MODERN KOREAN LITERATURE AS TESTIMONY TO WAR:
FROM THE KOREAN WAR TO THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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The Korean War was one of the most traumatic events in twentieth-century Korea. The war reshaped Korea's physical landscape and transformed its social and political structures. The war was, in origin, a civil conflict, a struggle between two opposing ideologies and a war that ended with an armistice that divided the Korean peninsula. These factors affected the way Korean writers expressed their experiences in it. The works I examine in my thesis are imbued with a strong sense of helplessness. Applying trauma theory used in psychoanalysis, I find that the helplessness is the result of a failure to deal with the traumatic events of the Korean War, a failure that I attribute to political and social causes. I examine the inability to resolve trauma in the works, and arrive at an understanding of the significance of an audience and a shared collective narrative in the resolution of private and public trauma.

Between 1967 and 1975, South Korea was involved in the Vietnam War. During the two decades following the Korean War, political and social changes had taken place on the peninsula. Several works about the Vietnam War reflect Korea's turbulent changes. I show how the Vietnam War presented Koreans with the temporal and spatial opportunity to reflect upon the past, and paved the way to express unresolved trauma and explore forgotten memories.

Literature about the Korean and Vietnam Wars contributes to our understanding of war and appoints the reader to the complex function of listener to experiences of trauma, hence allowing for a resolution of the authors' (and listeners') trauma. At the same time, reading literature as testimony is complicated when the reader takes into account the way texts are shaped by the political and social contexts surrounding their creation and the ways in which texts are read. I discuss how the anti-communist struggle
as a collective narrative stifled the expressions of trauma and shaped the way memory is
discussed in Korean War literature, and show how Vietnam War literature provides
insights into how social and political changes allowed for the beginning of the resolution
of Korean War trauma.
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Introduction
Modern Korean Literature as Testimony in War: From the Korean War to the Vietnam War

The Korean War (1950-53) was one of the most traumatic events in twentieth-century Korea. The Korean War reshaped the physical landscape and hardened changes in the social and political structure of Korea dating from the establishment in 1948 of separate regimes (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea) on the Korean peninsula. In origin, the war was a civil conflict, a struggle between two opposing ideologies and a war that ended with an armistice that divided the Korean peninsula. All these factors affected the way Korean writers expressed their experiences in it. Applying trauma theory as developed by psychoanalytic scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, I examine several literary works written about experiences related to the Korean War. The characters in the works examined are all overwhelmed with a sense of inability to come to terms with their war trauma. Some Korean critics maintain that the powerlessness expressed in these works, and the dearth of narratives that directly confront wartime horrors, are a direct result of turbulent times and traumatic events. I counter these arguments and show how political and social causes prevented writers from addressing pressing issues central to facilitation of the resolution of Korean War trauma. Through the examination of four representative Korean War works, I arrive at an understanding of the significance of an audience and of a shared collective narrative in the resolution of private and public trauma.

Between 1967 and 1975, South Korea was involved in the Vietnam War. During the two decades following the Korean War, significant political and social changes took place on the peninsula. These changes affected the way Koreans were able to view their
past and express their experiences as victims of colonization and the Korean War. Two major novels and two short stories about South Korea’s involvement in the Vietnam War reflect the transformations in society that followed the turbulent social and political changes of Korea. The time that elapsed between the two wars served as a kind of space or departure that presented Koreans with the opportunity to reflect upon the past, and paved the way to begin to express unresolved trauma and explore forgotten memories.

Literature about the Korean and Vietnam wars contributes to our understanding of war and appoints the reader to the complex function of listener to experiences of trauma, hence allowing for a resolution of the authors’ (and potentially – in the case of many Koreans – the listeners’) trauma. At the same time, accepting literature as testimony is complicated when the reader takes into account the way texts are shaped by the political and social contexts and the ways in which texts are read. Shoshana Felman writes:

In its most traditional, routine use in the legal context – in the courtroom situation – testimony is provided, and is called for, when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question (Felman and Laub).

Thus, testimony is called upon when “historical accuracy is in doubt.” However, it is important to realize that memory as it manifests itself in testimony is also subject to forces similar to those that shape society. Antze and Lambek write in their introduction to Tense Past:

As memory emerges into consciousness, as it is externalized and increasingly objectified, it always depends on cultural vehicles for its expression…in forging links of continuity between past and present, between who we are and who we think we are, memory operates most frequently by means of the threads of narrative. Life itself is a creative construction and there is a point at which a person’s life and the stories she tells about it begin to merge. However, stories require interlocutors and the right to establish authoritative versions never rests with the individual telling the story alone. It shifts from communal institutions
and collective memory to the domain of experts and beyond – to market forces and the power of the state (xvii).

Indeed, “market forces and the power of the state” have played a crucial role in the way Koreans have shaped their narratives and worked through their war trauma. Specifically, I find that the overruling anti-communist ideology is responsible for the ways memory is treated in Korean War literature. The underlying tone and atmosphere of the stories, the indirect mention of events, and the silences and breaks in the texts are unspoken testimonies that resist the overbearing ideology.

Social and political forces continued to weigh heavily upon writers such as Hwang Sukyoung and Ahn Junghyo when they wrote about the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War, a conflict in which Korean soldiers became involved roughly twenty years after the Korean War, has rarely been the subject of modern Korean fiction. Vietnam War novels reflect the way in which some of the social forces that constructed and obstructed memory during the Korean War – the foremost of which was right-left ideology – underwent a transformation from the fifties through the mid-eighties. The protagonist of Ahn Junghyo’s **White Badge** experiences flashbacks to his childhood during the Korean War, thus drawing a direct connection between the two wars. In **The Shadow of Arms**, Hwang Sukyoung uses his characters as mouthpieces for didactic lectures extolling the North Vietnamese cause and attacking the evils of imperialism, an approach that had no channel of expression twenty years earlier under the series of firm anti-communist military dictatorships.

In their introduction to **Tense Past**, Antze and Lambek write: “A central conceit of this book is to imagine memory as practice, not as the pregiven object of our gaze but as the act of gazing and the objects it generates. Memories are produced out of experience
and, in turn, reshape it" (xii). My purpose in this study is to examine the way memory is recorded in works of Korean fiction written about two of the most traumatic events in modern Korean history: the Korean War, which affected the whole population and the repercussions of which are felt until this day through the division of the two Koreas; and the Vietnam War, which involved 300,000 Korean soldiers but has been the subject of relatively little attention by creative writers and critics. I approach literature as testimony to the painful events of the two wars. I take into account, however, that testimony is subject, no less than the recording of history, to construction by politics and society, and that it is crucial to fully understand this construction in order to arrive at a more complete appreciation of literature.
Chapter I
Korea in the Twentieth Century: the Japanese Occupation and the Korean War

The Korean War was one of the most traumatic and disastrous events in the collective memory of modern Koreans. It continues to have both obvious and subtle influences on life in South Korea. The Demilitarized Zone, for example, an area that runs along the border between the two Koreas, is one of the most heavily armed and guarded borders in the world. And in South Korea today, freedom of speech, particularly discussion of left-wing activities, remains a problematic issue.¹

The conflict on the Korean Peninsula began officially on 25 June 1950.² North Korean troops forced their way across the thirty-eighth parallel and began advancing into South Korea. The United States moved quickly to intervene under UN auspices on the side of South Korea. The UN troops had been forced almost completely off the Korean peninsula when forces led by General Douglas MacArthur launched a surprise attack on the port of Inch’ŏn, proceeded to cut off the North Korean supply lines, and pushed the North Korean forces back as far as the Yalu River. There, however, the American and South Korean forces found themselves faced with ‘volunteer’ troops from the People’s Republic of China, North Korea’s ideological ally. By 1951, both armies had entrenched themselves around the 38th parallel, and after two more years of costly and inconclusive battles, a cease-fire agreement was signed which drew the North and South Korean

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¹ As of today, the National Security Law is still in effect in Korea, outlawing any activities that are considered dangerous to the political status quo. A visiting scholar at the University of British Columbia from one of the most prestigious universities in Korea told me that, before his appointment to his position, he had to submit a written statement denouncing his ties to the political left.

² 25 June 1950 is the official day given as the beginning of the Korean War. David McCann notes in his article “Our Forgotten War” that “to revisionist historians in the 1970s and later, the Korean War began to look more and more like a civil war that had been triggered soon after the Allied liberation and the American division of Korea in 1945 and grew from the increasingly violent struggles within Korea between the political Left and Right into the conflict that broke out on a massive scale in 1950.” For more detail see John Merrill’s book Korea: The Peninsular Origins of the War.
borders along almost the very point at which the war had begun. Even today, tensions between the Koreas remain unresolved.³

The territorial division of the Korean peninsula did not, however, start on 25 June 1950. The thirty-eighth parallel, which divided and defined the parties at war, was an artificial line drawn up in thirty minutes on 15 August 1945 by two young American officers using a *National Geographic* map (Oberdorfer 6). It is widely accepted that the war was fought in the name of cold-war ideologies, with the thirty-eighth parallel serving as a clear divide between the rightist factions in the South supported by the United States, and the leftist factions in the North supported by the Soviet Union. But different analysis, such as that provided by Bruce Cumings in his seminal work *The Origins of the Korean War*, proves that cold-war ideologies in fact reinforced an existing conflict and brought it to full scale. The roots of the conflict can be found in the tumultuous history of a traditionally rigid social class system and a forty-year Japanese occupation. It is necessary therefore to examine the war in order to understand more fully the response of the Korean people to this traumatic event.

The end of the Second World War liberated Korea from almost half a century of Japanese occupation. Japan had occupied Korea in 1905 at the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War, and formally annexed Korea in 1910. Japan attempted to make Korea into an inseparable part of Japan by trying to turn its inhabitants into loyal members of the Japanese empire. At the same time, the Japanese belief in the purity and superiority of their race and the often cruel and suppressive nature of the rule left many Koreans bitter

³ For details on the Korean War see Bruce Cumings’ seminal work *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes 1945-1947*, and Dan Oberdorfer’s *The Two Koreas: a Contemporary History*. 
and resentful.\textsuperscript{4} With liberation from Japan in 1945, Korea was suddenly given the opportunity to finally become master of its own fate.

By no means, however, did the Japanese departure leave a political void. Korea had experienced strong internal divisions well before the Japanese occupation – divisions based on severe class discrimination, and not on ideology. Since the establishment of the Chosŏn Kingdom in the fourteenth century, class divisions – which dictated behavioral codes and also defined the opportunities available for personal growth and social advancement in each class – had solidified, creating great resentment and resistance. In the 1920s under the Japanese occupation, this internal division took on an ideological expression. The struggle pitted those in favor of a socialist political system against vehement anti-communists who fought to keep the status quo, with a wide range of positions in between. As long as the Japanese were in power, a delicate balance was held in favor of the anti-communist forces. But the ground was prepared for the materialization of a struggle between the opposing forces in society, and the termination of the Japanese occupation gave the Korean people the long-awaited opportunity to take their nation’s future into their own hands.

On the international scene, however, another plan was brewing. The last-minute Soviet intervention in the Pacific War meant that the Soviets were looking to profit from the aftermath of WW II by gaining spheres of influence, and Korea was of crucial strategic importance in terms of both security and ideology. At first, there was talk of a four-power trusteeship of Korea for up to five years and a Soviet-U.S. Joint Commission

\textsuperscript{4} I thank scholar and translator Kevin O’Rourke for pointing out to me in an e-mail conversation, that not all Koreans regard the Japanese occupation as negative. He comments: “the Korean experience of Japanese occupation was not all dark. I know Korean men who served in the Imperial Army (Officer Corps) with great pride. I know Koreans who look back on student days in Imperial high schools with joy, and to their Japanese teachers with affection” (personal correspondence, February 19, 2002).
that would work toward the establishment of a unified provincial Korean government.

Soon, however, the commission ran into trouble because of the right-left polarization of
Korean politics as a result of Soviet and American occupation policies (Eckert et al. 340).

According to Eckert, while the United States and the Soviet Union were committed to an
internationalist solution to the Korean problem by exercising trusteeship over the country,
both allowed their respective occupation forces to pursue nationalist policies that
envisioned a unified Korean government. Their terms excluded the left and the right, a
view that Koreans on both extremes of the political spectrum themselves encouraged
(340). In any case, by autumn of 1945 both sides – North Korea occupied by the Soviet
Union and South Korea occupied by the United States – had laid the foundations for
separate governments. The final stage in the process of creating two separate Koreas
came in September 1947, when the United States announced its intention to move the
Korean question in the newly created United Nations. Elections were held in May 1948,
and on August 15 the Republic of Korea (ROK) was established with Syngman Rhee as
its first president. On the basis of its UN-supervised elections, the ROK claimed
legitimacy as the only lawful government in Korea and was promptly recognized by the
United States and its allies. North Korea proceeded to have its own elections on August
25, and also claimed to be the only legitimate government on the peninsula. In late 1948
the Soviets withdrew their troops from Korea, and the Americans followed in June 1949
(343).

