

## **Coda: A Conversation with Kim Dong-Choon**

Henry Em, Christine Hong, and Kim Dong-Choon

As a standing commissioner of South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission from December 2005 to October 2009, and as a historical sociologist, Kim Dong-Choon for over two decades has conducted research not only in the archives but also at massacre sites, examining physical evidence and listening to testimonies by survivors and witnesses. His knowledge and theoretical reflections on state violence offer unique insight on how Korea's partition and formation of separate states, and the Korean War that followed, continue to shape politics in and around the Korean peninsula.

The armistice that brought about a cease-fire in 1953 did not serve as a stepping stone to a peace treaty that would have ended the war. As Steven Lee has pointed out, there is repressed memory about the armistice. It has to be remembered that the United States and United Nations allies, and not just North Korea, were responsible for significant violations of the armi-

stice agreement. In 1957, for example, along with the announcement that it would no longer abide by paragraph 13(d) of the armistice agreement, which stipulates that no new weapons can be brought to Korea, the United States formally told the North Koreans and the Chinese of its decision to station atomic weapons in South Korea.<sup>1</sup> While the armistice is usually viewed as having kept the peace, it has actually served as a framework for recurring crises, the long-term militarization of the Korean peninsula, and as Kim Dong-Choon describes below, the formation of a “division system” and the configuring of Korean politics as war politics.

**Christine Hong:** A half century after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, you published *Chŏnjaeng kwa sahoe (War and Society)*, which was translated into English and published in 2009 as *The Unending Korean War*.<sup>2</sup> Could you speak about how the Korean War persists today?

**Kim Dong-Choon:** A permanent military confrontation persists between North and South Korea. Since 1995, North Korea’s political slogan has been “*sŏngun chŏngch’i*” (military first). In South Korea, the National Security Law is still in effect. Both North Korea and South Korea are amongst the most militarized countries in the world. This situation bespeaks the persistence of war, and Korean politics as war politics. Military clashes continue to break out, as demonstrated by the sinking of the South Korean Navy frigate Cheonan (Ch’ŏnan) and the shelling incident around Yeonpyeong (Yŏnp’yŏng) Island. Under the Lee Myung-bak government, those who were critical of war politics—for example, those who questioned the South Korean government’s report on the Cheonan incident—were quickly labeled as pro-North Korea agents/forces (*chong-Puk saeryŏk*). This is a situation in which state security prevails over every other consideration, and politics is reduced to confronting the enemy, including enemies among “us.” In this sense, the situation in Korea remains bound by the Korean War that has not ended.

**Henry Em:** Could you speak more specifically about what you mean by war politics? For Seoul, the proximity of the external threat is one factor. But how and to what extent does the history of the Korean War as a fundamentally brutal and devastating civil war and the many unresolved issues from

the immediate postliberation period leading up to and from the war itself determine South Korean politics today?

**KDC:** In every country, the ruling bloc periodically uses an external threat to maintain its position. But in the case of South Korea, the external threat is even more exaggerated because the ruling bloc suffers from a lack of legitimacy that is rooted in both the colonial and postcolonial periods. In terms of its historical origins, the South Korean ruling bloc does not have deep roots in the independence movement, and after 1945, it maintained its power and authority through state violence, military coups, and massacre of civilians—most recently in the 1980 massacre in Kwangju.

From the very beginning under the US Army Military Government (1945–50), then the Rhee Syngman government (1948–60), and thereafter, South Korea's security forces were used against internal "enemies"—for example, during the April 3rd incident on Jeju (Cheju Island) in 1948 when tens of thousands of people were killed for opposing the UN-sponsored elections that created South Korea.<sup>3</sup> Park Chung-Hee's military coup in 1961, the suspension of the constitution and establishment of the Yushin system in 1972, and Chun Doo-Hwan's coup in 1979 were legitimated by raising the specter of external *and* internal enemies.

North Korea is quite poor compared to South Korea, and its military is incomparably inferior to the South Korean military. Nevertheless, if North Korea attacks with an atomic bomb or with other military means, the consequences will be devastating for all of Korea, and that is why conservatives in South Korea are able to use the external threat as a political weapon within South Korea so often and so effectively. After the democratic transition in 1987 and the election of civilian governments since the 1990s, there has been broad recognition among the people in South Korea that the threat of military attack from North Korea is actually quite minimal.

