

## The Korean War and the Politics of Memory: The Kangbyŏn Incident\*

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*During the Korean War, thousands of civilians died in a fight between right- and left-wing forces in the county of Kangbyŏn, in North Korea, in an incident that South Koreans and North Koreans interpret differently. In this article I examine how South Korea's understanding of this traumatic event has shaped the collective memory and identity of people from Kangbyŏn and, in turn, has generated the individual memories and identities of those people. By exploring how shifting narratives of the post-Cold War era (the late 1990s and the early 2000s) have influenced both collective and individual memories and identities, I analyze how Cold War-era memories of the Korean War produced "division subjects" with identities based on the "us versus them" mentality, and how these people have negotiated their memories and identities during the period in which a hegemonic political order based on anticommunism faltered.*

*Keywords:* Korean War, politics of memory, trauma, collective memory, personal memory, identity, Kangbyŏn Incident

### I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2010 marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, the conflict that followed Korea's liberation from Japan and its subsequent division into two nation-states. A watershed in Korean history that helped construct the Korean identity, this war caused various traumas to the Korean people (such as death, injuries, separation, and forced relocation),

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particularly because the front lines constantly shifted, thus turning almost the entire peninsula into a battlefield. The country was leveled to the ground; an estimated 1,300,000 South Koreans and 2,500,000 North Koreans were reported killed, wounded, or missing; and countless people were threatened with death (Kim 2000). As a result, the war became a foundational experience for many of the Korean people who lived through it.

As the political division persisted through the Cold War era, the South Korean and North Korean regimes each claimed to represent the legitimate Korean nation, and both prolonged the conflict by “remembering the war.” Both regimes mobilized various rituals, erected monuments, and organized war-related anniversaries in attempts to appropriate the experience of war as sacred sacrifice. At the same time, they constantly evoked the tragedy of the war and thus kept their citizens in check with reminders that they were in a state of emergency during which the enemy could invade again and destroy everything (Kim 1999; Kim 2000; Lee 2006).<sup>1</sup> In this way, memories of the tragic war lent some legitimacy to authoritarian regimes and justified their suppression of dissent and opposition. Both regimes had been vulnerable upon their establishment but successfully consolidated their hold on power by using memories of the war to overcome internal division and conflicts. However, the memories themselves differed dramatically, depending on the ideology of each regime.

North Korea remembers the war as an event in which “South Korean lackeys at the order of the U.S. imperial power mobilized the puppet South Korean army and invaded the North” (Research Institute of History at the Academy of Social Sciences 1988, 394). Under the banner of “anti-imperialist, anticolonial struggle,” a North Korean people arose from this memory. In contrast, South Korea remembers the war as a tragedy of fratricidal war that resulted from the communist army’s sudden invasion of the South. This memory contributed to the establishment of an “anticommunist regimented society” in which anticommunism governs social relations and behaviors (Cho 2000; Lee 2006; 2010). In both Koreas, other memories have been suppressed, and people who supported these official memories have long

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<sup>1</sup> There is an element of truth to these claims: the war never formally ended. Thus South Korea and North Korea are actually in a state of ceasefire, not peace.

enjoyed legitimacy. As a result, a version of “the homogenization of memory” of the Korean War has been created in each Korea and become a “collective memory.”

In the 1990s, South Koreans experienced a period of dramatic social and political transformation in which a hegemonic political order based on anticommunism faltered. The period saw critical changes on both the local and global levels, including South Korea’s transition from military to civilian rule and the worldwide ebb of the Cold War. During that time it also became apparent that South Korea had won the race for economic supremacy against North Korea.

In the wake of South Korea’s “victory,” a new perspective has evolved in South Korea that urges the regime to reconcile and cooperate with North Korea—seeing the North as a partner, (rather than an enemy), so the two countries can work together to strengthen the Koreans’ collective “national” (i.e., an encompassing Korean ethnic community) capacities in the era of globalization. This perspective has prompted reevaluations of numerous incidents that had been labeled as “atrocities of the Reds” based on the “us versus them” mentality of authoritarian regimes. Even though considerable number of these incidents were civilian massacres perpetrated by the U.S. or South Korean armies or by the South Korean civilian militias during the establishment of the anticommunist state or during the Korean War, under those regimes they had little possibility of representation by the South as anything but “atrocities of the Reds.” Thanks to the testimonies of previously silenced survivors, however, they have now entered the realm of “contested memory.” In this way, dominant South Korean discourses of the war based on the memories of both the “atrocities of the communists” and the “victory of liberal democracy” have been ruptured and pluralized. Scholars have pointed to the need for reflection on the processes of memory formation and their material effects through the critical examination of the material and ideological basis by which official memory becomes the “truth” while suppressing other memories.<sup>2</sup> These discussions have called for studies of

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<sup>2</sup> Representative works include Kim (2002); Kim (2006); Kim (1999; 2001); Kwon (2006); Pak (2000; 2010); Pyo (2003); The Institute for Korean Historical Studies (1999); The National Committee for Investigating the Truth about Civilian Massacre During the

the “politics of memory,” focusing on “social and political characteristics of memory” and “their relationships with identity formation.”<sup>3</sup>

This article builds on studies of critical reflection in the politics of memory in South Korea yet differs from them in several key ways. Most studies have concentrated on events and memories that have been distorted and forgotten in the process of establishing South Korea as an anticommunist society, but this one explores the memory of people who were revered as anticommunist fighters in South Korea because they had initiated an anticommunist uprising in the North during the war. Their identity arose from their collective memory of the war as an anticommunist crusade. This article calls attention to the characteristics of this collective memory and the mechanism through which it was constructed, and at the same time analyzes relationships between collective memory and personal memory.

