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## **The Ongoing Korean War at the Sinch'ŏn Museum in North Korea**

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### **Abstract**

This essay analyzes the Sinch'ŏn Massacre and its memorialization at the Sinch'ŏn Museum of American War Atrocities in North Korea by placing the massacre within the context of North Korea's political history. The museum illustrates Pyongyang's perspective on the Korean War as a "war of liberation" and the museum's role in the political education of the North Korean people, not simply as victims of American war atrocities but as "martyrs" and model citizens. Within the geopolitics of confrontation between North Korea and the United States since the Korean War, the Sinch'ŏn Museum has served to foster anti-American nationalism in North Korea. While the museum has served this specific purpose within the North Korean context, it should be compared with other examples of war memorialization that serve the function of identity formation for a sense of national unity.

Keywords: North Korea, Sinch'ŏn Massacre, Sinch'ŏn Museum, war memorials, martyrdom, patriotism, anti-Americanism, nationalism

### **Introduction**

On November 25, 2014, the first secretary of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and supreme leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Un, visited the Sinch'ŏn Museum in South Hwanghae Province, North Korea. North Korea's official news media, the Korean Central News Agency, reported on his visit, during which he criticized the United States. Accusing the American military of committing a mass civilian massacre in Sinch'ŏn during the Korean War, Kim called the U.S. soldiers "murderers" and stated that any positive illusions about such an enemy is akin to death. He explained that the purpose of his visit to the museum was to strengthen education about anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism, and class consciousness, suitable for the current state of foreign affairs. What kind of place is the Sinch'ŏn Museum of American War Atrocities, and what is it about the Sinch'ŏn Massacre that made North Korea's supreme leader condemn the United States so harshly at the museum?

The renowned South Korean novelist Hwang Sök-yöng, who has personal ties to the town of Sinch'ön, dealt with the Sinch'ön Massacre in his novel *The Guest* (2001).<sup>1</sup> Hwang wrote the novel based on his interviews with a pastor originally from North Korea who had immigrated to New York. He used the word “guest” in the book’s title to suggest that the cause of the Sinch'ön Massacre could be ascribed to two external factors introduced into the Korean peninsula by foreign forces: Christianity and Marxism. According to Hwang, Christianity and Marxism were forced on Korea during the process of colonization and division, rather than being parts of an autonomous process of modernization. As a result, the scars from the war were particularly severe. The Korean War left both the North and South in ruins. Rather than fulfilling North Korea’s vision of a “war of unification” or a “war of liberation,” the all-out war initiated by North Korea endangered its own existence and resulted in the loss of countless lives. Civilian casualties took many forms, including massacres all over North Korea. In the fall of 1950, one such massacre took place in the Sinch'ön area. Despite the occurrence of mass killings in other areas, North Korea focused on the massacre in Sinch'ön and began to construct a museum dedicated to its commemoration in 1958.

In general, memorials reflect a community’s awareness of history. Today’s war memorials are closely related to the formation of modern states and nationalism. After the Second World War, for example, victor nations imparted their official recollections to the people in the form of war memorials. A connection is thereby forged through specific commemorative acts, a process through which past experiences are reconstructed for the social context of the present (Schwartz 1982, 374). This commemoration process is mostly carried out in a collective format, which frames the emotions and awareness of its constituents, ultimately building their identity. That is, a sense of nationhood is based mainly on a common set of experiences among individuals and their shared memories of the past (Smith 1996). Collective memories and identities are created and made meaningful through networks of actors, who feel an inclusive sense of community by sharing such thoughts and feelings as love, hate, and fear (Melucci 1995, 42–45).

Historically, war memorials were created as symbols to idealize war in artistic form. In recent years, war memorials have incorporated elements of state authority, justification of war, and sympathy for victims. They recreate the past to portray wars as noble acts and depict fallen soldiers as heroes who gave their lives for their country (Kidd and Murdoch 2004, 30–

35). The images of such soldiers are turned into mythical and religious figures, and the battles in which they participated appear as honorable and sacred. Through death they are seen to have protected their state and nation, and their sacrifices reproduce the sense of collective consciousness for the surviving community members (Gillis 1994). In this way, symbolic icons and cultural mediums give rise to collective identity.

The content and composition of war museums, as official memorials, clearly reveal the state's intentions. Moreover, the location of a memorial defines the significance of the event being memorialized as interpreted by the state. What this space commemorates is not only the event itself but also its victims, by mourning their deaths at the national level. In other words, narratives about the victims do not belong to the individuals themselves; instead, they become part of the official history that the nation should remember and commemorate. North Korea's construction of the Sinch'ŏn Museum of American War Atrocities, which deals with the civilian massacres said to have occurred in Sinch'ŏn, is no exception. Considering the Sinch'ŏn Museum in relation to other war memorials, this article aims to analyze North Korean interpretations of the war and the significance of its victims as presented in the museum, as well as North Korean perceptions of the United States that the museum exhibits.

It is important to situate the Sinch'ŏn Massacre against the religious, historical, and political background of the Sinch'ŏn area, as well as the localized guerrilla warfare that had begun in the years leading up to the war. Focusing on these variables, I first explain how the Sinch'ŏn Massacre occurred during the Korean War. Next, I describe North Korea's changing political climate, the shifts in international geopolitics, and America's deployment of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, in order to contextualize the period before and after 1958, when the Sinch'ŏn Museum was built. Finally, I examine the museum's exhibits in detail to show the ways in which the museum educates its visitors through its narrative structure. The collected artifacts in the various exhibition spaces elucidate Pyongyang's perspective on American intervention in the "war of liberation," while showing the manner in which the museum carries out its political education. While the museum has served a specific purpose within the North Korean context, it should be situated among other examples of war memorialization that contribute to the formation of a sense of national unity.

I should note at the outset that I was unable to physically visit the Sinch'ŏn Museum as a South Korean scholar without access to visit North Korea. The individual testimonies

used in this article are from official North Korean publications rather than oral interviews, which may call into question the validity of the statements from these publications. In other words, it was impossible to gather any statements that differed from Pyongyang's official pronouncements, inevitably revealing the rigidities of the government's system. Despite these restrictions and difficult conditions, this analysis of the Sinch'ŏn Museum was written to better understand the distinct logic of North Korea's internal system.

