koreans during the war. Even though many experienced the loss of children, husbands, mothers, and fathers it was too much for women survivors, who coped with this trauma by themselves. Jung Soon Park's memory of the death of her ten-month old baby shows her continuous grieving. Her baby had been malnourished because of the lack of available food and eventually died of meningitis. She had asked her sister to see how her baby was. She remembers her feelings of loneliness and grief:

She spoke the words I did not want to hear. He had died while I was carrying him on my back. I did not know what to do. I wanted my father-in-law to show some empathy to me. Instead of comforting me, my father immediately stated, "I will go and prepare to bury him." And then he left without saying another word. I was so scared. I called out his name as he went down the road, "Father, father," but he continued to walk without saying a word. I felt like leaving my lifeless baby there. I was so scared and confused. But I decided against it. Even though I was so scared to be myself, I managed to carry my baby and walk ninety minutes to my home.

The loss for Jung Soon Park was overwhelming. She and her family were living life as refugees. Their home was obliterated and now her child was gone. She remembers this painful moment in her life: "We had lost everything. We lost our home. We lost everything we owned. Now we had lost our child. The next months were like a dark fog with no light."

Another interviewee, Nam Soon Nam, also witnessed the death of four family members killed by exploding bombs. She states, "When I lost my family members, I felt like killing myself. When I looked at my children, I felt helpless. I couldn't do anything. I was worried about the children. How was I going to raise my children? What will happen next to us? I was living every day in horror."

In these memories, women shared their feelings of loss and eventual helplessness. The war had destroyed lives. It turned homes and property into rubble, and more importantly caused the loss of innocent loved ones.

During the Korean War, over 300,000 women became widows. Besides this great emotional loss, these women also faced the pressures of being the sole provider for their families. Many women resorted to "peddling." After In Hee Kim and her children had walked to Kong Ju, she decided to return to Seoul. In Youngdungpo, without any money and a place to live, she had to survive on a shrimp-selling business. She remembers how she started this small business:

I was able to get a jar of shrimp source. I was hungry and tired and a lady with a baby followed me. She didn't know any people in Youngdungpo so she followed me. She wanted to sell the source there and head back to Incheon. So she asked me to sell it for her, saying that she had to head back to Incheon on the night. We agreed to share the profit of her shrimp source half and half. So I sold them all but she didn't come back. It was my first business ever in my life. I made money; around 150,000 won.

Other women also recalled selling sweet potatoes or Korean rice cakes alongside the road. Many of these women had never had outside work experiences, and the loss of their husband often meant they had to utilize different skills

and networks for the very first time. Myoung Sook Moon, also a widow, recalled her experience trying to find work:

And I only thought about how I was going to raise my children. I was 27 years old at that time with my four children. It was so hard, and I didn't have any abilities or skills to make money. So I almost had to live with my in-laws but decided that somehow my children and I could make it on our own. From my friends, I heard that a telephone company was hiring some operators. I was familiar with this work. I had worked as a telephone operator during the Japanese colonization. So I applied and got hired and was able to support myself, and my four children.

Although many who lost husbands could have relied on their in-laws, many chose not to do so. Rather, they sought to make it on their own.

Family separation and displacement was the ultimate tragedy of the Korean War. Eleven million families were unable to communicate, unaware whether loved ones had lived through the war. The divisive politics of the Korean peninsula meant that families were now divided. At the beginning of the war, Seungshil Park remained with her aging mother-in-law and young daughter, but as the war progressed she left for Kangwha Island, where other relatives had fled. As a result, Park lost contact with her daughter and mother-in-law.

My mother-in-law and daughter were supposed to meet us once things worked out on Kangwha island. That never happened. We tried to go back home but because of the armistice signed on July 27, Kaesong became part of North Korea. So I became separated from my daughter, who was five years old at the time, along with my mother-in-law who was 71 years old. I didn't know if they were dead or alive. I haven't been able to find my daughter.

Kim Ok Kim left her entire family in North Korea. She managed to leave North Korea before the war with her husband and children. But the idea that she could not contact or see them during the war was painful:

Think of how I felt. I had only immediate family members in South Korea. I didn't have any of my extended family members and so I would weep knowing that my relatives were still in North Korea. I missed them. I missed my hometown. I didn't want to get caught crying because I missed my family and hometown so much. I did not cry in front of others, including my husband. I did this for three years. My daughter would ask me why I was crying. But as time went on, I couldn't think about my family in North Korea because I had to take care of my young children and husband.

Many of these women, in order to keep providing for their remaining children, learned to accept the deaths or separations that had occurred during this time. Because separations were so commonplace during the war, uncertainty still prevails over whether a son, daughter, or sibling survived.

By spring 1951, the Korean War was being fought solely along the 38th parallel; neither side moved beyond these lines. In the summer of 1951, armistice talks began. On July 27, 1953, the armistice was signed. Although soldiers suffered greatly, civilian suffering was the real tragedy of this war: two million North Korean civilians and one million South Korean civilians were killed. In 1954, two million Koreans were still displaced by the war. Innocent

individuals caught in the intense bombing campaigns lost parents, children, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and friends. The women in this war became separated from their husbands, or lost them altogether. Thus, they ended up as their children's sole caretaker. Mothers sought out food and safety for their children. The displacement of most Koreans occurred in the extremely cold months of winter. Korean families fled for safe shelter but along the way also faced death or injury. The chaos of war frequently brought death. The war also brought destruction of homes and villages. Even if shelter was found, mothers often raised their children in impoverished conditions: inadequate water and food supplies, and no access to medical care.

The war for these women was not about politics and ideology but about keeping one's children safe and healthy. For some this meant hiding their husbands and teenage sons lest they be recruited into the war. While for others it meant giving birth and somehow sustaining a life in the midst of bombs and bullets. These women resisted the war by being caretakers of their spouse and children. But the challenges of mothering during this time of death and destruction almost meant "letting go."

According to these interviewees, the war brought out the worst in people, including mothers. Many of the respondents witnessed mothers who panicked as the violence drew near and subsequently abandoned their children. Others witnessed death and felt helpless to help others. For everyone, this war meant accepting the death of a spouse, a child, friend, or other family member. Although initially quite overwhelmed by their loss, they learned to accept their fate. Mothering under extreme conditions often meant accommodating to and accepting an untimely, violent death.

Fifty years later, these horrific acts are still fresh in many of these women's minds. As survivors of the war, many claim that their story was not unique and that there was nothing heroic about their mothering. Rather, to these women, everyone experienced loss, death, and destruction and all witnessed the desperation of fleeing violence. Despite their tragic losses, they all agreed that their stories needed to be told.

Many had handwritten in Korean literally hundreds of pages of the experiences they had suffered during the war. Language had prevented them from telling their memories and stories to their English-speaking grandchildren. Some also suggested that their American-born grandchildren showed little interest in learning about the war. Many of these women were willing to share memories that had not been told, with hopes that, through such telling, this war would not happen again. Their greatest hope was that the next generation of Korean Americans would not forget the war that their grandmothers endured. As Jun Ki Park stated, "You never ever want this to happen again. War brings terror, loss, and sorrow."

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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