

**Where War and Home Front Meet: The Shared Spaces, Traumas, and Hopes of
North Korean Soldiers and Civilians during the Korean War**

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Where War and Home Front Meet: The Shared Spaces, Traumas, and Hopes of North Korean Soldiers and Civilians during the Korean War

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the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

As the fall of 1950 deepened, the Korean War literally came home with the retreat of the North Korean troops back across the 38th parallel, complicating the distinction between who belonged to the war front or the home front. This thesis examines letters written by North Korean soldiers and civilians that demonstrate their shared experiences, traumas, and hopes. They reflect soldiers' fluid identity between the war front and the home front and reveal the agency of the authors of the letters who tried to cope with and survive the war, yet remain absent in the history of the Korean War. Through the framework of the history of the everyday life, this thesis recognizes and argues for the shared experiences between soldiers and civilians and their agency to improve their situations as the war theatre was further compressed. Focusing on the first turning point for the Korean People's Army (KPA) after the successful Incheon Landing Operation by the US and UN forces in mid-September of 1950, this thesis follows the trajectory of the KPA's frantic retreat and rapidly worsening living conditions for the people when the war zone and the home front merged into one space. Yet instead of suffering as victims of the extraordinary circumstances of war, letters demonstrate how people coped, or at least attempted to, through writing, by taking initiative when help could not be found nearby. North Korean people found ways to navigate war-ravaged terrain and were not silent victims. The thesis examines the literacy campaigns that began before the war, children during the war, physical and psychological merging of the war and the home front, retreat and civilian refugees, and shared challenges that the soldiers and civilians tried to overcome with the failing infrastructure and economy.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines wartime letters written by North Korean soldiers and civilians in the fall of 1950 when the war zone and the home front came together. It argues that soldiers and civilians shared experiences, traumas, and hopes, recognizing soldiers as foremost civilians and viewing civilians in the home front as facing similar threats and predicaments as soldiers. Although the tide of the Korean War turned against North Koreans during this period, they tried to make sense of the war and actively sought to improve their conditions. They were more than silent victims.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Yee Rem Kim.

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For my parents

Introduction

Won Lin-sang had crossed the 38th parallel southward, passed through Seoul, and arrived in Incheon, a port city off the western coast of Korea. Two months had gone by since his departure from home in North Korea when the Korean War erupted in June 1950.¹ In a letter to his uncle, he asked whether Doo-byeong (likely his cousin) had advanced to a higher-level school and attended classes. His worry about Doo-byeong's education strikes one as extraordinary since he was facing the brutalities of war under the air strikes by “the United States imperialists.”² Lin-sang was as equally immersed in the everyday life he had left behind only a couple of months ago as he completed his duties as a soldier. The everyday concerns of children going to school juxtapose his participation in the war and its constant dangers.

Approximately two weeks later from Yangwonri, Lim Bok-shil informed her older brother Lim Hyeong-seop, who was also serving in the war, that her school had been closed for several days before writing the letter.³ Unlike Lin-sang's hopes and expectations for the home front, schools around North Korea had to close as the war dragged on and bombing became more severe. She reassured her brother that, despite some disruptions in the everyday life at home, everyone was doing well. She continued in her letter,

Our entire household has no choice but to wait for you, brother, to finish your job and come back home. We will patiently wait for that day. There are not many days left, I hope. Atrocious acts committed daily by ignorant American imperialists seem to never end. They have also come to Jjin-dong several times now and used machine guns, but people buildings have not been destroyed. Those bastards do not understand what waste they are causing and how many times we and animals

¹ For Korean names in the letters and their respective envelopes, I put the family name first as they appear and are accepted in the Korean language. For the names of the scholars, the personal name will be followed by the family name.

² Won Lin-sang to uncle, September 10, 1950, Record Group (RG) 242, Shipping Advice (SA) 2009, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (NARA).

³ Lim Bok-shil to Lim Hyeong-seop, September 23, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

(cattle) have been taken off guard [by their attacks]. So now whenever we see those bastards' airplanes, we feel the danger.⁴

Bok-shil wrote her letter to the front with the anticipation that it would arrive in her brother's hand with reassurances of the home and the hope that he would be back in no time, even though war had crept into everyday life by preventing students from going to school.

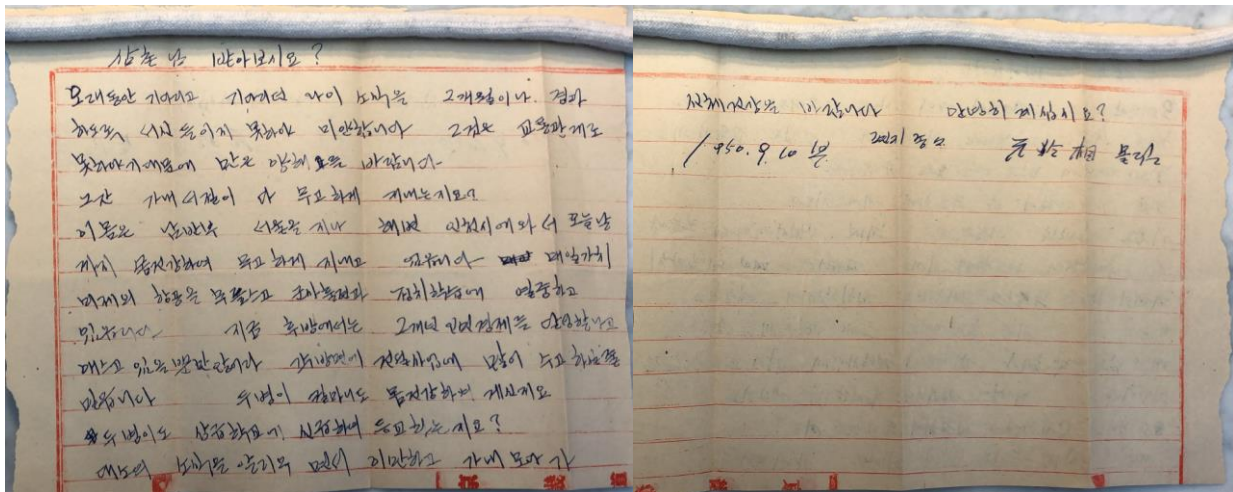


Figure 1. Won Lin-sang, September 10, 1950, letter, box 717, RG 242, SA 2009, NARA, College Park, MA.

These two letters, written in the same month, only two weeks apart, present the battle front and the home front of the Korean War as compressed into one war theatre. The hope that those on the receiving end of the letter would be safe and sound was an illusion, projected in their writing, while both the recipient and the sender faced the same risks. As the Korean War progressed and literally came home with the retreat of the North Korean troops back across the 38th parallel, shared experiences between soldiers and civilians complicated the distinction between who belonged to the war front or the home front. Individual stories in the letters by

⁴ Lim Bok-shil to Lim Hyeong-seop, September 23, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

North Koreans, which have not been thoroughly investigated before, reflect soldiers' fluid identity between the war front and the home front and reveal the agency of the authors of the letters who tried to cope with and survive the war, yet remain absent in the history of the Korean conflict.

As the fall of 1950 deepened, the wartime letters exchanged between the battle front and the home front reveal the toll the war was taking on both fronts. The first turning point for the Korean People's Army (KPA), the focus of this thesis, followed the Incheon Landing Operation by the US and UN forces under the command of General MacArthur in mid-September of 1950. The Incheon Landing Operation carried out a successful counter-offensive that pushed the KPA back from the Busan Perimeter, the last United Nations bastion at the southernmost tip of the peninsula.⁵ This offensive accelerated KPA's frantic retreat, merging the war with the home front. Consequently, the living conditions for people in North Korea transformed into those of hardship and scarcity. The United States air strikes, which only appeared in glimpses in letters from early fall, became a permanent landscape for many throughout the northern part of Korea.

Examining letters written during September and October of 1950, at the first turning point of the Korean War, opens our eyes to the parallel experiences of soldiers and civilians. Having experienced the wave of unprecedented social changes in pre-war years, North Korean people, whether on the war front or at the home front, reflected not only their transformation through the ongoing social revolution but also their coping and survival mechanisms during the war. Soldiers mirrored the effects of the literacy and educational campaigns in North Korean

⁵ William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 85-87; Stanley Sandler, *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished* (Taylor & Francis, 2003), 90-93.

society by discussing children at home and their education in their letters.⁶ Such analysis allows for recognition that North Korean soldiers were foremost civilians and that their identity was not solely defined by war and politics. The Korean War, which took place on a small peninsula, merged the war zone and the home front into one space where soldiers and civilians shared the same experiences and traumas. Occupying the same arena, both psychologically and physically, they were wary, for example, of the same looming presence of the US air force. Aerial bombings wreaked havoc everywhere, destroying trenches, battlegrounds, schools, and villages. Letters reveal that people also experienced scarcity in daily essentials such as food, clothes, and ultimately money to buy goods. Entering October 1950, when the military situation was bleak for North Korean people, experiences of the soldiers and civilians overlapped once again as the former retreated northward and the latter were forced to become war refugees in their own country.⁷ Yet instead of suffering as victims of the extraordinary circumstances of war, letters demonstrate how people coped, or at least attempted to, through writing, by taking initiative when help could not be found nearby. North Korean people found ways to navigate war-ravaged terrain and were not silent victims. I will explore these points by first reviewing the relevant scholarly literature and the questions it has failed to raise. Then, I will analyze letters written by soldiers and civilians to retrieve and situate their missing voices in the existing scholarship.