### **The Sinch'ŏn Massacre: Reprisal and Civil War**

In order to understand the Sinch'ŏn Museum, the Sinch'ŏn Massacre must be examined; in order to understand the massacre, the geographical and historical background of the Sinch'ŏn region of South Hwanghae Province must be analyzed. Sinch'ŏn is located at the foot of Kuwŏl Mountain in the central west side of the Korean peninsula and was known, along with Chaeryŏng and Anak, for its abundant grain production. In addition to such economic significance, Christianity was introduced to the region relatively early on, as depicted in *The Guest*. As a result, landowners and middle-class farmers who were heavily influenced by Christianity and Catholicism dominated the region. During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), many independence fighters were active around Sinch'ŏn. For example, Kim Ku and An Chung-gŭn stayed there in their youths before leaving for Manchuria. After being baptized in the Catholic Church, An worked as the managing director of the Sinch'ŏn Catholic Church.

The region was one of the most economically wealthy above the 38th parallel, and from the Japanese occupation to the formation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), segments of the area's youth population had opposed the suppression of Christianity and land redistribution. With Communist control in the North after liberation in 1945, their options were either to defect to the South or to remain and continue their anti-Communist struggle underground. Those who remained formed rightist youth organizations, such as the Patriotic Group (Aeguk Kyŏlsadae) or Anti-Communist Saviors of the Nation (Pangong Kugukdae), sporadically putting up resistance to the Communist authorities in North Korea. In September 1948, after the formal establishment of the North Korean government as the DPRK, anti-Communist youth moved to Kuwŏl Mountain to form an anti-Communist guerrilla unit (Cho 1957). This anti-Communist movement, made up primarily of right-wing youth, fought underground against the North Korean regime until the Korean War. Once war

broke out, Communist guerrilla units formed when North Korea pulled back from the region in October 1950. Resisting the South Korean and UN forces, these units—made up of members of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), People's Committees, and various social organizations that had failed to retreat with the northern forces from the Hwanghae area—were based around Kuwŏl Mountain (Kŭmsŏng Ch'ŏngnyŏn Ch'ulp'ansa 1982, 8). At different times, Kuwŏl Mountain thus became the site of both anti-Communist and Communist guerrilla activity. The Sinch'ŏn Massacre occurred after U.S. and South Korean soldiers seized the area, giving the rightist guerrillas the upper hand.

According to official North Korean sources, on October 18, 1950, there was a massacre at an air raid shelter of the KWP Sinch'ŏn County Committee.<sup>2</sup> North Korean records state that American soldiers massacred some 900 people, including Kim Chang-ryo, vice chair of the Organization Department of the local KWP, and Kang Chŏng-gyu, chairman of the local People's Committee. On October 20, there was another mass slaughter at the police station's air raid shelter, in which 520 people were killed, including some 50 women and children. North Korean materials record the deaths of some eight thousand youth and students in Sinch'ŏn at this time. In the end, during the fifty-two days between October 17 and December 7, 1950 when the area was occupied by UN forces, 35,380 lives were reportedly lost in Sinch'ŏn County.<sup>3</sup>

Alarmed at such instances of mass killings, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL) twice dispatched investigation teams to North Korea (in 1951 and 1952).<sup>4</sup> From March 3 to 19, 1952, the IADL team investigated the scenes of the massacres in the North. The eight-member team—made up of professors, lawyers, judges, and inspectors from eight countries (Britain, France, Austria, Italy, Belgium, China, Poland, and Brazil)—visited three towns located in Hwanghae Province: Sinch'ŏn, Anak, and Sariwŏn. They interviewed over one hundred witnesses based on reports provided by the North Korean government about the incident. The investigators concluded that there was overwhelming evidence of criminal acts committed by American soldiers to carry out mass and individual killings of Korean civilians, including women and children (Commission of International Association of Democratic Lawyers 1952).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the IADL investigation report included details on U.S. use of chemical weapons and germ warfare.<sup>6</sup>

Earlier, in May 1951, the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) also sent a delegation to investigate the atrocities in the North (WIDF 1951). The team

included a diverse group of women from seventeen different countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, representing both sides of the political divide. The investigation lasted from May 16 to 27, after which the delegation's findings were published in a report titled "We Accuse." The WIDF delegation was divided into four teams, which visited Hwanghae, South P'yŏngan, Kangwŏn, and Chagang Provinces.

According to the WIDF's investigations in Sinch'ŏn, massacres there were carried out in caves and warehouses. The WIDF documented the massacre site, with bloodstains left behind on the walls of the cave, traces of burns and bone remains inside the cave, and testimonies from survivors. Collating the investigations from each team, the report concluded that during the period in which the northern area was occupied by American and South Korean soldiers, tens of thousands of civilians, ranging from children to the elderly, were either tortured or murdered, more severely than during Hitler's occupation of Europe.

Before taking a look at Pyongyang's views on the massacre, let us return to the events in Sinch'ŏn in the fall of 1950. From mid-September of that year, the tide of war reversed against North Korea. As North Korea began to retreat in October, there was an armed uprising of right-wing anti-Communist youth in the Sinch'ŏn area of Hwanghae, including Chaeryŏng and Anak Counties. According to Cho Tong-hwan, then a member of the right-wing guerrilla unit, many right-wing youth, Christians, and anti-Communists in the Sinch'ŏn area were killed by North Korean authorities at this time (Cho 1957, 369–371; Kwak 2002). By the time the anti-Communists in Kuwŏl Mountain were able to seize the Sinch'ŏn police station on October 12, the number of deaths at the hands of the North Korean police and Korean People's Army (KPA) had already reached seven hundred.