I also examine how people who based their identity on their memories as anticommunist fighters have negotiated it in the post–Cold War era of “national reconciliation and cooperation.” When people form their identities based on the dominant memory, what do they experience when the dominant memory becomes an object of competition and rupture? By addressing these issues, this article complements studies of the process and mechanism of the return of silenced memory and thereby provides ethnographic data that enriches the literature on the politics of memory during and after the Cold War.

This analysis focuses on an incident that took place in 1950, during the Korean War, when thousands (the exact number is contested) of civilians perished in the county of Kangbyŏn, in North Korea.<sup>4</sup> North Korea and South Korea have completely different memories and interpretations of the event, which is a prime example of the politics of memory in the Cold War–era. Using data obtained through participant observation and interviews, this

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Korean War (2005); Yi (2001); Yoon (1997); and Yu (2007).

<sup>3</sup> For the “politics of memory,” see Chong and Yi (2009); Hirsh (2009); Kim (1998); Kwon (2006).

<sup>4</sup> I have changed all names and dates to protect the interviewees’ privacy. Some scholars question the need (or desirability) of altering names and dates in an analysis of a historical event. Because my aim here is not determine a “historical truth,” I have chosen to prioritize the interviewees’ privacy.

article examines how this event affected the members of the Kangbyŏnhoe (an organization of Kangbyŏn residents who survived the conflict and fled to the South) and investigates four themes: 1) how the Kangbyŏnhoe people remember the incident, 2) the factors that influenced their memories, 3) the relationships between memory and identity on both collective and personal levels, and 4) how the end of the Cold War has reshaped these memories and identities. In this way, it analyzes the subjects that memories of the Korean War in the era of Cold War have produced and how they negotiate their memories and identities in the era of faltering Cold War grammar.

## II. THE POLITICS OF MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND TRAUMA

The politics of memory “encompasses dynamics of social, cultural, and political power that intervenes in the process of historicization or deletion of collective memory and a mechanism of related discursive practice” (Kim 1998, 191). According to this definition, both the act and the contents of memory are constructed in relation to sociocultural contexts in which memory occurs; they do not necessarily reflect empirical reality. This position holds that memory is not a subjective or individual phenomenon: individual memory is always linked to group memory. Memory is shared (and therefore social) and enters the public realm at the moment of utterance, because testimonies are always given to and received by others. In other words, individual memories are constructed in relation to others. Memory also accompanies oblivion, because memories that are not desirable in a community (or accepted by others) are often silenced and thus forgotten. In this sense, we are not the sole owners of our memory, because it encompasses others. Accordingly, Halbwachs (1980) concludes that purely individual memory does not exist; rather, collective memory serves as a framework to constitute and structure individual memories. At the same time, collective memory exists only when individual memories interact.

Remembering does not entail the collection of objective information; rather, it is an act of giving significance and interpretation to certain experiences. An essential process of identity formation, remembering functions as a social rule that frames how individuals select significant experiences from

fragmented and complicated ones. In this way, both individual memory and identity are constructed in relation to others (Han 2002, 68-69).

Remembering similarly shapes collective memory and identity, and in this process shared memory is an essential element in the formation of collective identity. When a group bases its identity on one particular memory and not others, a complicated social process intervenes, often connected to power relations. A group's sociopolitical location in a society and its relation to other groups are critical in the construction of group memory, and thus memory changes dynamically with changes to these positions. Realms of remembrance are relegated to the realms of oblivion, and the realms of oblivion are revived as realms of remembrance, depending on the sociopolitical circumstances. Memory and identity interact: memory constructs identity, but identity also constructs memory.

In this article I analyze the dynamic relationship between memory and identity. I examine the collective memory of the Kangbyŏnhoe people by emphasizing its mechanisms and characteristics. At the same time, I consider the relationship between collective memory and personal memory and their relationship to identity, and discuss challenges to these memories and identities.

This article examines memories of the Kangbyŏnhoe people in relation to discussions of trauma. They lived through Japanese colonialism, national division, the North Korean communist regime, the Korean War, and the dictatorships and the democratization of South Korea. Thus, their stories are full of suffering and struggle, and many Kangbyŏnhoe people told me that their stories could fill hundreds of books. The Korean War figures prominently in their narratives about losing loved ones, dislocation, deprivation, and their fights against “the Reds.”

Although the war had devastating effects, the “division politics” of the South Korean postwar regimes' efforts to construct an anticommunist nation-state contributed tremendously to these people's enduring sense of insecurity and anxiety.<sup>5</sup> In examining Kangbyŏnhoe peoples' subjectivities in relation to

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<sup>5</sup> I use “division politics” to refer to South Korea's competition with (and rejection of the legitimacy of) North Korea, based on the ideology of anticommunism. My understanding of “politics” here is not limited to the formal domain of politics

trauma, I draw inspiration from scholars of the political and cultural nature of trauma in order to wrest this subject from conventional approaches that focus on its symptomatological and psychological aspects (Edkins 2003; Hakken 2002; Humprey 2000; Radstone 2002; Wise 2004). The conventional approach, what Radstone (2002) calls “trauma theory” (457), studies the impact of catastrophic events on human psychological and physical functioning. Many scholars have pointed out that this approach is limited because it overlooks the ways in which traumatic events undergo the “processes of narrativization and memory making” (457), which are embedded in the relations of power. As Edkins (2003) cogently argues, the ways in which we acknowledge, describe, and remember what we call “traumatic experiences” are always influenced by hegemonic discourses, and the production of trauma often entails the workings of a sovereign power. In other words, trauma “cannot be separated from the sociocultural process as far as it is represented” (Kim 2009, 36), and the politics of memory is at work in the process.