This brief examination of the circumstances leading up to the Korean War shows
that indigenous internal grounds for division between North and South Korea were
relatively weak. While the Korean people were indeed split ideologically, it is debatable
whether a war on the scale of the Korean War would have broken out had the United States and the Soviet Union not stepped in and sealed the country's fate by imposing their ideologies on either side of the border. Bruce Cumings argues in *Korea's Place in the Sun* that had the Americans and Soviets not intervened, it is quite likely that a leftist regime, a revolutionary nationalist government, would have come to power that, "over time, would have moderated and rejoined the world community" (199). In other words, the Korean people were on the brink of a social revolution – not a full-blown war between North and South.

Viewing the Korean War in this manner helps to explain it as a war not between two traditional foes on either side of the thirty-eighth parallel but as a war produced by class conflict and exacerbated by the interference of superpowers manipulating a country they hardly knew. Indeed, considering that the physical division began only in 1945, one finds it almost hard to believe that a vicious war could erupt a mere five years later, a war that left the entire peninsula in ruins, and the Korean people traumatized and displaced.

A full understanding of the essence of this war is needed in order to understand the range of emotions that are reflected in the literature Koreans produced about the war. First, one must consider the meaning of the war as a civil war. In conflicts between two distinctly different enemies, the identity of each side is generally easy to define. In Korea, however, the reality is more complex. History books record the Korean conflict between armies and political leaders; it is easy to assume, however, that there were many people...

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5 Kathryn Weathersby comes to a similar conclusion after an analysis of sources from the Soviet Union. Weathersby concludes that in the last analysis the Korean War was less a civil than hegemonic war, and that "had the United States made clear its willingness to intervene militarily in the Korean peninsula, then the ever-cautious Stalin would not have approved North Korea's attack" (McCann, *War and Democracy*, xxii). For more information, see Weathersby's article "'Stalin and the Decision for War in Korea,'" chapter 5 of *War and Democracy*.  

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who were forced into battle who had no hand in the political struggles between right and left, and that there were just as many men, women and children who were separated from their loved ones by the arbitrary thirty-eighth parallel. It is likely that many on the battlefield were at the very least uncomfortable taking up arms against their own countrymen. This reluctance was intensified by the fact that so many foreigners fought in the war and the battles, a situation which may have been particularly acrimonious for people who had only recently been freed of a forty-year Japanese occupation.

It is also crucial to examine the ideological aspects of the war, and the political climate in Korea during and after the war in order to understand the range of expression in Korean War literature. According to Cumings, “the Americans worked to turn South Korea anti-Communist, and thus Korea became the harbinger of policies later followed throughout the world” (200). After the division of the country, the appointed president Syngman Rhee and his supporters threw all their efforts into expunging leftist forces in society and government and establishing a hard anti-Communist line. South Koreans had barely time to enjoy their newfound freedom from the Japanese, when they had to report to despised collaborators with the Japanese as their newly found leaders, who were now collaborating with the United States. In North Korea, a similar purge of the right was taking place although in a much more systematic way (see Cumings 232). Thus, during these five years, each side was gearing up its citizens for a full-blown war in the name of righteous reunification with Rhee as an avid anti-Communist in the south against Kim Il Sung, the Communist leader and proud anti-Japanese war hero in the north.

6 Ahn Junghyo writes: we admired the heroic “Red” soldiers and were puzzled to find that the Reds were not red at all. They looked as yellow as ourselves, and we wondered why they were called Reds.... we did not know what those big words really meant” (“A Double Exposure of the War” 162).
The split between conservative nationalism and socialism in Korea does not have a long history. The left-right divisions of postwar Korea and the emergence of nationalist and communist groups date back to the 1920s (Cumings 154). The right-wing activists advocated Woodrow Wilson's inspiring 14-point speech regarding national autonomy and the right to the self-determination of nations, while the socialists appealed to the masses, advocating social equality and a return of power to the people who had lost their livelihood under the Japanese occupation. Under the Japanese occupation, however, Korean socialists and communists had been driven underground, a policy later reinforced by the Americans and supported by President Rhee. Cumings quotes an American general who toured Korea in late 1947 commenting that “many Koreans turned to the left because they could not stomach pro-Japanese collaborators, not because they were communists” (203). Cumings later notes that the Americans “thoughtlessly divided Korea and then reestablished the colonial government machinery and the Koreans who served it....[The] Soviet Union likewise [was] unconcerned with Korea’s ancient integrity and determined to build socialism whether Koreans wanted their kind of system or not” (238).

The picture that emerges, then, is that the thirty-eighth parallel was not a clear-cut division between two ideologically rival states. The issue at hand was whether to promote a social revolution that would rearrange the power structures and give opportunities to those who traditionally had none. Unfortunately, these issues played out on a land strategically valuable to the two strongest nations in the world at the time, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Cold War ideology, then, was very much a part of the Korean War but not necessarily of the Korean domestic scene. One can appreciate the power of ideology by
examining the intensity of the war and the great loss of life. But on the battlefield, it is most likely that ideology was an abstraction that meant little to the dying soldiers. In the literature about the war, this ideology also haunts characters afflicted by the physical and psychological wounds of the war.

Finally, one must keep in mind that discussion of the war in literature was hindered because the artists and writers looking for creative channels to express themselves were limited in the subjects open for free discussion. Because of anti-communist hysteria and strict censorship in South Korea until the late 1980s, people were prevented from expressing themselves freely. Writers, in discussions of their war experiences, were forced to support the state ideology, or else not concern themselves directly with the war at all. This is yet another explanation for the dearth of narratives openly discussing the conflict and the wealth of narratives discussing personal trauma.

Equally important is an understanding of the political situation in South Korea at the end of the war, because it sheds light on the way in which the country as a whole responded to this tragedy. As Eckert explains, “South Korean politics of the 1950s tended to revolve around or against one man: Syngman Rhee” (348). Rhee was one of South Korea’s most dedicated nationalists: in 1909 he had formed the Korean National Association in Hawaii, and he continued a dogged lobbying effort in the United States for the next thirty-five years (Eckert 274). On 20 October 1945, the American command in Korea presented Syngman Rhee to the Korean public as the new leader of South Korea (341). He was a fervent anti-communist and proceeded immediately upon his return to Korea to denounce not only the Soviets and the Korean communists, but any Korean group that was willing to work with them (342). His anticommunist witch-hunts
eventually affected tens of thousands of people, most of whom had no connection with the Communist Party (349). Rhee had a messianic belief that he was destined to reunite Korea under an anti-communist banner (see Oberdorfer 8). Both Rhee and Kim Il Sung sought backing for a major assault on the other side (see Cumings 251-54). Cumings quotes a prominent American journalist who described Rhee in 1950, just before the war, as being “militantly for the unification of Korea. [Rhee] openly says it must be brought about soon…he pleads justice of going into North country” (257).

With Rhee leading a hard anti-communist campaign and calling for reunification both before and after the destructive Korean War, the war was never brought to a conclusive end. Technically, the cease-fire was just that, not an official end to aggression finalized with a peace pact but an open-ended agreement that signified only a temporary respite from aggression – a situation that continues to this day. This technicality, however, carried with it concrete psychological implications for those who were fighting the war. That the Korean War was a civil conflict, that it was a war fought in the name of ideology, and that the political atmosphere did not allow for a clear-cut resolution to the war – all of these bring us to a fuller appreciation of the deep impact that the Korean War had on the Korean people.
Chapter II
Memory and Trauma in Post-Korean War Literature

In their introduction to Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, Felman and Laub discuss the relationship between history and text. “Issues of biography and history”, they explain, “are neither simply represented nor simply reflected, but are re-inscribed, translated, radically rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text” (xv). Felman and Laub thus challenge the authority that written words can have in its function as a record of an event. They “apprehend...the ways in which our cultural frames of reference and our preexisting categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain, and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history” (xv). In other words, Felman and Laub approach texts cautiously and attempt to uncover the social undertones and political dictates that force their way into the telling of history.

Following Felman and Laub's argument, I propose to approach literature as a text that attempts to record events no less than does a historical one. Korean War literature must therefore be examined in view of how Korean society and history have shaped the telling of the war. Korean War literature must be considered not just for its face-value presentation of events but also for the silences incorporated within it and events that are not present in the text. Indeed, Korean War literature is valuable testimony to the trauma experienced by the Korean people. The writing provides important documentation of the trauma experienced by individuals and helps preserve and affirm the lives and memories otherwise lost in war.

It is commonly held among scholars of Korean literature in Korea today that most Korean literature about the war deals primarily with the “legacy of the war” (Kim 5),
with personal trauma rather than the actual combat between South and North Korean soldiers (see my discussion below of Kim Sangt’ae, Park Sinhŏn, Kim Chong’un and Chŏn Hyeja). The striking absence of a war novel per se reveals much about the nature of the Korean War and the political and social background that existed prior to and after the Korean War. A close look at some of the important works of fiction about the war from such prominent authors such as Yi Pŏmsŏn, Yi Ch’ŏngjun, Hwang Sunwŏn, and O Chŏnghŭi, sheds light on the complex effects of the Korean War on the Korean people. These writers’ works are concerned with the loss, dispossession, passivity and most of all lack of resolution and a clear raison d’être for the suffering. First, however, I would like to outline a theoretical framework that will contribute to a deeper understanding of the literature of the Korean War.

Scholar and translator Kim Chong’un argues that despite the formative significance of the Korean War, few Korean literary works deal directly with the war, and none of the war novels is commensurate with the importance of the tragic event itself (Kim 4). Indeed, fewer works overall were published in the troubled decades of the 1940s and 1950s. Figures presented by critic Kim Sangt’ae support this argument: 1679 works were introduced in the decade of the war (1950-1959), compared with 2244 works between 1930 and 1939 and 2234 works between 1960 and 1969 (39). According to Kim Chong’un, the war was significantly the central and omnipresent core of the situation, the shadow as well as the substance, the protagonist as well as the antagonist, of virtually all the novels and stories produced during the first decade of the period. Only what can be called the legacy of the war – the vast dehumanizing aspects of the war, alienation from the self, society and nature – rather than the war efforts and activities themselves loomed large in fiction (5).
Kim Chong’un, in his insightful introduction to his anthology of postwar Korean short stories, draws our attention to the images of man in postwar Korean fiction. Kim divides the figures that appear throughout postwar Korean fiction into three categories: the Walking Wounded, the Inspired Rebel and the Victimized Aesthete. Of these, the Walking Wounded describes those who are wounded physically, spiritually, or both. The general tone of these works is largely despairing and apocalyptic (Kim 5). Discussing the characterization in different works, Kim notes that “another common factor is the manner in which the suffering and brooding main characters respond to the predicaments in which they find themselves...their [pain of loss, despair and anguish] finally do not lead to any awareness pointing to the means by which their plight may be mitigated. Even in the works in which social-environmental nexus plays a vital role, the indictment of the ill remains merely suggestive” (13).

According to scholar Yi Chaesŏn, the powerlessness and the absence of resolution and catharsis that Kim Chong’un points to is a distinct break with the literary tradition in Korea. Yi explains that han is indeed prevalent in the different genres of Korean literature, but it traditionally has always been resolved. “Resolution” (p’uri) can be found embedded in different Korea expressions such as “han-resolving” (hanp’uri), “anger-resolving” (hwap’uri), and “boredom-resolving” (simsimp’uri). (292). Resolution methods can be found in both shamanism and Buddhism (294), and can be traced throughout traditional Korean literature, in genres such as p’ansori and mask dance.

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7 Martin Holman points to a similar phenomenon in his introduction to a collection of translations of Yun Hunggil's stories, The House of Twilight. Holman comments that because Yun’s narrators are often children, “the ideological struggle is present obliquely. The narrator sees the conflicts only on the most basic human level and is either unaware or unconvinced of the magnitude or the import of the ideologies his elders may espouse” (ii).

8 Yi defines han as a complicated set of emotions in which resentment (wŏnhан) reaches a state of psychological closure and entanglement. If left unchecked, this state can grow to become a weighty burden, and thus an emotional trauma (291).
which use methods such as black humor and vulgarity to help the audience resolve its frustrations (296-98). However, with the Japanese occupation and the beginning of a darker era for the Korean people, the nature of catharsis and resolution changed such that, in works from that period, resolution can be found in the language of personal vengeance, aggression and violence (see Yi 299-303). This, according to Yi, is the measure of an unhealthy society, and this kind of catharsis should not be given the status of an aesthetic accomplishment. Yi calls for a rediscovery of resolution in its traditional forms (303-4).  

Rolf Kleber, a professor of psychology and researcher of psycho-trauma, notes that “central characteristics of traumatic stress are the experiences of helplessness, powerlessness, and the threat to one’s life and sense of control. Trauma attacks the individual’s sense of self and the predictability of the world” (33). Trauma, loss of memory and loss of control are central to the four works that I will examine in this thesis. 

Cathy Caruth explains that the notion of trauma has confronted us not only with a simple pathology but also with a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche’s relation to reality. In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 91-92).