As the KPA continued to retreat further north, on October 13, right-wing youths held an anti-Communist rebellion in Chaeryŏng and Sinch'ŏn, where UN and South Korean forces had not yet arrived. From that point on, sporadic fighting began between the armed anti-Communist youths and members of the local KWP and People's Committee. On October 19, U.S. forces seized Sinch'ŏn, and the area was then officially left under the jurisdiction of the Eighth U.S. Army Civil Affairs unit. However, neither the U.S. military nor the South Korean forces could secure complete administrative control in this area (K. Yi 2001).<sup>7</sup> The end result was that the Sinch'ŏn area turned into a vacuum in which neither U.S., Republic of Korea (ROK), nor DPRK forces were able to maintain authority. The security and administration of the area was left in empty hands. Without any governing institution, the

armed anti-Communist youths took control of the residents who were not able to flee. As KPA, KWP, and People's Committee officials retreated, the remaining members and officials of the local government and residents were killed by the right-wing security units (Han 2012, 296). This kind of revenge killing reveals the nature of the *civil* war in Korea, which cannot be understood as a mere temporary flash of emotional vendetta. From the end of Japanese colonial rule and national liberation to the formation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the war was the explosive result of continued economic and religious conflict between the left and the right.

### **The Political and Social Changes of 1958: A Turning Point**

Let us now turn to the political and social changes in North Korea before and after the construction of the Sinch'ŏn Museum of American War Atrocities. According to official North Korean records, Kim Il Sung gave orders to build the museum at the site of the KWP Sinch'ŏn County Committee building during his visit to Sinch'ŏn on March 26, 1958. Why did Pyongyang wait to build the Sinch'ŏn Museum until 1958? What prompted the decision to establish a memorial, defining the United States as a hostile enemy, five years after the July 1953 ceasefire? Were the massacres not an impediment to the reconstruction efforts immediately after the war? Anti-Americanism in North Korea had already sprouted when the second Joint Commission of the United States and the Soviet Union failed to result in a compromise for a united Korean government in 1947, and it was further consolidated by the experiences and realities of war. However, anti-Americanism as a mass political movement did not develop with full force until the late 1950s, largely due to the political and social changes in North Korea and its foreign affairs around 1958 (Han 2012, 432–456).

I will detail the political and social changes in North Korea by looking at politics, the economy, society, and the military, in turn. First, politically, Kim Il Sung's one-man power structure was internally consolidated at the First KWP Congress in 1958. Initiating the purge of Pak Hŏn-yŏng and his South Korean supporters in the KWP during the Korean War, Kim Il Sung increasingly depicted any potential rival to his power as an antiparty faction after the August Incident of 1956, when criticisms against his cult of personality were launched within the party in favor of the wave of de-Stalinization across the Soviet bloc. At the 1958 Party Congress, the Yan'an faction (including Kim Tu-bong), the Soviet faction, and the domestic faction lost power, while Kim Il Sung stabilized his power base. Between 1958 and 1959,



almost ninety leading officials were purged from the KWP. As a result, Kim Il Sung and his former anticolonial guerrilla forces became the leading political force in North Korea, and the potential for political pluralism in North Korean political history was thereby extinguished.

Economically, North Korea considered itself to have completed its transformation to a Socialist economy by August 1958. During the reconstruction period, agricultural production shifted from individual farming to collectivized production in the form of cooperative farms. North Korea established a Socialist economic system by abolishing private ownership of the means of production, thereby unifying the classes. According to North Korean accounts, this meant that the people were masters of the state and society in exercise of their rights (Research Center for History and Social Science Institute of the DPRK 1981, 89). For North Korea, this was a historically significant step in the building of Communism.

Socially, Communist ideological training and nationalism emerged at this time. On November 20, 1958, Kim Il Sung called for the abolition of individualism and egotism in his speech titled “On Communist Education,” along with the implementation of Socialist patriotism, proletarian internationalism, and the cultivation of love of work (Kim 1981a, 591, 596–598). Ideological training to nurture people into Communists was grounded in collective labor, advocating Socialist patriotism that combined class consciousness with national autonomy. North Korea defined Socialist patriotism as yet another form of nationalism (Research Center for Philosophy and Social Science Institute of the DPRK 1970, 376; Social Science Press 1992, 1231). In addition, beginning in 1956, North Korea categorized people into three classes—core (revolutionary), middle (ordinary), and antirevolutionary (hostile)—as part of its efforts to centralize power around the KWP (Kim 1972, 203). The ideological training in Communist education encompassed class struggle, and class order was formed by placing people into these categories.

Militarily, the Chinese People’s Volunteers (CPV) completely withdrew and the KPA was firmly established as the party’s official armed force in 1958. On February 5, 1958, Pyongyang announced that all foreign forces, including the CPV, should simultaneously withdraw from the Korean peninsula (Research Center for History and Social Science Institute of the DPRK 1981, 408–410). On February 7, the Chinese government responded with support for North Korea’s announcement and began negotiations to withdraw the CPV in stages by the end of 1958. In accordance with these changes, the KWP strengthened its

control over the KPA. On March 8, 1958, the KWP Central Committee instituted the establishment of party committees within the KPA. Until then, the party had penetrated the military only through party cells, but party committees were now fully enforced in order to strengthen political allegiance within the military. It was at this time that the political organization of the KPA was completed and Kim Il Sung was able to declare the KPA the party's armed force (I. Kim 1981b, 74).<sup>8</sup> In its formative stages before the Korean War, the KPA took a united front approach, but it expanded its political work to stress the importance of class struggle during the war. After the formation of party cells within the KPA in 1952, the 1958 formation of party committees fully transformed the KPA into an arm of the party.

In terms of international relations, the 1956 policy shift toward "peaceful coexistence" by the Soviet Union exacerbated conflicts between the Soviets and the Chinese by 1958. Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin's dictatorship, while advocating coexistence with the West, overlapped with Kim Il Sung's monopolization of power in North Korea. After the November 1957 meeting of the Socialist bloc in Moscow, North Korea had to balance the principles of proletarian internationalism even while insisting on its autonomy and independence (Research Center for History and Social Science Institute of the DPRK 1981, 522–524). Without forgoing Marxism-Leninism, North Korea included nationalism to develop the key idea of *juche* (self-reliance).