### III. KANGBYŎNHŎE AND “THE 9.30 ANTICOMMUNIST UPRISING”<sup>6</sup>

In April 1998, in the midst of my dissertation fieldwork on Korean national division and the formation of division subjects, a Silhyangmin (a person who has lost his or her homeland) whom I had met in the early stage of my research told me of a place where I “could meet many Silhyangmin on a daily basis and hear their life stories.”<sup>7</sup> People from Kangbyŏn had established a

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often discussed as divorced from the economic and cultural aspects of a society. The definition I employ enables me to consider not only the formal aspects of South Korean politics, but also its social and cultural aspects. This perspective invites analysis of the articulation of different ideologies and the construction of specific political subjects through different cultural technologies. For more discussions on division politics, see Lee (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Koreans tend to refer to significant events by the date on which they occurred, saying each numeral separately. Thus this event’s name is read as “nine three zero.”

<sup>7</sup> Silhyangmin are the people who came into what is now South Korea from what is now North Korea between Korea’s liberation from Japan in 1945 and the end of the Korean

civil organization (called Kangbyŏnhoe) that gathered in a small space called “the Office.”<sup>8</sup> Because many Silhyangmin came to the Office to meet their friends, he thought that it would be a good research site for me. Located on the rooftop of a shopping center in downtown Seoul, the Office resembled a community center for the elderly. Members talked in a small room furnished with a table, a sofa, and a table and used a larger room (with two big tables and many chairs) for watching television or playing *hwat’u* (a card game) or *changgi* (a Korean version of chess). During the day, 10 to 15 men (most of whom were retired) in their 60s and older came to the Office to see their friends. I visited the Office once or twice a week to conduct participant observation and interviews.

From my first visit to the Office, I could see that members of the Kangbyŏnhoe were frustrated with South Korea’s political situation and inter-Korean relations.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Song, an active member of the Kangbyŏnhoe, railed against the news about Chong Chu-yong’s plan to visit North Korea:<sup>10</sup>

Now we can’t talk about our fights with the Reds or anticommunism. Kim Dae Jung and Kim Yong Sam are the heads of that bunch who were doing *üüsha üüsha* [onomatopoeiatic expression for demonstrating]. Chong Chu-yong is

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War in 1953. The term “Silhyangmin” describes both this group and an individual member of this group.

<sup>8</sup> It is not common for small Silhyangmin organizations to have such a space.

<sup>9</sup> The year 1998 was when then-president Kim Dae Jung, who had long been accused of being a communist sympathizer, sought national reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea.

<sup>10</sup> Chong, the founder of Hyundai Group, took 500 head of cattle to the North in June 1998. When he ran away from his home in North Korea in 1932, he had taken the money his father had gained by selling the family cow before the Korean War. Thus, his 1998 return was depicted as a “a personal triumph for him whose lifetime wish has been to become successful and pay back his father a thousand times for a youthful misdeed” (*Korea Herald*, 18 June, 1998). However, it was as much the product of political change as a “personal triumph,” since his visit was made possible by the new government’s principle of separation of politics and business in dealing with North Korea. There was a mix of envy and criticism of Chong’s visit among Silhyangmin that I interviewed. His visit also brought about mixed reactions from the progressive forces: whereas some praised him as a figure in overcoming the division, others viewed his action as motivated by his desire to advance his capitalist interests—by facilitating Hyundai Group investments in North Korea.

taking cows to the North? Crazy! They are our enemies. He wants them to eat well and be strong.

During my fieldwork I had often heard the Silhyangmin hardline position toward North Korea and criticism of the South Korean government's "sunshine policy," but Mr. Song's expressions were much more vehement. When I asked him to tell me his life stories so I could understand his perspective, he was very concise:

Even if you listen to 100 people from our hometown, their stories are the same. All the same. We lived in the North. When 6.25 [the Korean War] occurred, we fought against communists. After coming South, we still fought as guerillas. Then we tried to make a living and succeeded.

His collective representation of the people of the Kangbyŏnhoe intrigued me. Over time, I discovered that this kind of collective representation was very common among the members of the Kangbyŏnhoe, and the memory of the "Kangbyŏn 9.30 Anticommunist Uprising" was central to their narratives. It functioned as a "critical event" that "institute[d] a new modality of historical action" for a group of people (Das 1995, 6). The "Kangbyŏn 9.30 Anticommunist Uprising" is one of many controversial historical incidents of the Korean War in which thousands of civilian lives were lost. The experience and memory of this event organized the collective and personal identity of the Kangbyŏnhoe people and continued to structure their political views and actions.

These narratives of Kangbyŏnhoe people stressed the nature of the event as "a voluntary anticommunist uprising against the Reds" rather than as a tragedy that caused massive civilian casualties. Proud to describe the incident as the largest anticommunist uprising in the North, members of the Kangbyŏnhoe saw it as proof of the North Korean communist regime's failure. Although these people admitted that "the whole county stank of blood" and that "thousands of people must have died," they saw the victims as "the Reds who harassed patriots and innocent people" or "families of the Reds." (The few exceptions were "hundreds of our side," when North Korea ruled Kangbyŏn.) These Reds or their families were "subhuman beings" to whom

moral standards did not apply.<sup>11</sup> These descriptions reiterated the dominant discourses of South Korea and thus contributed to the formation of South Korea's official narratives.