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9 Yi’s argument, that the absence of resolution in postwar literature is a clear break from a tradition of catharsis and resolution, is complicated if one takes into account the central role that the acceptance of fate (unmyŏng 運命), destiny (p’alcha 八字) and resignation (ch’enyŏm 譲念) play in Korean philosophy. These are central concepts in Confucianism and Buddhism and are an integral part of tradition and literature. However, it is important to distinguish between resignation to a fate and destiny that has been passed down for hundreds of years (as in Korea, where Confucian philosophy dictated behavior and social status until the fall of the Chosŏn kingdom in 1910, and continues to play an influential role in the modern Korea), and on the other hand the frustration Koreans experienced in the twentieth century when they felt social change was at hand, and Western influences indicated that different values were possible.)
Korean War literature is permeated with a sense of powerlessness, and not merely because of the tragic and traumatic events of the Korean War. As Caruth notes, “for history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (18). Something, in other words, prevents the victim of trauma from coming to terms with and being able to fully perceive his or her own history. In Korea, I argue, it is precisely the ideological divide that prevented people from having access to their traumatic experiences. In Caruth’s words: “the traumatized...carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Trauma 5); and “the ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it” (152). In Korea, a narrative of strict anti-communist struggle was dictated by the state. 10 In his article “Contemporary Korean Literature as Division Literature,” critic and scholar Kwôn Yŏngmin asserts that the post-liberation literary world in Korea was “swept up in the ideological conflict between free democracy and communism” (35). He writes:

Division period literature could be evaluated as an even more significant literary phenomenon in that it grapples with the question of a general recognition of the overcoming of [national] division and the overall life of the Korean people… In particular, that the division of land and people is based upon ideological conflict exerts tremendous influence upon literature dealing with the intellectual world; and literature is constrained in its scope by the demands of ideology (Kwôn, “Contemporary Korean Literature” 36).

10 I am indebted to Don Baker for pointing out to me that many leftist writers went north before June 1950, and thus there was already a rightist or apolitical bias to South Korean literature after the war. Moreover, a series of repressive right-wing governments made it difficult for anyone to write about the war from a leftist or even a neutral perspective (personal correspondence, March 1, 2002). Pihl writes that “ideological strife tore the literary world apart, and its ranks were significantly thinned as about one-third of Korea’s writers – more than 100 – migrated to the North by the early 1950s” (See Pihl 84).
The ideological narrative crowded out the possibility for the exploration and telling of personal stories through which a catharsis and coping with trauma might ensue. Kwŏn notes that “as acute wartime conditions, stemming from ideological confrontation and conflict, took shape, they were accompanied by an increasingly dramatic tension in literature; and, after the war, a language of resistance responding to postwar realities and despair overtook the literary world” (36). Pihl makes a similar observation in his article “Contemporary Literature in a Divided Land”:

The literature of the 1950s was fraught with a sense of estrangement, reflecting the barrenness of the aftermath of the Korea War. Although efforts were made to grapple with questions of existence, works of this period emphasized conflicts between the individual and the world and fell short of offering a general perception of life (83).

Writing about theater and drama in Korean literature, Yi Miwŏn notes that as the scars from the civil war deepened, Koreans’ understanding of the war became limited to a black-and-white understanding of ideology. This perspective, notes Yi, could not but inhibit the maturation of drama; dramatic works from the period of the war are generally plagued with the superficial equation of communism with ultimate evil, and thus fail to go beyond didactic morality plays. Moreover, the plays deal exclusively with the immediate pain and damage caused by the war, and do not explore the long-term psychological repercussions of the war (See Yi Miwŏn 130-32).

It is essential to remember that Korean literary circles, from the beginning of the 20th century, were in conflict over the degree to which their writing had to respond directly to social and political realities — “Engagement Literature,” an approach championed by the leftist groups — and those who opted for and “art for art’s sake” approach. For a detailed discussion, see Kevin O’Rourke’s article, “The Korean Short Story of the 1920s and Naturalism.”

Another scholar, Chŏn Hyeja, comes to a similar conclusion: after examining 25 pieces of fiction from the war period, she notes that though ideology is the main instigation for the Korean War, Korean literature from the war period does not deal directly with the complications stemming from ideology but instead paints a superficial picture in which communism is portrayed as evil, and anti-communism as good (Chŏn 103).
In his article “Characters and Characteristics of Korean War Novels,” Shin Dong-Wook provides a different approach to Korean War fiction. In his summary, he claims that the majority of works opted for a balance between two poles, between the macroscopic view of the war of Korea as a pawn in the hands of superpowers and the microscopic view that focuses on the suffering of the individual. Shin interprets what he finds in some Korean War fiction as what he calls a certain “stoic reserve,” which he attributes to the fact that writers “were hardened by the trials of colonial government, world war, and the social upheaval following liberation; their take on this latest calamity reflects a certain stoic reserve” (357). Shin explains that “even while the Korean War violently shifts the otherwise well-planned direction of each person’s life, the … generation … had already faced and overcome many calamities and was quietly confident that this too would pass” (358). I disagree with his interpretation because I think people at the time could not possibly have guessed which way the war was going. The role ideology and politics played in limiting the expression of writers is much greater than Shin is willing to acknowledge. For example, Shin claims that the writers who began their careers in the late 1950s and 1960s are remarkable in that “quite a number of their works consistently confront the problems of ideological commitment that their generation faced. Not as callous or jaded as the generation that preceded them, these authors truly struggled with the question of involvement and, even more importantly, with which side” (359). Shin writes that later, in the 1970s and 1980s, we see young writers attempting to further expand the thematic boundaries of the Korean War. Still, there is as much continuity as there are abrupt shifts in direction, with their predominant concerns being for the possibility of healing and reunifying the nation (361).
Shin’s interpretation, in my opinion, suffers from his lack of sensitivity to the political subtleties and an absence of attention to the political atmosphere which so varied from the 1950s to the 1980s, and which had a direct effect on what could and could not be expressed in literature. Pihl, for example, notes that any and all discussions of writers who migrated to North Korea were largely limited up until the liberalization in 1987 with the first democratic elections (85). Although it is true that a detailed analysis of all works of Korean War fiction may point to the wide range of emotions that Shin argues can be found in this literature, the few stories that I examine in this paper share qualities of stifled emotions and passivity which indicate that political and social realities of the period were indeed very influential.\(^{13}\)

Yi Pŏmsŏn’s story “A Stray Bullet”\(^{14}\) was published in 1959, just a few years after the cease-fire agreement was signed. It is the story of a man named Ch’ŏrho, who supports a family under conditions of extreme poverty: his deranged elderly mother, his pregnant wife and small daughter, his unemployed younger brother, and his younger sister, who works as a prostitute for the American soldiers. Ch’ŏrho works hard to make ends meet, but in a single day his brother is arrested for armed robbery, his wife dies giving birth, and Ch’ŏrho uses his sister’s money to pay for a risky surgical operation. At the end of the story, he finds himself bleeding to death in a taxi, with nowhere to go. The taxi driver calls him a “stray bullet” – a wanderer with no direction.

\(^{13}\) Two examples of slightly different treatments of the war can be found in Pak Wŏnsŏ’s short story “In the Realm of the Buddha,” and Chang Yonghak’s story “The Poetry of John.” Both stories are directly related to the Korean War, and both grapple with dichotomous realities that result from the paralyzing effects of ideology. In Pak’s story, the silence imposed on the shameful (ideology-related) deaths of family members causes their surviving kin to bury the truth within themselves, but the story ends in a resolution; and in Chang’s story, one of the characters experiences a schizophrenic detachment from reality, while another commits suicide after he is unable to function in a world which insists on imposing strict definitions between left and right, light and dark.

\(^{14}\) Kevin O’Rourke has noted that the Korean title of this story “O’balt’an” should more accurately be translated as “misfire” (personal communication, February 19, 2002).
"A Stray Bullet" is striking first and foremost in its dark, foreboding atmosphere. Ch’ŏrho returns after a long day at work to his home in “Liberation Village,” an ironic name assigned to “a collection of wood shacks, flung at random one against the other into gouges in the hillside” (Yi 272). His mother cannot control her random cries of “Let’s go” – meaning go back to North Korea, to the home that they fled in the war. Chŏrho tries to explain that the 38th parallel now marks a point of no return, but his mother resists his explanations. “I don’t understand it. I never will. Thirty-Eighth Parallel. Are you trying to tell me they built a wall there that goes right up to the sky? Who on earth do you think would stop me from going home?” (276). This personal testimony shows that in many ways the Korean War was an imposed struggle that left many people not only bereft of their homes but confused as to the very meaning of the war and definition of the enemy.

When Ch’ŏrho’s brother Yŏngho returns home after a night of drinking with his friends, the two share an exchange from which it is clear that they differ greatly in their views on life. Yŏngho charges: “Why don’t we try living like other people do for a change? Damn it, everyone else enjoys life, why do we have to go on like this?” (279). When Ch’ŏrho suggests that his brother get a job, Yŏngho refuses, replying instead that he and his friends “just want to get rid of all that baggage and travel light, like everyone else does...you know, all this stuff about conscience, ethics, customs, laws, and all” (283). Yŏngho continues to accuse his brother of being passive: “Sure, it’s good to live a clean life. But do we have to make sacrifices just for you to keep clean? Dressed in rags, starving...you have a bad tooth that throbs day and night, but you don’t do anything about it...you just put up with the pain” (285). This exchange reveals much about the
difference between the characters in the story. Most of the lines belong to Yŏngho, the younger brother, who not only does not express regret at his arrest, but grins at Ch'ŏrho and admits to his crime. Ch'ŏrho, by contrast, says very little throughout the story, thus enforcing the impression that he is weak and passive. When Ch'ŏrho arrives at the hospital too late and discovers that his wife is dead, the only emotion he can muster is relief: “as though some very burdensome task were now over with” (300). His final thoughts before he slips into unconsciousness are: “I’ve too many roles to fulfill. As a son, a husband, father, older brother, a clerk in an accountant’s office. It’s all too much. Yes, maybe you’re right – a stray bullet, let loose by the creator. It’s true, I don’t know where I’m headed. But I know I must go, now, somewhere” (304).

“A Stray Bullet” ends on a dark note, as Ch’ŏrho slips into unconsciousness, leaving his family alone and uncared for. The main theme of the story is Ch’ŏrho’s passivity and lack of control in contrast with his younger brother’s active search for a better life, even at the cost of the sacrifice of morality. In a critical essay about “A Stray Bullet,” scholar Yi Yongnam notes that author Yi Pŏmsŏn accurately portrays the tragic state of affairs in society, and writes that while Yi Pŏmsŏn poses important questions, he offers no solutions: “[Yi Pŏmsŏn] does not resist the paradoxes present in society, but by dealing directly with questions of resignation and acceptance of fate, exposes the limits of defiance to them” (Yi Yongnam 84). The critic writes that the reason “A Stray Bullet” is representative of the times is because its characters fail to arm themselves with resistance, and succumb to a nihilistic vision of life (80-82). Yi Yongnam does not analyze the background of the story, nor does he provide an in-depth exploration of why Yi Pŏmsŏn’s work is such an accurate portrayal of the postwar period in Korea. In fact, the
nihilistic vision of life portrayed in this story, as Yi Yongnam accurately notes, is a vision that corresponds with the incapacity to come to terms with the loss of life and homeland in the Korean War, and moreover, the inability to formulate in words and express the resulting powerlessness that has overcome the Korean people.

Passivity and frustration are also central themes in Yi Ch’ongjun’s story “The Wounded.” The narrator’s brother was a soldier in the Korean War, and has not shared his experiences with anyone for years. A traumatic event at his workplace brings upon him a crisis that he tries to overcome by writing a novel that describes for the first time his experiences during the war. At the same time, the narrator, an art student, is suddenly unable to continue his work until his older brother completes his novel. Both are trapped, each in his own way, in a desperate, immobilizing passivity.

Passivity and frustration are expressed in several different ways in “The Wounded.” First, both brothers experience artistic blocks. The story begins with the narrator’s confession: “For several days, I hadn’t been able to add anything to my new canvas; it overpowered me completely” (Yi Ch’ongjun 128). The narrator blames his creative frustrations on his brother’s writer’s block, saying, “while he was at a standstill, I couldn’t carry on with my work” (129). Second, there is very little dialogue between the characters, and the narrator admits to knowing little about his brother or, for that matter, about himself. About his own art, the narrator says: “I can’t explain even a fraction of what I think about my art nor what I wish to express through brush and paint” (133). “I knew very little about my brother,” he adds (129), and also claims, “my sister-in-law’s assessment of my brother was not completely accurate” (131). And the sister-in-law later accuses the narrator of being elusive, saying, “you’re unknowable too – like [your older
brother]” (145). Their failure to know each other is a part of the characters’ passivity and apparent indifference to their surroundings.

Particularly revealing is an incident that occurs while the brothers are out drinking. The narrator watches with horror as his older brother accidentally steps on the hand of a young beggar girl. The narrator accuses his brother of ignoring the girl, saying, “Your feet must have been out of control, right? The girl didn’t look like she was in pain, but then you couldn’t have known that because you didn’t turn around to look” (134). The absence of reaction in both his brother and the girl shocks the narrator.

In his work Han’guk chonjaeng chon-hugi sosŏl yŏn’gu, critic Pak Sinhŏn addresses the deterioration of morality and humanism in literature and in Korean society in general during the Korean War. Pak remarks that Korean War literature is concerned with how morality changes and deteriorates with the progress of battle and advent of hardship (104). For example, Pak explains that Seoul went from enemy to friendly hands three times within three months of the war, and that during that time, people’s ideologies and loyalties had to undergo transformations overnight (105). Pak claims that the deterioration of human values in Korean society during the war is directly related to the failing economy, and that people were forced into deranged behavior in order to survive (113). He quotes a writer from the period, who discusses the difficulty of creating and writing literature during wartime and attests that at the time, “our souls were rusty and our bodies diseased” (80). Actually, Pak explains, during the war, those who hoped to continue with their lives were deemed abnormal. The literary world was no exception.

