

## 28. PICTURES FROM KOREA: SHARDS OF AN ALMOST FORGOTTEN PAST

**GRADE LEVEL:** 9-12

**AUTHOR:** Vincent Amato

**SUBJECT:** Social Studies, Literature

**TIME REQUIRED:** 1-2 class periods

### **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Stimulate an interest in a given historical period (in this case, the Korean War) by bringing it more to life through visual images.
2. Prompt students to speculate on what the photographs actually depict.
3. Promote further research.
4. Serve as a creative inspiration for developing poetry, short stories, essays, or other artistic or historical genres.

### **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

The photographs included in this lesson

### **BACKGROUND:**

*History describes events based on facts, while literature portrays people's lives through fiction. But in some instances fact and fiction coexist in a single work, such as a history-based novel. Literature tends to follow the scattered experiences of individuals rather than the activities of specific groups of people or organizations or the complex events with which they are involved.*

—from an essay by Hong, Sung-Won. "The Korean War and the Lives of Koreans," *Korea Focus* 8:4 (2000), pp. 75-84.

The scattered experiences of individuals. A young African American (in the parlance of the time, a young Negro, or even colored boy) finds himself half a world away from his home in New York or Philadelphia or Baltimore wearing a soldier's uniform and present at one of the great historical events of his time. While serving, like so many others, he takes snapshots, images to bring home as souvenirs of his time in the service. These images will be placed in a photo album to age and discolor. The soldier will age as well, live his life, and perhaps after he has died, the album of photos along with others of his belongings found to be of no value by his survivors will be discarded or sold to a dealer in such things. They are startling images.

Among the pictures, we find a four-star general conferring near his personal plane (four stars on the fuselage) with some Koreans in suits, politicians perhaps. There are random street scenes, a trolley on the Tongdaemun market line, a couple in Korean dress, and also our young man seated on a bed with a young Korean woman, yet another woman standing in a field, and a young Korean boy. Through the magic of the camera—a small time machine—we are transported to a time some fifty years ago. Coincidentally, ironically, the fiftieth anniversary of the war finds this album in a flea market on a long table almost hidden between rows of dusty books. It is late in the day when they are found. No doubt others have flipped through the pages of the album, found it of little interest and of no value, and stuffed it back between two books. They are startling images—images of the scattered experiences of individuals.

Upon my return from South Korea and my participation in the Korea Society's Summer Fellowship Program, I

gave a great deal of thought to how I could best encapsulate the many impressions, the great deal I had learned during the trip. The summer of the year 2000 was a very exciting one. Our arrival in Seoul came on the heels of the Summit 2000 conference between South Korea's Kim Dae Jung and North Korea's Kim Jong Il. Even before arriving in Seoul, the excitement had been transmitted back to the states. Coverage of the event on television station KBS in New York was extensive, and the images of the two leaders interacting cordially, the street scenes of Pyongyang broadcast for the first time in the United States and South Korea, could not fail to make a profound impression.

South Koreans seemed excited, full of hope, yet wary. There seemed to be no consensus among those we would meet in the country itself about whether we were witnessing the beginning of a long awaited reunification and a lasting peace or another attempt at reunification that would result in failure. In the journals back home, there was even talk of a fear of reunification because of the enormous economic burden such a turn of events would represent for the South. The example of Germany was both a harbinger of hope and an omen of the serious difficulties that might lie ahead. Although South Korea, like many of its Asian neighbors, seems to have survived the recent IMF crisis, many were nervous that the sharp "vee" recovery had been a bit too sharp, and that there would be aftershocks. Many of the intellectuals who spoke to our group emphasized the incredibly telescoped nature of the economic miracle. The country had developed amazingly rapidly, going through changes in a few decades that Western nations had had many decades if not centuries to absorb. Seoul is a city of affluence, a world-class city, yet all too manifest are the problems of pollution, traffic jams, overcrowding, crass commercialism, and the erosion and possible dissolution of traditional Confucian values.

Old and new exist partly side by side, partly in conflict. I had worn the garb of a *yangban* at the Arts Center in Seoul, visited the village of the masked dramas and seen one performed, and visited the temples and the palaces of the past. But I had also watched *Shiri*, the provocative new film, called the *Titanic* of the Seoul film industry, a film which so excited the younger generation that it broke box office records. Reality had caught up with art; the fictionalized summit meeting that takes place between the leaders of North and South Korea in *Shiri* had just taken place.

