Memory of Forgotten War

Directed by Deann Borshay Liem and Ramsay Liem. 2013. 38 minutes.

Study Areas: Korean War, North and South Korea, seperated family.

The Korean War (1950-1953) has remained "unfinished" for more than 60 years. No peace treaty has been signed, yet this war is almost forgotten. Ironically, it is a "forgotten war," not only by Americans but also by Koreans, despite the fact that the consequences of the war continue to shape American foreign policy in that region, as

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well as the politics of the two Koreas. As most Americans know little about it and simply recall Korea either with the infamous image of North Korea's communist dictators, or the recent K-Pop sensation of Psy's "*Gangnam Style*," many South Koreans of today's new generation don't know exactly when the war broke out or regard it only as a distant historical event.

The documentary film *Memory of Forgotten War* insightfully explores the continuous impact of the Korean War and powerfully challenges historical amnesia about the conflict. The film mainly follows the stories of four Korean-Americans who survived the war and its aftermath; however, it also situates their stories in the trajectory of the war and a broader historical context by providing analyses by historians Bruce Cumings and Ji-Yeon Yuh and rich archival images. International relations paradigms and Korea's own official nationalist historiography generally frame discussions of the war's causes and effects. Consequently, what has to be collectively remembered or forgotten has been dictated by these approaches. However, in this film, directors Deann Borshay Liem and Ramsay Liem highlight the lasting impact of the war on ordinary people from a different angle, reminding us what should be remembered, and suggesting what approaches might be needed to heal the collective pain and trauma of war by focusing on the on-going healing processes of the individuals depicted in the film.

It is easy for audiences to sense the survivors' fluctuating emotions on their faces – the natural feeling of happiness or sadness when they recall old memories of families and war. In her account, Hee Bok Kim recalls how her overflowing joy of liberation from Japanese colonialism came too soon, and was unexpectedly replaced by sorrow. Having moved from Pyongyang to Seoul with her husband as newlyweds just before the liberation, she was separated from her natal family in the North by the division that took place at the 38th parallel. Immediately after the war began, her only brother—who stayed with her at the time—was killed by North Korean soldiers. Before long she had to join the millions of refugees fleeing to Pusan and endure the hardships of war. Since that time her natal family has remained only a cherished memory.

Kee Park, whose grandfather was a wealthy landlord in Bukchang in the North, fled with her family to the South before the war when their property was stripped by the land reform policy. They were treated as criminals by the North Korean communist regime. When she left home with her parents, she never expected that it could be the last time for her to see her grandparents, who decided to stay in the North. After that everything began to change for her family. She survived poverty but lost her father and a sister during the war.

Min Yong Lee's family was hit very hard during the war by nationalist ideological conflict. He had two brothers and four sisters. He, a happy nine-year-old boy in Seoul, suddenly lost his eldest brother with socialist ideals to a right-wing paramilitary youth group. This same group took revenge on suspected North Korean sympathizers when Seoul was recaptured by US/UN/ROK forces. During the War, both the North and South purged each other when they occupied and reoccupied certain areas. The left or right sympathizers and their families were often killed whenever the war situation turned. And the atrocities of both parts linger in Koreans' postwar memory. Later, Min Yong's older brother and a sister went to North Korea, leaving him in a state of trauma. "And then everything fell apart," he says. All of sudden he belonged to a "criminal" family. Min Yong had to live in constant fear of being ostracized as a member of a communist family and hide his family history. His mother even procured a new official family registration to erase all traces of his siblings who went to the North; he became the eldest son after their new family registration. However, he eventually decided to immigrate to the US after he found no hope in his career in South Korea because of the tag of communism on his family.

Suntae Chun was the eldest son in his family and lived in Kaesong, just below the 38th parallel. In the midst of the armistice negotiations, he left home to find his father in Incheon. Unbeknownst to Suntae, his father had already returned to Kaesong. Then he could never go back home and see his family because the final armistice placed Kaesong on the northern side of the new border. Unexpectedly separated from his

family and alone in the South, he survived as a child laborer by working at US military bases. However, the impact of war was not limited to his permanent separation from his family. He left South Korea when he realized he could not become a diplomat, a career he had considered, simply because his family was in the North.

Under anticommunist authoritarian regimes maintaining the implicative system (*yŏnjwaje*), which was officially abolished in 1980, many families and even their relatives in South Korea shared the responsibility of having family members who were communist. Together they were punished or suffered discrimination in their social lives. For example, they were blocked from obtaining civil service positions, gaining employment in large companies or being admitted to Korea's West Point, or even obtaining travel visas because they could not pass a background check.

In a sense, these survivors have lived in exile. Their lost families have haunted their lives since the war, with unfathomable longing and frustration. Some of them could not even properly grieve following their losses. Hee Bok Kim and Kee Park immigrated to the US, dreaming they might be able to see their families in the North. And Minyong Lee and Suntae Chun left their country with the realization that they could not fully live their own lives in South Korea. However, they all eventually could have met their family members in the North. Furthermore, Kee Park and Suntae Chun are actually helping other South Koreans to visit or correspond with their families in the North.

What audiences finally can glean from deeply personal accounts in this documentary film is an omitted part of their history, due to ongoing ideological and military conflicts between South and North Korea, and the broader Cold War context of the past. By reopening the wounds of the war beyond politics and ideology, and through discovering marginalized voices, *Memory of Forgotten War* challenges the culture of silence that has rendered this conflict a forgotten one. There might be many stories yet to be told. We know that every trauma is healed only after it is told. Breaking silence still matters as long as such traumas, pain, losses, and yearnings exist, as to this day 10 million Koreans are separated from family members by national division—a tragic tale powerfully narrated in this film.

This 37-minute-long documentary would be a useful teaching tool and an invaluable resource for students (in high school- and college-level classes) or a general audience that wants to have a better understanding of humanity, war, Korea, the Cold War, and Korean-Americans.

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To watch the trailer or purchase this film, visit the Mu Films website.

Last Updated: January 20, 2014.

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