⁶ Jae-Woong Kim, “Puk'anŭi Min'ganjawŏn Tongwŏnjŏngch'aekkwa Ilsangjŏk Tongwŏnch'ejeŭi Hyŏngsŏng (1945-1953)” [North Korea's Mobilization Policies of Civil Assets and the Making of Everyday Mobilization System (1945-1953)], *Han'guksa yŏn-gu* 175 (2016), 240-242; Armstrong, *North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 71; Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 75; Armstrong, *North Korean Revolution*, 166

⁷ In South Korean context, as in Dong Choon Kim's *The Unending Korean War: A Social History* [*Chŏnjaenggwa sahoer uriege han'gukchŏnjaengŭn muŏshiŏnna?*] (Paju: Dolbegae, 2016), displaced population due to the Korea War are more commonly referred to as *piranmin* (피란민), which is translated to civilian refugee.

Literature Review & Assessment of Primary Sources

Korean War historians have usually tried to answer questions regarding the origin and evolution of Communism in Korea as well as who was responsible for starting and prolonging the war.⁸ Political and military histories of the war have taken precedence over its social history and have left behind the voices of the people as individuals and their local perspective. This approach contrasts with scholars in modern European and American history who have worked with wartime letters.⁹ Scholars like Bruce Cumings have spearheaded a revisionist movement against state-produced anti-Communist histories with his earlier works critical of the responsibility of the United States. Others such as Wada Haruki and William Stueck have situated the Korean War within the context of international politics.¹⁰ However, the Korean War historiography lacks the social history from below that narrates the experiences of the ordinary people during the war, who had no say in the high-level politics and were preoccupied with their daily survival.

⁸ See Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (Seoul: Yuksabipyungsa, 2013), Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, California, 1993), Wada Haruki, *An International History: The Korean War*, trans. Frank Baldwin (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), Robert A. Scalapino, Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea: The Society* (University of California Press, 1972), Kathryn Weathersby, "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no. 4 (1993): 425–458.

⁹ For political and military histories on the Korean War, see Allen R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1950-1953: They Came from the North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*, trans. Neil Silver, and Sergei N. Goncharov, Lewis, and Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* highlight the behind-the-scenes arrangements, often through correspondence through various mediums. For works on wartime letters, see Bill Adler and Trace Q. McLennan, eds., *World War II Letters: A Glimpse into the Heart of the Second World War Through the Words of Those Who Were Fighting It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), Andrew Carroll, ed., *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars* (New York: Scribner, 2001), Eberhard Demm, *Censorship and Propaganda in World War I: A Comprehensive History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), Richard Knott, *Posted in Wartime: Letters Home from Abroad* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2017), Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Zeimann, eds., *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010), and Tat'iana Vasilevskaia, ed., *Pis'ma s fronta* (Krasnodar: Kniga, 2015).

¹⁰ See Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War Vol. 1*, Haruki, *An International History: The Korean War*, and William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Following the demise of authoritarian rule in South Korea in the 1980s, historians constructed a new paradigm with the focus on retrieving silenced memories and reconciling the wounds of the past. Led by historical sociologist Dong-Choon Kim, they unearthed state-led violence against its South Korean civilians and began new discussions on the political violence of both the victims and the perpetrators. Although there is more to be recovered in the South Korea context, similar efforts are absent in North Korean history, usually due to lack of archival sources. Korean War studies have yet to locate the soldiers and position them in the historical narrative by assigning them agency and responsibility. Failing to do so may contribute to what Andre Schmid has referred to as reproducing North Korea's self-image and reducing its history to the personality cult of the Kim Il Sung family, having "inherited from the Cold War" assumptions about socialist state power.¹¹ This thesis utilizes wartime letters, written by soldiers and civilians, to investigate how they exercised their agency to cope with the war.

This thesis extends the history from below approach to soldiers and dismantles the dichotomous approach to studying war exclusively from the perspective of either civilians or soldiers.¹² Recent scholarship by Suzy Kim, Charles Armstrong, and Youngjun Kim has explored North Korea's formative years between 1945 and 1950, extending their focus on North Korean society.¹³ However, wartime and postwar North Korean history has yet to include North Koreans who participated in the war or remained in the home front during the Korean War. The image of North Korean soldiers as "the backbone of the state's 'total system'" with the

¹¹ Andre Schmid, "Historicizing North Korea," *The American Historical Review* 123 no. 2 (April 2018), 462. The works of Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York, 2012), and Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York, 1996) heavily emphasize the personality cult and the Kim family and reproduce the self-image of the North Korean state.

¹² Wan Bom Lee, "New Directions in Korean War Studies," *The Review of Koreans Studies* 9 no. 2 (2006): 10 and 5; Steven Hugh Lee, *The Korean War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 60.

¹³ Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution*, Armstrong, *North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950*, and Youngjun Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State* (New York, Routledge, 2018).

assumption that they were an impeccable symbol of North Korea's centralized and growing power must also be dismantled.¹⁴ Su-kyoung Hwang grieves the anti-communist violence during the Korean War, delving into who was responsible and what justifications they gave. However, scarce literature on bombings in North Korea at the time look at victims with a bird's-eye view, leaving readers with gruesome pictures of the dead and the wounded and shocking statistics.¹⁵

Sung-hoon Han wrote the only article on the collection of letters that is central in this thesis. Han gave a general overview of letters written by broader portion of North Korea's population during the war, focusing primarily on text analysis and extracting meaning regarding the state, the war, and the future of the people.¹⁶ What is missing is treating these letters as a window into the everydayness of the home front and discovering the vestiges of North Korean society, articulated by soldiers and civilians.

Using the framework of the history of the everyday life, the thesis will look at the everydayness of North Korean society as “patchwork of impositions and incentives, symbols and interests” and ways “people have ‘appropriated’ –while simultaneously transforming – ‘their’ world.”¹⁷ In North Korea after 1945, different structural formations – the collective as members of the party, workers groups, the military, or youth leagues among others – expressed many forms of agency. I will extend this framework into the war period and track soldiers' and civilians' agency. As Kim claims, the everyday was not ordinary at all, especially when the front and the home front came together.¹⁸

¹⁴ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 217-218; Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State*, 108.

¹⁵ Su-kyoung Hwang, *Korea's Grievous War* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 20-23.

¹⁶ See Sung-Hoon Han, “Kaein p'yönchi-e nat'anan pukhan inmin-üi chönchaeng sösa” [War Epic of North Korea People expressed Personal Letters], *Kyöngjewa sahoe* 6 (2012).

¹⁷ Alf Ludtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, trans. William Templer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 6 and 16.

¹⁸ Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution*, 8.

This thesis fills this blank canvas of the shared experiences and agency to improve their situations by “[interpreting] one fragment in the context of other fragments” of everyday lives of North Koreans under extraordinary circumstances of war.¹⁹ Paul Steege and others identified functions of everyday history as “inhabiting the story, filling up the space in between the fragmentary historical artifacts, to make it into a recognizable human place” when, as Lutz Niethammer claimed, “maintaining silent normality breaks down in the extreme case” such as war.²⁰ Communication through letters on a nationwide scale, exchanged between soldiers and civilians, was a new phenomenon in North Korean society with its social reforms. Through their letters, soldiers and civilians were vocal about their everyday life, needs and struggles, which was an atypical behavior in the Korean War historiography. Their letters are fragments that create space for interpreting how they coped with war.

Letters that appear in this thesis never made it to the intended audience but are instead stored under the Record Group 242 in the National Archives at College Park, Maryland. Commonly known as North Korean Captured Documents, this collection includes “Records Seized by the US Military Forces in Korea” during the years of the Korean War (1950-1953). It holds hundreds of letters written by the contemporaries of Won Lin-sang and Lim Bok-shil in September and October of 1950 when the war drastically turned against the KPA following the US military intervention.²¹ By analyzing these letters, this thesis offers a new framework for

¹⁹ Paul Steege et al., “The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter,” *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 2 (June 2008), 375.

²⁰ Paul Steege et al., “The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter,” 375; Lutz Niethammer, “Zeroing in on Change: In Search of Popular Experiences in the Industrial Province in the German Democratic Republic,” in *History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, ed. Alf Ludtke (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 279.

²¹ Haruki, *An International History: The Korean War*, 174 and 180. Han briefly explains these letters were written by soldiers in the 300th security unit, which occupied Incheon in the early months of the war and were in charge of security of the city and islands off the west coast. See Han, “Kaein p’yönchi-e nat’anan pukhan inmin-üi chönchaeng sösa,” 341. These letters are located in Box 717.

understanding North Korean society, its experience with the Korean War, its people's agency, which previously have not been explored in-depth without involving the North Korean regime, its leader Kim Il-sung, and its ideology.

Where War and Home Front Meet

From Revolution to War: Letter Writing in North Korea

Letters exchanged between the home front and soldiers collectively reveal the culture of letter-writing and stand witness to increasing literacy across North Korea. Letters as means of communication manifested state's initiative to educate its people to read and write. The original and the most important goal of the state was to mobilize and use literacy to strengthen the regime. However, education provided a medium of communication now available to a wider population than simply the elites.²² The letters, even with inconsistent grammar, allude to the impact of writing, supporting the fact that the literacy campaigns and other state-led initiatives to educate its people had an impact, though their extent may not be clear.