#### IV. “ANTICOMMUNIST UPRISING” VERSUS “U.S. ARMY MASSACRE”: TWO NAMES AND TWO COMPETING TRUTHS

The Kangbyŏn Incident has multiple names. The South Korean government calls it Kangbyŏn 9.30 Paŋgong Ŭigŏ (The Kangbyŏn 9.30 Anticommunist Uprising), sometimes shortened to 9.30 Uigeo (9.30 Uprising) or Kangbyŏn Paŋgong Ŭigeŏ (Kangbyŏn Anticommunist Uprising). In North Korea, it is known as Kangbyŏn Taejunghaksal Manhaeng (The Atrocity of the Kangbyŏn Mass Massacre). As “mnemonic signs” that “condense an interpretation of events and give the day a historical saliency . . . [that] is selective and highlights some aspects and obscures others” (Alonso 1988, 39), these names “define reality, create history, and shape memory” (Arexaga, 1997, 43). In a narrow sense, these different names signify competing characterizations of the incident; in the broad sense they represent North and South Korean views of the character of the Korean War, a source of foundational narratives for each state's nation building.

North Korean historians claim that the U.S. army and its Korean puppets in the south killed 35,383 innocent civilians (one-fourth of the county's population), including women and children, when U.S. forces occupied the county between October 17 and December 7, 1950. North Korea made the attack an international political issue. In a 1951 letter to the U.N., Park Heon-yong, North Korea's secretary of foreign affairs, cited this incident as typical of massacres committed during the U.N. occupation north of the 38th parallel. After North Korea politicized this incident, a few progressive international organizations sent research groups to North Korea on two occasions. These research groups, according to testimonies of the Kangbyŏn residents, accepted North Korea's assertion that the U.S. army had massacred tens of

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<sup>11</sup> On the issues of formation of anticommunist state of South Korea and its relation to the production of racist discourses/images of the Reds, see Kim (2001) and Lee (2006).

thousands of civilians. However, the U.S. and South Korean governments and the U.N. denied this allegation. Since then, North Korea has insisted to the international community and its citizens that the U.S. army slaughtered civilians during the war. As a part of this effort, North Korea transformed a government office building for the National People's Congress of Kangbyŏn into a Memorial Museum of the Kangbyŏn Massacre and called on survivors and witnesses to testify about "the brutality of the U.S. army" and "the great struggle of the people against it."

The book *Let's Not Forget the Grudge of Kangbyŏn*,<sup>12</sup> published in the North in 1987, recounts the North Korean version of this event. This book is full of pictures of victims, details of massacres, letters by victims' families, and witness testimonies. It names the U.S. commander who supposedly directed the massacre and lists the incident among many other historical crimes of the "U.S. imperial power" since the "discovery of the American continent." It also reveals the brutality of the "U.S. imperial power" by emphasizing the murders of women and children. At the same time, by highlighting the people's heroic and patriotic resistance against the U.S. army, it supports North Korea's interpretation of the Korean War as "a struggle against U.S. imperialism and its South Korean puppet regime," thus promoting national unity based on the spirit of revenge.

In contrast, the official South Korean narrative, *Kangbyŏn Kunji* (*The Documentation of Kangbyŏn County*), describes the incident as a voluntary anticommunist uprising organized by nationalist elites and youth who had been oppressed by the communist regime. It opens with the following description:

North Korean youth-students had been happy with a dream for real independence and liberty [at the moment of Korea's liberation from Japan.] However, as a pack of wolves came in and harassed people with communism,

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<sup>12</sup> This book's title includes the county's actual name. Therefore I have used the pseudonym "Kangbyŏn" here (and not listed this work as a reference, because its publication information will make it readily identifiable) in order to protect my informants' privacy. I have done the same for two other works I mention in this text: *Kangbyŏn Kunji* (*The Documentation of Kangbyŏn County*) and *Warriors of Anticommunism*.

North Korea turned into a living hell. Thus many of them came over to the South and exerted their best efforts to establish the Republic of Korea (1984, 146).

This narrative also argues that youth-students who had remained in town also fought bravely against the communists. In the process, many of them were almost conscripted by the “puppet group” (North Korean communists who had decided to invade the South) but fled to the mountains to escape the draft. Together with those who could not escape and thus remained in town, these escapees “formed a secret anticommunist guerrilla group” and “solemnly vowed, motivated by revenge, to work together to accomplish the great work of unification” after “witnessing the rebels’ brutal slaughter of innocent patriots when they retreated to the North.” The document also describes the indiscriminate killings of civilians by North Korean communists and states that “the uprising force, composed of anticommunist patriots and patriotic youth-students, defeated this puppet army.” It also highlights the extensive cooperation by county residents with leaders of the “uprising,” signifying the failure of the communist rule. It does not specify the total death toll, but reveals that 225 lives were lost on the southern side (146-156).

Another book, *Warriors of Anticommunism*, claims to be a record of this incident. Published in the South in 1957 it was written from an anticommunist perspective and based on the testimonies of surviving participants. With a goal of “countering North Korea’s propaganda,” the author focuses on “smashing North Korea’s slander” with more than 500 pages of testimony from witnesses and participants. Troubled by North Korea’s propaganda war, the South Korean government gave the book credibility by providing the author with the vice president’s signature and testimonials by the Minister of Defense and the Public Prosecutor General. *Warriors of Anticommunism* traces the origin of the “9.30 Anticommunist Uprising” to the oppression and massacre of the people by North Korean communists. It mentions a few killings by the right wing, but reports them as inevitable reprisals against “the Reds.”

In a narrow sense, the terms “uprising” and “massacre” represent competition over signifying practices of this incident. More broadly, however, they are different significations of the Korean War by the two Korean states.

The war is a fundamental event in the formation of both Korean states.