But the Lee Myung-bak government (February 2008–February 2013) worked hard to change that perception, shifting South Korea's policy away from engagement to an aggressive and hostile policy toward North Korea. That, in turn, led to North Korea's aggressive and belligerent stance toward South Korea. Thus, while the situation is quite different from the dictatorial regimes that governed through martial law or declarations of a state

of emergency up until the late 1980s, the Lee Myung-bak government has demonstrated that the old-style state of emergency can be revived. In that sense, we might borrow from Giorgio Agamben in arguing that the “normal” situation (in South Korea) is explained by the state of exception.

**CH:** In an interview with Mark Selden,<sup>4</sup> you suggested that current US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan must be understood in relationship to US intervention in the Korean War. Could you elaborate upon this point?

**KDC:** When I first read about war crimes committed by the US forces in the Fallujah offensive of November 2004, I was reminded of the 1948 April 3rd incident on Jeju Island. The April 3rd incident was both a suppression and a scorched earth policy that began under the US Army Military Government and continued after South Korea’s official establishment in 1948. That suppression policy was accompanied by the rhetoric of liberation and freedom. In the case of Korea, immediately after liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, freedom was narrowly understood as freedom from communism. That is to say, the United States disavowed any association with colonialism by embracing the rhetoric of freedom and the struggle against totalitarianism as a way of suppressing and displacing the historical and political significance of Korea’s anticolonial movements, which were led by the Left. In terms of the suppression policy itself, there was striking similarity in the use of aerial bombings against civilians during the Korean War and the current US-led war in Afghanistan.

**CH:** Elsewhere you have spoken about how the Lee Myung-bak administration brought the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Korea (TRCK) to a premature close, particularly with regard to cases involving US bombing of civilians. Yet this kind of indiscriminate air war, which typified the Korean War, has persisted as a feature of subsequent US military interventions. Air bombing goes to the heart of asymmetrical warfare. Could you speak about this aspect of the Korean War?

**KDC:** The most serious oversight of the work of the TRCK involved US-related incidents. Correctly interpreting US military documents that include a great deal of military terminology was challenging enough, but we also had limited time and access to relevant documents. In the future, we must

resume the investigation of US bombing and strafing operations during the Korean War. Starting in November 1950, after Chinese troops entered the war, the United States considered dropping atomic bombs on military bases in Manchuria, and General [Douglas] MacArthur pursued a scorched earth policy in North Korean territory. In some parts of South Korean territory too, the US Air Force resorted to carpet bombing, a form of warfare that knowingly exposed an allied civilian population to mass killing. During my tenure as a standing commissioner, the TRCK investigated more than twenty separate incidents involving the US military, including the August 1950 massacre of civilians in Masan, the September 1950 bombing of Wölmi Island prior to the Inch'ön landing, the January 1951 bombing of civilians in Yech'ön sansöngni North Kyöngsang Province, and the April 1951 targeting of refugees in Tanyang koggyegol North Ch'ungch'öng Province. If our incident reports were translated into English, more people would be able to understand the continuity in the basic US bombing strategies from the Korean War through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as better grasp the lethality of those US military tactics against treated nonwhite peoples.

**HE:** In 2009 and 2010, during your lecture tour at a dozen universities in North America, you pointed out how many major South Korean media outlets were hostile to the TRCK's investigations into past wrongdoings by the South Korean state.<sup>5</sup> Although the commission was not authorized to pursue prosecution, punishment of perpetrators, or reparations to victims' families, you referred to the uncovering of long-suppressed truths as a form of democratization from below. Truth finding being the central focus of the commission, you said that this effort would create more favorable conditions for achieving historical, political, and legal justice through a form of social punishment for perpetrators and official recognition of the death and violence suffered by victims and their families. Now two years later, what are your thoughts?

**KDC:** The end result was half success and half failure. Half failure was predictable from the beginning. The May 2005 Framework Act, which established the TRCK, accommodated the conservative party's demand that no National Assembly hearings be held related to the TRCK's investigations

and findings. This restricted the TRCK's ability to communicate and engage with civil society. Even more importantly, because of strong opposition from the Ministry of Justice and other government agencies, the TRCK had no power to initiate prosecution proceedings, nor could it conduct searches or seize evidence. Ultimately, insofar as it lacked the power to prosecute perpetrators and to hold (televised) National Assembly hearings, the TRCK did not bring about a significant change in the people's historical consciousness, and major media outlets were able to ignore the TRCK's work and major findings. I am writing a book about my experience with the TRCK because I think our case will be of interest to many people, especially in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Cambodia, and perhaps Indonesia and Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

**HE:** Earlier, as indicative of “half success,” you pointed to a shift in attitude in a number of communities where the local media provided coverage and local leaders were not hostile to the commission's work. Could you speak to the importance of historical knowledge as a democratizing and empowering force?