When the war started, soldiers and civilians, regardless of their previous social status and background had experienced these extraordinary yet tumultuous times of change. Many of those who joined the war as members of the KPA were civilians turned into soldiers when the war began. As they entered the war zone, they carried with them life before the war. Instead of relying on war and its politics to define them, letters written by them allow glimpses into the life soldiers left behind and ties they have maintained since their departure from home, making it difficult to simply view them as soldiers.

“Now [Korea's] fight is not one of armaments but one of propaganda of spoken and written words,” Kim Il-sung urged the propagandists, culturists, and artists in his speech in May

²² Jae-Woong Kim, “Puk'anüi Min'ganjawön Tongwönjōngch'aekkwä Ilsangjök Tongwönch'ejeüi Hyōngsōng (1945-1953)” [North Korea's Mobilization Policies of Civil Assets and the Making of Everyday Mobilization System (1945-1953)], *Han'guksa yōn-gu* 175 (2016), 240-242; Armstrong, *North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*, 71 and 166; Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 75.

1946.²³ However, the reality was that there were approximately 2.3 million illiterates in North Korea at this time.²⁴ The impetus to be rid of old colonial legacies and have a clean slate for the construction of a new state necessitated an enlightened population and “cultural revolution.”²⁵ In the economic sense, the exodus of Japanese skilled technicians at the end of the colonial rule from industries, primarily built in the northern half of Korea, created a pressing demand for technical workforce and thus literate population. The “11-Point Immediate Tasks of the Party” proposed in February 1946 and the “20-Point Platform” in the following month set the foundations for “democratic reforms,” which began to tackle the urgent problem of illiteracy. These efforts culminated in the “Illiteracy Eradication Movement” of November 1946. After the cleansing of colonial collaborators in the remaining literate elite, the regime later expanded to mobilize its population.²⁶

In contrast to colonial and pre-colonial Korea that privileged the elite, literacy reforms allowed ordinary people to pursue formal education, which not only increased chances of social mobility but also empowered people with what has been traditionally a sign of social status.²⁷ In theory, education became available for all. On December 18, 1946, the regime standardized public education, mandating children to start kindergarten at the age of six and undergo education from elementary school to high school, with the option of opting out for technical or

²³ Il-sung Kim, “Pukchosŏn kaktŏinminwiwŏnhoe chŏngdang sahoedanch'e sŏnjŏnwŏn munhwain yesulga hoeŭi-esŏ chinsurhan yŏnsŏl” (1946nyŏn 5wŏl 24il) [“Cultural Workers Should Become Combatants on the Cultural Front” speech at the Meeting of Information Workers of the Provincial People's Committees, Political Parties and Social Organizations, and Cultural Workers and Artist and North Korea May 24, 1946], in *Chogugŭi Tongiltongnipkwa minjuhwarŭl wihayŏ 1* (Pyongyang: Chosŏnlotongtangch'ulp'ansa, 1949), 59-61.

²⁴ Sung-bo Kim, *Puk'anŭi yŏksa 1 – kŏn'gukkwa inminminjujuŭi kyŏnghŏm (1945~1960)* [History of north Korea 1 – State-Building and the Experience of People's Democracy] (Goyang: Yŏksabip'yŏngsa, 2014). The number of illiterates in North Korea at the time is contested.

²⁵ Joo-hwan Lee, “1945-1949nyŏn Puk'an-esŏi munmaengt'oech'i undong yŏn'gu,” [Anti-Illiteracy Campaign in North Korea, 1945-1949] *Han'guktongnibundongsayŏn-gu* 25 (2005), 341.

²⁶ Lee, “1945-1949nyŏn Puk'an-esŏi munmaengt'oech'i undong yŏn'gu.”

²⁷ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 168.

specialty school.²⁸ In September 1949, compulsory education required children from the ages of seven to fifteen to attend schools free of charge. Enrolling children in schools became a common practice for families, evident in the quadrupled number of children in primary schools.²⁹

Soldiers and civilians alike could equip themselves with the ability to read and write. When the Korean War started in 1950, those who actively participated in these campaigns and worked hard to learn were the product of the social revolution. However, these letters do not offer any information on the social background of both the senders and recipients. Due to the lack of background information on individuals who penned the letters, there are dangers of generalizing their experiences of the social revolution and the Korean War. As much as there were ground-breaking changes in North Korean society, there was as much social upheaval in the context of decolonization and socialist state building. Though many elites were purged at the time in North Korea, some remained in the North under altered circumstances. They may have written their letters comparatively more elegantly, using Sino-Korean characters, but literacy was no longer their exclusive privilege.

One of the prominent aspects of North Korean society that appear in soldier's letters is children's education that the soldiers inquire after. While facing their enemies in combat, they used letters as a means to access a personal and intimate space, where they shed light on manifold motivations behind the urgency of sending children to school and consequently the widespread primary school enrollments. Coming out of the social reforms that were taking place to join the war effort, they, like the majority of Korean people, perceived education as a means for social advancement. While people operated under the "democratic reforms" that ran in parallel with the "Total Mobilization Campaign of Thought for the State Building," initiated in

²⁸ Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution*, 102

²⁹ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 149.

November 1946, letters demonstrate that sending children to school was not as ideologically charged. Families considered education as important irrespective of ideologies, and multiple intentions for sending children to school coexisted. However, historians of North Korean history tend to equate social mobility as a means of becoming politically awakened intellectuals to build a socialist society.³⁰

Unlike the common portrayal of educational reforms as solely top-down initiatives, letters show that the people and soldiers simply wanted to guarantee a better life for the younger generation with secure jobs that came with education. They were not meant to only fashion their worldviews in Marxist-Leninist style and discipline them to value the collective and the unity between the state and the people.³¹ A letter addressed to Bong Shik wishfully imagines years ahead: “Bong Shik, I hope you will diligently study and become a great *ganbu* (a party cadre, who is an official in important positions in party organizations) in the future.”³² Bong-shik formed a link between education and his possible future. That world is not explicitly connected to serving the state and contributing to the collective as it is commonly understood. This perspective pushes back against the reproduction of North Korea’s self-image as a “a totalizing, unifying ideology that would instill the masses with the ‘correct thinking.’”³³ Letters do not mention the Children’s League (*Sonyōndan*) or the North Korean Democratic Youth League (*Puk Chosŏn minju ch’ōngnyŏn tongmaeng*), which are often highlighted to show children and youths’ participation in the social revolution.³⁴ People in North Korea negotiated with the regime

³⁰ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 169.

³¹ Jae-woong, “Kaein chasōjōnūl t’onghae pon haebang hu Puk’an kyoyugūi chihyanggwa inmindūrūi segyegwan’gach’igwan pyōnhwa,” [The Aim of North Korean Education after Liberation Seen through the Autobiographies Written by Individuals and Transformation in Peoples World View and Values], *Han’gukkūnhyōndaesahak’oe* 81 (2017): 215-249.

³² *To my beloved Bong-shik*, September 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2009, NARA, College Park, MA.

³³ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 174.

³⁴ Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution*, 119-125.

in their own ways by taking full advantage of new opportunities not only as the state intended but for themselves and children in their families and villages.

Letters reveal that schools were not only a place of learning but also a childcare system to share the burden of mothers. Despite radical strides made to ensure the liberation of women, the role of motherhood remained, only refashioned as a social duty for a successful revolution.³⁵ We can only imagine women's responsibilities as both a mother and a worker under the circumstances of war. A letter addressed to a son reads, "In the meantime, you should study diligently and become in the future a courageous worker of the fatherland." This letter portrays education as key to joining a workforce like the earlier letters. Several lines down, it continues, "you should take Il-seon and Il-nong to school with you and study. If you don't, your mother will be in a difficult position."³⁶ In this instance, not only does the writer advise his son to go to school to learn but also to share the burden of his mother by taking his siblings to school with him. Education was not merely a unilateral process, imposed by the state.

Soldiers wished to stay relevant to the life they had left behind by addressing that which was a significant part of the physical and social landscape in North Korea before the start of the Korean War. Through letters, they actively showed interest in, and concern for, the affairs of the home front, especially children's education. Interestingly, letters also reveal how families negotiated with the social reforms and responsibilities that followed by using educational policies to their advantage while they simultaneously benefitted from them.

³⁵ Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution*, 194.

³⁶ Letter, September 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2009, NARA, College Park, MA.

The Other Side of the Korean People's Army

There is the tendency for scholars who have written on the KPA to present the army as a well-organized and centralized organization that was the pinnacle of the solidifying power of the North Korean regime.³⁷ However, letters show soldiers who were disorganized and lacking in experience. When looked at individually, soldiers have not been in the military force for long and at times were not too different from civilians, having made the decision to join the war weeks or months before.

Letters reveal that siblings, fathers, husbands and wives, uncles, friends, and neighbors enlisted into the army.³⁸ They were not viewed as merely soldiers by either their family or friends. They did not identify themselves as part of the army more than the communities they had left. They deployed without prior extensive knowledge or experience in warfare. A significant portion of the letters collected from Incheon, presumably days after the Incheon Landing, depict soldiers who left their homes right around the time the war began. Many letters from September begin by noting how much time had passed since the soldiers had left their homes. Won Lin-sang, cited at the start of the thesis, was one of them. He who wrote that "Time has gone by, and it has been two months since I departed..."³⁹ Though their previous careers and experiences in battles cannot be known, soldiers appear to have not had a whole lot of experience in combat. In short, according to the letters, not all North Korean soldiers at the start of the war were veteran soldiers. Often men but also women joined the army as the war unfolded. However, they were not always properly equipped with much training and preparation.