15 The issue of shifting loyalties according to changing authorities and governments is a central theme in Chŏn Kwangyong’s story “Kapitan Ri,” which was awarded a prestigious literary prize in 1962 (see Marshall Pihl’s translation in Land Of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction, trans. Marshall R. Pihl and Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton [Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1993]).
Pak quotes literary critic Paek Ch'ŏl who explains that during the war, the literary world, like other parts of society, was scattered, and literature had sunk into a dark and desperate place (81). Finally, Pak writes that during the three years of the Korean War, Korean literature barely kept itself alive through sparse literary magazines that portrayed people’s war experiences. Perhaps because there are so few texts, he suggests, there has been very little research on the literary production during the three years of the Korean War (82). He further claims most novels propagate anti-Communism, while stories about ferocious fighting on the front lines are rare, because writers of the time were interested not so much in the war itself but in the pursuit of distorted existences behind the lines.

According to Pak, writers were caught up in the inescapable struggle of wartime (see Park Sinhŏn 123). While it is true that the war disrupted every aspect of life and made it impossible to create works of art, the alleged scarcity of literature from this period and the overwhelming sense of powerlessness are not sufficiently explained with this somewhat superficial reasoning. Rather, I contend that the scarcity of writing arises from the political imposition of an anti-communist narrative that deprived people of their personal stories.

This argument is supported further by several critics who note that Korean War literature marked a period of introspection, during which literature turned inward to deal with issues of the individual. Kim Sangt'ae notes that from the end of the 1950s, there is evidence of a turning away from national dilemmas or group concerns and a focus on the individual. He notes that, surprisingly, instead of allowing national questions to penetrate their writing, writers seemed to take a step back and observe the meaninglessness of the struggle. Writers from this period, he explains, focus on the futility of private struggles
and personal suffering, not on those of the group (Kim Sangt’ae 61-62). Kwôn Yongmin also notes:

The literature of the 1950s abounds in examples of a focus of concern on searching for the meaning of war and the individual and concentration on a critical understanding of postwar realities, rather than the tragic meaning of national division. In this context, a tension in authorial mentality and an agitated tone were particularly apparent. Such emotional imbalance embodied the weakness of localizing the real state of things to the sphere of individual experience, in spite of the acutely problematic nature of the times (36).

In this article, Kwôn does not provide specific details regarding the repercussions of the overbearing anti-communist narrative on literature of the Korean War, but in the framework I adopt in this thesis, the inward focus of Korean War literature is a direct result of having to avoid or side step a national narrative.16 The choice to write about the individual does not necessarily come from a conscious and deliberate choice to do so but, by focusing on people’s lives, is rather a way of escaping the overall, deafening picture dictated by politics. The exploration of universal questions of suffering, according to Kim Sangt’ae, is also what takes the literature of the Korean War beyond its own borders and joins it with the flow of global literature (63).

The narrator in Yi Ch’ŏngjun’s story “The Wounded” reads through the pages of his brother’s novel, and is deeply disturbed by his passive nature: “He always hesitated, agonizing over other people’s actions, imagining they were his, and never acting on his own” (139). And yet the narrator himself is no different. His ex-girlfriend Hyein comes for a final visit to inform him of her approaching wedding, and hands him a letter. In the letter, she accuses him of the same kind of passivity: “You never wanted to take any kind

16 Kwôn provides an in-depth analysis of ideology in postwar Korean literature in his seminal study of those writers who migrated north, Wolbuk munin yön’gu. Pihl quotes Kwôn as follows: “Questions about the literary people who went north – Who? Why? How? – inevitably produce an acute allergic reaction in people who talk about them because of the ideological questions that are entailed.” (see Kwôn; Pihl 84-85).
of responsibility, and my attempts to pressure you to be responsible never succeeded… perhaps you are under the impression that not taking responsibility is a responsible act in itself” (141). She adds that his brother’s behavior is understandable because his war wounds never healed, but that the narrator himself has “a wound with no origin…suffering from a wound that isn’t a wound” (141). While the older brother manages to come to terms with his wound years later through creative expression, the younger one remains injured by his invisible wound, unable to determine the source of his pain. Here, too, the story ends on a pessimistic note, with no resolution of tension and no release from the weight of helplessness.

Deterioration of morality and people’s inability to take their lives into their own hands are central themes in Hwang Sunwŏn’s novel Trees on a Slope. The novel traces the lives of Tongho, Hyŏnt’ae and Yungu, three young men who meet on the battlefield during the Korean War. Hyŏnt’ae is the leader of the group, a self-assured young man who has no regrets and no compunctions; Yungu is a follower while Tongho, nicknamed ‘the poet,’ is the most sensitive of the group. The novel records the development of the personalities of the three men during the war and, in the case of Hyŏnt’ae and Yungu, after their discharge. At the opening of the novel, Tongho is seen fighting not only his fear of battle but also struggling to hold on to the memory of his girlfriend Sugi, who is waiting for him back home. As the war proceeds and as his friends exert their influence on him, however, Tongho loses his resolve and abandons hope of remaining loyal to his girlfriend and to his own principles. He murders a prostitute and commits suicide. Yungu survives the war and manages to make a life for himself after his discharge. Hyŏnt’ae
falls into lethargy and periods of depressed sleep, and destroys the lives of his friends before he is finally arrested and imprisoned indefinitely.

The first part of the novel focuses on the downfall of Tongho. To begin with, he distances himself from Hyŏnt’ae and Yungu, avoids their drinking and whoring, and focuses on the memory of Sugi. Tongho attempts to cling to her memory and to images of her purity in order to preserve his humanity. But he begins to change after his friend Hyŏnt’ae admits to having raped and murdered a survivor from one of the villages they have passed through. Later, when Tongho’s friends trick him into sleeping with a prostitute, his downfall begins. He describes his feelings thus:

It can happen to anyone. You try to jump a ditch, but you fall short and one foot ends up in the water. You’re disgusted with yourself. The feeling is all the worse if there’s mud or sewage in the ditch. And if you’re wearing new shoes, it’s a struggle to keep from losing your temper. Why didn’t you start running farther back, you ask yourself. Then you could have made it. Ah hell! You finally think. You let your anger run its course, and by that time you feel like sticking your other foot in the ditch and getting it mucked up too (52).

From that point on, Tongho loses his self-control and puts his “other foot in the ditch” thinking “it was high time he killed off that part of himself” (52). Tongho burns Sugi’s letters and makes an effort to erase both emotion and memory. He is haunted by a dream of a bus with no driver, rolling down a dangerous pass with only a single screw holding it together. His loss of control reaches a peak when he returns to the prostitute he had been seeing only to discover her with another client, and shoots them both. That night, he returns to his watch with Hyŏnt’ae and asks: “what I’d like to know is, are we the victims or the victimizers? ...the way I look at it, the young people serving in this war are nothing but victims – no matter what they may have done” (74).
Tongho’s question is a pivotal moment in the story. The roles played by the young people who participate in the war – soldiers and civilians alike – are ambiguously defined. The characters in the story are overwhelmed by a sense that they have lost control of their lives. Yungu is the only one who tries to start anew; Hyŏnt’ae falls into a state of lethargy that destroys both himself and those around him. Hyŏnt’ae talks about needing a “spiritual pruning” (82). He obtains a visa and plane ticket to America, one of the most valuable luxuries at the time. And he recognizes his need to leave, “if for no other reason than to break out of his ineffectual ennui” (100). But instead of taking charge of his life, he slips back into a “languid weariness” (101) and depressed sleep. Towards the end, Hyŏnt’ae articulates thoughts very similar to Tongho’s:

Have you ever felt like you had too much freedom? I don’t mean an excess of freedom in itself, but the excess you feel when you can’t deal with that freedom... You know what it’s like once you’ve fallen into that situation? At first you move your foot a little and you think you can get out of it. But it doesn’t work. You can move your whole body, and the more you move the deeper you go in... And there’s something else. When you fall into that swamp, you have no idea [of] the situation you’re getting into. You find you’re in up to your knees, then you’re up to your waist, then your chest, then your neck, see?... While it’s happening, you figure you can call out for someone to save you. But it doesn’t work that way. Once you fall into an excess of freedom it’s all over. Once you realize where you are, you’re already in over your neck (132).

Hyŏnt’ae and Tongho represent opposite extremes of the human spectrum: Hyŏnt’ae lacks a conscience and feels most confident in the battlefield, while Tongho’s artistic sensitivity cannot withstand the horrors of war. Yet both experience a similar paralysis in the face of a fate they cannot change. In Trees on a Slope, the defining line between victim and victimizer is blurred and the conventional understanding of the enemy challenged. In its place is a confused world where people lack both the memory to
preserve their loved ones and the power and control that are needed to change their own lives.

In her discussion of post-traumatic stress syndrome, Cathy Caruth notes that, “the pathology (PTSD) consists... solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Trauma: Explorations in Memory, 4-5). She continues:

The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. (8)

Caruth explains that “repetition at the heart of catastrophe -- the experience that Freud will call “traumatic neurosis” -- emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (2). According to Caruth, victims of trauma are doomed to repeat, reenact and incessantly re-experience their past precisely because they were prevented from fully experiencing and knowing their experiences in the first place: “[The] insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred. Trauma ... does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (151). Indeed, all the characters that appear in the works I examine are compelled to relive trauma in one way or another. In “A Stray Bullet,” Ch’ôrho loses his family to postwar social and political upheaval and chooses to go through surgery which kills him; In “The Wounded,” the elder brother’s war scars return to plague both him and his younger brother in the form of
artistic block and emotional paralysis. Hwang Sunwŏn’s characters also continue to carry their trauma within them after the war, and Sugi is left pregnant with Hyŏnt’ae’s child, a symbol of the passing of trauma from one generation to the next. Caruth holds that “unlike the symptoms of a normal neurosis, whose painful manifestations can be understood ultimately in terms of the attempted avoidance of unpleasurable conflict, the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way” (Unclaimed Experience 59). Caruth turns to Freud to explain further:

[Freud] proposed that traumatic recall remains insistent and unchanged to the precise extent that it has never, from the beginning, been fully integrated into understanding. The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge...and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time. Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become...a “narrative memory” that is integrated into a completed story of the past. The history that a flashback tells...is, therefore, a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. (Trauma: Explorations in Memory 153)

Nowhere is the theme of reenactment of trauma more clear than in O Chŏnghŭi’s chilling novella “Spirit on the Wind.” The story is told from points of view that alternate between Sejung and his wife, Ùnsu. The couple leads a relatively peaceful existence, except for the wife’s occasional unexplained disappearances. Sejung hopes that after the birth of their child, his wife will cease her wanderings but her disappearances continue, and slowly erode their relationship. Sejung is furious at his wife’s irresponsible neglect of their son, while Ùnsu on her part cannot explain her behavior nor can she control her drifting. On one tragic outing, she reaches a mountain, where she is gang-raped. When she gets home she finds that her husband, who had come home earlier to find their son
sleeping outside the locked gate of their house, has decided to turn her away once and for all. Unsu retreats, and her husband files for divorce. She makes one final attempt to reconcile with her husband but fails, and proceeds to take her son for what turns out to be an overnight trip. Furious at what he can only imagine as a kidnapping of their son by his unworthy mother, Sejung takes back their son, and it is clear that his wife has lost everything. It is only then, at the very end of the story, that her stepmother reveals to her the truth about her past and she begins to understand the strange powers that control her and force her to drift forever.

The story opens when Unsu comes home after having disappeared again for a few days. To her husband’s queries, she can give only vague answers, at which he marvels, “was it really possible...that she didn’t specifically remember where she’d been?” (O 1). This is, in fact, her ailment – Unsu cannot remember her past. She discovers at a young age that her mother is not her biological mother, but she keeps the secret to herself. And from time to time, a force she does not understand seizes her and sends her in search of her memory.

Unsu’s countenance reflects her inner turmoil. Her face is haggard, her clothes worn-out and limp. Her every move cries of negligence and carelessness, and she chain-smokes uncontrollably. When she first disappears, her husband Sejung is sure a disaster has befallen her – yet when he finds her sitting alone on a beach, after a sleepless week worrying about her – she can only blink and smile, and grope for words. Later, she excuses her actions by explaining that she sought out the site because is was where the two had spent their honeymoon: “Like I said, I just wanted to come back here. To see if
I’d have the same feeling I had then…” (15). She has gone in search of memories and a past that elude her.

Her disappearances continue, as does her self-neglect. “I have these spells – that’s all. I just get to wondering, is this how life is supposed to be? Is this how I’m supposed to live?” (19). To Sejung, she seems an “eternal trail of smoke, an everlasting shadow” (21). He spots her one cold evening on the roof of their house: “There on the slab roof stood my wife, a spirit on the swirling wind that rent the dark heavens” (21). In Sejung’s eyes, Unsu appears to be a woman lost, who gives in to self-destruction and who, by disappearing more and more frequently, convinces her husband and the reader as well that she is an untrustworthy, unfit mother.