**KDC:** The most important achievement of TRCK had to do with the normalization of social standing and social relations for not just the victims but also their families who were socially and politically stigmatized and excluded through the “guilt-by-association” system. While this system was officially revoked in late 1980, its effects still reverberate today. Those who went to North Korea before or during the Korean War, and those who were victimized by indiscriminate and sweeping arrests, rape, torture, illegal detention, summary execution, and massacres before, during, and after the Korean War were forever marked as Reds, and by association their family members were branded as belonging to a Red family (*ppalgaengyi kajok*). In the more recent case of the 1980 massacre in Kwangju, the democracy activists were categorized as rioters (*p'okdo*). In the 1950s, stigmatization sometimes involved physical separation from the community. For example, when Cho Pong-am, twice presidential candidate and leader of the Progressive Party in the 1950s, was arrested and charged with being a North Korean spy in 1958 (he was executed in 1959), following the Chosŏn dynasty practice of *cordon sanitaire*, his house was cordoned off with a rope (*kūmtchul*). In social life, that kind of *kūmtchul* existed until very recently, and those separated out no

longer belonged to the realm of ordinary people; their lives were a kind of living death (*sarainnŭn songjang*).

**CH:** That kind of exclusion and social stigma has profound material consequences, which necessarily raises the question of reparative justice for people who were condemned to “living death.”

**KDC:** Yes, people who were condemned by virtue of family association suffered restrictions in employment, promotion, and travel. A required background check that unveiled a leftist family member would disqualify an applicant for a government position, including, for example, a teaching position in a public school. With that kind of tainted background, you could not travel abroad, thus limiting your career trajectory, and marriage to someone in a sensitive government position would be prevented. It must be kept in mind that this kind of social and political exclusion was based on one-sided information, one-sided knowledge, and one-sided stigma. If I had been marked by the South Korean state as a Red, all my family members would have had no choice but to shun politics. In many cases, the TRCK was able to provide official recognition of victimization and wrongs perpetrated by the government, thus ameliorating their isolation and stigma and to some degree replacing their fear and victimhood with a sense of inclusion and social solidarity with their neighbors.

**HE:** In 1990, in the name of national reconciliation, the Law for Compensating the Victims of Kwangju Incident was passed, which compensated the victims of the 1980 massacre without fully investigating those responsible for the massacre. Only belatedly, in 1995 and 1997, during the Kim Young-sam administration, the two former presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, and seventeen others were finally put on trial and found guilty for their roles in the 1979 coup and 1980 massacre in Kwangju.<sup>7</sup> Could you speak more about the decision not to pursue prosecution of those who committed massacres before and during the Korean War?

**KDC:** In the time since I served on the TRCK, my opinion has changed quite a bit. In the debates leading up to May 2005 when the Framework Act was passed, human rights activists focusing on cases of torture and suspicious deaths during the 1970s and 1980s argued for the punishment of perpetra-

tors. As their counterparts did in Latin America and South Africa and as had been done in the prosecution of Chun Doo-hwan, they argued for the suspension of the statute of limitations so as to enable criminal proceedings that would establish justiciable facts, render verdicts, and punish those responsible for torture and suspicious deaths under the Park Chung-Hee and Chun Doo-hwan governments. But the mandate of the TRCK was to deal comprehensively with the past, and I initially thought that punishing the perpetrators of killings and massacres committed before and during the Korean War would be very difficult, in no small part because both armed insurgents and the South Korean state were responsible for killing civilians.

But as I said, I've since arrived at a different perspective. Now I think there has to be full accountability for past crimes, and if we do not punish perpetrators, we cannot achieve justice. Most of the violence perpetrated by the South Korean state was committed by the Defense Security Command (originally the Army Counter Intelligence Corps) and the National Intelligence Service (originally the Korean Central Intelligence Agency). The power of these two organizations and their sense of impunity must be challenged, and ultimately both organizations must be dismantled. Justice, as indicated by the TRCK's work, requires the end of this form of institutionalized group domination. State violence cannot be perpetrated with impunity in the name of anticommunism and national security.