³⁷ Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution*, 216-218.

³⁸ Authors of the letters often used the Korean word *ibdae* (입대), which means "to enlist," to describe how they joined the army. This suggest that many soldiers willingly and voluntarily joined the army. However, one must also consider the possible cases of conscription during this time.

³⁹ Won Lin-sang to uncle, September 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2009, NARA, College Park, MA.

Deconstructing a narrow image of the North Korean soldiers only as a military force during the Korean War and its projection on North Korean society and military today allows one to see the soldiers in a more everyday context. These letters broaden our understanding of North Korean soldiers who participated in the Korean War. Although many historians of the Korean War have already argued that, in comparison to their southern counterpart, the North Korean forces were better prepared for a military conflict, it would be wrong to generalize that level of readiness and military experience to everyone in the KPA.

Almost four months after the war began, letters show that people in the army were new recruits. As the war continued, people were newly mobilized and trained. In a letter to his wife on October 11, Moon Tae-seok revealed that it had been 15 days since he left home. His daily schedule revolved around training and eating well for it. He gave himself away as a newly enlisted soldier not only through his enthusiasm but also his anxiety when he shared that he has not seen his comrades Chae Yi-jun and Park Wan-seo after they were separated.⁴⁰ There were also others who were prompted by patriotism to join the war. Families reminisce the departures of their loved ones. Bok-shil recalled in her letter the day her brother left Pyeongyang to join the war in July 1950. She wrote, “Then, it was a hot summer day. Your hope must have been big when you left behind your parents, younger sister, and hometown you love to move southward for the reunification of the fatherland.”⁴¹ Similarly, Hong Eung-beom wrote about his younger sibling Eung-seon, who has been mobilized to ensure the safety of the fatherland and its people since July, though he has not heard back about their whereabouts.⁴² Park Jong-gap reminded his friend Young-Il of his fervent patriotism to his homeland that led him to join the army three

⁴⁰ Moon Tae-seok to Moon Tae-seok’s wife October 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁴¹ Lim Bok-shil to Lim Hyeong-seop, September 23, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁴² Hong Eung-beom to Kim Yeong-sam, October 1, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

months before in July.⁴³ These letters reveal that not all soldiers who joined the army were part of the KPA and trained ever since the establishment of the North Korean state or in China's civil conflict.

Letters asked after or shared news of those they knew from the same school, workplace, or neighborhood. Such connections and relationships made it difficult for one to identify solely as either a soldier or a civilian. These new recruits and enlistees were family and friends to those who wrote and received these letters. Some also joined the army together at the same time and were sometimes even dispatched to the same base. Jeon Jong-ok in her encouraging letter to her brother expressed happiness in learning that he was serving together with his six other friends. She also commented that she was glad that he stayed in contact with the older brother of their common friend. Soldiers shared family members, friends, and acquaintances from the same communities and homes they have left. Finally, she added, "No-il, Na-eul, and Il-sung have not gone to the People's Army but are playing at home... It's just that there are still a lot of youth and there are less than ten [eligible to join the army]."⁴⁴ Someone who lived in the same community could set off the next day to join the army. To try to explain when one stops being a civilian and becomes a soldier is meaningless when letters show that both identities were true for the soldiers. Rhee Myeong-seo wrote to his older brother Rhee Byeong-seo that "Kyeong-hee *hyeongnim* and Kyeong-do *ajuban* have also left."⁴⁵ Son Dong-seon also ended their letter, informing the recipient Kim Gi-Taek that "Rhee Sung-gil *ajaebi* has also left to achieve the reunification and independence of the fatherland. Rhee Gi-soon and Saeng Ga-rae's brother-in-

⁴³ Park Jong-gap to Bang eong-il, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁴⁴ Jeon Jong-ok to Jeon Hwa-soo, September 22, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁴⁵ *Hyeongnim* refers to either one's older brother or a close friend or acquaintance who is like an older brother. *Ajuban* and *ajaebi* are North Korean dialects, used to address someone who is close and older and may or may not be related by blood. They can be translated often as "uncle."

law also have gone [for the same cause].”⁴⁶ Close ones, like brothers and uncles as shown in these letters, were the ones to leave to fight in the war.

Letters also often carry similar stories of youth leaving home to join the army after being inspired by their family or friends, who were already in the army. Hong Soon-ae wrote to her sister that she had worked hard to support the war efforts from home since her sister and brother left to fight in the war. She also made an oath that she would fight courageously, following in the footsteps of her siblings, and join them soon. Perhaps a sudden and uncommon departure of her siblings for “the happy day of victorious reunification of the fatherland,” left a great impression on her.⁴⁷

Noh Tae-won wrote to his wife Han Bong-nam, who was “at the frontlines protecting the home front,” that after failing three physical examinations, he was working hard to support the home front instead of joining her at the war front. This letter shows how the war effort also mobilized the home front. Those unable to join physical combat turned the home front into a space where they could devote themselves to the war cause. Kim Eul-ryong’s letter also shows glimpses of training a month prior to enlisting into the army. He wrote that In-yong *hyeong* returned home after training at the Kaecheon camp and enlisted into the army a month later, days before the start of the Korean War.⁴⁸ Even before the war started, the home front had become a training ground, putting the front and the home front at close proximity.

Though letters do not disclose the frequency or the intensity of training procedures, many emphasized a more regular and thorough training once people joined the army. Additionally,

⁴⁶ Kim Yeong-taek to Kim Ki-taek (the second letter), September 22, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁴⁷ Hong Soon-Ae to Kim Myeong-hee, September 17, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁴⁸ Kim Eul-ryong to Kim Gi-yong, September 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.; *hyeong* is an informal way of saying *hyeongnim* for older brother.

because this thesis relies only on Korean language sources, the experiences of those who participated in the Chinese Civil War previously and may have written letters in Chinese characters are absent in this work. This is not the focus of this thesis, but to further support Cumings' argument about the Communist Koreans' experience in China prior to the Korean War, there is a letter in Korean that lays out a route of a Korean soldier Kim Chang-ryeol, who fought in the Chinese People's Liberation Army in Guangxi prior to joining the Korean War for "the absolute independence of the fatherland."⁴⁹ He wrote, "According to the order from the higher ranks, we breached the 38th parallel on June 25 and liberated Daegu, Busan, and Kyeongju-do."⁵⁰ Though he was exaggerating about capturing these cities because the KPA never, he explained that they were retreating from the South under another order from the higher ranks. This letter stands out from the rest because it is not about someone who joined the army only several days or weeks before writing the letter. Overall, there were more new recruits and enlistees in the KPA that historians have presented before as Jeon Cheong-song acknowledged to his wife that "the Choson people's lack of experience in warfare, causing high casualties" and that "they often fail to act."⁵¹

Children in the Revolution

Despite the consistent increase in US aerial bombings, as shown in the letters exchanged between the front and the home front from September until October 1950, soldiers expressed their hopes that the lives and home they left behind would be safe from the dangers of the war and that pre-war life would continue. This was most notable when soldiers discussed children,

⁴⁹ Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume 2* (Yöksabip'yöngsa, 2013), 351.

⁵⁰ Kim Chang-ryeol to Kim Moon-gwan, October 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁵¹ Jeong Cheong-song to Park Ok-seon (the first letter), October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

who were part of North Korea's social transformation as much as any other group. They continuously bring up *eaorin aideul* (어린 아이들) and *dongsaeng* (동생). *Eaorin aideul* translates to “young children,” and *dongsaeng* often refers to a younger sibling or relative but could also mean a child who is not necessarily related by blood. Kim Young-hee wrote, “You must have been working so hard, taking care of [the family] while farming... I want to know if Shi-eum, Shi-sun, Yoo-gap, Choon-geo, and Seo-doo are getting along together... I bless you and *eaorin aideul* with health.”⁵² “Brother, it must be a lot of work for you looking after *dongsaeng*” read another letter by Jang Cheo-neol.⁵³ Often, soldiers in letters with limited space and limited time were concerned about the well-being of the children. They also expressed their indebtedness to their immediate families or relatives for taking care of children who may have been soldiers' siblings, children, or neighbors. Children's frequent appearance in wartime letters points to their presence during the transformative years of North Korean society.