Finally, with regard to the situation on the Korean peninsula, what North Korea feared most was the deployment of nuclear weapons. Between the end of 1957 and January 1958, the United States reportedly placed nuclear weapons south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) (Norris, Arkin, and Burr 1999, 26–35).<sup>9</sup> From 1957 to 1958, in accordance with its nuclear weapons decentralization policy for the Pacific, the United States installed nuclear weapons in South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Already in 1956, nuclear weapons systems were developed in Guam, Okinawa, and Hawaii, and by the end of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's term in 1961 around seventeen hundred weapons were installed along the U.S. Pacific coast. As the Cold War heightened in the mid-1950s, the United States stationed some twelve thousand nuclear weapons across twenty-seven bases in eighteen countries in the Pacific Rim, including South Korea. The United States established the Fourth U.S. Missile Command in Ch'unch'ŏn near the DMZ and brought in Honest John rockets and ten different types of nuclear weapons. These weapons were tactical nuclear bombs, including 280-mm atomic guns.

As nuclear weapons entered the South for the first time since the Korean War, tension and conflict were bound to amplify for Pyongyang. A nervous Kim Il Sung announced that the United States had abrogated the armistice agreement, criticizing the introduction of nuclear weapons near the DMZ (I. Kim 1960, 230). In December 1957, the KWP Central Committee meeting suggested that all foreign forces be withdrawn from the peninsula in order to convert the armistice into a peace settlement. The Supreme People's Assembly declared the Korean peninsula to be a nuclear-free zone, protesting the deployment of nuclear weapons in the South with a mass rally. Although not quite the same as the peace movement, the fear that the nuclear weapons posed a threat to the system was by no means an exaggeration.

In the state of confrontation over nuclear weapons between North Korea and the United States, the danger of war increased. From Pyongyang's point of view, the placement of nuclear weapons near the DMZ by the United States and South Korea was a direct threat. Without knowing when there could be a strike, Pyongyang desperately sought internal unity through anti-Americanism. Under threat of another potential armed conflict, Kim Il Sung ordered the construction of the Sinch'ŏn Museum, a project that signaled the beginning of mass anti-Americanism. While the museum was under construction in 1959, this political program took on a more concrete form through the "month of joint anti-American struggle" (*panmi kongdong t'ujaeng wŏlgan*), which designated the period between June 25, the outbreak of the Korean War, and July 27, the date the armistice was signed, as an annual anti-American month. The designation in June 1952 of June 25 as the "day of struggle against U.S. imperialism" by the Central Committee of the All Korea Labor Union first institutionalized anti-Americanism in North Korea. And during postwar reconstruction, anti-Americanism had been an active force in people's everyday lives. However, the expansion of anti-Americanism as a mass political campaign began with the construction of the Sinch'ŏn Museum. In major cities across North Korea, including Pyongyang and Kaesŏng, anti-American mass rallies and revenge meetings were held, with particular emphasis on large gatherings in Sinch'ŏn, the site of civilian massacre.

### **Exhibitions at the Sinch'ŏn Museum: Martyrdom and Patriotism**

The specific configuration of the Sinch'ŏn Museum and the contents exhibited in it clearly show the intention behind the memorial. The museum consists of a main building

with sixteen rooms, a second building with three rooms, and an outside viewing room. Materials in the main hall display the history of the U.S. invasion of the peninsula and the massacre during the Korean War (*Ch'öllima* 1984; 1999a; 1999b; 2000).<sup>10</sup> The first room holds artifacts from the nineteenth century intended to trace American ambitions back in time; these include an epitaph of an anti-foreign stele and a picture of the *General Sherman*, a U.S. warship. General material on the Korean War and comprehensive photographic and documentary evidence of the Sinch'ŏn Massacre can be found in the second room, while the third room displays letters written by youth to the guerrilla unit at Kuwŏl Mountain. The fourth room documents the massacre at the police station's air raid shelter in Sinch'ŏn and the surrounding areas (*Ch'öllima* 1996a). This exhibit shows that on October 20, 1950, 520 people being held in the police station's warehouse were moved to a bomb shelter, shortly after which the entrance to the shelter was blown up and the shelter was covered in flames and smoke, killing almost all the people in it. In 1988, the remains of three hundred people—reportedly including smashed skulls and broken arm and leg bones—were excavated around the shelter and the police station.

The seventh room displays weapons and tools used to torture people during the massacre, including firearms, sickles, axes, clubs, and chains. The museum offers these weapons as “living proof of the invaders' brutality” (*Ch'öllima* 1996a). According to the testimony of survivor O Ŭn-sun, her father, a scout leader of the people's guerrilla unit in Kuwŏl Mountain, was killed by being lit on fire with gasoline. Twenty of her relatives were also killed at that time, and she herself barely survived, in her uncle's embrace. For museum visitors, O's testimony stresses the massacre of an entire family, using this case to magnify the survivor's agony and sense of terrible tragedy.

Another victim's letter appeals to visitors' emotions in a different way. In the eighth room, a letter on one side of the wall catches visitors' eyes. This letter was written by Lim Hyŏng-sam, who was fourteen years old at the time of North Korea's tactical retreat. He had been the leader of the Samch'ŏn Middle School Children's League in Sinch'ŏn when he was captured along with seven members of his family. Although his older brother was active in the guerrilla unit in Kuwŏl Mountain, he never revealed this information. According to the display, the boy had written the letter inside a mine after being tortured. The letter was delivered to the people's guerrilla unit by another boy who narrowly escaped from the cave.

The significance of the letter lies in the emotions it arouses in visitors. As a narrative, a letter is similar to a confession in that the writer reconstructs his or her consciousness in the process of writing (Hirsch 1977, 21–23, 26). For those reading the letter, it conveys a certain context for an event or a memory of that event. This means that the letters or memoirs often displayed in museum exhibits actually embody the task of speaking. Under the rubric of language, philosopher Paul Ricoeur placed text on par with speech (Ricoeur 1991, 106). In other words, text is a form of discourse fixed through the act of writing. This way, even without the explanation from the museum guides, the letter speaks to the visitors, becoming a vehicle for restructuring not only the letter writer's consciousness, but that of the visitors as well.

