

American Responsibility and the Massacres in Cheju Conference on Overcoming the Past: Healing and Reconciliation -- Cheju and the World in Comparison

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Abstract

On Cheju Island something happened in ‘peacetime’ under the American Occupation—namely a major peasant war—and after decades of repression Cheju people finally have come forward to tell their stories and demand compensation, and no special pleading about the exigencies of wartime will suffice to assuage the American conscience. What formerly classified American materials document is a merciless, wholesale assault on the people of this island. No one will ever know how many died in this onslaught, but the American data, long kept secret, ranged between 30,000 and 60,000 killed, with upwards of 40,000 more people having fled to Japan (where many still live in Osaka). There were at most 300,000 people living on Cheju Island in the late 1940s.¹ This happened when the U.S. was legally responsible for actions taken under its command, but as it happened, instead of punishing the criminals, American leaders directed the suppression of the rebellion and were pleased when it was crushed.

The effective political leadership on Cheju until early 1948 was provided by strong leftwing people’s committees that first emerged in August 1945, and later continued under the American Occupation (1945–1948). The Occupation preferred to ignore Cheju rather than to do much about the committees; it appointed a formal mainland leadership but let the people of the island run their own affairs. The result was an entrenched leftwing, one with no important ties to the North and few to the South Korean Workers Party (SKWP) on the mainland; the island was also well and peaceably governed in 1945–47, particularly by contrast to the mainland. In early 1948 as Syngman Rhee and his American supporters moved to institute his power in a separate southern regime, however, the Cheju people responded with a strong guerrilla insurgency that soon tore the island apart.

Key words :

American Responsibility, the Massacres in Cheju, Overcoming the Past, Healing, Reconciliation, Cheju and the World in Comparison

1) This paper is drawn in part from my 2010 book, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Random House). Seong Nae Kim, “Lamentations of the Dead: The Historical Imagery of Violence on Cheju Island, South Korea,” *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 3 (2) (summer 1989), 253. See also John Merrill, “The Cheju-do Rebellion,” *Journal of Korean Studies*, v. 2 (1980), which gives a figure of 30,000 (194–95).

Introduction

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Before Rhee came to power, silenced his officials, and blamed the whole rebellion on alien communist agitators, Koreans in the U.S. Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) attributed the origins of the insurgency to the long tenure of the Cheju governing committees and subsequent police and rightwing youth-group terrorism. Gen. John R. Hodge, commander of the Occupation, told a group of visiting American Congressmen in October

1947 that Cheju was "a truly communal area that is peacefully controlled by the People's Committee without much Comintern influence." Shortly thereafter a Military Government investigation estimated that "approximately two-thirds of the populace" on the island were "moderate leftist" in their opinions. The chairman of a big leftist organization, a former Cheju governor named Pak, was "not a Communist and [was] very pro-American." The people were deeply separatist and did not like mainlanders; their wish was to be left alone. This survey determined, however, that Cheju had been subjected to a campaign of official terrorism in recent months. According to Counter-Intelligence Corps (CIC) information, the current governor, Yu Hae-jin, was an "extreme rightist," a mainlander with connections to rightwing youth groups; he was "ruthless and dictatorial in his dealing with opposing political parties." He thought anyone who did not support Syngman Rhee was "automatically leftist;" for months in 1947 he had sought to prevent "any meeting by any party except those he definitely approves."

An official investigation by USAMGIK Judge Yang Won-il conducted in June 1948 found that "the People's Committee of Cheju Island, which was formed after the Liberation . . . has exercised its power as a de facto government." He also found that "the police have failed to win the hearts of the people by treating them cruelly." A Seoul prosecutor, Won Taek-yun, said the troubles began because of official incompetence, not "leftist agitation;" Lt. Col. Kim Ik-yol, commander of Constabulary (military) units on the island when the rebellion began, said that the blame for the uprising "should be laid entirely at the door of the police force."