The third-person narrative told from Unsu’s point of view sheds a different light on her story. Told from her perspective, her helplessness seems all the more frustrating because she is keenly aware of it. She feels her inadequacy as a wife and mother at every turn – yet is unable to control the spirits that drive her away in search of something she herself has no knowledge of. She knows that she is in search of memory: “Whenever she heard the wind, Unsu would nod as if some long-forgotten memory were suddenly surfacing” (24); “Her wandering mind…was constantly trying to grab onto a gust of the wind rattling the windows” (25). All that is left of her childhood dreams are “the bare bones of her anxious quest for identity, to be stirred up and given wing by the slightest breath of wind” (29).

Memory is a central theme in “Spirit on the Wind.” Unsu’s endless wanderings and her inability to stop them are rooted in her lack of memory of her early childhood. In
her heart-rending monologue at the end of the story, she appeals to the people living in
her hometown village, but does so silently, unable to voice her pain to the very end:

Do you remember a little girl? ...something happened in that yard...could you tell
me what it is that keeps pushing me from behind, that keeps shaking me by the
neck? I have a frightening yearning inside me that blows me about like the wind,
that sets me adrift. I’ve paid a great price – lost everything except my
shell...What could it possibly be, this thing that prevents me from staying put,
that rips me away? Eyes I can’t see are examining me – whose are they? A soul I
can’t see has set me drifting – whose is it? ...And now I’m a phantom – I don’t
even have a shadow. I look back and see no trace of myself. All I do is wander,
rootless, imprisoned in the wind’s vortex (78).

Only on the very last page of the story does Ünsu find her memory, as her stepmother
tells her the truth: that she walked halfway across the city on her bare feet to find the
woman who was to become her stepmother after she witnessed the cold-blooded murder
of her twin sister, mother and father by hungry looters during the Korean War.

At the same time that she struggles to recapture her memory, Ünsu must also
suppress memory in order to retain her sanity on the day she loses her way in the
mountain and is brutally gang-raped. “Was she supposed to keep her eyes and ears open,
to etch this scene in her memory?” (39). Later, she plans to go to her husband, to
reconcile with him, and promise to lose the memory of the rape: “You don’t realize this,
but I have experienced something no one should have to experience, something so
horrible I can’t even remember it. But I’ll forget everything. And if I forget it completely,
won’t it merely be one ugly, horrible incident that has nothing to do with me?” (67).

Memory is a key to unlocking the source of trauma, thus allowing for the healing
to begin. Victims of traumatic events must learn to cope with the memories of their
experiences in order to free themselves of their debilitating effects, and in order to gain a
perspective that allows them to continue with their lives. In order to uncover and come to
terms with one's traumatic experiences, Dori Laub comments that there is "an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (Felman and Laub 78). The articulation of the events is therefore the prerequisite to healing.

As scholars such as Kleber and Caruth point out, however, the ability of individuals to talk about their trauma is directly influenced by their social environment. "A person victimized by a traumatic experience does not live in a vacuum," Kelber explains. "He or she is surrounded by others, not only the people in the close environment, but also the members of the society as a whole and the legacies of earlier generations. All these people shape the process of coping with trauma and its consequences" (303-4). As stated before, Caruth also notes that social context and the individual's personal history within that social context exert a great influence on the way individuals deal with their trauma (Trauma: Explorations in Memory 110). Clearly, society and politics are of central significance in the process of helping individuals come to terms with both their personal grief and with collective trauma. It is therefore crucial to appreciate the different forces working upon the individual during the Korean War. The political leadership at the time of the Korean War was not willing to allow for narratives outside of the anti-communist line, and was thus unable to take responsibility for the healing of its people who might have other stories to tell. In consequence, a second crisis exacerbates the trauma reflected in Korean War literature: the crisis of witnessing.

According to Caruth,

the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another. The meaning of the trauma's address beyond itself
concerns, indeed, not only individual isolation but a wider historical isolation that, in our time, is communicated on the level of our cultures.... This speaking and this listening – a speaking and a listening from the site of trauma – does not rely ... on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don’t yet know of our own traumatic pasts (Trauma: Explorations in Memory 11).

If individual stories are inaccessible or impossible, (as, for example, in the case of those Koreans for whom ideology meant little or those who experienced oppression under the anti-communists and liberation under the communists) their witnessing of events is rendered irrelevant. Korea during the war was precisely what Felman and Laub describe as “a world in which the very imagination of the Other was no longer possible” (81);

“Testimony is...the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal ‘thou,’ and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself” (85). The Korean people did share traumatic experiences in the war, but the overriding anti-communist narrative robbed them of their personal testimony. In “Spirit on the Wind,” for example, Unsu fails to find an audience in herself and in others. She is doomed to relive her trauma, through a gang rape and the loss of her child. Felman and Laub explain the consequence of not being truly listened to:

The act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing, if the price of speaking is re-living; not relief, but further retraumatization.... Moreover: if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma – a re-experiencing of the event itself....[Ultimately,] th[e] denial by the listener inflicts...the ultimately fateful blow.... The absence of an emphatic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (Felman and Laub 67-68).

Any war leaves irreparable physical and psychological scars on the generations of men, women and children who are directly involved, and on the generations that follow

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17 See above for discussion of Kwôn’s article “Contemporary Korean Literature as Division Literature.”
them. Coming to terms with the memory and trauma of war depends on both the initiative of the individual and on that of the collective, and these efforts must be supported by all strata of society. The ability of a nation as a whole to come to terms with war and explain its origins and purposes can have immeasurable effects on the people who risk their lives and hopes for their country. In Korean literature of the time, such issues remained for the most part both un-addressed and unresolved. Korean literature about the war provides insight into how the internal and external factors that contributed to the Korean War prevented the Korean people from having access to their history, and from alleviating the trauma they experienced.
Chapter III
The Vietnam War in Korean Literature

Paul Fussell, in his seminal work on World War I, writes: “Every war is alike in the way its early stages replay elements of the preceding war. Everyone fighting a modern war tends to think of it in terms of the last one he knows anything about.... The act of fighting a war becomes something like an unwitting act of conservative memory, and even of elegy” (314). Much research is being conducted today into the way traumatic events that take place in one generation begin to be approached and understood only in the generation that follows it. This research can be traced to Freud’s explanation of trauma. Caruth notes, for example, that in the case of accident trauma, it is “the act of leaving that constitutes its central and enigmatic core” (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 22). She quotes Freud as follows:

> It may happen that someone gets away [literally, “leaves the site”], apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision” (Moses and Monotheism, taken from Sigmund Freud, Studienausgabe, band 9).

“The trauma of the accident,” Caruth explains, “its very unconsciousness, is borne by an act of departure. It is a departure that, in the full force of its historicity, remains at the same time in some sense absolutely opaque, both to the one who leaves and also to the theoretician, linked to the sufferer in his attempt to bring the experience to light” (Unclaimed Experience 22). It is possible, then, to think of the twenty years between the Korean War and the Vietnam War as a kind of “departure,” a space which at once exacerbates the trauma but also allows for the opportunity to begin to bridge the temporal and spatial gap between the two wars.
The Vietnam War, in which Koreans became involved for eight years, provided such an opportunity for the soldiers fighting in the war.\textsuperscript{18} Between 1965 and 1973, South Korea sent 300,000 troops to fight on behalf of the Americans in their anti-communist war against North Vietnam. The Vietnam War helped stimulate South Korea’s economy, and Korea’s political leverage with the U.S. was improved thanks to the country’s active involvement in the war. More important, however, the war in Vietnam was close enough in circumstance, but distant enough both temporally and spatially, to give Koreans the opportunity to reflect on the Korean War, on their nation’s politics, and on their identity as a struggling Asian nation. In several works of fiction about the Vietnam War, writers Hwang Sukyoung (“Pagoda”, 1970; “Camel eyes” 1972; The Shadow of Arms, 1983-1987) and Ahn Junghyo (White Badge, 1983), begin to work through their past and reassess both their individual trauma and their identity as a part of a collectivity of victims under Japanese colonization, of the Korean War, and of three decades of military authoritarianism.

To gain a fuller appreciation of the Korean involvement in Vietnam and Korea’s reactions to the Vietnam War, one must understand the relationship between the two wars. Khong writes in his book Analogies at War, "The historical analogy that played the most influential role in the decision-making of the 1960s was that of Korea. This is true...because however one sifts the record – by quantitative analysis of the public and private use of the analogies, by textual analysis of the documents of the period, or by what former policymakers are now willing to say – the “lessons” of Korea emerge as a preeminent consideration in the minds of those who formulated America’s Vietnam policy (97)."

\textsuperscript{18} The degree to which the Vietnam War enabled Korean society as a whole to come to terms with Korean War experiences is difficult to assess. The War in Vietnam still today remains relatively un-discussed, and the overall dearth of works of literature about the Vietnam War reflects this silence.
Khong goes on to argue that “the Korean analogy – or rather, what the U.S. decision-makers considered to be the major lesson of the U.S. experience in the Korea War – can explain why the Johnson administration decided to intervene in Vietnam, as well as why the American intervention took the form it did” (97). For the purposes of this thesis, the details of how the Korean War influenced the American involvement in Vietnam are not as important as the fact that the U.S. administration had the Korean War very much in mind when it entered the Vietnam War. According to Khong, the way the U.S. administration defined the situation and assessed the stakes in South Vietnam contained the implicit notion that “U.S. military action along the lines of Korea might be necessary to counter communist expansion” (100). The fundamental lesson learned from the Korean War was that “international communism was at work” (101), and that the war in Korea had proved successful insomuch as the U.S. managed to prevent North Korea and its supporters, the Soviet Union and China, from expanding, and South Korea remained independent (see Khong 99). Despite the fact that the Korean War had ended in stalemate and the country remained divided, by 1960 Korea had become “an example of a successful limited war” (102). Naturally, the vision of the Vietnam War as analogous to the Korean War was passed down through the ranks to the soldiers who fought in the war. The Korean soldiers who fought on behalf of the Americans were exposed to, and indeed were a part of, the anti-communist mission in Vietnam that drew so clearly from

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19 An additional connection between the Korean War and the Vietnam War is that Lieutenant Colonel Dean Rusk was one of the two American officers who, on 10 August, took a *National Geographic* map of Korea and drew a line roughly along the 38th parallel (Oberdorfer 6). Dean Rusk was later Secretary of State under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and played a major role in the decision-making of the Vietnam War. Rusk, along with President Johnson, believed that the Korean War was analogous to the situation in Vietnam, a belief that greatly affected the decisions made in the Vietnam War (Khong 110).
the past experiences of the Korean War. As a result, Korean soldiers began to rethink their past, based on their experiences in the Vietnam War.

South Korea became involved in the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s. From before the Korean War to 1960, South Korea was led by Syngman Rhee. Rhee, an avid anti-communist, had made his name in U.S. and world politics as a tireless advocate for the independence of Korea from Japanese colonial rule. Once he became South Korea's first president, however, Rhee proved to be a dictatorial leader. He alienated both his own people and the United States government, who had openly supported his regime. The U.S. was committed to strengthening Rhee politically, militarily and economically as an important opponent to the growing military power of communist North Korea. In 1960, however, the people of South Korea took to the streets against Rhee's authoritarian rule in the Student Revolution of 19 April. Rhee stepped down and elections were held. The year after this triumphant political revolution, however, a military strongman and former officer in the Japanese army by the name of Park Chung Hee led a military coup and took control of the political and military institutions. The United States did not support him at first, and demanded that he take off his military uniform and stand for election. Later, the U.S. began supporting him for his vehement anti-communist stance and for his emphasis on developing a strong Korean army. The support Park gave the United States in the Vietnam War was also a major factor in changing how the U.S. viewed him. Park's military coup of 1961 began another authoritarian era in the history of South Korea, which was to end in 1979 with the assassination of Park by the head of his secret police.

The relationship between Park and the United States was crucial because it led to the involvement of Korea in the Vietnam War. It was in the interests of the United States
to support a strong anti-communist leader in South Korea at a time when the cold war was at its peak. North Korea had committed repeated acts of aggression, including an attempt on Park’s life (in which his wife was killed). Park, for his part, depended on U.S. economic and political support for his power. When the Johnson administration launched a diplomatic mission to secure troops for the Vietnam War effort from European and Asian countries, Park consented and South Korea became the most important contributor by far, dispatching a total of some 300,000 troops to Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 (Eckert 397-98).

Park’s decision to participate in the Vietnam War had several far-reaching economic and political consequences. The war in Vietnam quickly developed into an economic stimulus for South Korea: in 1966, the war accounted for 40% of South Korea’s crucial foreign-exchange receipts (Eckert 398). Many South Korean conglomerates, such as Hanjin and Hyundai, received their first economic boost from the war (399). Han Sungjoo notes: “The Vietnam ‘earnings’ became available during a critical stage in Korea’s economic development, when large amounts of international liquidity were needed for the rapid expansion of export industries” (898).

