

How does one talk about the Korean situation? For some it is a military target to be destroyed<sup>1</sup>, for others a casualty figure<sup>2</sup>, for some a human rights violation<sup>3</sup>, for others a failure of government<sup>4</sup>. But all these stories focus on the question of governance, or statesmanship. It is a world of shifting estimates and military designators. There is no people involved.

What I wish to discuss is the human side of the conflict. For contrary to the widespread attitude of the media, people DO exist North of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), there is life within the supposed hellhole of human existence between the Yalu and the DMZ, and the featureless face wrapped in digital camo with a K2 rifle is the firstborn of a family and the pride of his grandparents who eagerly await the day their grandchild returns to the hometown.

This is a monologue. This is a shambling product of deep-seated frustration and resentment. But more importantly, this is also intended to be a product of love, of care, of acknowledgement, a letter in a bottle for the brothers separated by war, by design, by fists and lies wielded by faceless figures. It may never reach the other side, but I have made my peace with that. For this letter is addressed to myself as much as the brothers of the two sides.

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<sup>1</sup> Peters, Ralph. "The moral answer to North Korea threats: Take them out!" *New York Post*, Sep. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Shear, Michael D., and Michael R. Gordon. "With Tensions Rising, How U.S. Military Actions Could Play Out in North Korea." *The New York Times*, Aug. 2017

<sup>3</sup> Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, United Nations, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Editorial Board, "Mi gong-gun dan-dok dong-hae jak-jeon,'gun-sa-jeok korea passing' anin-ga" (미 공군 단독 동해 작전; 군사적 '코리아 패싱' 아닌가: Does the solitary military action over the East Sea represent 'Korea Passing' on a military level?). *Munhwa Ilbo*, Sep. 2017

## Isolation

*The first day on the training camp passed in a whirl of tears, apprehension, fear, sadness, despair, and everything else in between. The next concrete memory is the Trainee 161 and 5 others standing in front of the duty officer at 3 a.m. in the morning, crouched down onto the cold sheen of the tile, trembling out of cold and... fear. Fear of the nightmare that one has survived, the fragile peace of the present moment, and the terrible unknown of the future that one has no control of. The brim of the red hat obscures the features of the duty officer as he scribbles away on some document. One dare not whisper, let alone glance at others, as time passes by on a snail's crawl.*

- *Early morning, August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Nonsan Korean Army Training Center*

The Korean military experience is one of absolute isolation. The average conscript in the army branch spend 638 days<sup>5</sup>, minus the intermittent leave or excursions, within the barbed wire of the base. There is limited Internet access, telephone privileges, and television. The outside world exists only as the noise of the cars wafting along the cool autumn wind or the glimpses of high-rise apartments and pedestrians between the fences. Television provides the news, but what really goes outside the world is unknown to the conscript. Every contact between the conscript and the outside world is mediated by an object: one's belongings are screened by the officers made to function according to the rule, one's sight is mediated by the gap or the visibility beyond the fence, one's voice is

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<sup>5</sup> Exact number depending on the administration, policy, and 'luck' of the conscript

mediated by the telephone exchange, and so on. One survives day by day, knowing (or rather believing) that the outside world exists, and slowly learn to create their own reality within the impermeable walls: for one soon realizes that one's existence within the barbed wires has no bearing on the life outside, that aside from short phone calls and leaves one does not exist in the mind of those outside, and everything else change relentlessly while the time stands still within the walls.

Can the same be said about the people on the northern side of the DMZ? Perhaps. North Korea is the "most isolated country in the world"<sup>6</sup>. We do not know who the North Koreans are, let alone what their dreams and wishes are. Our contact with the people of North Korea is mediated by the government; the only information available on the mysterious country is its official news agency, the Korean Central News Agency, the testimonies of the defectors, satellite pictures, and shapeless and mysterious sources in some government agency somewhere. Some fictional work imagines a world where the people in North Korea suddenly disappear, and nobody knows where they went<sup>7</sup>. But if an entire population of Pyongyang, for instance, indeed disappear into the thin air in reality, it would be hard for those living outside the borders of the North Korea to tell.

Such isolation is artificial, enforced by the governments of all nations involved in the situation. In South Korea, one only has access to certain news outlets

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<sup>6</sup> World's Most Isolated Countries, World Policy Institute, 2013.