Governor Yu had filled national police units on the island with mainlanders and refugees from northern Korea, who worked together with "ultra rightist party terrorists." Some 365 prisoners were in the Cheju city jail in late 1947; an American investigator witnessed thirty-five of them crowded into a 10' by 12' cell. "Direct control of food rationing" had also been placed in the hands of "politicians" responsive to Yu, who operated out of township offices. Unauthorized grain collections had been five times as high as official ones in 1947. When Americans interviewed Gov. Yu in February 1948 he acknowledged that he had utilized "extreme rightist power" to reorient the Cheju people, "the large majority" of whom were leftist in his judgment. He justified this by saying that "there was no middle line" in island politics; one supported either the

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left or the right. He said the police controlled all political meetings, and would not allow the “extreme leftists” to meet. Although the author of the survey called for Gov. Yu’s dismissal, Gen. William F. Dean decided in late March 1948 not to remove him.³

Direct American involvement in suppressing the rebellion included overseeing the suppression, the daily training of counter-insurgent forces, interrogation of prisoners, and the use of American spotter planes to ferret out guerrillas. On May 22, 1948 Col. Rothwell Brown (who later had a long career in American covert operations around the world) developed the following procedures, to “break up” the revolt: “police were assigned definite missions to protect all coastal villages [from guerrillas]; to arrest rioters carrying arms, and to stop killing and terrorizing innocent citizens.” The Constabulary was told to break up all elements of the guerrilla army in the interior of the island. Brown also ordered widespread, continuing interrogation of all those arrested, and efforts to prevent supplies from reaching the guerrillas. Subsequently he anticipated the institution of a long-range program “to offer positive proof of the evils of Communism,” and to “show that the American way offers positive hope” for the Islanders. From May 28 to the end of July, more than 3,000 islanders were arrested.⁴

One newspaper reported that American troops intervened in the Cheju conflict in at least one instance in late April 1948, and a group of Korean journalists even charged in June that Japanese officers and soldiers had secretly been brought back to the island to help in suppressing the rebellion. Naval ships had completely blockaded the island, making resupply of guerrillas from the mainland impossible.⁵ By early 1949 more than seventy percent of the island’s villages had been burned, partially or completely. But in April things got worse:

Cheju Island was virtually overrun early in the month by rebels operating from the central mountain peak . . . rebel sympathizers numbering

possibly 15,000, sparked by a trained core of 150 to 600 fighters, controlled most of the island. A third of the population had crowded into Cheju town, and 65,000 were homeless and without food.⁶

By this time 20,000 homes on the island had been destroyed, and one-third of the population (about 100,000) was concentrated in protected villages along the coast. Peasants were only allowed to cultivate fields near perimeter villages, owing to “chronic insecurity” in the interior and the fear that they would aid the insurgents.⁷

Soon, however, the guerrillas were basically defeated. An American Embassy official, Everett Drumwright, reported in May 1949 that “the all-out guerrilla extermination campaign . . . came to a virtual end in April with order restored and most rebels and sympathizers killed, captured, or converted.” Ambassador John Muccio wired to Washington that “the job is about done.” Shortly it was possible to hold a special election, thus finally to send a Cheju Islander to the National Assembly; none other than Chang Taek-sang, the long-time head of the Seoul Metropolitan Police, arrived to run for a seat.⁸ By August 1949 it was apparent that the insurgency had effectively ended and the rebel leader Yi Tok-ku was finally killed. Peace came, but it was the peace of a political graveyard.

American public sources reported in 1949 that fifteen to twenty thousand islanders died, but the ROK’s official figure was 27,719. The North Koreans said that more than 30,000 islanders had been “butchered” in the suppression. The Governor of Cheju, however, privately told American intelligence that 60,000 had died, and as many as 40,000 people had fled to Japan; officially 39,285 homes had been demolished, but the Governor thought “most of the houses on the hills” were gone: of 400 villages, only 170 remained. In other words one in every five or six islanders had perished, and nearly half the villages were destroyed.⁹

Just before the war began in June 1950, a U.S.