North Korea calls the war a “Fatherland Liberation War” and defines it as an incident initiated by “South Korean lackeys at the order of the U.S. imperial power” (Research Institute of History at the Academy of Social Sciences, 394). For the North, the war was part of the USA’s goal “to militarily occupy South Korea and make it its complete colony” (290) and “to expand its reactionary ruling system to the North of the republic and make our fatherland a complete colony of the U.S. imperialists by means of a fratricidal war” (394). North Korean historians also argue that “wherever the U.S. imperialist-invaders who initiated this immoral war and their mercenaries [i.e., the South Korean army] arrive with their red [bloody] hands and feet, the noble blood of members of the Labor Party and peaceful civilians runs down without exception. They soaked our beautiful fatherland in the red blood of the people” (417). At the same time, the North Korean view insists that the popular struggle against oppression was formidable. *Chosŏn T’ongsa* describes it as follows:

U.S. imperialists’ unprecedented brutality could not coerce North Korean people into submission. All people, from patriotism, stood up and fought against the enemy in occupied territories. The Communist Party and communists led the vanguard in these fights (418).

North Korea’s representation of the Korean War frames this incident, as seen in the fact that this perspective constantly argues that the U.S. army is the event’s main actor.

South Korea’s version of this incident is also closely related to its interpretation of the Korean War. As an extension of its representation of the war both as an invasion of the immoral and illegal North Korean communists and as a victory of civilians and the South Korean army who fought with the U.N. troops, it characterizes the Kangbyŏn Incident as a voluntary uprising of an oppressed people. Civilian deaths were unavoidable because they were caused either by communists or while resisting the communists. In this interpretation, people who fought for democracy did not have to take responsibility for the deaths.

In this way, two different versions of truth, or memory, exist about the

Kangbyŏn Incident. Particularly interesting is the fact that South Korea's memory is a rebuttal of North Korea's version of this incident. *Kangbyŏn Kunji* states that North Korea "exaggerates the number of victims and forced young students to see the exhibition center that is full of fabricated false propaganda" (155). The introduction to *Warriors of Anticommunism* refutes North Korea's version of memory by accusing it of distorting the truth. The use of the date September 30 in South Korean versions of this incident implies that the uprising preceded the U.S. army's entrance into the town on October 17. The name itself serves as evidence against North Korea's account and proves that South Korea's memory of the incident is constructed in interactions with North Korea's memory.

Members of the Kangbyŏnhoe have actively participated in the creation and spread of this South Korean version of the incident. The author of *Warriors of Anticommunism* is a member of the Kangbyŏnhoe, and many members of that group whom I met during my fieldwork described the incident in ways that replicated the official discourse. Because their experiences were so painful, these witnesses were reluctant to offer detailed descriptions of the event. Rather, their narratives had more to do with North Korea's interpretation of it. When they talked to me, they mentioned a North Korean book about the incident and offered line-by-line challenges to that version. They contended that civilians like themselves, not the U.S. army, had initiated the incident. They argued that the death toll was much smaller than the one given by North Koreans and blamed the casualty rate on the fact that "there were so many people who resented vicious communists." In other words, these members of the Kangbyŏnhoe conceptualized the incident as the "people's uprising against the North Korean communists' tyranny" and posited themselves as heroes of popular resistance.

Their persistent refutation was also an expression of anxiety. Based on their readings of North Korean publications and propaganda, they believed that North Korea defined them as "puppets of the U.S. imperialists" and "deadly enemies" and thus as targets of revenge. They also believed that Kim Dae Jung's reconciliatory policy toward North Korea and the South Korean government's reevaluation of history made people likely to accept North Korea's version of this incident. At the same time, the "North Korean interpretation and practices" they mentioned are as imaginary to them as

they are real. The Kangbyŏnhoe people combined pieces of information about North Korea that they collected from news articles and North Korean defectors' testimonies, and mixed them with their own memories of North Korea. Then they grasped "North Korean reality":

They [North Korean communists] know everything about us. Our names are written in Kim Jong Il's notebook as "reactionaries." . . . Our families are all dead. They killed all of them. They could never leave families of anticommunist fighters alive.

These stories reflect dominant images of a North Korea "that knows everything and is an extremely violent totalitarian state." These Kangbyŏnhoe people believe that remaining in a state of war against North Korea is the only way to protect South Korea, and view themselves as "fighting subjects" against North Korea and its sympathizers.

## V. THOSE WHO WENT INTO THE MOUNTAINS VERSUS THOSE WHO REMAINED IN TOWN: INTERNAL CONFLICTS OVER "TRUTH"

Different views about the "truth" of the Kangbyŏn Incident—that is, disagreements about how to remember it—lay not only between the two Koreas but also among the Kangbyŏnhoe people. In the course of my fieldwork, I learned that since the early 1990s the Kangbyŏnhoe people had been working to publish another version of the Kangbyŏn Incident. Mr. Hyon, the person in charge of the new book, informed me that the Kangbyŏnhoe had been preparing this work because they wanted to publish a more accurate and objective account than *Warriors of Anticommunism*. According to him, two groups of anticommunist fighters had participated in what he called "the Kangbyŏn Uprising": a group of young men who had fled into the mountains to avoid conscription, and townspeople. *Warriors of Anticommunism*, he insisted, did not give enough credit for this latter group. Mr. Hyon added, "The people who went into the mountains survived the incident better and quickly moved south. They gained power by settling down earlier when the

South Korean army retreated with the participation of the People's Army of China." In other words, the mountain group had wealth and power in South Korea and wrongly took all of the credit for the Kangbyŏn Incident. He then noted that *Warriors of Anticommunism* mentioned some people who had not participated in the incident at all but who were friends with the author, and that the author himself had exaggerated his own role in the incident. For all of these reasons, Mr. Hyon stated, a more accurate history needed to be written.