[http://www.worldpolicy.org/sites/default/files/uploaded/image/Spring13\\_22-23\\_Anatomy\(1\)\\_1.pdf](http://www.worldpolicy.org/sites/default/files/uploaded/image/Spring13_22-23_Anatomy(1)_1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> For example, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* by Max Brooks posits that North Korean population suddenly disappears after the titular outbreak.

and defector testimonials on information regarding their fellows in the north. The defectors live quiet lives, trying to escape the stigma and discrimination that they often face. Contact is impossible to establish, let alone a direct conversation, and many South Koreans live their entire lives without seeing a living, breathing North Korean with their own eyes. North Koreans likewise face powerful scrutiny from the central government in contacts to the outside world, and their only option is often the reception of satellite TV, radio, or other communication that happen to pass over the DMZ. As for the rest of the world, their only point of contact with North Korea is the media, which derive its sources from the same ones that we have seen earlier. Precisely few people get to go to North Korea, and those who do are forbidden from engaging others outside the precisely defined movements of their guided tour. I cannot think of anyone who has a complete picture on what the life is like in North Korea – not even the officials of the DPRK, or the intelligence officers of the ROK-US alliance.

## Objectification

*I was in line in Beijing Capital Airport, waiting for a flight to Frankfurt am Main. Two men in grey suits were in front of me. One of them wore a pin of red flag, adorned by a star and the bust of the Kim Il-sung. I found myself staring at them, their Mun-hwa-eo<sup>8</sup> drifting lazily between us, past the inexorable, invisible barrier that seemed to exist between us. If I remember correctly, they were discussing how tiring their trip was.*

*The man turned around and our eyes met for a brief second. I turned around quickly, making it laughably obvious that I was staring at him. Somewhere beyond my field of vision, the voice said, "what, a Nam-jo-seon<sup>9</sup> punk, huh?" It was the same kind of voice that I would have heard in my hometown, perhaps slurping down a bowl of soup and knocking back a glass of hard Soju<sup>10</sup> with a friend, a voice of our fathers, gruff yet gentle.*

*- Beijing International Airport, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

Back to the military. Our office was tasked with military intelligence. The strategic map in our office was a blank map of the Korean peninsula, upon which the locations of the military units would be marked - the North Koreans in red rhombi, South Korean units and US Army units in green rectangle. Two groups divided cleanly by the DMZ, grouping together to form the cities or lining the frontline, the only recognizable characteristic being the shape of the designator and the number given to the unit.

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<sup>8</sup> Standard dialect of North Korea.

<sup>9</sup> South Joseon, the word used to refer to South Korea in North Korea

<sup>10</sup> Vodka-like liquor of South Korea, which in its modern form is distilled industrially from potato starch

Once in a while, we conscripts were required to attend a lecture from a Troop Information & Education officer. The basics were the same. North Korean regime and the military are our enemies. North Korean people are not. They are our brothers separated by the inhuman regime of the Kim family, and we must liberate them from their misery and help them. "Yes", I thought at that time. I remember being relieved that my (conservative) government was willing to take a relatively humane view of the people of the North.

But the public discourse of the Korean situation is drawn like the old strategic map in our old office: there are only unit designators north of DMZ, nothing else. North Korea is a homogeneous block of a militarized state. A veil of invisibility covers the everyday lives of the people up there. It is as if they do not exist. To be fair, for the talking heads and supposed experts who discuss the threat of North Korea, the people of North Korea is as good as nonexistent. The only thing they care about, after all, is the Kim regime that supposedly rules over the northern part of the peninsula. All other details which cannot affect the situation are irrelevant. And with the absolute isolation and the lack of contact between 'them' and 'us', they are truly as good as nonexistent. And since nonexistent people cannot suffer from military action, or economic sanctions, it is a free game.

If one grants visibility to the people of the North, it is through their objectification. Their 'terrible' living conditions and 'human rights violations' are invoked as a means to justify political actions. They are described as long-lost brothers by nationalist politicians in Korea, often solely for domestic political gain.

Their stories are used as propaganda pieces or intelligence sources. They are only valuable to the extent that they can provide something to our objectives. And what difference does it matter, if we use them in such a way? Nobody can verify their agency, their identity, their existence. As I have said before, they are good as nonexistent. Can one commit a crime towards those who do not exist? The consensus of our time seems to be 'no'.

One step further: the most charitable description of North Koreans sees them as victims of horrible oppression. They are counted as brothers as the part of the Korean *Volk*, who must be liberated from the Kim regime and be integrated into the neoliberal democracy of South Korea. This is what is truly meant by the Korean military's insistence on describing its 'enemy' as the regime and the military. Indeed, in South Korea, people rarely doubt that the reunification must happen on *our* terms. And by *our* terms, it is understood to refer to the government of reunified Korea by the South Koreans and their democracy, rather than the evil dictatorship of the Kim family and their cronies. And it is understood that the liberated North Koreans will see the merit of *our* system right away, and be uplifted to the freedom of liberal democracy with our help. But even in this narrative, it is painfully clear that North Koreans do not exist as autonomous agents. They are objects to be liberated and integrated. In fact, they *should not* be given agency, for they may relapse back into the old habits and threaten the supremacy of our liberal democracy. And this is necessary for their own good.