3) National Archives NA), USFIK 11071 file, box 62/96, transcript of Hodge monologue to visiting Congressmen, Oct. 4, 1947; RG332, XXIV Corps Historical file, box 20, “Report of Special Investigation -- Cheju-Do Political Situation,” March 11, 1948, conducted by Lt. Col. Lawrence A. Nelson. Nelson was on Cheju from Nov. 12, 1947 to Feb. 28, 1948.

4) Rothwell Brown Papers, Brown to Hodge, “Report of Activities on Cheju-Do Island [sic] from 22 May 1948, to 30 June 1948; Seoul Times, June 5, June 7, 1948. I have found no evidence of the return of Japanese officers, but that does not mean it did not happen.

5) USFIK, G-2 Intelligence Summary no. 154, Aug. 21-27, no. 159, Sept. 24--Oct. 1, no. 163, Oct. 22-29, 1948; National Archives, RG94, Central Intelligence, entry 427, box no. 18343, 441st CIC detachment monthly report, Oct. 21, 1948; 895.00 file, box no. 7127, Drumwright to State, Jan. 7, Jan. 10, 1949.

6) National Archives, 895.00 file, box no. 7127, Drumwright to State, March 14, 1949; Muccio to State, April 18, 1949.

7) British Foreign Office, F0317, piece no. 76258, Holt to Bevin, March 22, 1949.

8) National Archives, 895.00 file, box no. 7127, Drumwright to State, May 17, 1949; Muccio to State, May 13, 1949.

9) “The Background of the Present War in Korea,” Far Eastern Economic Review (Aug. 31, 1950), 233-37; this account is by an anonymous but knowledgeable American who served in the Occupation. See also Koh Kwang-il, “In Quest of National Unity,” 149, Hapdong t’ongshin, June 27, 1949, quoted in Sun’gan t’ongshin, no. 34 (September 1949), 1. Also National Archives, RG349, FEC G-2 Theater Intelligence, box 466, May 23, 1950, G-2 report on Cheju, which has the Governor’s figures. He put the pre-insurgency island population at 400,000, which I think is high. For a detailed North Korean account, see Yi Sŭng-yop, “The Struggle of the Southern Guerrillas for Unification of the Homeland,” Kŭlloja [The Worker], (January 1950), 18.

Embassy survey found the island peaceful, with no more than a handful of guerrillas. During the warfare at the Pusan perimeter, Americans reported that police had collected radios from the entire island population, so they could not find out about the North Korean advance on the mainland; the only telephone network was controlled by the police, and would be the main means of communication should the North Koreans seek to invade the island. Americans surmised, however, that a “subversive potential” still existed on Cheju, because of “an estimated 50,000 relatives of persons killed as Communist sympathizers in the rebellion.” Fully 27,000 of the islanders had been enrolled in the National Guidance Alliance, an organization set up to convert leftists and run by the state. In 1954 an observer of Cheju wrote, “village guards man watchtowers atop stone walls; some villages have dug wide moats outside the walls and filled them with brambles, to keep bandits out.”¹⁰

The Temper of Reconciliation and the Uses of History

Since its democratization South Korea has shown that mutual understanding and rapprochement between enemies needs to be preceded by a process of truth and reconciliation, that is, a scrupulous, penetrating, forensic look at the past which investigates and acknowledges buried and suppressed aspects of history. And so, mostly unbeknownst to the American people or press, the Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission dredged up and verified the massacres of tens of thousand of its own citizens by the Syngman Rhee regime, various villages blotted out by American napalm (in the South), and reexamined massacres by North Korean and local communists (these were the cases endlessly propagandized during and after the war ended).

The Koreans found their primary model in the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa, which defined that vexing term, “truth,” in at least four ways: forensic truth (dig up and examine the bodies; forensic evidence is “embodied memory:” violence is written, inscribed, even performed on the body, living or dead¹¹); eyewitness truth (let

the victims speak); scholarly truth (historians and archival documents); and perpetrator’s truth—get them on the stand, let them speak too, and then let the others respond. It is a method for letting all the relevant parties have their say, for achieving a social or “dialogue” truth, a healing or restorative truth, a way to allocate justice and assess punishment, all in the interest of reconciliation rather than revenge or self-justification. South Africa adopted its Commission in 1995, predicated on public deliberations, truth established in these ways, official investigations using fair procedures, testimony from planners, perpetrators and victims alike; and amnesty for those who disclosed the full facts and recognized their complicity.¹²