Some soldiers were invested in the seemingly uninterrupted lives they left behind, which lie in stark contrast to “massacre,” “indiscriminate bombings,” and “heaps of ash” that some letters expressed. They did not simply ask how children were doing; they beseeched their families to ensure that children were in schools. Their letters to the home front were full of hope that the future generation would be well-equipped and unharmed by the war when it inherited postwar world. Amid precarity and instability, they implored their families and friends to offer children what they thought was best for them at the time – education. Ri Jung-geun wrote to his uncle that he was “frustrated for not knowing if Aeng-seon is going to school without any difficulty.”⁵⁴ Jang Jung-hyeon's letter to his older sister at home read, “I especially entreat you to

⁵² Kim Young-hee to Baek Geun-sook, September 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2009, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁵³ Jung Chang-neol to Jung Kyoung-deok, September 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2009, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁵⁴ Ri Jung-geun to Ri Jung-ho, September 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2009, NARA, College Park, MA.

send Jung-neul, Song-roon, sister Gi-hwa's *dongsaeng* to school."⁵⁵ In a separate letter to his parents Jang makes the same request, adding "I ask you to send [them] to school through whatever means." Soldiers' experiences in the Korean War as presented in the letters show their preoccupation while situating themselves between war and home. As soldiers did on the European fronts, North Korean soldiers assumed the continuity of stable, pre-war life back home, which remained "the horizon of all their hopes and wishes."⁵⁶

When soldiers still felt connected to the relationships and affairs they have behind, they also began to share the threats of war when bombing intensified, especially after the KPA began to retreat after the US successful intervention during the Incheon Landing. Viewing them as a distant threat at first, soldiers did not expect that air attacks would reach their homes and cause schools to close or relocate. Postponement of the start of school also became common. Rhee Chang-seok, who was the chairman of the youth league at his middle school, portrayed in his letter the convergence of the war zone with the home front. With a mature tone, Chang-seok reassured his older brother, writing, "[Our] household members have intensified our efforts at the home front and are working hard to support the war and society with our hearts at ease because you are ferociously combating enemies at the forefront of the battleline." However, he also wrote towards the end of his letter, "Our Hamjong Middle School postponed the start of the school because the US aircraft are daily carrying out a savage bombardment..."⁵⁷

Similar disruptions in students' lives from the bombings demonstrate the proximity of the war. Yet students maintained their desire to go to school or pursue their studies in a safer environment. Others took initiative to study on their own or help and support the home front.

⁵⁵ Jang Jung-hyeon to Jang Choon-nam, September 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2009, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁵⁶ Hammerle, "You let a weeping woman call you home?" 165.

⁵⁷ Rhee Chang-seok to Han Tae-hyeon, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

Bok-shil reassured her brother that the family was safe, but she also notified him that the advanced middle school she attended had been closed since September 21. She explained that ever since the school closed, students from each school in the village gathered to study for three hours, complete extracurricular activities for half an hour, and study individually. In addition, she shared about her involvement in the domestic chores. “It is not as good as going to school, but this is also fun,” she commented towards the end of her letter.⁵⁸ Jo Jin-yeon and Rhee Il-seok also informed her parents and his father respectively, both from Gangseo-gun that their entire schools were relocating to an unknown destination.⁵⁹ Jo Jin-yeon specified, “The reason for the move is that the enemy planes fly over us every day and students cannot study in peace.”⁶⁰ Distraught, Il-seok commented on the relocation, “We have set on an endless and heartless path on foot.”⁶¹ For Kim Yi-geug, his school had to close because of daily attacks by the American planes. Therefore, he wrote in his letter to his brother that he has been devoting himself to farming at home instead, assisting with making food rations for the People’s Army.⁶²

Merging of the Front and the Home Front

The grim contrast between what soldiers wished for the home front and what took place, as presented in the case of children and their education, confirmed that war came home and that the war theater was further compressed. The merging of spaces they occupied brought their experiences together. As the KPA retreated northward across the 38th parallel, the distance between the two fronts closed in on one another both physically and psychologically. The enemy

⁵⁸ Lim Bok-shil to Lim Hyeong-seop, September 23, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁵⁹ Jo Ji-yeon to Jo Ryok-seok, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA; Rhee Il-seok to Rhee Won-gook, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁶⁰ Jo Ji-yeon to Jo Ryok-seok, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA

⁶¹ Rhee Il-seok to Rhee Won-gook, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁶² Kim Myeong-geuk and others to Kim Seon-geuk, October 8, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

over their heads did not discriminate based on whether one was either a soldier or not.

Consequently, the fate of those in the war zone and at the home front were tied by the common threat and the shrinking distance between the war zone and home front. As the war intensified and moved closer to home, letters carried worry and despair for the recipient while unable to hide dangers the sender was facing.

Both those on the frontlines and those at home found themselves under indiscriminate bombing. In a letter to his father, Hwnag Myeong-soo expressed his worries that Anju City, his home city, has been under aerial attack and that bombing has also taken place in Yangdeok, where he was located.⁶³ Writing from his home, Baek Myeong-deok observed that “bastards are bombing villages too when they are bombing the cities. We have been bombarded several times, but not much damage has been done.”⁶⁴ Damage from these aerial attacks were not concentrated in a few locations but were happening nationwide, as seen in Kim Chang-joo’s letter: “US barbaric bombings are indiscriminately attacking our beautiful cities and villages that are glowing with the coming of the fall. Our previous house in East Pyeongyang has also gone up in flames because of their bombardment.”⁶⁵

Though one may expect those at the home front to be more concerned about those who left to fight in the war being bombarded by enemy planes, the role in the context of the Korean War is reversed. Many soldiers’ letters cautioned their family members against aerial attacks in the cities and villages they lived in. Jeon Jeong-won warned his mother of the military attacks and to be safe together with the young children.⁶⁶ Jo Jin-yeon, writing a letter home in Pyeongyang, asked, “Father, are you and the family living comfortably under horrible and scary

⁶³ Hwang Myeong-soo to Hwang Chan-jeong, August 26, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁶⁴ Baek Myeong-deok to Rhee Chang-shin, October 9, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁶⁵ Kim Chang-joo to Kim Bong-soon, October 5, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁶⁶ Jeon Jung-won to Mother October 12, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

bombings?”⁶⁷ Yeong*, concisely described the situation in his letter, “The more severe their atrocities are, the more our envy and strength will shake and rattle.”⁶⁸ They have bombed Pyeongyang more than ten times since I have arrived here and have threatened our mothers, fathers, and children with murder.”⁶⁹

Due to the merging of the war and home fronts, juxtapositions were too frequent when soldiers and civilians alike wanted to be encouraging and optimistic about the war while they had no idea when a bomb could be dropped on them. Song Yeong-ja wrote from her home, “I can perceive how strong our People’s Army is through newspapers and reports on the righteous war of the fatherland. My heart overflows with happiness when I look at newspapers and reports.”⁷⁰ However, in the same letter, she also wrote, “Whenever the enemy planes of Rhee Syng-man’s puppet government come, my heart thinks of how we can destroy them quickly.”⁷¹ Despite her praise of the military power of the North Korean army, her life was at risk due to the planes flying overhead. Similarly, Ryu Il-hwa wrote earlier in her letter to her husband that “the US bastards are bombarding Pyeongyang, but no matter how fierce the bombings are the hearts of we comrades are bound like steel and work hard for the production.” However, she dedicated the rest of her letter to explain to her husband how she had been forced to leave the city and relocate with the factory she was working at. “Here [at a new location], there are no air-raids, and we can work with our hearts at ease.”⁷²

From the soldiers’ perspective, separation was often harder when the lives of those they had left behind at the home front were exposed to the same danger as they were. Most of them

⁶⁷ Jo Jin-yeon to Jo Ryok-seok, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁶⁸ Asterisk * means that the letters or characters in the names are either missing or illegible.

⁶⁹ Yeong* to Go Yang-ryong, October 14, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁷⁰ Song Yeong-ja to Song Geun-seop, September 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁷¹ Song Yeong-ja to Song Geun-seop, September 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁷² Ryu Il-hwa to Hyeon Jung-gyu, September 18, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

voluntarily joined the army because of their patriotism or for socio-economic or other personal reasons, but they would have expected those they had left behind to be out of harm's way, especially when they were rapidly moving southward in the initial months of the war. With enemy planes over his head, Jung Cheong-song wrote in the trenches to his wife and his two children that he was making time to write a letter to them because he missed his sons Choon-gil and Choon-deok so much despite the hectic times. The sentiment that his family were fighting this war together under the same circumstances is more visible when he wrote, "Several days ago I saw in the newspaper that enemy planes attacked Hamgyeongbuk-do on July 19 and that 90% of Cheongjin City as well as Jueul Town have been bombed." Against this backdrop, he strongly warned his wife, "Enemy planes come on average 15 times a day and there must be casualties. If you are not careful, you can easily leave this world and die, so I ask you to take absolute caution. When enemy planes attack, please hide yourselves in the dugout. Do not dismiss these dangers in villages."⁷³ Reading in the newspapers that a village where his family lived was bombed almost in its entirety eliminated the divide between the war zone and the home front.

Psychologically, soldiers were helpless in ensuring the safety of their loved ones; however, because war unfolded on a peninsula, the size of Utah, soldiers and civilians often mingled together. The Korean War as an intimate war with soldiers, civilians, and the enemy located at a proximity. Many family members promised that they would visit soldiers at their base. On the other hand, letters also show soldiers asking their family and friends to visit them, often with requests for various items.⁷⁴

⁷³ Jung Chung-song to Park Ok-Seon, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA; Jung Chung-song to Jung Choon-gil, October 9, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁷⁴ Choe Bok-deuk to Choe Jong-myeol, October 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA; Kim Jun-* to Kim Choon-bok, October 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA; Rhee *-Myeong to Rhee *-kyeong, September 3, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

Geographically, what stands out in the letters is the ability and accessibility people had to visit soldiers where they were stationed. Addresses on envelopes show that some senders and recipients of letters were located in the same province, at a reasonable distance from each other for traveling. Writing from South Pyongan, Choe Bok-deuk apologized in her letter to her older brother for not keeping her word that she would visit him: “I will prepare and go to you in the several days to come. Although it will be cold and difficult, please persevere. Father was planning to go, but because of important business, he could not go. I will go.”⁷⁵ The ways in which the sister apologized for coming later than promised and encouraged her brother to hold on for a little longer suggest that he needed assistance somewhat urgently, though it is surprising that the family could visit him in the first place.