The eleventh room documents the massacres in the Nagyön and Ŭnyul mines in the Hwanghae area. The twelfth room contains weapons used in the killings, and the thirteenth room holds details on members of the KWP and local residents who remained steadfast in their revolutionary beliefs and loyalty to the party and supreme leader in their fight against the Americans. The fourteenth room displays materials on patriotic farmers, women, and youths, and the sixteenth room documents the work of international investigative teams and foreign delegations visiting the museum in support of North Korean claims of massacre and bereaved families. This last exhibit includes pictures taken by the WIDF team and the official reports it submitted to the United Nations. The second hall displays evidence of American air strikes, chemical warfare, and the resulting civilian massacres.

The museum's treatment of massacre lends itself to comparisons with the kind of displays found at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland. Although there is no comparison between the two sites in terms of the number of victims killed in their respective conflicts, parallel techniques can be observed in the kinds of materials collected and displayed. The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum strove to collect and preserve the detention facilities, prisoners' possessions, and articles found around the concentration camps. The collection department at the museum manages the donated artifacts, which include shoes, bags with names and addresses, plates and dishes, glasses, prosthetic legs and arms, prisoners' uniforms, suits, talliths, iron articles, and hair from female prisoners (Świebocka, Webber, and Wilsack 1993). All the collected articles are on display to the public for viewing.

The nature of such exhibits is to allow visitors to identify with the victims. The visible scenes of massacre and photographs of the victims cause people to share the anguish. The way the Sinch'ŏn Museum produces this sense of community is also shown in the reconstruction of the Holocaust at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. In terms of the physical memorial space, and the number and diversity of artifacts, both museums attempt to quantify the amount of suffering by overwhelming the viewer with the sheer number of artifacts piled together, whether as piles of shoes or clumps of hair. The unrepresentable quality of the horrific events requires a quantifiable form. Ian Buruma pointed out that Auschwitz is a persistent past—not only a problem for Germany but also a part of Germany itself (Buruma 2009, 69). Likewise, Sinch'ŏn is a persistent past and a part of North Korea itself.

Thus, the Sinch'ŏn Museum highlights the victims' "martyrdom." This is clearly shown in the lectures delivered to the visitors by the museum guides. For example, referring to a picture of Ri Yong-jin, the chair of the South Hwanghae Province People's Committee, displayed in the thirteenth room, the guides explain how he fought against the enemies with his loyalty and revolutionary beliefs (*Ch'ŏllima* 1999b). Ri was captured on his way to Kuwŏl Mountain after the North Korean retreat, yet he endured torture. Until the moment he died, he never betrayed his country; the guides emphasize his patriotic actions, inspiring visitors to emulate Ri's fighting spirit. His immortal bravery was akin to that of martyrs, providing a model for what patriotism should look like.

Examples of patriots provided by the museum vary in their class and status. In addition to cases like that of Ri Yong-jin, exemplary peasant victims are also highlighted to reproduce the tragedy of the massacre, inducing a "collective patriotic consciousness" among visitors. The victims of the massacre were not simply casualties of the war perpetrated by the Americans, but have become an instrumental part of the North Korean Socialist revolution as model followers of state policies. Moving beyond simple hostility toward the United States, the museum serves to combine patriotism and anti-Americanism by enlarging the scope of patriotism. If the main goal of the Sinch'ŏn Museum is to instill a sense of patriotism, then the case of Yu Yŏ-bae is a good example.

Displayed in the fourteenth room is the story of Yu Yŏ-bae, a farmer from Sinch'ŏn who greatly increased his production of wheat by implementing the farming method suggested by the party during the revolutionary period (*Ch'ŏllima* 1999b). On January 28,

1949, at the Supreme People's Assembly meeting, Kim Il Sung designated Yu a "patriotic farmer." As the North retreated during the Korean War, Yu guided the People's Army to safety, and as South Korean and UN forces occupied the Sinch'ŏn area, he also participated in the guerrilla attacks against them. However, in the end he was detained and shot by his enemies, and his body was tossed in the Chaeryŏng River. As visitors to the museum listen to the guides' narrative about Yu's patriotism, they also see newspapers and artifacts documenting his life.

The most memorable display at the Sinch'ŏn Museum is a bloodstained North Korean flag. Ri Hŏn-su, leader of the Kutan Middle School Children's League, was arrested for collecting information on the enemy on behalf of the people's guerrilla unit. He reportedly held this flag to his chest until his last breath was exhaled, according to the explanation from the guides (*Ch'ŏllima* 1996b). There is nothing more important than a flag to symbolize patriotic love of one's homeland. As a symbol by which individuals acknowledge their national affiliation, a flag can also be used as a tool to symbolize loyalty, depending on the manner in which one maintains and uses it. North Korea used the flag to instill patriotism generally throughout the Korean War. That is, when the northern area was occupied by South Korean and UN forces, simply possessing a North Korean flag became a symbol of loyalty and patriotism. For example, when UN forces occupied South Hamgyŏng Province, the members of the Children's League rushed to the school to take down the North Korean flag for safekeeping. Official narratives add that the commitment of the Children's League members "manifested the boys' loyalty to the party and passionately expressed their love for the country and the people" (Kŭmsŏng Ch'ŏngnyŏn Ch'ulp'ansa 1982, 30).

Testimonies from survivors of the Sinch'ŏn Massacre act as mechanisms by which people not only identify as victims but become internally united. Reportedly, 400 mothers and 102 children died inside a gunpowder warehouse in Wŏnamri. Chu Sang-wŏn, one of the boys who managed to survive after being locked in the warehouse, currently works as a guide at the museum. He testifies to the cruelty of the methods by which people were killed, and how mothers and children were pulled apart. His testimony reaches a climax at the moment when he describes the warehouse bursting into flames (*Ch'ŏllima* 1996b). The meaning of Chu's remarks to museum visitors centers on his feelings of "resentment" and "revenge" toward the United States. The sense of "resentment" conveyed to the visitors is a universal sentiment resulting from empathy for the unjust deaths of mothers and children. "Revenge"

requires more active intervention against the United States, but this does not imply concrete acts of hostility. Rather, the more appropriate interpretation is that these emotions are used to create greater commitment on the part of the self toward internal unity in preparation for the bombing and invasion of North Korea that could happen at any moment.