## Helplessness

*Occasionally, the government of South Korea implements civil defense trainings. For most people, that consists of cars stopping at the side of the road amidst the blaring of the air raid sirens. From that description alone, it should be apparent that nobody takes it seriously. On one occasion, I remember the air raid siren blaring, and instead of staying put as I was supposed to, I just went into the restaurant nearby. As I closed the door to the restaurant, the owner glanced up from the cashier, but only for a moment. A few minutes later, I had a plate of pork cutlets in front of me.*

*Sometime later during my military service I would learn that the area near that restaurant, being close to an air force base, would be completely flattened by North Korean missiles and chemical weapons if (or when?) the war breaks out.*

- Summer of 2011 or 2012, Daegu, South Korea

One of the questions that a South Korean is often asked is, 'how do you survive with the crazy country up there?' The answer is simple: we just do our business. People know that the two Koreas are technically still at war since 1953<sup>11</sup>, and that theoretically war could break out any moment, and almost every year in recent memory had at least one 'provocation' or military action between the two countries, and that there were high-profile shelling and attacks and missile tests, and so on *ad nauseum*. But South Koreans learn to live with it and pay no heed, because if one reacts to every incident that happens one is bound to go mad.

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<sup>11</sup> The current situation between the two countries is not one of peace, but of armistice: a temporary cease-fire in the war, negotiated in 1953.



People worry when the media tells them to worry, but stop worrying when they have to return to work or live.

This is rather surprising, because the majority of the country's young men are conscripted into the brutal military service that reminds them constantly with the fact of war. But there are always loopholes. Some forge medical certificates. Others simply do not return from overseas or acquire different citizenship. Some, like me, choose to work in 'easier' office work by the virtue of skills in English or others. The ones sent to the front lines are often those who are unlucky, or have no other leverages to pull. But these loopholes do not necessarily change the fact that people are forced to throw away nearly two years of their youth in isolation and brutal objectification of their selves, and expect to return to the state of 'normalcy' after their discharge.

If North Koreans are nonexistent in the discourse, South Koreans are rendered helpless. While similar in that they are both effectively silenced, there is a certain difference to be said between the two. South Koreans are visible as the unlucky people who are forced to live under constant threat, or the 'well-behaved' sibling of the crazy North<sup>12</sup>. But the people-at-large still lack any voice in the situation of the peninsula. For South Korea, the matter of North Korea is a matter of diplomacy and military action, two things that must be left to the care of the

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, the words 'Nice Korea' and 'Naughty Korea' referring to South and North Korea respectively, in an Australian paper during the 2012 London Olympics.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2012/aug/08/london-2012-north-korea-naughty>

government for secrecy and effectiveness. Oftentimes (and especially in conflict situations like the present one) the only option left for the people of South Korea is electing the politicians who (hopefully) will engage with the North. And even then, there are limits to what the South Korean government can do. The 'Korean situation' involves not only the two Koreas, but also the United States, Japan, China, Russia, not to mention the United Nations and other interests around the world. And because these actors are not capable of being influenced by the people of South Korea, any action toward North Korea must necessarily learn to work with these influences.

What, then, are we South Koreans left with? The 'interest' of South Koreans is almost entirely shaped by the media and the state in questions of North Korean 'problem', which is made possible by the forced isolation of the North Korea and the lack of contact between the people of the two. They live under the constant threat of war against a faceless enemy, having no idea of what is on the other side of the DMZ. They know only what the government wants them to know, and they act according to what the government wishes them to do. Any agency that they have is limited to the choice of who gets to supervise these matters, but what good is the choice to choose one's constraints, if one's voice is drowned out in the sea of talking heads and deafening silence? People sometimes say that North Koreans are indoctrinated by the state, and forced to work against their own interests by the dictatorship of the regime. I sometimes wonder whether they are talking about the 'free, democratic' side of South Korea.

## Violence

*Everyone is a victim in the army*

- *Found on a corner of my notebook during military service, circa December 2013*

Despite being one of the more visible conflicts around the world, the Korean situation is engulfed in a similar sense of silence. Of course, when one sees the incessant threats, talks, observations, discussions, interviews, on CNN, BBC, FOX News, ZDF, Al Jazeera, NHK, CCTV, and other news channels around the world, the description seems to be an oxymoron. But this conflict, like many other conflicts, silences those who live closest to its heart. And like many other conflicts, something valuable is lost.