This proximity can be also observed in letters that often requested certain things for their family to bring to them. After giving a detailed account of his promotion and the responsibilities that followed, Kim Joon-* ironically wrote, “Risking humiliating myself, I would like to ask for some things... I would appreciate it if you can buy (make) [these things] and bring them to me quickly.” He then added, “You can come to the middle school, which is 100 meters behind the location where we met last... I would be grateful if you could come quickly.”⁷⁶ In these moments, Kim Joon-* showed how some soldiers were stationed close to their homes so that family and others could easily visit them. In a letter sent to his younger brother, Lee *-myeong asked him when he last visited their home. He then proceeded to ask him to go there as often as he could so he could tell him about the situation in the household. Though two brothers were

⁷⁵ Choe Bok-deuk to Choe Jong-myeol, October 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁷⁶ Kim Jun-* to Kim Choon-bok, October 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

simultaneously serving in the army, a brother could request the other to frequent their house in the middle of a war to see how the family was doing.⁷⁷

Family and friends could visit those in the army more freely than one would expect. They shared not only a perceived danger of air bombing but also physical space, which defied the common understanding of soldiers being far away from home. Han Man-seop's letter even demonstrates how officials working for the regime had more freedom of mobility beyond the military base. Man-seop wrote to her sister that *ajusshi*, who worked at the Department of Home Affairs in Pyongyang, visited their oldest brother twice and left his clothes behind, which their brother has not been able to return. He reassured her that *ajusshi* was not in a hurry to receive them.⁷⁸ Similar interactions between families and their acquaintances during war point to the fact that for many there was hardly any physical divide between soldiers and civilians.

“How could I have believed that mother would be alone in...Pyongyang?!” exclaimed Yeong* as he recounted a heartbreaking reunion between him and his mother.⁷⁹ The mother who chose to go to Pyongyang, where her chances of seeing her sons in the army were high, vividly depicts the overlap between the home front and the war. The son, who “has taken up arms in front of Choson and its people and sacrificed his life for them,” unexpectedly experienced a clash between his world as a soldier and the other as a son to his mother. He described their second tearful farewell as he sent her off to their hometown. Among the requests at the end of the letter, he beseeched his brother not to mention to their mother the urgent and critical situation of the war.⁸⁰ As the war situation became more dire, the psychological and physical space of war intruded and mixed with the home and those tied with the home front.

⁷⁷ Rhee *-Myeong to Rhee *-kyeong, September 3, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁷⁸ Han Man-seop to Jang Ho-mook, October 12, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁷⁹ Yeong* to Go Yang-ryong, October 14, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁸⁰ Yeong* to Go Yang-ryong, October 14, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

Retreat and Civilian Refugees

Compared to the pervasive hovering of the United States air force that penetrated different aspects of the everyday life of the ordinary people in North Korea, the North Korean state remained rather absent. Except for one rare expectation Kim Yi-Geuk testified that he had witnessed an enemy plane being shot down, letters present the state as helpless by its absence.⁸¹ When cities and villages burned, schools closed, and family and friends continuously left their homes to join the war, bombs kept raining down, pushing the home front and the frontlines closer toward each other. As absent as the state's presence in the everyday lives of the ordinary people was, it was just as nonexistent, the letters show, when soldiers were ordered to retreat and people were forced to flee their homes.

There are hardly any records of or studies on North Korean refugees of war during the earlier period of the Korean War. While the images of the South Korean war refugees and the bombed Hangang (Han River) Bridge in Seoul are ubiquitous, the voices and experiences of those in the North are missing in the narrative of the Korean War. As Su-Kyong Hwang and Dong Choon Kim have concluded in their works, the lives of civilians and especially North Korean people were forfeited in the act of containing communism and trying to win a victory.⁸² However, the letters offer glimpses of the chaos North Koreans had to navigate when war invaded their homes. Through letters, many attempted to warn their families and pleaded with them to flee.

Desperately writing to those at home who were unsuspecting of their fate as war refugees, when even soldiers had no idea where the war was going, gives the illusion that there

⁸¹ Kim Myeong-geuk and others to Kim Seon-geuk, October 8, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁸² Hwang, *Korea's Grievous War*, 2; Dong Choon Kim's *The Unending Korean War: A Social History* [*Chŏnjaenggwa sahoer uriege han'gukchŏnjaengŭn muŏshiŏnna?*], chap. 3, Google Books.

was a divide between the war front and the home front. Gil Yeong-gook wrote to his father as he retreated that he was concerned for the safety of his family and urged his father to stay at his sister's place. He, like many others, did not know where he was headed and promised to write again in the next province that he would be in. This short letter delivers the urgency to the reader of ensuring the safety of his family while he himself was on the run.⁸³

Soldiers who were forced on the path of retreat would soon share the same fate as civilian refugees, who would flee their homes to escape impeding enemies. Kim Tae Ha disclosed his route of retreat in a letter which had begun at 3AM the night before because of "the bombings by the US bastards." His letter shows that his unit was traveling primarily while the sun was down at around 2:30-3:00 AM most likely to avoid being seen and targeted by the US aircraft. He explained that before writing the letter he just finished eating breakfast at 7:30 AM after a more than four-hour long march. The plan is, he wrote, to sleep during the day and set off again at night. However, he addressed the letter to Nampo City in Pyeongnam Province, which was only 35 kilometers away from where he was in Kangso-gun in the same province.⁸⁴

Gil Yeong-gook and Kim Tae Ha's letters to their families illustrate that the Korean War involved everyone on the ground equally whether one wore a uniform or not.⁸⁵ Rhee Chang-seok, while writing that his family had not yet been affected by the bombing yet, urged his brother to flee.⁸⁶ There was much uncertainty about the future as a civilian refugee and people could not tell if the homes people left behind would remain intact or if they would return at all.

⁸³ Gil Yeong-gook to Gil Joon, October 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁸⁴ Kim Tae-ha to Yoon Jung-bok, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁸⁵ Kim Tae-ha to Yoon Jung-bok, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA; Jang Yeong-sam to Kim Gwan-heung, October 17, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁸⁶ Rhee Chang-seok to Park Joo-hwan, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

However, the younger brother did not hesitate to advise his brother to leave, indicating dangerous and urgent circumstances that have pushed many families to this final resort.

Hopelessness and despair were prevalent in the letters as soldiers set on the path of retreat and endless walking into precarity and the unknown. Han Un-* explained that “Under an urgent order, we left Pyeongyang the night it was issued on October 10 and are now evacuating to Kanggye (a mountainous region bordering China). Because we have been walking so much, our feet are swollen, and I do not think we can continue like this... The road that lies ahead is hopeless.” He continued in his letter that “Mom has left for Yangdeok. The situation is urgent and changing so drastically.” When soldiers began their retreat on orders, people at home had already begun to flee from the encroaching enemies. Before the state began evacuating cities and villages, people, like Han Un-*’s mother, assessed the situation on their own and took measures. His worries extended to his family without knowing “when we will meet again or when this letter will reach you. All is unclear and uncertain.” The desperate situation had rendered him helpless: “Mother has sent me 3,000 won, but now there is no reason to send money at all. It is unbearable to think of how you will live through the winter with the children we have left in your care. Please just stay alive.”⁸⁷ All he can do from a distance is to hope that those at home would do anything to stay alive.

Jang Yeong-sam was blunt about the war when writing to his family. He did not play down the worsening course of the war and instructed what steps his family should take. Writing in mid-October as he left Pyongyang, he asked his father to take care of and evacuate family and relatives. He strongly advised them to go through Kwiseong to Hamjong. “Please act exactly as I tell you.” Not only did he give them instructions but also sent them 4,500 *won* to help them with

⁸⁷ Han Woon-* to Han Soo-gil, October 14, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

the move amid the chaos. The urgency comes through when he cautioned them to prepare to survive the entire winter and not to be afraid to leave things behind.⁸⁸

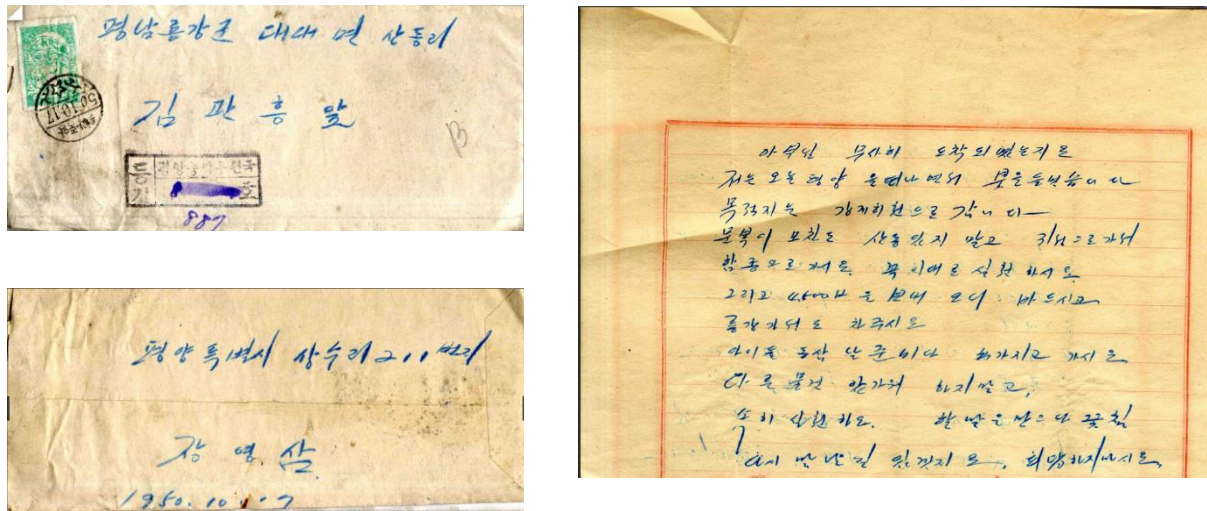


Figure 2. Jang Yeong-sam to Kim Gwan-heung, October 17, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