Although these strategies cannot exactly reproduce the tragedy and pain of the past, they can ignite hostility toward America as the enemy. In this manner, Pyongyang organizes a fresh force for the future. As indicated above, North Korea describes this kind of ideological training as a form of “patriotic education” through “aesthetic and emotional training” (Ri 1955, 70–72; Han 2012, 204). Stated differently, this is a union of history and politics characteristic of North Korean political education that utilizes historical facts for political ends (Sö 2000, 365). This kind of teaching method is included in classroom content as well. If we take an example from an elementary school lesson, teachers ask students about civilian massacres perpetrated by American imperialists. Teachers then introduce students to cases of civilian massacres from the area. This kind of educational process, carried out through reading methods used during literature classes, grafts historical facts such as massacres onto politics, ultimately training students to be loyal to the North Korean system by arousing rage at the tragedy and hostility toward the United States.

### **“Class Liberation” and the “Fatherland Liberation War”**

As discussed above, details of the victims’ deaths, the survivors’ testimonies, the victims’ letters and photographs, and the weapons displayed at the Sinch’ön Museum are, needless to say, ghastly. It is distressing to believe that the mass murder happened during the war and that these weapons were in fact used to kill. The visual documentation together with the weapons used in the killing transform the United States and its military into an absolute enemy that committed the massacre described in the exhibited materials. As in the case of the Sinch’ön Massacre, North Korean descriptions and interpretations of historical facts are often exaggerated and distorted out of domestic or international political necessity.

At this point, it is necessary to consider whether the American military is the actual perpetrator of the Sinch’ön Massacre, as North Korea officially claims. Regardless of the specifics of American military conduct, the United States clearly comes across as the enemy in the museum exhibits, based on the displayed materials and survivors’ testimonies on the Sinch’ön Massacre. What, then, are the facts? According to Kwak Pok-hyön, who was in an



anti-Communist guerrilla unit in Sinch'ŏn during the war, the massacre was committed by right-wing security units (Kwak 2002). Kwak's testimony was recorded during the 2002 production of a South Korean television documentary program about the Sinch'ŏn Massacre titled *Now We Can Speak the Truth*. He also stated that approximately one hundred people were killed in the air raid shelter in Sinch'ŏn, less than the number claimed by North Korea. Originally from Sinch'ŏn, Kwak himself was involved in the October 13 anti-Communist movement and the massacre of residents.



Figure 1. Firearms used by anti-Communist right-wing youths in Sinch'ŏn with the characters 治安隊 (Security Unit) and 韓靑 (Korean Youth League) written on the weapons. All photos in this article were provided by Professor Mizuno Naoki of Kyoto University, whom the author sincerely thanks for permission to use the images.

Next, let us examine how the North Korean leadership understands the massacre. In November 1998, Kim Jong Il visited the Sinch'ŏn Museum indicting “the American imperialists [for] killing innocent people with their own hands in Sinch'ŏn.” While this statement is typical of the narrative surrounding the massacre, he goes on to also mention “the security units that had crawled into Sinch'ŏn” by disclosing that “the remaining exploitative classes and anti-Communists organized right-wing security units and massacred many people in revenge” (J. Kim 2000, 450). In other words, the U.S. military was the invader of the Korean peninsula, but the Korean right-wing security units were the direct perpetrators of the massacre. As shown in figure 1, the Sinch'ŏn Museum indeed displays the firearms used by the anti-Communist right-wing youths. The characters—治安隊 (security

unit) and 韓青 for 大韓青年團 (Korean Youth League, using the character 韓 to refer to South Korea)—visible on the weapons identify the perpetrators. Kim Jong Il’s statement above reveals that North Korea understood the indigenous nature of the massacre, establishing the Korean War as a civil war. At the beginning of the war, North Korea justified the all-out war as a “class liberation war” to extend the Socialist revolution to the South by force. But after the U.S. intervention, the Korean War became a new kind of war: the “Fatherland Liberation War.” In this context, Kim Jong Il’s reference to the right-wing security units as the perpetrators of the Sinch’ŏn Massacre is an indication of the Korean War as a civil war for “class liberation,” while the United States is held responsible for its intervention leading to the “Fatherland Liberation War.”

North Korean historiography on the atrocities committed in North Korea is more comprehensive than that provided in the museum. High school history textbooks narrating the history of the Korean War focus on the Sinch’ŏn Massacre, propagating the notion of a “heroic struggle of the people in the occupied areas” with examples of “brutal crimes of the U.S. invaders.” The important elements in these textbooks are the civilian massacres, which are attributed to anti-Communist youth, including right-wing security units, alongside U.S. forces (Department of Education, DPRK 1955, 209). While formally and structurally stressing American responsibility, content-wise, the text focuses on the actions of the right-wing youth organizations.

The Sinch’ŏn Massacre is also connected to Christianity. In North Korea, religion, especially Christianity, was an obstacle to the Socialist revolution. Before and after the establishment of the North Korean government, Christians in the Sinch’ŏn area naturally took the lead in the anti-Communist struggle, and anti-Communist activities by those who had not moved to the South were especially fierce during the war. Christian youths were the ones in charge of the right-wing security units that carried out the Sinch’ŏn Massacre. As shown in figure 2, the Sinch’ŏn Museum houses a display of the stone plaque that stood in front of the Sŏbu Presbyterian Church in Sinch’ŏn. Hwang Sŏk-yŏng’s novel about the Sinch’ŏn Massacre also focuses on the Christian youth affiliated with the right-wing security units. The protagonist in *The Guest* was based on actual interviews with Pastor Yu T’ae-yŏng. In the novel, Pastor Yu appears as Ryu Yo-sŏp, a character who endured the Sinch’ŏn Massacre while living in Sinch’ŏn. Pastor Yu was the third generation in a family of pastors, growing

up pro-American and anti-Communist under the influence of Christianity. After *The Guest* became popular in South Korea, Pastor Yu reiterated in detail the information he disclosed to Hwang Sŏk-yŏng in an interview with the press.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 2. A stone plaque that stood in front of the Sŏbu Presbyterian Church in Sinch'ŏn is displayed in the Sinch'ŏn Museum.