The financial benefits were significant not only on a national level but on a private level as well. Participating in the Vietnam War meant, for individual soldiers, an opportunity to earn wages and obtain foreign goods at a time when such opportunities were scarce. Blackburn explains that a Korean private, earning a base salary of $1.60 a month, could earn almost that much, from $1 to $1.25, with one day’s service in Vietnam (65-66). The price for Korean soldiers in Vietnam proved to be a bargain for the United States, which paid between $5,000 and $7,800 a year per South Korean soldier, as
opposed to about $13,000 a year for an American soldier in Vietnam (Han 897).\textsuperscript{20} Korean soldiers were in effect mercenaries for the American government. According to Blackburn, although no official records expressly state that the U.S. government hired mercenaries in Southeast Asia, “a close reading of the government documents suggests strongly that several high ranking American officials did consider the Korean troops as such” (66). The fact that Korean soldiers fought in Vietnam for money is essential for understanding the ways in which they viewed themselves and consequently dealt with their war trauma.

South Korea’s involvement in Vietnam also had a profound influence on its domestic and foreign politics. The government became much more assertive, and less susceptible to U.S. pressures. At the same time, Korea became more aggressive in, and capable of, generating military and economic support from the United States (Han 894). Han notes, for example, that the United States “promised to increase overseas allowances for the Korean troops and to give South Korea preferential treatment in the procurement of supplies, as well as helping her to strengthen and modernize her armed forces” (899).

More significantly, South Korea’s decision to send troops to Vietnam owed much to its fear of a weakening in the U.S. security commitment to Korea. South Korea, too, saw the Vietnam War as analogous to the Korean War, and the South Korean government urged the U.S. “to strive for a military victory” and “reject any peace that signified appeasement” (Han 906). In May 1969, Washington was stunned when President Park met privately with South Vietnam’s President Thieu and urged the latter to reject any settlement involving a coalition government. The two presidents declared their “common

\textsuperscript{20} Don Baker points out that the U.S. may have paid from $5000 to $7800 per soldier, but the soldiers themselves took home much less than that. The difference went to the Korean government.
resolve to reject enemy demands for the withdrawal of allied forces from Vietnam” (Han 907). In summary, South Korea’s decision to join the U.S. in its war effort in Vietnam was intended to prevent a weakening in the U.S. security commitment to Korea, to influence the Vietnam negotiations, to increase its international contacts and roles, and to acquire greater bargaining power in its relationship with the United States and maximize economic gains (911).

The fact that Korea and Vietnam have similar histories and both nations share a traditional Confucian culture complicated matters for the Korean soldiers who went to fight with the Americans in Vietnam. The aforementioned semi-autobiographical novels and short stories reflect the complexities that Korean soldiers faced in Vietnam. Hwang’s Shadow of Arms and Ahn’s White Badge reflect a general ambiguity regarding the Viet Cong and the conflict in general. Hwang’s ambiguity is turned outwards: while recognizing that the Viet Cong are the enemy, he still sympathizes with the North Vietnamese, expresses antipathy for the Americans and regards the Korean soldiers with general apathy. Ahn, on the other hand, turns his ambiguity inwards. He focuses his novel on two characters who are emotionally scarred by the war and fail to function in society upon their return. Ahn’s characters internalize the battlefield of Vietnam and suffer because of their inability to come to terms with the waste of the war and their responsibility as participants in the war. Ahn’s protagonist frequently experiences flashbacks to his childhood during the Korean War, memories that reflect his complicated position in the Vietnam War.

In addition, both authors express ambiguity regarding their role as paid soldiers in a war not their own. Their positions are complicated by the fact that they share a tradition
with the Vietnamese. In the war, they are superior to the Vietnamese (as American agents), yet branded inferior by the Americans who often cannot distinguish between the two cultures. The treatment of women in these two novels brings to mind Korea’s own genre of kijich'on fiction, which describes the prostitution and black market activities surrounding the American military bases in South Korea.

In The Shadow of Arms, author Hwang Sukyoung externalizes his ambivalent attitude towards the Vietnam conflict. He does so by failing to discuss the inner thoughts of the characters, instead openly sympathizing with the North Vietnamese cause and accusing the American soldiers of perpetuating an imperialist war and of committing war atrocities. Furthermore, Hwang uses his novel as a stage to deliver didactic lectures about the state of affairs in Korea. He makes the black market in Vietnam the focus of his novel, and uses his characters as mouthpieces for pointed sermons on the corruption of the United States. The characters are superficial and the story is straightforward: Ahn Yongkyu is a Korean soldier who is stationed in Danang as a member of the Joint Investigations Headquarters. He is charged with uncovering a grand scheme by a North Vietnamese soldier, Pham Minh, to divert American weapons to the cause of the NLF. Although Ahn uncovers Pham’s plans and kills him, the author is clearly sympathetic to the cause and struggle of the North Vietnamese soldier. As critic An Namil notes, Pham Minh emphasizes that his is a struggle for independence and liberation from foreign occupational forces, rather than an ideological struggle between the forces of North and South Vietnam (276):

Under his breath, Minh rehearsed the ten essential points of the NLF path, followed by the final moving phrases: “Victory certainly shall be ours. For the combined strength of our people is not to be broken, justice is on our side, and colonialism has had its century in the sun and is now bound for extinction. Peace,
democracy and the national liberation movement are spreading far and wide like a storm, winning one victory after another" (Hwang 309).

An Namil explains that author Hwang Sukyoung expresses his philosophy through Pham Minh’s character: that true victory of a people’s liberation movement cannot come with support from the outside but must come from a natural surge of strength from the inside (277). In his introduction to Hwang’s book, literary critic Paik Nakchung notes that Hwang “clearly [sympathizes] with the cause of the National Liberation Front” (Paik v).

Hwang’s sympathy for the Vietnamese is also apparent in his short story “T’ap.” Corporal O is a soldier assigned to a division that is charged with guarding a run-down pagoda in a Vietnamese village. The American soldiers appreciate the pagoda only in terms of its strategic importance. Corporal O, on the other hand, realizes the emotional value of the pagoda, and expresses his sympathy for the North Vietnamese who hold the structure in such high esteem. “In the past,” O says, “I had passed through several villages during my patrols and was surprised by their religious fervor” (59). The Americans and Koreans capture a hostage and tie him to the pagoda, expecting thus to effectively fend off any enemy operations. Another soldier explains to O that the North Vietnamese will not attack the pagoda and their hostage out of respect for the village. “They have a strong feeling of camaraderie-in-arms” (66). The narrator’s sympathies are most clearly revealed in the final dialogue between the American soldier and O:

I didn’t like it, but I did try and explain the relationship between the people and Buddhism, the state of mind of the officers in charge and the villagers. But as soon as I did I realized that we had been completely duped. Whose pagoda was it, anyway? As soon as I had uttered the word Buddhism and before I had finished my sentence, my western counterpart was already nodding his head:

“We have to get rid of such headaches. The United States Army has to be able to protect all places, all the time. And I mean the whole world.”

I then realized that there was no way to explain to him the filthy, sticky relationship we had with that pagoda. The officer seemed to perceive himself as
part of the strongest, most practical, most rational power in the world and his opinion of the pagoda was formed in light of his background. What value could there possibly be in shedding even a drop of blood over a pile of rocks? But me, I know. I know that we've been fighting for our own pathetic lives" (87-88).

The last line in the story is spoken by one of the American sergeants: “I tell you, I don’t get those yellow people” (88). It is clear that the author sees himself as a part of the “yellow people,” on the opposite side of the fence of the American soldiers.

Hwang’s anti-American feelings are clearly visible in both his short story “Nakt’a nukkal” and his novel The Shadow of Arms. In the short story, there is a scene in which an American soldier is seen beating a Vietnamese child for having stolen a book. And in several damning chapters of his novel, Hwang also accuses American soldiers of raping Vietnamese women. An Namil notes that Hwang’s dry description of the Americans’ actions in Vietnam serves to emphasize their cruel acts and clarify their evil intentions in Vietnam, and to prove that they did not in fact have Vietnam’s future and freedom in mind in the Vietnam War (278). Paik states in his introduction, “I believe a good deal of the power of this novel derives from its being more than just a realistic presentation of a little-known aspect of the Vietnam War…. the black markets, with the PXs of the U.S. military as their main fountainhead, also serve as a synecdoche of a war which, for all its irrational carnage and wastefulness, was meant to promote the interests of the hegemonic capitalist power” (Paik vi). Later, Paik adds: “the author no doubt was inspired by the similarities in the two struggles” (vii). An Namil also comments on Hwang’s unique approach in his novel, explaining that while the roots of the Vietnam War are complex and numerous, it is still the case that most novels dealing with the Vietnam War choose rather to explore the problems of life, death and love related to the war. In An’s opinion,
what sets Hwang’s book apart is its penetration into the basic nature and foundation of the war (An 267) and its depiction of the war as not simply an anti-communist struggle, but also an anti-imperialist war (274). Hwang shows that U.S. aid was in fact nothing more than a weapon used to control foreign countries, and the PX merely a “Trojan horse” institution employed to turn economies to the benefit of the United States (279-80). Song Sûngch’êl notes that “Hwang’s strategy is clear: he tries to convey his message by stereotyping his characters, the Americans, Koreans and Vietnamese, so that there is no depth and no truthfulness to his characters” (89-90). While it is clear that Hwang is approaching the Vietnam War from a unique angle, his superficial psychological portraits and unnatural, drawn-out didactic monologues weaken the communicative and persuasive effects of his novel.  

Hwang’s critical stance toward his own government and his anti-imperialist sentiments did not go unnoticed: he was arrested following his unauthorized visit to North Korea in 1989, a criminal offense for South Korean citizens, and after spending four years in exile, was imprisoned in South Korea until pardoned in 1998 by current president Kim Dae Jung. Hwang also notes that during the time he was writing The Shadow of Arms, he was “harassed by the domestic security agencies several times” (Armstrong and Lee 433).

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21 It is interesting to note that all the above mentioned critics, regardless of their positive or negative assessments of Hwang’s writing, do not challenge his political stance which views the United States as a perpetrator of a war aimed at creating an economically dependent Vietnam (and by extension, Korea). In Outposts of Empire, Steven Lee explains: “The American empire after 1945...cannot be viewed within a traditional framework of imperialism. It was informal in the sense that it sought to create indigenous elites with a stake in an alliance with the Western industrialized world...Korea and Vietnam were to act as local Western proxies, to contain the outward expansion of the Soviet Union and China, and eventually to help retract communist power globally” (254). In his book, Lee provides a detailed analysis of the U.S. and its allies’ economic interests in Asia that contradicts Hwang’s approach.

22 President Kim has advocated a more forgiving, open policy towards North Korea called the “sunshine policy,” an approach that won him the Nobel Peace Prize in the year 2000.
Hwang's standpoint on the Vietnam War is evident in an interview that was held between the Korean writer and North Vietnamese writer Bao Ninh. The two met on 4 June 2000, a few days before President Kim held a historical meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong II. Hwang began his meeting with Bao Ninh by bowing before him and apologizing "on behalf of Korean intellectuals" (Armstrong and Lee 432). Hwang noted that the year 2000 marked both the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War, and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War — tragedies "the U.S. 'Pax Americana' policy caused in Asia" (432). Hwang mentioned that the Korean soldiers who fought in the front lines "were all from farm villages. They were young people who, at nineteen and twenty years of age were poor and hungry... the direct contact, intensive '3-D' [dirty, difficult, and dangerous] war was mainly carried out by the Korean Army" (434). The two writers agreed that "the Korean War is the Vietnam War and the Vietnam War is the Korean War" (434). Hwang explained that during the Vietnam War, he was assigned to be a criminal investigator of black market activities, and it was at that time that he "discovered what the Vietnam War was ... that the United States was carrying out an imperialist War" (436). He adds:

I am very grateful to the Vietnamese people. I was reborn as an East Asian writer, and the Vietnamese people taught me many things. I discovered my homeland's destiny there, too... the things I learned from the South Vietnamese liberation struggle were a mental help. In the end, after returning from the Vietnam War, I became an active, radical leftist (436).

From the interview, it is clear that Hwang deeply identifies with the Vietnamese people and their plight. The two writers found that they shared similar biographical backgrounds: Bao Ninh and Hwang both had families in the North as well as South of their country.
In addition to the ambiguity that Hwang expresses towards his characters and the sympathy with which he portrays the North Vietnamese cause, Hwang uses his novel to criticize the Americans and to portray the state of affairs in Vietnam as a mirror to events in his own country. In his novel, an American division commander comes to lecture about the domino theory. The narrator notes that “the commander was talking of the land as the flat plain he was used to seeing whenever he looked down at his maps. That square frame, containing streams drawn in ballpoint pen...could not show the forests, the birds or the fish, nor could it show the hearts of men stooping over in the rice paddies or their rejoicing at night in the embraces of their wives and children” (Hwang 219). A Vietnamese official then says:

Americans must realize, first and foremost, that they have entered into a cultural sphere that has nothing in common with their own... the Vietnamese are Oriental people who follow the teachings of Confucius. Unlike Western people, we attach more importance to seeing rightness put into practice than to the fulfillment of material desires...The Way of Ho Chi Minh includes plenty of ethical and ascetic elements. These are the features that make it possible for them to approach the traditional Vietnamese manner of thinking...the North Vietnamese leaders made no wild promises, not did they allow bribes to distort their plans. They only showed the blood, sweat and pain of toil, and implanted an image of leadership with a bold and Spartan manner (219-20).