Victims of past atrocities and injustices carry with them memories they can never quite escape, expiate, or explain to others—even those who suffer a similar fate. Instead they animate dreams, spirits, and ghosts. Here, to take just one example, is the reminiscence of a man named Pak Tong-sol who was eight years old when he witnessed the murder of his family in Naju (a town near Kwangju) in July 1950:

At the time, at daybreak, my family members were caught by the police. . . . They took us to a valley where they made all the men kneel down. After a brief speech, the police shot all of them including my father and uncle. Afterwards, the police ordered the women and children to leave, but they only cried instead of moving. Then the police shot them too. A bullet penetrated my shoulder and came out through my armpit. . . . After my mother was killed, my younger sister, was three-year-old [sic], began to cry. The police beheaded her for this.¹³

Heonik Kwon has explored this phenomenon brilliantly in his *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, where a lively dialogue with and about ghosts inhabits the village, social life, and broader moral and political issues. They mingle together with familial and ancestral practices and become constitutive of village lore, collective memory, and historical meaning itself. These spectres also deliver people from the terrible political fractures of right and left, good and evil, that defined the wars in Vietnam and Korea.¹⁴

Korean and Vietnamese culture are by no means identical or interchangeable, but they are close enough such that Professor Kwon’s work can provide a facsimile of the experience of millions of Korean civilians: those whose kin were massacred,

10) National Archives, 795.00 file, box 4299, Drumwright to State, June 21, 1950; box 4268, Drumwright to Allison, Aug. 29, 1950, enclosing a survey, “Conditions on Cheju Island.” See also Korean Survey (March 1954), 6–7. The Americans put Yi’s death in June, but in awarding him a posthumous medal the North Koreans said he died in a guerrilla skirmish on the mainland in August, 1949. See Nodong Sinmun, Feb. 11, 1950.

11) Winter (2006), 55–7

12) South African statements quoted in Minow (1998), 55. See also her useful catalogue of ways to achieve truth, justice and reconciliation, 88.

13) TRCK, www.jinsil.go.kr/english, February 23, 2009.

14) Kwon (2008), 166; Cho (2008), 16.

or who died en masse from air attacks, or who had families bifurcated by the North–South impasse, thus to live out their lives with no knowledge of those on the other side of the DMZ. All of the mass suffering during the war reflected not just the dead kin, but “a ritual crisis” that shattered the society.¹⁵ Koreans had to choose between a state–ordered truth and the eminently more important truth burned into their bones. Past and present have their deepest connection in Korea through ancestors, around which families have performed rituals for millennia. History and memory so intertwine with lost relatives that for most people history, experience, loss, family and ritual observance bleed together to create social memory. Koreans are secular and eclectic about religion, including those who have become Christians in recent decades; the afterlife that they desire preeminently resides in the “great chain of being” linking distant ancestor, grandparents, the nuclear and extended family, and the progeny of all of them, until kingdom come.

Mass violence kills the beloved, but leaves nothing for the bereaved. Without the corporeal dead body a proper burial is impossible; without burial in a sacred place (the family tombs), the death cannot be assimilated to memory, and ritual is not possible; something like 6,000 Americans are still missing from the Korean War, and no doubt the majority just vaporized in some high combustion fashion—and how many Koreans did the same? Thus the evaporated dead cannot be honored, and their ghosts wander and cannot be satisfied (at the site of Korean War massacres local residents say that “ghost fire” or honbul flares up from the ground¹⁶). Most excruciating of all is the death of young children who, in a Confucian universe, are never supposed to die before their parents. The very meaning of life is traduced, for the dead and for the living survivors, and social memory has to be recomposed in the aftermath of catastrophe. There are entire towns in Korea that perform the chesa (ancestral remembrance) rituals all on the same day, because that is the day a massacre happened or a town was blotted out. Here bifurcated hot and cold war ideology gives way to human truths. It is not an accident that a poignant reunion of opposites came during a prolonged period of reconciliation between North and South, initiated by Kim Dae Jung in 1998.