According to Mr. Hyon, "the Uprising" was initiated and led by townspeople. He emphasized that he had interviewed all of the surviving participants and that his version of the incident was "a faithful writing of the facts." To ensure objectivity, he claimed, he included the real names of all of his interviewees when he quoted their testimonies. However, he was unable to publish it until 2000 because, according to Mr. Hyon, none of the survivors of the event who read the manuscript liked it. "Everybody wanted to be the protagonist of the incident," he complained. The people who had hidden in the mountains did not want the manuscript published at all; nor did one of the self-proclaimed leaders of the Kangbyŏnhoe (a man who claimed the leadership position because he was wealthy, not because he had actually done anything). In short, none of the contributors believed he had received the credit he deserved.

This controversy over the record of the incident reveals multiple truths among the Kangbyŏnhoe people. Because one way of remembering eclipsed the others, disagreements arose. Unlike the different "truths" held by the two Koreas, however, differing "truths" among the Kangbyŏnhoe people are consistent with the official interpretation of the incident as a voluntary uprising by people who had been oppressed by the communist regime. But controversy persisted over who initiated the incident and who participated in it.

Mr. Hyon's story reflects the significance of this incident and the identity formation of an anticommunist fighter as a powerful source of symbolic capital within the Kangbyŏnhoe, as well as in South Korea's anticommunist society. If identity is always formed in relation to others and constructed in the way others recognize, it also signals the prevalence of empathic listeners over a long period of time in South Korea. Their long efforts to develop an identity as anticommunist fighters are related to the fact that anticommunism

has long been a dominant grammar in South Korean society. Division politics that remind people of the constant state of emergency under which they live and promote personal fulfillment through the extinction of the enemy (based on an “us versus them” mentality) has given members of the Kangbyŏnhoe spaces of competition in which they can claim for themselves the identity of anticommunist fighters. Because the incident caused thousands of civilian deaths in a small rural county, I wonder what it would be like to have participated in or witnessed such a terrible massacre and yet continue to celebrate it. The division and division politics have created a tragic situation in which people fight over memories that are likely too painful to remember.

Publication of the new version of the Kangbyŏn Incident was also delayed for political reasons. Members of the Kangbyŏnhoe expressed their distaste for the Kim Dae Jung government, saying, “It is no longer a source of pride that we fought for democracy [*minjujuŭi*] anymore under this ‘red’ government.” One member bitterly complained that “people like us, anticommunists, are even called ‘anti-unification forces’ in these days.” They decided that it was too dangerous to remember the Kangbyŏn Uprising under Kim Dae Jung’s “red government” and thus chose instead to relegate those memories to the realm of oblivion. They invested themselves in the narratives of the incident based on the collective identity of the people of the Kangbyŏnhoe as “fighters for the liberal democracy [*chayu minjujuŭi*].” Thus, as they experienced the time when their career as anticommunist had ceased to be a source of pride, they felt extremely insecure.

They were especially angry about revisionist accounts and the attempts of both the Kim Yong Sam and Kim Dae Jung governments to reevaluate the violent practices of authoritarian regimes. “We thought that they [historical incidents revisited] were committed by the Reds. We were told so. Now everything becomes sins of the [previous South Korean] government and of the United States. The world is turning upside down, ruled by the Reds,” they lamented. Part of their anger came from their fear that the Kangbyŏn Uprising would receive the same revisionist treatment: “What if the Reds decide that the Kangbyŏn Uprising was our fault?”

## VI. COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND PERSONAL MEMORY

Over time, I learned that not all the members of the Kangbyŏnhoe actively participated in the incident, even though they have long portrayed themselves as fighters against communism. Accordingly, as the reconciliation between the two Koreas began during my fieldwork, they expressed their collective political and social location as “outsiders” or “anti-unification forces.” Then they insisted that all Sihyangmin were in the same position.

Mr. Song is a typical example of someone who has invested in the collective identity of anticommunist fighters even though he did not participate in the incident. He gave me a confusing account of his role in the event, but another member informed me that Mr. Song had “just remained in town and followed us to the South.” Mr. Song’s case shows how personal memory that is often understood as being formed and transformed according to a memory system is in fact influenced and constructed by a person’s society and culture (Kwon 2006, 13).

Mr. Song’s case also illustrates how the South Korean authoritarian regimes opened a space for Kangbyŏnhoe people to appropriate this traumatic story as part of a heroic anticommunist struggle, and how this appropriation has made Mr. Song feel personally invested in the trauma. The fact that Mr. Song did not participate in the incident but narrates and lives it as a collective participant demonstrates the power of those regimes, which used anticommunism to organize narratives and to produce and govern their subjects. At the same time, Mr. Song’s story shows how personal memory is not completely framed by a society’s dominant memory. Incoherence in Mr. Song’s stories can serve as an object of analysis that reveals the ideological character of the incident narratives.

Mr. Song admitted that he had once wanted to join the North Korean Communist Party, but he did so in the context of his critique of it:

Those communists were so bad. I really tried to be a member of the party, since the majority of the people at my workplace were party members and it would help me get promoted quickly.