In 1950, when Yu T'ae-yŏng was nineteen years old, he had left home and was studying in Pyongyang. With the outbreak of war, he avoided the draft into the KPA by returning to his hometown in Sinch'ŏn and hiding out in a large basin buried in the kitchen. When fall came, UN forces advanced north across the 38th parallel, and as the KPA retreated from Sinch'ŏn, right-wing youths took charge, establishing the security of the area. After a fortnight, starving Communists who had been in hiding in the mountain returned, only to be killed by the security units run by the Christian youths. In the novel, Yu's brother, who appears as Ryu Yo-han, was also a member of the security unit and actively participated in the massacre. As shown by the murder weapons displayed in the Sinch'ŏn Museum, the security units took dozens of Communists into a mud hut in an apple orchard, set fire to the

hut, and hacked to death with farming tools such as pitchforks anyone who escaped. Just as almost all fundamentalist ideologies and movements postulate the extreme difference of their counterparts, the radical anti-Communist activities of the Christian right wing exacerbated the cruel nature of the Sinch'ŏn Massacre. If understood simply, the Sinch'ŏn Massacre can be construed as a confrontation between right-wing Christians and leftist Marxists, but ultimately it is an indication that the Korean War was a civil war.

However, the story that Pastor Yu really wanted to share in his interview was not about the horrors of the massacre. In January 1951, during the South Korean retreat, he had left his older sister, sister-in-law, and young nephew in the North to flee to the South with his older brother; some forty years later, in 1990, he was able to visit North Korea as an American citizen. In Pyongyang, he met his older sister, and when he was reunited with his sister-in-law and nephew in Sinch'ŏn, he could not have been more surprised. His assumption that the North Korean government would have retaliated against the families of the perpetrators turned out to be wrong. In May 1952, North Korea legally prosecuted four leaders involved in the Sinch'ŏn Massacre. However, the relatives and family members of the participants in the massacre were not punished, at least not in the case of Pastor Yu's family. What he had really wanted to address was not the horror of the massacre as such or the conflict between Christians and Marxists. Looking at his nephew, who had become a member of the KWP (a privileged status) while working at a cement factory, Pastor Yu was impressed that North Korea had looked after the families of the perpetrators; he tried to speak of the Christians, by contrast, who seemed to have no regrets about their past crimes. He pointed out that Christians, rather than Communists, were the ones "living without a sense of guilt, conscience, or regret" in regard to the massacre.

There are no comprehensive sources to confirm Yu T'ae-yŏng's impressions and show whether the families of Christian youths who participated in the Sinch'ŏn Massacre received the kind of attention that Yu's family did, or, conversely, suffered retaliation in North Korea. Just looking at Yu's individual experience, we know that North Korea does not see the massacre as an individual act of the Christian right-wing youths. As in Hwang's novel, the perpetrators who killed the Communists and North Korean people in Sinch'ŏn were the right-wing security units. However, the fundamental essence of the case, as reviewed earlier, cannot be understood simply as killings between the left and the right. It must be understood three-dimensionally, as the explosive result of the contradictions

emanating from the colonial period after liberation, combined with the division and establishment of two separate states in the North and South, and eventual war, which exacerbated internal problems of class, hierarchy, and religion.

### **Conclusion: Nationalism and Internal Unity**

As discussed in this article, war memorials serve the function of interpreting the war according to official state discourse and presenting this narrative to the public. The state's official discourse is determined by the interests of the political system, and while it may cause controversy among those who accept it, it is clear that such discourse helps to develop an identity for the members of society. At the Sinch'ŏn Museum, the displayed artifacts and the guides' explanations include not only the details of the events, but also the intended interpretations of the events. Creating a collective consciousness for visitors is a teleological process that mediates the relationship between the state and the people to create a political community.

Pyongyang's view of "America" as presented in the Sinch'ŏn Museum holds the United States responsible for intervening in the "Fatherland Liberation War." Of course, this is not only an event of the past. While the sense of threat has changed since the 1950s, it is manifested externally in the emphasis placed on the need for the Sinch'ŏn Museum. According to Ricoeur, a symbol evokes an idea and can be interpreted only when it has a certain meaning. Thus, the purpose of interpretation is to find meaning (Ricoeur 1967, 352). From this perspective, North Korean definitions of "America" in the Sinch'ŏn Museum include the "symbol of evil." Regardless of whether the U.S. military perpetrated evil acts as conveyed in the museum, the opponent is condemned. To objectify an adversary as evil using standards of morality or ethics becomes what Ricoeur refers to as a "symbolism of evil."

The way Pyongyang defines its relationship with the United States can be compared to the way in which the George W. Bush administration named North Korea a part of the "axis of evil." There are differences, however. First, North Korea searches for the origins of American "evil" going back sixty-five years to the Korean War, whereas the United States focuses on the nuclear issue that emerged in the early 1990s. Second, in terms of international relations, the most critical issue facing North Korea today is the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States; however, normalizing relations with Pyongyang is not a diplomatic priority for the United States. Third, as mentioned, North Korea defines the

United States as a hostile enemy for the purpose of promoting internal unity by creating a sense of victimhood through the keywords “martyrdom” and “patriotism.” In contrast, the United States calls Pyongyang “evil” to maintain its political and economic influence in East Asia and the Korean peninsula, rather than doing so for domestic reasons.

It is clear that the historical context and political intention behind the description of relations with the United States, as well as the exhibits and ideological education provided by the Sinch’ŏn Museum, are all important means by which nationalism is forged in North Korea. This focus on the United States in the Sinch’ŏn Museum can be compared to the memorialization of the Vietnam War in Vietnam. Like the Korean War, the Vietnam War simultaneously carries the characteristics of both a civil war and an international war. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the National Liberation Front fought against the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in a civil war, while China and North Korea, on one side, and the United States and South Korea, on the other side, intervened in the international war as allies. Thus, Vietnamese memorials dedicated to the Vietnam War symbolize and energize not only nationalism, but also socialism, tradition, and criticism of capitalism.