The restorative truths told by the survivors and living victims of the Korean conflict are fruits of

the popular struggle for democracy in Korea; this surge of civil society is also a surge of suppressed information, and would never have been possible during the long decades of dictatorship. Suppressed memory is history’s way of preserving and sheltering a past that possesses immanent energy in the present; the minute conditions change, that suppressed history pours forth. Thus, in the past twenty years Koreans have produced hundreds of histories, memoirs, oral accounts, documentaries and novels that trace back to the years immediately after liberation.

Professor Seong Nae Kim has given eloquent voice to Cheju survivors, whose repressed memories of violence surface in dreams, or in sudden apparitions—ghosts, spirits, the conjurings of a shaman, or fleeting glimpses of loved ones “in blood–stained white mourning clothes.” The widow of an insurgent is hounded by the police into autism, catatonia, and suicide. Families cannot even utter the name of the dead or perform ancestor rituals, for fear of blacklisting; if one relative was labeled a communist, the entire family’s life chances were jeopardized for decades under the Law of Complicity (yonjwa pop). Forgetting was the immediate cure for such suffering, but its comforts were temporary. Memory surfaces apart from one’s intentions, the deceased return in dreams, the terror recurs in nightmares. The mind compensates for loss and adapts to the dictate of the state: if your brother was killed by a rightwing youth squad, say the communists killed him. Time passes, and the bereaved turn this reversal into the recalled truth. But the mind knows it is a lie, and so psychic trauma returns in terrible dreams, or the apparition of an accusing, vengeful ghost.¹⁷

Memory has its opposite: forgetting, which Friedrich Nietzsche thought “essential to action of any kind.” The unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure to human health, because forgetting is a gate–keeper of conscience—how immoral the world would look without forgetting, he wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*. To act in the present is to live unhistorically, and it is also to repress. In a passage that Freud learned much from, Nietzsche wrote of the plastic power of people to suppress truth, to heal wounds, to go on, to transform, to recreate broken molds. The former sex slaves who have insisted on Japanese accountability and contrition are exactly broken human vessels, recreated into strong mettle through painful struggle. To find ways to acknowledge past crimes, to grasp how they happened, and to reconcile with the victims is another path toward self–respect and strength.

15) In the words of Harvard President Drew Faust, foreword to Kwon (2006), xii.

16) Choe Myong–hui used this as the title of her monumental documentary of the murderous political trials of her hometown, Namwon. See *Honbul [Fire spirit]*, 3 vols (Seoul, 1985–92).

17) Seong Nae Kim, “Lamentations of the Dead: The Historical Imagery of Violence on Cheju Island, South Korea,” *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 3/2 (summer 1989), 251–285.

These are the qualities and attributes of human thought, anxiety, memory, amnesia, strength. They do not express Korean or Japanese or American difference. In fact from 1998 to 2008 South Korean leaders came very far toward a useful understanding of history's value. Korea surely suffered one of the worst 20th-century histories of any nation, and remains divided in the new century. Yet when Kim Dae Jung was elected in 1997, a charismatic politician rather than an historian or scholar, he inaugurated a sweeping effort at reconciliation with the North and with the rebellious southwest of his native land, which had lived very uncomfortably from the 1890s into the 1990s with the Japanese, the Americans, and successive Korean military dictators. At his inauguration he pardoned two previous militarists, Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, who had been sentenced to death or life imprisonment in 1996. As scholars like Na Kan-chae of Chonnam University have argued, the trials of Chun and Roh and Kim's election in 1997 represented a distinct victory for the people of Kwangju and South Cholla, even if they came many years later and after great suffering.