Mr. Song had obviously not always been an anticommunist. Nevertheless, he frames his memory to emphasize the drawbacks of communism. This pattern continues throughout his account of his life. For example, he worked at the regional branch of the North Korean Monopoly Office to administrate the trade of monopoly goods such as tobacco, salt, and ginseng, and thus had no memory “of being insulted [*sumo rül tanghada*] by the Reds.” He heard rumors that the communists executed people suspected of anticommunist activities, but he himself never suffered in this regard. His family even benefited from North Korea’s land reform. He once commented that his mother was so happy to get land that she exclaimed, “Oh! Things that I expected have finally come [*ol göt i watkuna*]! The land should be given to farmers.” But he claimed that he had always had a secret antipathy for the communists. In answer to my question on how he came to resent the party, he said that it was “natural for young people to have ill feelings about the government.” Later he told me that he stayed in town when the “Kangbyön Anticommunist Uprising” occurred, because he did not have to escape like his colleagues, most of whom were party members. I suspected that this might have been the moment that decided his fate, but he did not interpret it that way. Rather, he wanted to assign more agency to himself by ambiguously describing himself as one of the “fighters” inspired by the “natural feelings of young people,” without specifying his role in the event.

Whenever the issue of separated families was raised, he seemed very uncomfortable. Criticizing Kim Dae Jung’s sunshine policy and promise to reunite separated families, Mr. Song said:

My family members in *ibuk* [North Korea] are all dead. I came south after fighting [against the communists]. Would they [the communists] leave them alive? There will not be a reunion of separated families. All of Kim Dae Jung’s words are lies.

Among the Kangbyönhoe people there was a widespread rumor that all their families in North Korea had been executed or removed to other regions by the North Korean regime. Mr. Song told me that they heard this from a member of the KCIA (the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, renamed in 1999 as the National Intelligence Service) and thus believed that none

of them would be able to see their families in the North even if there were exchanges between the two Koreas. Mr. Song also suspected that his own family had been killed by the communists: “They killed all the families of fighters for liberal democracy.” In this belief lies his identity as a fighter, which originated in the narratives of the members of the Kangbyŏnhoe as the fighters for liberal democracy. Because he endorsed the representation of the people of the Kangbyŏnhoe as anticommunist fighters, he was bound into that collectivity. In order to assert his ideological position, he therefore had to assume that his families had been killed.

Because of his displacement, Mr. Song has made his home far from his homeland, where his family died. Maybe this was why he took one of the most extreme positions on North Korea. For him, *ibuk* (North Korea) was filled with the enemy. He insisted, “We should let Ibuk die from starvation because they are our enemies” and opposed any kind of humanitarian assistance to the North. He also believed that communication or negotiation with North Korea was impossible, which left only one possible kind of unification: the South’s absorption of the North. Any attempt to challenge that theory was threatening to him.

In July 1999 I met Mr. Song at the Unification Building when he came to participate in an event organized by the provincial civil organizations.<sup>13</sup> He had not wanted to participate in the event because he disliked the guest speaker (the Minister of Unification), but he was required to attend in order to meet his county’s quota of participants.<sup>14</sup> Shilhyangmin organizations had long mobilized their members for government events, and finding willing attendees was not much problem when the political positions of the

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<sup>13</sup> The Unification Building is a government-owned building that contains both the offices of government agencies (Ibukodowiwŏnhoe [The Committee for Five Provinces in the Northern Part of Korea]) and the Silhyangmins’ main civil organizations (Ibukodowiwŏnhoe [The Association of Citizens for the Five Provinces of the Northern Part of Korea]). Ibukodowiwŏnhoe is a symbolic administrative organization to govern “a yet unreclaimed area that is temporarily occupied by an antistate organization” (i.e., North Korea). It is based on the territorial clause of South Korean Basic Law, which defines the territory of North Korea as its own.

<sup>14</sup> “Nobody wanted to come,” he complained, so as a county manager he had to participate.

government and of Silhyangmin organizations coincided.

Mr. Song told me that under previous regimes this type of event had been one “through which we could hear news about North Korea’s situation and we could help government’s policies.” However, as the new government in 1999 had a different (i.e., oppositional) political position with the Silhyangmin organizations, there existed ground for conflicts. Because the representative Silhyangmin organization, Ibukodominhoe, was not free from government influence (it benefited from government largesse—renting a government building for almost nothing, for example), it could not publicly oppose the government’s policies. Leaders of Silhyangmin organizations were perplexed to see “reds” seize power. Nevertheless, they had to cooperate with them.<sup>15</sup>

At the event, the Minister of Unification explained Kim Dae Jung’s North Korean and unification policy. He outlined the sunshine policy as an engagement policy (*pòyong chǒngch’æk*), rather than an appeasement policy (*yuhwa chǒngch’a*). Aware of many Silhyangmins’ critique of Kim’s North Korean policy as a “give-in” or “red” policy, he emphasized that engagement was a policy of the powerful, whereas appeasement was a policy of the weak, and argued that in facilitating the opening and reform of North Korea, the sunshine policy would be more effective than a “blockade policy” supported by the conservatives. He also stressed that South Korea had to reconcile and cooperate with North Korea in the aftermath of the Cold War and decades of national competition. He clearly described South Korea as superior to North Korea and as a powerful agent to bring “national prosperity” to all Koreans.

As we left the Unification Building, however, Mr. Song insisted that both the president and the minister were “lying” about South-North relations. He complained that whereas previous regimes organized “anticommunist” events, the current government organized “procommunist” ones.

We named this the Unification Building. Who could want unification more than Ibukodomin? We Silhyangmin are the most desperate about the national

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<sup>15</sup> Ibukodominhoe comprises five provincial levels of civil organizations of Silhyangmin. After the Korean national division, Silhyangmin founded each Tominhoe (provincial civil organization), which functioned as self-help centers and networks for Silhyangmin. They operated as vanguards of anticommunism under the authoritarian regime and currently share a government-owned building (Lee 2006).

unification, because we have hometowns and family there. That is why we named this building as such. Now? I am not sure what we are heading for. We had a clear idea about unification. Unification, in terms of a liberal democratic system. That is what we wanted. That is why we fought so hard. We had a strong conviction about it. But, I am not sure what this “red” government wants.