**CH:** To what extent was the TRCK constrained by its political goal of restoring the "innocence" or recovering the "dignity" of victims of state violence, a purifying political project that arguably reflects and even reinforces the anti-communist logic of South Korea's National Security Law? Beyond exonerating those who were falsely accused of being leftists or leftist sympathizers, what about justice for those who actually were leftists, or sympathetic to and supportive of leftists?

**KDC:** Armed guerillas were not civilians and cannot be considered victims of state violence. But for those who did not engage in armed struggle but were victimized, the TRCK provided "exoneration" in the sense that they were wrongfully killed by the South Korean police or military simply because they were sympathetic to or supported the Left. For the children of these



victims, many of whom are more conservative than the perpetrators, such exoneration is quite important.

**HE:** During your 2009–10 North American lecture tour, you pointed out that the vast majority of those who petitioned the TRCK were poor and that the possibility of reparations might have been a factor in their coming forward. You speculated that many families of victims who are now socially and financially secure (middle class and beyond) might not have come forward because they potentially had more to lose from the TRCK's investigation. Could it be that families of victims that remained politically progressive did not come forward because of political reasons?

**KDC:** Many children of victims know little to nothing about their parents' (or parent's) past. For those families victimized by the anticommunism of South Korea's Cold War culture, the removal of the label of "*ppalgaengyi*" (Red) and "enemy," and an official recognition of their parents' innocence are enormously important. Yet, among those who did not come forward, there were some who were very proud of their parents' activism and who therefore did not seek any exoneration from the South Korean government. Eventually, an international Truth and Reconciliation Commission must be established that would investigate the killings of civilians in both North and South Korea during the Korean War, by the armed forces of not just North and South Korea but also China, the United States, and the other countries that participated in the Korean War. Ultimately, I believe the restoration of dignity for all will be possible only after the unification of North and South Korea.

**CH:** In this regard, the TRCK's mandate was limited not just geographically to South Korea but also temporally insofar as postunification, as you suggest, signals a different possibility for the restoration of truth and "dignity."

**HE:** Regarding the persistence of Cold War culture in South Korea, could you talk about the ideology of triumphalism in which South Korea's economic success is not only touted as evidence of South Korea's economic superiority vis-à-vis North Korea but also retroactively used to argue South Korea's historical legitimacy and to justify capitalism and state violence against leftist insurgents?

**KDC:** We must be vigilant against such logic. We cannot conclude that South Korea's economic development was single-handedly achieved by Park Chung-Hee and the KCIA. We, moreover, cannot attribute South Korea's economic achievements to the work of those who collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial period and then supported serial dictatorial regimes in South Korea. Rather, we must recall that workers, of course, and democracy activists were essential to South Korea's political and economic achievements.

As you know, my investigation of Korean War massacres originated from my study of labor and my work with the labor movement in the 1980s. At a certain point, I had to turn to history and examine how anticommunism was used to fracture social solidarity and to suppress labor, starting from the colonial period and continuing down through the postliberation period under American occupation.

The Cold War in South Korea gave rise to a culture of normativity—to anticommunism as the foundation of technologies of world making and everyday social habits. In this regard, anticommunism must be understood as part of a class system in which the ruling class used violence, including symbolic violence, to disrupt and demolish people's internal solidarity, and to reproduce class domination and social hierarchy. The United States figures prominently in this history, and the development of this culture, in many ways, required the continuation of colonialism, albeit renominated as "anticommunism."

Starting in 1945, in terms of what [Michel] Foucault calls "sovereign power," the United States intervened through military occupation, involvement in the Korean War, and then the establishment of military bases throughout South Korea. But the United States also helped establish a form of governmentality based on the idea of individual free choice. Understood through the prism of neoliberalism, this ideology now permeates our consumer culture, media, and universities.

The TRCK's engagement with the past, its challenge to the older form of power—that is, the state's power to kill—and its redress of state violence against civilians, can help revive civil society and help establish a culture of solidarity. Truth finding, identifying the wronged party and the wrongdoer, helps to restore not just the full moral status of those victimized by the

South Korean state in the past but also those who, in the present, speak out against unjust treatment by the state or by giant conglomerates (*chaeböl*).