One of Kim's projects was "A History that Opens the Future," dedicated to fresh and honest examination of any number of difficult issues in modern Korean history, and between Korea and its neighbors. After his term in office and his successor's, it is fair to say that South Korea finally became one unified nation, all orthodox and heterodox "points of view" were aired, and enormous progress was made in reconciling with Pyongyang. In an important speech in April 2007, Kim's successor, Roh Moo-hyun, criticized Japanese leaders for seeking to justify the actions of their forebears in the 1930s and 40s, instead of finding common understanding with their neighbors: "true reconciliation, whether domestic or international, is possible only on a foundation of historical truth."¹⁸

When the Korean War began about 300 people died in the town of Kurim, near the southwestern coast. A village of ancient familial continuity, Kurim's history traces back a millennium, with four clans; today it has about 600 households. In the conflicts after liberation villagers attacked each other with pitchforks and hoes ("hoe squads"), a common occurrence throughout the region. Some villagers supported guerrillas in the hills, who also foraged indiscriminately for what they needed. When the war broke out some villagers killed some policemen and rightwingers. When South Korean forces recaptured Kurim in October, the police killed ninety alleged communist sympathizers. Guerrilla

war continued in the region throughout 1950, but after the war stabilized in 1951 a local ROK Army sergeant executed thirteen more villagers in a nearby valley. Choi Jae-sang was twelve when the police told his older sister to take her clothes off; when she refused they shot her in the head in front of her parents. This village civil war left just about every family with a grievance and desire for revenge; for decades opposing families did not speak to each other. But it became a symbol of reconciliation throughout South Korea when, in 2006, village elders published a 530-page history of Kurim, listing the war dead without naming the killers, and sponsored joint memorial services. It turned out the elders had collectively decided, after the war ended, not to reveal who killed whom, or to pursue revenge.¹⁹

The purpose of the various South Korean inquiries has not been to sow blame or refight Cold War battles, but to seek reconciliation between North and South and to establish an understanding and an orientation that produces *verstehen* of one's former enemy—not sympathy, perhaps not even empathy, but an understanding of the principles that guide one's adversary, even if one finds those principles abhorrent or deeply wounding to one's own knowledge of what happened historically with this same enemy. After all, to blame one side (as most Americans do) for all the blood and agony of the past century since Japan seized Korea, is to fit an extraordinarily complex, merciless and implacably brutal history through the eye of an ideological needle. But through techniques of requiem under a fair system of justice—investigation, trial, testimony, adjudication, apology, purge, reparations—people can finally reconcile, propitiate, and put their ghosts to rest. Once the enemy's core principles are understood without blinking, once we view our history with this adversary from all sides, appeals can be made to the adversary's world view. And, of course, full recognition of what one side (the South) did might lead to a better understanding of all the grievances husbanded by the other side. But perhaps the greatest gain is self-knowledge, for if you do not know yourself and what others think of you, rightly or wrongly, it is difficult to navigate a complicated world.

If Americans have trouble reflecting on this "forgotten war" as a conflict primarily fought among Koreans, for Korean goals, they should hearken to the great chroniclers of their own civil war. International involvement was important—and particularly U.S. involvement—but the essential dynamic was internal to the peninsula, to this ancient nation that has known a continuous existence within well-recognized boundaries since

18) President Roh Moo-hyun, "On History, Nationalism and a Northeast Asian Community," (Seoul, Global Asia, April 16, 2007).

19) Choe Sang-hun, "A Korean Village Torn Apart From Within Mends Itself," *New York Times* (February 21, 2008), A4.

the time of Mohammed. Korea remains divided so long after the Berlin Wall fell because this war cut so deeply into the body politic and the Korean soul.

The Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a major result of the decades-long struggle for democracy and human rights in South Korea, pursuing a comprehensive and penetrating inquiry into the truth, defined as it was in the South African experience, in the interests of healing and restoration, in the interests of peace and reconciliation. Healing not just the people but the nation—the restorative and therapeutic value of victims and perpetrators telling and knowing the truth. For Americans, the forensic truths establish lies at all levels of their government, perpetrated for more than half a century, but they also (in the Commission’s words) “reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse.” The personal truths of the victims and survivors should become a restorative truth, a requiem for the “forgotten war” that might finally achieve the peaceful reconciliation that the two Koreas have been denied since Dean Rusk first etched a line at the 38th parallel in August 1945.

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