Mr. Song’s statement illustrates the rigidity of his Cold War thinking. Even though the minister emphasized that the new policy was intended to open and reform North Korea, Mr. Song interpreted it as “procommunist.” For him, the state of constant struggle against North Korea was the only condition in which he could feel safe. A government that did not continue that fight was “red” and opposed to the liberal democratic system. When anticommunism ceased to be the focus, as a “fighter against communism” Mr. Song became an anachronism and therefore felt insecure.

## VII. CONCLUSION

During the summer of 2000, when excitement about family reconciliations following the inter-Korean summit reached its peak, I returned to the Office. Members of the Kangbyŏnhoe who were watching the reunion scenes were visibly uncomfortable. They were especially troubled by the public emergence of the Wŏlbukcha who had come from North Korea to see their families in the South, and by their own increasingly marginalized position.<sup>16</sup> Mr. Hyon deplored what he saw as a “world in which the Reds have become heroes,” and told me that he came to the Office because he felt “suffocated” while watching the reunion scenes on television. Mr. Song also criticized the Wŏlbukcha by saying, “There is no reconciliation as far as ‘Kim Il Sung’ and ‘Kim Jong Il’ attached to their mouths.” He was agitated by the Wŏlbukcha’s repeated mentions of their gratitude to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, who, according to the Wŏlbukcha’s understanding, took care of them and made the reunions

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<sup>16</sup> Wŏlbukcha are people who went north between Korea’s liberation from Japan in 1945 and the end of the Korean War in 1953. They are considered “communists” in South Korea. For more information on the Wŏlbukcha, see Lee (2006).

possible. For many members of the Kangbyŏnhoe, the war was not over. They regarded the state of war between the two Koreas as a normal condition—and the only guarantee of their safety.

At the same time, in the historical circumstance of national reconciliation and reunions of separated families, members of the Kangbyŏnhoe retreated from their “heroic memory.” While recognizing massive civilian deaths during the Kangbyŏn Incident, some of the Kangbyŏnhoe people lamented that “it was such an inhuman incident. Everybody was crazy.” Another member rejected his own agency by saying that “we danced to our seniors’ tune” (that is, they were just following orders).

The tearful excitement of the reunions also stirred up mixed emotions about “family.” Some members of the Kangbyŏnhoe who had assumed that their relative had died expressed their longings for them. Mr. Song had once told me, “My mom must have died of old age. But two sisters may still be alive. But I am not able to apply for the family reunion. What if they are harmed due to my contact?” As the reunion he had firmly believed impossible seemed possible, he regretted past actions that might have made his own family reunification impossible, sadly adding that “the unification will be accomplished after all of us die.” He seemed to accept that he was not free of his self-image as an anticommunist. His story and others like it reveal that the Kangbyŏnhoe people, who seemed to have a strong identity as anticommunist fighters, were in fact subjects of trauma and conflicted subjects. These stories also show how conflicts that had been anchored within the discourses of anticommunism amplified at the moment of “historical fissure.”

I have introduced politics of memory in relation to the Kangbyŏn Incident and Mr. Song’s story to show how interactions between South Korea’s glorification of anticommunist activities and memories of the war and North Korea’s binary and militant interpretation of a single incident during the Korean War had formed the identity of a group called the Kangbyŏnhoe. I have also examined how these memories have become sources of trauma in the post-Cold War era. Members of the Kangbyŏnhoe have constructed their collective identity based on their memories as victors of a traumatic incident.

In this process, though his life narratives do not conform to the dominant narratives of the Kangbyŏnhoe, Mr. Song employed the collective identity as anticommunist fighters and acted accordingly. His story is a good example

of the “socially constitutive function of collective memory” observed by Maurice Halbwachs (1980) and others, as well as its material basis and effects. Mr. Song’s selective memory construction of an anticommunist fighter was facilitated under the anticommunist South Korean regimes and strengthened those regimes. But as the regime changed, so did its main narratives, and in this context Mr. Song’s memory, which had been a source of pride in the state of emergency, became a source of extreme insecurity. His resistance to this changing world illustrates the difficulty of transforming an identity based on the memory framed by a particular interpretation of the Korean War, even as division politics were seemingly on the wane.

In the long history of the Korean division, my observations of these phenomena took place during a relatively short and exceptional historical interlude of national reconciliation. This extraordinary situation in which old grammar seemed to be faltering enabled me to examine issues of memory and identity of the Kangbyŏnhoe people who are both agents and victims of national division. They are members of separated families who want the division system to end, as well as agents who have participated in the perpetuation of that system. This analysis of memory and identity formation based on the “us versus them” mentality that has prevailed since the division aids the understanding of why both Koreas constantly revive memories of the war and amplify the sense of crisis at this historical moment in which an international Cold War system holds sway.<sup>17</sup>

As the inter-Korean relationship grows antagonistic again and division politics experiences a revival, follow-up research is necessary to examine changes of memory and identity of Kangbyŏnhoe members. It is also time to seek a new “politics of memory” that enables Koreans to develop new ethics based on healing, self-reflection, and reconciliation rather than reproduce conflicting subjects who are insecure and angry by remembering the war “through the war.”

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<sup>17</sup> Cold War-era antagonisms waned during the period of my fieldwork, but when I originally published this article in 2011 they were in a period of resurgence; renewed tensions between the two Koreas persist in late 2013 as this article is being prepared for republication.

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