**CH:** In his recent book, *The Korean War: A History*, Bruce Cumings refers to North Korea as the party of memory and the United States as the party of forgetting.<sup>8</sup> Who is the party of forgetting in South Korea?

**KDC:** When I spoke earlier about the ruling bloc, I was referring not just to the ruling class and the security forces but also the Christian church, the mainstream media, and the conglomerates (*chaeböl*) that dominate South Korea's economic and cultural life. For this ruling bloc, especially evangelical Christians, remembrance means, for the most part, remembering an inhuman foe, an archetypal signification of the enemy rather than a historical subject, and identifying with national narratives that depict South Korea as a member of the free world, which in the 1960s would stand shoulder to shoulder with the United States to fight against communism in Vietnam. Such representations of the past promote forgetting: not just of the anticommunist violence before, during, and after the Korean War but also of the 1980 massacre in Kwangju and the price paid by democracy activists during the 1970s and 1980s.

**CH:** There are many ways of forgetting the Korean War. Forgetting haunts even progressive efforts to redress legacies of violence from the war. We haven't yet discussed sexual violence against women before, during, and after the Korean War. Can you speak about the centrality of gendered violence to the biopolitics of the war? That is, not just the killing of civilians, but rape committed by South Korean and US armed forces, and in many cases rape followed by killing, as a constitutive under-considered aspect of South Korea's state formation process, wartime conduct, and legacy of the Korean War?

**KDC:** Unfortunately, the TRCK did not specifically investigate sexual violence against women. Understandably, victims would not come forward to testify about being sexually violated, especially if the perpetrators were South Korean or US soldiers. In making the Framework Act, we should have been attentive not just to those who were killed but also those who survived sexual violence. This was a very significant lapse. Investigation into

wartime rape would have clarified not just the gendered nature of the conflict but also the gendered nature of the state that came to be formed by the Korean War.

**HE:** We began our conversation about how the Korean War persists today. By way of a conclusion, would you say a few words about North Korea's past and present?

**KDC:** I have been quite critical of the North Korean leadership because they are the mirror image of South Korea's conservatives. We need to keep in mind that after the Korean War, the American policy of containment and sanctions, which was a policy of calculated coercion, have kept North Korea politically and economically isolated. If not for that kind of containment and sustained enmity, North Korea could have been more prosperous, and perhaps it might not have resorted to the military first (*sŏn'gun chŏngch'i*) policy in the 1990s and the development of nuclear weapons in the 2000s. If South Korea were to engage North Korea, more independent of US policy and strategy, North Korea would also take a more flexible approach. The Korean War has persisted for much too long.

## Notes

This conversation between Kim Dong-Choon and the coeditors, Christine Hong and Henry Em, took place at Sungkonghoe University on June 23, 2012. Jeongmin Kim, a PhD candidate in East Asian studies at New York University, transcribed more than three hours of conversation. Henry Em wrote the preface and abridged and edited the transcript.

1. Steven Lee, "The Korean Armistice and the End of Peace: The US-UN Coalition and the Dynamics of War-Making in Korea, 1953–1976," *Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 193.
2. Kim Dong-Choon, *The Unending Korean War: A Social History* (Larkspur, CA: Tamal Vista Publications, 2009).
3. The April 3rd incident refers to leftist-led armed uprisings and subsequent counterinsurgency campaigns on Jeju (Cheju) Island from 1948 through 1954.
4. Kim Dong-Choon and Mark Selden, "South Korea's Embattled Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, March 1, 2010, [www.japanfocus.org/-Kim-Dong\\_choon/3313](http://www.japanfocus.org/-Kim-Dong_choon/3313).
5. Coordinated by the Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea (ASCK), the two lecture

tours led to the publication of a thematic issue of *Critical Asian Studies* on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea. See *Truth and Reconciliation in the Republic of Korea*, ed. Jae-Jung Suh, *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010).

6. This book has been published in Korea as *Chōnjaeng chōngch'i: Han'guk chōngch'i ūi maekkhōnijūm kwa kukka p'ongyōk* (*War Politics: State Violence and the Mechanism of Korean Politics*) (Seoul: Kil, 2013). See also Kim Dong-Choon, "The Long Road toward Truth and Reconciliation: Unwavering Attempts to Achieve Justice in South Korea," *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 525–52.
7. After one year of imprisonment, Chun Doo-hwan, Roh Tae-woo, and seventeen others were pardoned and released.
8. Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010).