Par ** sounds more optimistic to keep fighting the war, but the letter sounds just as rushed. “Gwan-seon, I’m sorry I couldn’t write to you as I left Hanpo for Pyeongyang because I had to evacuate Hanpo quickly,” he wrote. “I do not know where we will go from Pyeongyang... Our destination may be here in Pyeongyang, somewhere northward, or Manchuria. Gwan-seon, I don’t know what will happen to us.” However, unlike the earlier letter, this is more hopeful about the People’s Army, writing soldiers are ferociously fulfilling their duty in the face of a pressing situation in the fatherland, ready for a “Third World War.”⁸⁹

As much as soldiers were in the dark about their next destination or their fate, many of the civilians were as clueless of the situation on the ground, with the rapidly retreating forces. Rhee Chang-seok’s letter to his friend Han Tae-hyeon, composed on October 10 and sent to the

⁸⁸ Jang Yeong-sam to Kim Gwan-heung, October 17, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁸⁹ Park ** to Kim Gwan-seon, October 16, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

South Korean city Daegu, read, “Are you well and chasing the enemies southward for the righteous war on our fatherland and to bring about the victory soon?”⁹⁰ Chang-seok also wrote about Tae-hyeon to his other friend and that he is in combat in Daegu and headed farther southward. Chang-seok even encouraged him to send Tae-hyeon a letter to the same KPA mailbox code that he addressed his own. These kinds of letters reveal that though the tide of war have changed weeks ago and the KPA have abandoned cities like Daegu, some in the home front were unaware of the situation that the KPA found itself after the retreat began.⁹¹

During the times when soldiers in the army could not guarantee their own safety, they perceived distant danger for those they had left behind at the home front. They did their best to contact them through one of the few means of communication available, which was to write letters, to warn them and caution them to leave their homes for safety. Yeong-sam ended this short letter, saying, “Do not reply to this letter.”⁹² This further shows how fast the circumstances were changing in the context of war. He could only hope that they would act accordingly after receiving his letter. Although similar letters warning their family and friends of the encroaching letters never reached the intended audience, they still disclose the efforts soldiers made to ensure the safety of those at the home front.

No Longer Helpless, Idle, or Silent

Soldiers and civilians shared the burden of suspension of vital communication and transportation services as well as the economic crisis throughout North Korea because of the unceasing bombings and retreating KPA soldiers. The crumbling infrastructure and economy

⁹⁰ Rhee Chang-seok to Han Tae-hyeon, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁹¹ Rhee Chang-seok to Park Joo-hwan, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁹² Jang Yeong-sam to Kim Gwan-heung, October 17, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

throughout the country were affecting soldiers and civilians alike. Disrupted and destroyed postal services and roads impacted communication and transportation among people. There was high inflation, food shortages and lack of daily necessities. These difficulties were not contained to either the battle front or the home front. Sharing these troubles and trying to overcome them demonstrate parallel experiences between soldiers and civilians. While they shared the burden, they coped with hardship by voicing their concerns in written form and actively seeking help.

Train stations and roads in cities and villages alike were in ruins. This destruction presented significant challenges amongst the ordinary people but also between the people and the state. On October 9, Baek Myeog-deok wrote, “I wanted to send a letter sooner, but I hope you’ll understand I have not been able to because there are currently considerable delays in postal delivery that it takes over a month for a letter to arrive.” He advised his brother-in-law about coming to see him by writing that it would be better to come on foot because transportation via trains and cars into the Nampo region has been suspended: “Under savage US bombings, the Nampo countryside has suffered great damage, but most of the factories still stand and the Nampo district still exists. It is hard to know whether trains are running in other regions, but the Nampo Station has lost all of its trace because of enemy’s air-raids.”⁹³

Ban Hyeon-soo’s letter also testifies to the difficulties of staying in touch with family and friends. His letter begins with “I have written several letters home, but I have not heard any news from you and have been worried. Perhaps you have not received the letters, or I have not been receiving letters from you.”⁹⁴ He wrote that he had even tried to send them a telegram, which did not work.⁹⁵ Hyeon-soo attempted all possible ways of contacting his family, but the fact that this

⁹³ Baek Myeog-deok to Rhee Chang-shin October 9, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁹⁴ Ban Hyeon-soo to Ban Hak-soo, October 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁹⁵ Ban Hyeon-soo to Ban Hak-soo, October 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

letter never made it to the intended audience further confirms the challenges people, in the military or not, had to face in communicating with one another.

Kim Yeong-taek wrote to his brother, “You must be frustrated not having heard from me, but I am also frustrated for not knowing how you and your family are even though I have been sending letters because there have been difficulties in sending them out. I am sending you another letter.” He explained that when he tried to send letters previously, he had trouble sending them out because the [People’s] Committee was far too busy. In the same envelope, his friend Son Jong-seon wrote, “Time has flowed like water, and it has been a month since you left. Though we have received your letter, you must be frustrated for not having anything from us because the letters we do send are not properly delivered.”⁹⁶

Soldiers and civilians also shared the experiences of scarcity and shortage of common, necessary goods as well as the extreme inflation illustrated in several letters. However, they were not silent sufferers. In the act of writing letters to seek help, both soldiers and civilians objected to the status quo. This at times helped them alleviate their dreadful situations. For example, Rhee *-Myeong wrote, “US imperialist thieves’ armed intervention has brought daily bombardment which has made it difficult for us to live. One *mal* of rice in Seoul is 9,000 *won* and in Icheon it is 6,000 *won*. How are the farmers going to live?”⁹⁷ Towards the end of the letter, he asked his younger brother, who was also in the army, to go home and grab some clothes for him: “Although the winter is approaching, it is hard to prepare for it. As you know, it is difficult because we only have the clothes we wore when we [joined the army]. Please go home and send me underclothes, pants (*jjeubong* - derived from the French word “jupon”), and shirts. I entreat

⁹⁶ Kim Yeong-taek to Kim Gi-taek, September 22, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁹⁷ Rhee *-myeong to Rhee *-Kyeong, September 3, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

you.”⁹⁸ The letter demonstrates how even some soldiers lacked clothing to wear when in combat as the winter approached. Economic difficulties in the form of high inflation of rice price or lack of basic needs were affecting people across the country.

When soldiers’ basic needs were not met and they were unable to receive or buy essential goods, they requested items or money in their letters usually from their families. Kim Joon-*, asked Kim Choon-bok, perhaps his mother, to quickly bring to him things including foot wrappers, socks, undershirts, long underclothes, underwear, different types of cloth, gloves, some money, short-sleeve shirts, and postcards.⁹⁹ Hwang Myeong-soo wrote to his father, “I understand you must not have a lot of money, but I would be grateful if you could quickly send me 2,000 *won*.”¹⁰⁰ Rhee Il-seok also wrote to his father, who had sent him 1,500 *won*, that he was using the money to support himself while away from home training.¹⁰¹

Similarly, on the home front, letters detail the everyday difficulties of paying rent, feeding children among others and their efforts to seek assistance in their letters. Baek Byeong-seop, who was living with his mother, reached out to his father about their poor state. Living in isolation from his grandparents while he was still attending school, he explained in his letter, made it difficult for him and his mom alone to survive: “It will be difficult for us to live away from you. Winter is coming and hardships no less challenging will creep into our lives. We await your speedy return and wish you good health.”¹⁰² These letters reflect a society still heavily reliant on the husband or father as the primary breadwinner for the family, despite their military service in the Korean War.