What, then, is lost? I say, humanity is lost on the both sides of the border. When a North Korean is silenced and their place on other's mind taken by the dubious idea of a brainwashed, oppressed subject, then the North Korean is undone as a human being. When the myths surrounding the North Korean figure are twisted to serve the interests of those who benefit from their isolation, the North Korean is undone as a human being. For what does it mean to be a human? One of the fundamentals of the state of 'being human' is the capacity to live and experience the world as a human being, and to be taken as an agent by others. The isolation of the North Korean replaces this agent with a figure that is not capable of speech, of making oneself being heard by others. Nay, one cannot even

be 'perceived' by others. The state of North Koreans in the current 'Korean situation' is essentially one of subaltern.

What about those in the South? Their opinions are heard as the supposed victim of North Korean aggression. Their existence is likewise respected. Some among them even use the subaltern-hood of North Koreans to their advantage. But not all. South Koreans are likewise caught in the web of lies and obscurity, forced into a conflict that they neither know nor deserve. Their un-freedom to seek their own future is stifling: the illusions of free choice and thought in South can only do so much to assuage the bitter taste of powerlessness. And if one reminds oneself that this state of powerless tranquility is predicated upon the erasure of one's fellows, then peace itself becomes toxic.

Restoration must happen. Restoration in this conflict is the restoration of dignity to the people of the both sides of the DMZ. For South Koreans, it is their agency, or rather the freedom to engage the world as they fit, outside the artificial constraint of lies and deception that they are forced into. For North Koreans, it is their humanity, a voice to declare one's presence and a presence to make oneself heard. The largest obstacle to this path of restoration is the web of isolation and deception that surrounds the peninsula. Breaking away from isolation and meeting each other will not be the solution in itself, but it will mean that for the first time in their memory, Koreans will be free to pursue their solution.

## Brotherhood

그 순간의 가녀린 입술이 말하는 것을     *I heard the fragile lips of the moment*

나는 들었다 처음과 같이     *Say the words, just like the beginning*

지금 마주본 우리가 서로의 신입니다     *Now, as we stand facing each other*

*We become gods to each other*

나의 혁명은 지금 여기서 이렇게     *My revolution is here, now, like this*

- *An excerpt from the poem 'To my infinite revolution', Kim Seon-woo*

So far, we have discussed the violence of the 'Korean situation' on the people that live under it. But it is also true that such an attempt to discuss their 'human situation' within the 'Korean situation' invariably carries the seeds of the same kind of violence that was condoned under the existing conditions, for neither the people of the North or the South are homogeneous entities, and any attempt to homogenize them will fall into the trap of perpetuating the same kind of violence that was imposed upon them before<sup>13</sup>. What, then, is the solution? What is clear is that it, whatever it is, is not for this monologue to decide.

This monologue is not an answer to these questions. It may not even be capable of serving as a medium for these questions. No. This monologue is a

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<sup>13</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the subaltern speak?." *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea* (1988): 21-78.

"message in a bottle". I throw the bottle into the sea, whether it be the cobalt blue of the East or the gentle muck-brown of the West. There is no guarantee that it will reach its intended destination; there is no guarantee that it will reach anywhere. But as long as the bottle exists, it becomes an evidence for the things that I wanted to cry out, and my longing for my cry to reach the other side, and the future that the message had hoped to bring<sup>14</sup>.

I write these words 8,000 kilometers away from the peninsula. I cast the bottle across 70 years of separation, across the ideological conflict that was never my own, across the lives that I do not know and I will never be able to know. The letter is addressed to those who I have always been told to be my brothers, yet those who I have never met as a human being. I write my frustration, my anger, my loneliness into the letter. But I do not wish this letter to only be a memoir of my powerlessness. This letter is an acknowledgement of the fact that people happen to exist on both sides of the DMZ. This letter is a profession of love to those who were never met. And this letter is an evidence of the future that could happen instead. For the day that the separated meet once again, reaffirm the existence of each other, and "for the first time in our life, we shall be free to think about what we are going to do<sup>15</sup>".

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<sup>14</sup> This idea of 'message in a bottle' was inspired by the production of the play *Winterreise*, produced by Yael Ronen and the Exil Ensemble in Gorki Theater, Berlin.

<sup>15</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *An essay on liberation*. Vol. 319. Beacon Press, 1969.

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