Here Hwang uses his characters, both American and Vietnamese, to express his sympathy for the North Vietnamese cause. He also uses his protagonist, An Yongkyu to reiterate his own position:

The Korean War broke out when I was eight years old. Well, a few years after my birth, we were released from colonial status. But my parents’ generation was forced to serve in armies of colonials and many were killed, just like now, all over Asia and the Pacific in wars fought by the imperialist powers. From that time, you people were already on the scene. Your government partitioned our country and occupied it (Hwang 343).
Hwang's critical stance toward the Americans and their ignorance of the importance of land, for example, in Asian culture, is in essence a comment on the Korean situation - Hwang is himself a victim of the North-South division that left part of his family in North Korea. It is clear, then, that Hwang Sukyoung's position in The Shadow of Arms is critical of the Americans and also of the South Koreans' position as mercenary collaborators in what he regards as the Americans' war.

Ahn Junghyo, the author of White Badge, expresses similar ambivalence towards the North Vietnamese enemies. In Ahn's case, however, the ambivalence on the battlefield translates into an internal enemy that makes his characters turn against themselves. Ahn's novel focuses on two soldiers who return to Korea after the Vietnam War, but are unable to resume normal lives. In White Badge, the ambiguity is partly the result of the protagonist's identification with the people of Vietnam. Whenever he comes across Vietnamese children, the protagonist, Han Kiju, experiences frequent flashbacks to his childhood growing up during the Korean War. He has an affair with a Vietnamese woman and as a result finds himself emotionally involved with the country.

Park notes that the following passage has been omitted from the English version of Ahn's book:23 "I often find drawings of trees, full moons, pretty girls, clouds, and mountains from the diaries the Viet Cong left behind. They must have been sitting under a tree feeling extremely lonely when they drew these pictures" (Park Jinim 218). In White Badge, Han Kiju frequently questions the suffering that he and his fellow soldiers endure in the war: "The killing I had witnessed in the trench, the animosity and violence of humans destroying one another with mechanical butchering devices - it all seemed to

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23 Ahn's first version of the book was rejected by literary circles in Korea, apparently for its controversial political content. He then wrote another version in English, and translated it into Korean. The reason for the omission in question is unclear (http://www.yes24.com/bookian/20011001/interview1.asp).
be a momentary insanity. Blood, the ecstatic thirst for blood... I wondered what victory meant, and defeat” (125).

The ambiguity expressed in Ahn’s novel towards the Viet Cong enemy and the Vietnam War is affected also by his general feelings of betrayal by the South Korean government. After a particularly costly battle, a regiment of Korean soldiers returns to base only to be remobilized by a Korean War correspondent who was “planning to make a vivid combat documentary of the soldiers fighting the battle that had just ended” (Ahn 147). The narrator notes that the journalist arranges his set but does not mind that “no action had taken place at the plantation during the battle because the erect trees with no underbrush offered little concealment from the Vietcong” (149). At the same time, the soldiers, “whose knees were still shaking from lack of sleep and prolonged battle fatigue trudged down the whole distance of one kilometer along the rusty railroad to play actors for a staged war documentary” (149). As he participates in the scene, Han Kiju comments: “I wondered what my friends might be doing right now at home...but I was out here, alone, abandoned and forgotten, belonging nowhere...and now I was going through these untrue moments of a fabricated danger in another mock war” (151). Han later notes that Korean newspapers do in fact report that his unit, the White Horse Warriors, had killed 580 Vietcong, but that “not a single newspaper reported that the Koreans also lost two hundred lives... no news film ever mentioned that any of us died during the raging battles” (159). He adds:

When these ‘live on the spot combat reports’ were shown at the Korean cinemas or on television, the ordinary people would never guess what pains we had gone through during the two weeks of ‘victory and glory.’ And they would never know

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24 It is interesting to compare this scene with one in Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 film Apocalypse Now, in which a film crew comes to capture the Vietnam War on film. The director yells at the protagonist (played by Martin Sheen) “Don’t look at the camera,” and the soldier stares at him in a dazed look of disbelief.
that we died, or were maimed and crippled, or raved terrified in our foxholes, for they saw us only as the exciting heroes running around with blazing rifles. Truth was victimized for the creation of cardboard glory...watching our brave selves on the screen, I wondered what I should say to my friends about this war (159-60).

Part of Ahn's anxiety, then, is his feeling of betrayal at the hands of the journalists and government and people of Korea, who are completely unaware of what the war is about. Ahn's novel, and to a larger extent, the movie that was based on it, focuses on the inability of Han Kiju and fellow soldier, Pyŏn Chinsu, to return to and function in society.

In White Badge, sergeant Han Kiju has constant flashbacks to his childhood, growing up during the Korean War surrounded by American soldiers. He sees himself in the young boys he encounters in Vietnam: "I was attracted to [the Vietnamese boy] perhaps because he reminded me of myself twenty years ago when I had done the same thing to American soldiers" (Ahn 79). Han later befriends a young Vietnamese boy and has an affair with his mother. Han is curious about the boy, Trau, and says: "I believed his life might be the same as my own during the Korean War" (103). The protagonist clearly identifies with the Vietnamese children, which contributes to the confusion he feels as a part of the American forces.

Korean soldiers fighting in Vietnam fought "in American uniforms, wearing American helmets, using American weapons, eating American C-rations, smoking American cigarettes and being paid by the American government" (Ahn 68). Park notes that Korean soldiers in Vietnam were expected to internalize the presumed identity of

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25 In his article "A Double Exposure of the War," author Ahn Junghyo relates that "the media often described exaggerated military accomplishments.... sometimes, Koreans talked as if they were winning the whole war by themselves" (165).
26 The movie version of White Badge makes more prominent use of the flashbacks of the protagonist to his childhood in war-torn Korea, emphasizing the ambiguity felt by the main character towards the Vietnamese.
their American allies. Ahn remarks that "personally, I often had the impression that many Korean soldiers were imitating GIs who fought in Korea in the 1950s. In a sense, they were Americans" ("A Double Exposure" 168). In addition, the American administration made it clear that it considered the Vietnam War analogous to the Korean War, too. Khong explains in his book Analogies of War that the United States saw the invasion of North Korea and the ensuing Korean War as analogous to the situation developing in Vietnam: "The Korean analogy did not just describe the nature of the conflict in Vietnam. By comparing the Vietnam conflict to the Korean War, the analogy also implied that the political stakes in Vietnam were extremely high" (101); "The Korean analogy was used in private to define the nature of the problem in Vietnam, to assess the stakes of the problem, to prescribe possible responses, and to indicate the morality of those prescriptions" (117).

The role of Korean soldiers as mercenaries is a central theme in both novels. South Korean soldiers were paid by the American government to "fight and die in South Vietnam so that Americans would not" (Blackburn xiii). However, their position was complicated by the fact that, like the Vietnamese, they had also suffered under colonialism followed by an anti-communist war that had cost millions of lives and ravished the country. Korean soldiers had to fight an elusive enemy, but at the same time found themselves identifying with the Vietnamese, based not only on common values but also on a history of suffering under very similar circumstances.

The protagonist in Ahn Junghyo’s novel acknowledges his difficulty with his position as a salaried soldier, fighting a war not his own. He goes to war initially in order to save money for college but experiences nothing but emptiness and waste. "If I had a
right to choose a war to fight... I might have chosen a war.... in which I could see the purpose and motivation of the whole conflict more clearly. I wished I could convince myself on the reasons, even one single reason, why I had to fight somebody else’s war in somebody else’s land” (213). The protagonist is well aware of his reasons to join the army: “The blood money we had to earn at the price of our lives fueled the modernization and development of this country. And owing to our contribution, the Republic of Korea, or at least a higher echelon of it, made a gigantic stride into the world market. Lives for sale. National mercenaries” (40).

It is clear that the mixed feelings the Korean soldiers harbor towards the Vietnamese is the result of their own recent and very similar history. In addition, the issues the Korean soldiers face in Vietnam are complicated because of their physical appearance. Both Ahn and Hwang in their novels explain that the word “gook” was originally coined during the Korean War. In Hwang’s novel, the Vietnamese character Toi points out that the Koreans look like the Vietnamese:

‘You and I, Ahn, we’re both gooks, slopeheads.’
‘In the eyes of the Americans I suppose so’
‘In our own eyes, too. It’s nothing to feel bad about’ (Hwang 140).

Renny Christopher notes in her work The Viet Nam War, The American War that “some Americans had trouble distinguishing allies from enemies – disrespect for the ARVN was widespread, but the United States had also been allied with Korean troops...Koreans and Vietnamese...there wasn’t much of a line... they called them gooks over there” (Christopher 145). Jinim Park points out that having colonial experiences does not necessarily translate into a better appreciation of being colonized, but it certainly

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27 Both writers claim that gook was coined in the Korean War and comes from the final syllable of the word hanguk, which is the Korean word for Korea. However Don Baker notes that the term has existed since the Second World War, and was used by the Americans to describe the Philippine soldiers.
complicated the position of the Korean soldiers, who did feel superior to the Vietnamese but at the same time felt inferior to the Americans.

The ambiguity prevalent in the two novels concerning their North Vietnamese enemy extends to the representation of women in the two novels. Both make references to sex and the industry of prostitution in Vietnam, but neither discusses any sexual violence committed by Korean troops. In White Badge there is an unlikely scene in which a captured woman of the Viet Cong is stripped and searched, but the woman is then left unharmed. Moreover, she is then treated with respect, as the soldiers consider her “too young ... too beautiful, too feminine to shoot at us as our enemy” (Ahn 203). The protagonist notes that what the soldiers wanted from her “was not slimy grunting sex, but warmth and comfort and peace. That is what I wanted from her, if I could want anything from that captive” (201).  

In Hwang’s novel, the protagonist carries on a platonic relationship with the Korean prostitute who has aligned herself with a high-ranking Vietnamese official. The prostitution industry in Shadow of Arms brings to mind the Korean genre of stories set in the kijich’ on, the “demimonde that has sprung up around the American military bases in Korea” (Fulton 199). According to Fulton, the kijich’ on is a place where “Koreans and Americans – mostly male military personnel – meet in an economic and emotional marriage of convenience” (200). Prostitution and black-marketing, a common practice in these “villages,” both during and after the Korean War, must have been in the back of the authors’ minds when they wrote about similar arrangements in Vietnam.

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28 The absence of a self-incriminating discussion of sexual violence is notable in several Vietnam War texts written by both American and Vietnamese soldiers. Noted among these are Michael Herr’s Dispatches, Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried, Tobias Wolff’s In Pharaoh’s Army, Keith Walker’s book of interviews A Piece of My Heart, and Bao Ninh’s Sorrow of War.
As I mention in chapter two, the discussion of ideological questions was largely limited in postwar Korean literature, until the emergence of Vietnam War novels. Jinim Park writes:

For Koreans, the [Vietnam] war functioned as a mirror in which they could reflect on the post-colonial – from Japanese colonialism – to America – history of Korea. The literary representations of the war add a distinctive color to the history of Korean literature. Korean soldier-writers in their writings specifically and directly question the ideological implications of the war and what the war means to Koreans (211).

As stated before, the Korean War and the authoritarian, anti-communist regimes that followed in South Korea created an atmosphere in which any discussion of leftist ideology (and of course, criticism of the government) was deemed subversive. It is only with the Vietnam War novels that South Korean writers first begin to explore and express their opinions about their past. One critic writes: “The Vietnam War is not a war of ‘others’ – it is a war that reawakens our awareness regarding the latent potentials of our own war in our modern history” (Ch’ŏn 350). Chong Chonghyŏn notes that “novels about the Vietnam War open the way for Korean society to understand itself. In particular, the confrontation of ideologies in the Vietnam War provides an opening to discuss the similar situation that exists in today’s divided Korea” (1-2). An Namil criticizes the fact that most Koreans view and accept Korea’s role in the Vietnam as that of mercenaries in “others’ war” (274). Song quotes a writer who was also an officer during the Vietnam War: “300,000 soldiers were sent overseas to this war and over 3000 young soldiers lost their lives; the War brought to our attention many problems in our own past; and yet the Vietnam War remains misunderstood by Koreans, a forgotten chapter, buried away” (77). Song comments that there was very little resistance to participation in the war on behalf of this writing, the National Security Law in Korea is still in effect, outlawing any activities that are considered “dangerous” to the political status quo.
of the people, the politicians and even the students. He notes that the two opinions about the Vietnam War commonly held in Korea at the time were that participation in the war brought economic benefits, and that South Korea had yielded to U.S. pressure.

Both indicate, according to Song, that people viewed the Vietnam War as an "others' war." It is therefore understandable, he claims, that the Vietnam War has been ignored in Korea all these years, "seeing as Korea played the shameful part of mercenary soldiers. The fact that soldiers still have to struggle to receive compensation for Agent Orange injuries, and children born to Korean soldiers and Vietnamese women are still an unresolved and controversial issue in Korean society, all indicate the degree to which Korean society denies its responsibility for the Korean War" (77-78). Indeed, the Vietnam War has rarely found its way into the consciousness of South Koreans and their literature.