⁹⁸ Rhee *-myeong to Rhee *-Kyeong, September 3, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

⁹⁹ Kim Joon-* to Kim Choon-bok October 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹⁰⁰ Hwang Myeong-soo to Hwang Chang-jung, August 26, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹⁰¹ Rhee Il-seok to Rhee Won-gook, October 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹⁰² Baek Byeong-seop to Baek Chang-eop. September 24, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

The perpetual state of poverty and heavy dependence on the husbands, who were fighting in a war, indicate how people hardly had any support from the state and thus turned to one another for help. Choe Soon-ok worried for her mother, writing in her letter, “Mother, day by day the cold is encroaching upon us, and prices of all goods are gradually increasing. How difficult must it be for you to support the family under these conditions?” She offered her possessions at home, “In my trunk, there are white underclothes. Please put them on Won-geun in this cold. If there is anything in the trunk that you need, please take and use everything you find in there.”¹⁰³ For some, this period hit some harder than others. Letters contained pitiful stories of others at the home front, usually mothers, who were left behind to care for children or support the family in the absence of their husbands. In a heart-wrenching letter, Kang Soon-hyeok pleaded with her mother to send her husband to come and rescue her and their son from a miserable state. She wrote,

Mother, I have to leave for Pyongyang because of food shortage or else I cannot stay here. Aunt came with a basin of rice and told me that I should buy rice after I am done with this or return, but how am I supposed to buy rice when 1 mal of rice costs 1,000 won... Seong-gun’s father, please come to us. A day feels like 10 years, so please send him soon. I should have stayed in Pyongyang even if I could live or die; I do not know what I was thinking when I came back to my hometown. It is a terrible place to be where I cannot even give Seong-gun a single potato when he asks for it. We would leave if it were not for all our luggage, please hurry. Seong-gun looks for his grandma every day and cries day and night. There are no words to describe our current situation. We found a new house and it has been five days since we moved. Please send Seong-gun’s father to us as soon as you receive the letter without a day to lose. The more I think, I am speechless and dumbfounded [by the preposterous words of the aunt]. What can one do with one basin of rice? Mother, do we not have anything? Seong-gun refuses to eat millet and there are many days where he goes to sleep on an empty stomach. Hope you know our predicament and come soon. Soon-hyeok.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Choe Soon-ok to Kang Yi-deok, October 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹⁰⁴ Kim Soon-hyeok to Choe Shin-seong, October 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

Song Yeong-ja, mother of two girls, entreated her husband in the army to help support the family. Apologetically, she opened up about their poverty and that she has not been able to pay rent although the county has been sending people daily to their place. Interestingly, she noted that she has not paid rent at all in 1950, indicating that the father has been absent since the pre-war period. The mother and her children have been so neglected without any means to support themselves despite their father's service in the military. She continued in the letter, "I cannot buy Yeong-ja (same as the mother's name) and Yeong-suk new shoes when theirs are worn out. Yeong-ja's father, though I may seem bold, I ask you to send us some money. Though you may be busy fighting in the war, please write to us often whenever you can."¹⁰⁵

People did not just voice their needs and present their predicaments. Amid the unstable economy and perpetual shortage of food and goods, people completed the informal economy by lending their hand to those in need and supporting primarily families who lived separately. Sometimes letters illustrate people relying more on one another, who came through in the end, to make their ends meet. Letters containing gratitude and relief about assisting others from afar is a testimony that the people actively sought help and in some cases their situation improved. Mother of Yeong-ja and Yeong-suk later wrote in a different letter that "[her] heart is happy and happy again" that their father has sent the money, specifying the date she has received it.¹⁰⁶ Kim Shin-Ok also wrote to her brother, "I'm thankful that you have safely received the money I sent you previously. The eldest brother sent you the money because he is working at People's Committee in Hwanghae-do."¹⁰⁷ Despite the ever "sharpening" state of affairs in the fatherland and increasing struggle with the enemy, Kim Chang-Bong, through his letter, sent 1,000 *won* to

¹⁰⁵ Son Yeong-ja to Son Geun-seop, September 13, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹⁰⁶ Son Yeong-ja to Son Geun-seop, September 15, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹⁰⁷ Kim Shin-ok to Kim Byeon-*, October 11, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

support the household but also his older brother's wedding, the date for which he asked after in the same sentence.¹⁰⁸ Money orders were not necessarily sent or received in the context of hardship and poverty. In anticipation of big family celebrations, families supported each other from afar even under the conditions of war.

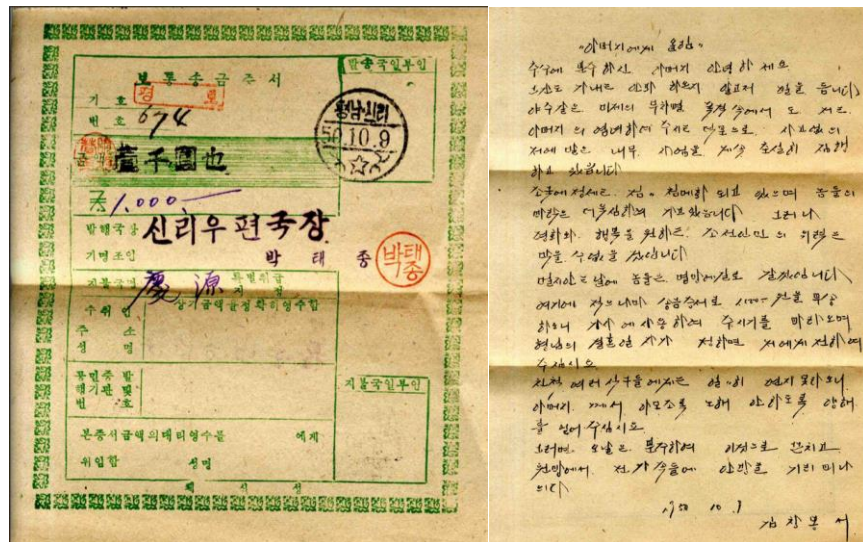


Figure 3. Kim Chang-bong to Kim Soo-hak (with the money order), October 9, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

Letters also hold numerous stories of those who depended on those members of the family who were fighting in the war but also worked to earn wages to support themselves and their families. They were not helpless, idle or silent. Baek Heung-seop explained that they could not receive any food rations because the food rationing station had not yet received their brother's certificate of military service. Baek's letter shows that though some families relied on those who were serving in the army for food rations, they would demand that which was theirs as a relation to the one in the military.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Lim Baek-jin requested his brother to send the

¹⁰⁸ Kim Chang-bong to Kim Soo-hak, October 9, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹⁰⁹ Baek Heung-seop to Kang Chang-Woo, October 8, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

certificate of military service again as they had not been able to receive it when it was initially sent.¹¹⁰

There were also more fortunate ones, who were fully employed and could support themselves and their family. Rhyu Il-hwa later wrote to her husband, “Four of us comrades received a little bit of award money in celebration of the fifth anniversary of the Independence Day (August 15th). Though she credited her husband “who [was] working endlessly hard for the reunification of the fatherland,” she also worked, her letter reveals, at a clothing factory. She was capable of supporting herself in the absence of her husband. Il-hwa informed her husband that the city’s party manager paid back 1,000 *won*. She also asked him not to worry as she was receiving all the rations on his behalf and 3,000 *won* salary.¹¹¹ Kim Nak-hoon wrote that the family has been receiving food rationing and a salary worth 9,000 *won* allowing the family a comfortable living.¹¹² Of course, pre-war social background determined what jobs and positions one received. Those with education, like Nak-hoon’s family, could secure more stable jobs. However, people across North Korea under various circumstances actively sought help to improve their living situations and voiced their hardships in their letters.

¹¹⁰ Lim Baek-jin to Lim Myeong-jin, October 4, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹¹¹ Rhyu Il-hwa to Hyeon Jeong-gyu, September 18, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

¹¹² Kim Nak-hoon to Kim Hwang-won, September 10, 1950, RG 242, SA 2012, NARA, College Park, MA.

Conclusion

While there are large gaps in the understanding of North Korean society during the Korean War, letters written by soldiers, civilians, adults, children, and families serve as a rare window into what everyday life in North Korea was like during the conflict and how the people experienced the war. Looking at letters by soldiers and civilians reveal parallel experiences during the war that demonstrate that North Korean people actively tried to ensure a better and safer life for themselves and for their loved ones. Understanding the social climate in North Korea prior to the Korean War and recognizing soldiers and civilians' shared experiences and spaces offer new perspectives on their fluid identity that cannot be clearly placed in either the war front or the home front.



Figure 4. A picture of some of the letters taken by Yee Rem Kim. NARA, College Park, MA.

The divide between the battle front and the home front, the letters reveal, was meaningless when the war theatre was compressed, especially in the fall of 1950. Soldiers, who

still maintained ties to their life before the war and existing relationships, and civilians, who, in turn, tried to reassure the soldiers of their safety, shared the same threats from the air and on land when the KPA rapidly retreated northward and brought war home. When the KPA were in retreat, civilians, also soon to be displaced as civilian refugees, shared the same fate of uncertainty of where they were headed and what awaited them. However, through all the shared trauma, letters demonstrate how North Korean people, unlike their absence in North Korean or Korean War histories, have tried to cope and survive the war. They were vociferous in their letters about their difficult situations, actively sought help, and, more importantly, offered assistance to their families, friends, and neighbors.

Engaging personal stories found in the letters with the existing historiography on the Korean War and the North Korea broadens and enriches our understanding of the experience of the Korean War for North Korean families. Including the voices from below deviates from common narrative of the Korean War that heavily focuses on the military and political histories and narrowly defines soldiers and civilians only in their stereotypical roles. Letters, which this thesis examines, open our eyes to the everydayness – both traumas and hopes – which were shared by both soldiers and civilians.

This thesis acknowledges the fragmented nature of the letters when they are not consistent correspondences between select few and one cannot know much about the recipients or the senders beside what is provided in writing. Investigating the myriad of interests, hopes and despairs of North Korean people in the context of extreme circumstances of war helps making sense of these gaps and filling them with what the soldiers and civilians felt and experienced together in a shared space. Doing so allows North Korean people during the Korean War to speak for themselves not merely as unwavering agents of the state or silent victims.

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