Among these memorials, the museum located at the My Lai Peace Park in Quảng Ngãi, Vietnam, features exhibits about the My Lai massacre. Although the My Lai Peace Park may appear similar to the Sinch’ŏn Museum in that they both target the United States as the perpetrator of civilian massacres, the facts reveal the two museums to be completely different. The My Lai Massacre was initiated by the U.S. military without the kind of regional, internal class and religious conflicts that formed the backdrop to the Sinch’ŏn Massacre. Moreover, the My Lai Peace Park not only deals with the massacre itself, but also aims to commemorate the victims to promote peace. By contrast, the Sinch’ŏn Museum deals with the right-wing security units as perpetrators within the context of American responsibility for the war, emphasizing the victims’ identities as “martyrs” and “patriots.”

The My Lai Massacre is also dealt with in the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, which displays the horrors of the war, highlighting civilian losses, the spirit of resistance, and the victorious war against the United States (Yi 2011, 26–38). The exhibit on civilian losses details the damage from defoliants such as Agent Orange, the Hanoi bombing, and the My Lai Massacre. Like North Korea, Vietnam also stresses the memorialization and commemoration of war in order to strengthen nationalist ideology. But the primary difference

between the Sinch'ŏn Museum and the Vietnamese war memorials and museums is the influence and awareness of the relationship with the United States: Vietnam does not currently receive systematic threats from the United States, while Pyongyang is still at continual risk of such threats. This factor affects the displays, content, and narrative within the Sinch'ŏn Museum. In this regard, the Sinch'ŏn Museum creates a North Korean tradition on how to remember the war, constructing a "hostile nationalism" against the United States. This historical understanding is passed down to those who have not directly experienced the war, connecting the world view of one generation to the next.<sup>12</sup>

North Korea uses the experience of the Korean War against the United States first to identify itself as a victim and, second, to declare victory. This perspective can be easily inferred from the North Korean characterization of the Korean War as the "Victorious Fatherland Liberation War" (see S. Kim in this volume). However, victimhood is an extension of the reality of American participation in the Korean War, and the subsequent failure of "forceful unification by war." The Sinch'ŏn Museum is the clearest expression of this sense of victimhood as it moves beyond a view of the right-wing security units as actual perpetrators of the massacre to see the United States as responsible. Through this lens, the North Korean people view the United States as the enemy, and the museum continues to foster patriotism and internal unity.

The collective consciousness that results from the Sinch'ŏn Museum is not meant to lead to a balanced understanding of the United States. The United States is seen only through the horrible deaths of the massacre, and the significance of the massacre is only available within this frame. Within the logic of anti-Americanism, the Sinch'ŏn Massacre symbolizes the memory of victimhood. However, the reality is that it reveals the Korean War to be a civil war, and is the most effective example of political ideological education produced by the North Korean memorialization of the Korean War.

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**Notes**

- 1 Although Hwang was born in Xīnjīng, otherwise known as Chángchūn (長春), in Manchuria, his legal residence was his father's hometown, Sinch'ŏn, in accordance with Korean tradition.
- 2 For details of the mass killings between the right and the left in Sinch'ŏn, see Han (2012, 295–303). For the inculcation of class consciousness by the Sinch'ŏn Museum, see Han (2011).
- 3 Excavations of remains have been conducted many times in Sinch'ŏn. From the time news of the massacre was made public in 1952 until the museum was built in 1958, there were several reports on the discovery of remains. After the museum was built, mass graves continued to be discovered; 75 corpses around the air raid shelter of the KWP Sinch'ŏn County Committee in 1988; 239 corpses near the police station in August 1988; 79 corpses in July 1994; and more at Bŏm Rocky Mountain in Sinch'ŏn in 2001 (see Jung and Kim 2009, 15–17). In 2004, four more corpses were found in northern Sinch'ŏn (Korean Central News Agency, May 18, 2004; *Rodong Shinmun*, May 19, 2004).
- 4 Monica Felton, a member of the IADL delegation, published her account in *That's Why I Went* (1953). After the March 1952 visit, the IADL released its "Report on U.S. Crimes in Korea." Felton was in charge of investigating the effects of the war on civilians in the Pyongyang and Hwanghae areas.
- 5 The association reported that the United States was responsible for the mass slaughter of the civilians.
- 6 The DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodged a strong protest to the United Nations about the use of biological weapons by the United States during the war. See the following articles in *Dong-a Ilbo* (1976, 507–524). The recently disclosed confidential document of the joint chiefs of staff of the U.S. military strongly suggests American use of biological warfare during the Korean War. According to the document, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff of the U.S. military directed large-scale field tests in September 1951 to check how effective a specific virus would be in biological warfare (broadcasted Al Jazeera documentary, "People and Power," March 17, 2010, available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/peopleandpower/2010/03/201031761541794128.html>, accessed March 23, 2015).
- 7 The information in this paragraph comes from Yi Kyŏng-nam, who was a member of the anti-Communist guerrilla unit in Kuwŏl Mountain and was an anti-Communist operative affiliated with the intelligence force named "Donkey" from the time of his defection to the South in December 1950 until the ceasefire in 1953.
- 8 See Han (2012, 402–413) for more details related to the establishment and education of the KPA.
- 9 Norris, Arkin, and Burr (1999) described the placement of nuclear weapons and tactical weapons, and evacuation in areas within the Pacific Rim by the United States and Europe from 1944 to 1977. In 1954, in response to a threat by China toward Taiwan in the Pacific Rim, the United States developed a plan to send nuclear weapons to Taiwan; and in December of that year, it placed nuclear weapons in Okinawa. While President John F. Kennedy was in office, the number of nuclear



weapons began to increase, reaching about 3,200 by 1967; out of this total, approximately 2,600 weapons were placed in Korea or Okinawa. At the end of 1970, South Korea was America's nuclear forward base, and from the first placed tactical nuclear weapons in 1958, the last nuclear weapons were pulled out of South Korea in 1991.

- 10 This article does not include information about display rooms 5, 6, 9, 10, and 15, because I could not physically visit the museum and my analysis is based solely on documents.
- 11 For a transcript of this press interview with Pastor Yu T'ae-yŏng, see *Minjok 21* (2001).
- 12 In 2008, according to the North Korean population census, the total population was 24,052,231. Of this total, 19,994,444 people (83 percent) were born after 1953 and were less than fifty-five years old without direct experience of the Korean War (Central Bureau of Statistics Pyongyang DPR Korea 2009, 14).

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