According to Chŏng, "until now, both the quality and quantity of research done on the Vietnam War has been negligible" (2). Yet despite the relative absence of works about the Vietnam War in Korean literature, a close look at two of the central novels and several short stories reveals much about the contribution of this genre of literature to an

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30 University students have played a major role in modern Korean history, and their demonstrations have toppled several regimes and helped to install democracy.

31 In a conversation in the street a few weeks ago, a Korean man insisted that the South Koreans' participation in the Vietnam War was completely involuntary. This statement is made more complex if one considers the fact that some soldiers did in fact volunteer, while others, who were sent to Vietnam as a part of their obligatory service in the Korean army, were victims of Park Chung Hee and his administration, who came to power in a military coup in 1961. Ahn, for example, notes that "most Korean soldiers who went to Vietnam, including me, were zealous volunteers. In fact, there were too many volunteers and competition to go to war was so high, especially in the first several years, that many soldiers cut their fingers to write petitions in blood to the president...to allow them to go to war" (165).

32 Park quotes an article titled "138 plaintiffs lose case against government" from the newspaper Chosun Ilbo from 15 February 1997: "The Korean government is not responsible because the American military authority was in charge of the spraying of Agent Orange in Vietnam. The Korean government was neither given any right to participate in the decision-making process, nor was the government aware of the potential danger...Korean constitutional law...declares that military personnel cannot appeal for compensation beyond that which is classified in the lower case concerning the damages that have incurred while such personnel were performing their military duties" (Jinim Park 192).
understanding of the evolution of Korean literature. Through their works, writers such as Hwang Sukyoung and Ahn Junghyo were able to give voice to their war trauma. In Ahn Junghyo’s novel, the Vietnam War brings the protagonist back to his own childhood and enables him to reassess from a distance, both physical and temporal, the ideological civil war of Korea. Hwang’s success in publishing his novel and short stories, as well as his eventual pardon at the hands of president Kim Dae Jung, is also evidence that Korean society has started to come to terms with its past. These works of fiction are important because, in them, Koreans begin to be reconciled with their troubled modern history.
Chapter IV
From the Korean War to the Vietnam War: Form, Language and the Text as Testimony

In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell touches upon the connection between war and theater. He notes that "the most obvious reason why "theater" and modern war seem so compatible is that modern wars are fought by conscripted armies, whose members know they are only temporarily playing their ill-learned parts" (191). In other words, putting on a uniform and participating in the ritual of war requires an element of acting which keeps the terrible reality of war at a safe distance. In the Vietnam War novels, the theatrical element that Fussell points to manifests itself in the spectator's distance both authors seem to keep from their subject matter. Hwang creates this distance through long, drawn-out monologues and two-dimensional, stereotypical characters that enhance the general ambivalence the author expresses regarding the war. In Ahn's novel, protagonist Han Kiju also maintains an ambivalent attitude toward the war and toward his role as a mercenary fighting in Vietnam such that he remains detached from the events taking place. Even upon their return to Korea after the war, the characters in Ahn's novel remain distant from their surroundings and are incapable of readjusting to "normal" life.

By contrast, the Korean War stories examined in this paper focus more on the characters' psychological states of mind. The most convincing and artfully presented of these is O Chŏnghŭi's "Spirit on the Wind," which is told alternately by the husband and from the viewpoint of his wife. By presenting both points of view, the writer paints a more penetrating and believable portrait, one that involves the reader closely in the narrative. Hwang Sunwŏn in *Trees on a Slope* also presents the reader with complex
characters, and shows how his characters deteriorate in the madness of the Korean War.

Both Yi Ch'ŏngjun and O Chŏnghŭi's stories contain an element of mystery: the characters start off in the same position as the reader in the sense that they are unaware of the source of their frustrations, and only with the development of the plot do both the characters and the reader gain insight into the characters' predicament. There is thus a progression from an introverted involvement with the material in Korean War literature to an externalization and attitude of detachment in the novels about the Vietnam War.

The way the authors of these texts use characterization and narration to draw their readers closer or alienate them from their text raises further questions about the use and function of language, the role of audience and the function of text as testimony.

Referring to the First World War, Fussell comments that "one of the cruxes of the war, of course, is the collision between events and the language available – or thought appropriate – to describe them" (Fussell 169). The Korean language – literary language in particular – has also been affected by Korea's turbulent history in the last 100 years, and a brief outline of the development of Korea's literary tradition is essential in understanding some of the obstacles that faced writers of the period of the Korean War.

Korea's history and politics have directly affected the Korean writing system and quality of writing, and the content of the works. Until the turn of the last century, the language was in a state of diglossia and digraphia: the official written language was hanmun, or Classical Chinese in its Korean guise, while the spoken vernacular was a series of related but unstandardized dialects of Korean, and was written in the native Korean script (King, "Nationalism and Language Reform" 35). Exposure to the West in the late nineteenth century stimulated, among other developments, discussions over the reform of the
Korean language, raising questions over the need for a standardized official language and how it will be written (35). These reforms were further encouraged by the state of affairs in Korea during the Japanese colonial rule of 1910-1945. In the late 1930s the Japanese stripped Koreans of the right to speak their own language in public. Attempts at reform in the language in the 1930s came as a reaction to this treatment by the Japanese, and symbolized Koreans' assertion of cultural hegemony, national pride and national independence in face of the oppressive Japanese colonization (63).

In his article “Language, Politics, and Ideology in the Postwar Koreas,” King compares Korea with Germany and points out that whereas the German language in 1945 had been the object of concentrated standardization for well over one and half centuries, concerted standardization efforts in Korea did not get under way until the late 1930s. King writes: “for all practical purposes, language standardization [in Korea] has proceeded since the late 1950s in two separate states [North and South Korea], each isolated from linguistic developments in the other” (143).

The late development of the standardization of language in Korea is of significance in the discussion of the development of modern Korean literature in general, and the expressive tools available to writers of the Korean War period in particular. The lack of a standardized language until as recently as fifty years ago has hampered the development of a modern literary language and delayed growth and maturity of expression and style in Korean. While it is true that the tradition of Korean writing did not start with the modern period and does go back hundreds of years, one cannot ignore the fact that all “serious” literature was written in Chinese, which carries with it a different cultural identity. Korean scholars themselves promote the view that there is a
definite break between pre-modern “Korean” literature written in Classical Chinese, and modern literature written in the vernacular. In any case, it is important to understand that for hundreds of years the Korean elite wrote and were educated in Chinese and later during the colonization in Japanese, and that this background had inevitable effects on the content and style of their written works.

Fussell writes the following about the use of language in First World War literature:

Inhibited by scruples of decency and believing in the historical continuity of styles, writers about the war had to appeal to the sympathy of readers by invoking the familiar and suggesting its resemblance to what many of them suspected was an unprecedented and (in their terms) an all-but-incommunicable reality...it would take still another war, and an even worse one, before such language would force itself up from below and propose itself for use.” (Fussell 74)

In contrast with the situation Fussell depicts in literature of the Great War, I argue that in the Korean case there was not, in fact, any tradition of writing about the war in modern Korean literature which writers could draw upon to write about their experiences. The Vietnam War, then, was that “other war” that Fussell mentions which provided its authors an opportunity to go back to their experiences in the Korean War.

“The real reason,” writes Fussell, that soldiers so seldom render their experiences in language, “is that soldiers have discovered that no one is very interested in the bad news they have to report” (Fussell 170). Trauma theory places great importance on the existence of a listener:

Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other -- in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time (Felman and Laub 70-1).
The great emphasis in literature from the Korean War on introspection and personal loss without questioning the source of that pain may be partly due to the fact writers were aware that their audiences were all undergoing similar experiences. At the same time, communication of trauma in Korean War literature was complicated by the fact that it was impossible to give voice to pain that was outside the parameters of ideology. Pak Sinhŏn writes that fiction from the War period produced and propagated mostly anti-communist narratives, and focused on the degree that society was damaged. Stories about ferocious fighting at the front lines of the battle, he says, are rare because writers were interested not so much in the war itself but rather first in survival, and next in the pursuit of some kind of existence behind the front lines (see Pak Sinhŏn 123). Pak’s insistence that writers were simply “caught up in the fetters of the inescapable struggle of wartime,” (123) is insufficient – I argue that it is more the limits on expression defined by ideology and language that created the situation in which people had no audience. For example, O Chŏnghŭi’s protagonist in “Spirit on the Wind,” suffers first for being bereft of an audience, as she alone witnessed the murder of her family, and second for lacking the support of her surroundings, her husband and mother-in-law, who refuse to be active listeners to her experiences. Dori Laub explains:

Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both… To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process – a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, or re-externalizing the event – has to be set in motion (Felman and Laub 69).
The construction of a narrative and reconstruction of a history that is so essential to the recovery of victims of trauma is only possible if a willing and responsive audience is present. In Korean War literature, then, the presence of audience is complicated by the overriding influence of ideology. This serves to explain also why Korean War stories are so often turned inward and focus on the psychological state of their characters rather than present a more complete picture of the war, or question the premises of the war itself.

A similar predicament faced those Korean soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War. Soldiers such as authors Ahn Junghyo and Hwang Sukyoung came home to an unsympathetic, disinterested audience. Critics such as Song Sāngch’ōl, An Namīl and Kim Ch’ōl mention that the prevailing attitude of Koreans today is that the Vietnam War was an “Others’ war” which took place far away and was experienced by a particular population of Koreans (see Song 77-78; An 274-75). The absence of a wide audience explains the more detached approach of both writers to their material. Hwang Sukyoung, for example, uses reportage-type references interwoven with prose as an attempt for a more authentic presentation of events.33 Ahn’s characters also remain detached from their surroundings. While there was no need to “report” the Korean War to the Korean people, writers who fought in the Vietnam War knew that their audience was limited in their ability and willingness to participate as listeners.

As readers of literature, we become an audience: listeners to undisclosed pain and creators of a space into which writers can reveal and share their traumatic experiences. The short stories and novels I examine that deal with the Korean and Vietnam Wars,

33 An Namīl also comments that the sections written in documentary style add to the overall impression of objectivity in Hwang’s novel (275). In light of the overall didactic tone of the novel, however, the persuasiveness of these sections is weak.
serve as a testimony to painful experiences. However, it is important to remember that these texts are complex constructions of their writer's imaginations, and the conditions under which they are created must always be taken into consideration. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek note:

Personal memory is always connected to social narrative, as is social memory to the personal. The self and the community are the imagined products of a continuous process. The transfers between the individual and the collective are mediated at several points...the writer of the “simple” life history often unintentionally reproduces the assumptions and biases contained in these links (xx).

The texts examined in this paper disclose much about the conditions under which they were created and, to a certain extent, have perpetuated. The silences prevalent in Korean War literature attest not only to the trauma experienced by the Korean people but to the fact that the overruling political ideologies have limited and clouded the ability of writers such as Yi Pŏmsŏn and Yi Ch’ŏngjun to express themselves freely, forcing them to avoid discussion of the larger picture of the war and to focus inwardly, thus infusing their works with unresolved trauma.

Works about the Vietnam War contain the beginnings of a discussion of previously un-discussed issues: Hwang makes ideology a central theme in his novel and goes so far as openly sympathizing with the North Vietnamese struggle in what he defines as an imperialist war motivated by economic interests of the United States. And author Ahn Junghyo takes protagonist Han Kiju back to the Korean War in a series of flashbacks, thus creating a bridge between his experiences in the Korean War and the experiences he felt the Vietnamese were undergoing under the Americans (and, by extension, the Koreans, as mercenary soldiers working and fighting for the Americans).
But both Hwang and Ahn’s interpretations of the war in Vietnam are in the end subjective experiences. Song Súngch’ŏl writes that within such a paradox-ridden, “dirty” war as the Vietnam War, soldiers could not but rationalize their own participation. That is why, according to Song, one must not read Vietnam War literature as pure reportage and testimony, despite the authors’ insistence that they describe their experiences authentically and honestly. In the afterward to White Badge, for example, Ahn claims that in his writing he was simply driven to portray human behavior as he saw it. Song’s response in his article is that Ahn’s reaction cannot be taken for granted, and that literature cannot be considered reliable historical text (see Song 80). Ultimately, the works of literature examined in this paper must be read not only as testimonies to unspoken trauma, but also as works which expose how politics and society shape the way we process, reflect, and pass on our experiences to following generations.

Finally, I would like to point to several discussions that were not included in this thesis but must be considered as a part of a serious exploration of trauma and testimony in Korea literature. To my knowledge, there is no interdisciplinary research to date in the field of linguistics and literature in Korea that might draw, or refute, any connections between the use of the varied forms of the past tense and the way past experiences can be reflected in the language. In a personal correspondence with Yi Chongt’aek of the linguistics department in Seoul Women’s College, from March 10, 2002, I was informed that no such research exists. It is essential, in my view, to uncover and explore the way the Korean language shapes the particular expression of trauma and the past in literature.

Furthermore, this brief examination of two wars in the modern history of Korea, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, opens the way to a detailed study of the way war
and conflict has been presented over the years in Korean literature. A detailed survey of all works about the Korean War and the Vietnam War is necessary in order to appreciate the range of emotions reflected in this literature. Furthermore, a study of works beginning with records of the Imjin invasions of 1592-97 through modern short stories and novels about the conflicts throughout history, both in pre-modern and modern Korean can point to the fascinating development of war literature in Korea.
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