Summit 2000 exceeded in excitement even the frantic aura of a Western-style action movie. Kim Jong-Il, though clad in the typically austere garb of a communist leader, proved to be witty, charming, a patrician in mufti. The North Korean government buildings in which he entertained Mr. and Mrs. Kim Dae Jung and their entourage with their backdrops of huge seascapes were more appropriate to a palace than a drab bureaucratic meeting hall. Celadon oceans topped with sea foam cascaded dramatically behind diners at which both the famed *hamhung naengmyun* (buckwheat noodles) and fine Bordeaux wines were at various times in evidence. Much excitement—and yet the usual intrigues, suspicion, and fear. "Kim Dae Jung had overstepped his mandate," muttered one visiting professor. Conservative elements generally thought events were happening too fast; the tiger had not changed his stripes; the wolf had donned sheep's clothing. Hard on the heels of the summit honeymoon, reality seemed to hit Seoul with a vengeance. There was a doctor's strike that paralyzed the city. A demonstration at the Lotte Department Store left the area looking as if martial law had been declared. For days after the event, hundreds of young soldiers assembled in the corridors around the store. There was labor discontent and the inevitable demonstrations. Summitry came home to a certain chaos domestically. I left Korea somewhat daunted by my prospects for ever really getting the big picture, especially given my inability to communicate in Korean. It was a complex tapestry indeed.

And then, on a lazy, sunny Sunday in New York as I rummaged through long tables full of old books at the flea market on Twenty-sixth Street and Sixth Avenue, I came upon a photo album. In fact, I might well have passed it by because my real interest is in books and not photographs. But in this case the leaves of the photo album

were outside of and next to the album itself. One of the photographs immediately caught my attention. It showed a young Black soldier holding a child in his lap, both of them looking somewhat forlornly into the camera. As I turned the now crumbling pages of the album, my eyes widened at what I had come upon. Who was the four-star general? I searched my memory of the histories I had read. "There could not have been that many four-star generals serving in Korea at the time. I should be able to find out who he is," I thought. What was the event that led him to land in that open field? Who were the Koreans with whom he conferred? The images were so vivid. The black-and-white photos could well have been taken yesterday. They retained their original clarity and contrast. The color pictures now had an amber cast, faded with time.

After purchasing the album, (for which my excitement--impossible to disguise--no doubt led to my overpaying the now intrigued vendor), I took it to the privacy of my car and studied each of the pictures. Although most of the Asian photos appeared to have been taken in Korea, not all of the signage was in *hangul*. It was possible that some of them had been taken elsewhere, on R&R in Japan or even Taiwan. Other than the photos of the general that first caught my eye, the picture that next drew my attention was the one in which the young Black soldier appears with a young Korean woman seated on a bed. They are cheek-to-cheek. His arm is around her, and her hand rests comfortably on his thigh. They seem intimate, genuinely happy. Yet there is another pair of photos. In the first, the woman stands alone, in an open field. She is wearing a coat; the air seems cold and clear; and she is happily smiling. In the second, he stands next to her—but it is not the same young woman.

Who were these women? We think we know, perhaps; but do we? Now, if they are still alive, the young people in these photos would be in their seventies. Even the children would be approaching sixty. Was there real love, real attachment in any of this? Innocent friendship? How many other photo albums like this one exist? How many countless lives have been touched because war and global conflict have taken lives almost as disparate as one can imagine and thrown them together? And then I thought of the many tales that have grown out of such relationships. The interconnectedness of love and war was an ancient theme. In the tradition of *Madame Butterfly*, stories of interracial love between Western males and Asian women during World War II, the Korean War, and then the war in Viet Nam have proliferated, were even, for a time, a Hollywood favorite.

I also thought back to an essay by Chungmoo Choi in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (in Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi, eds., New York: Routledge, 1998) in which she chronicles a modern woman's reaction to soldiers from abroad. Driving along the Pacific Highway, Choi catches a glimpse of a military vehicle in a her rear-view mirror:

Momentarily, I caught myself in the act of preening, but at the same time straightening my back and holding my chin up. At first I was at a loss to explain my actions, which were but the long-forgotten habits of another time. I felt overwhelmed and confused. The pounding of my heart was clearly audible. Then inexplicable anger welled up inside me. I suddenly realized that my reaction to this encounter with the specular image of an American soldier was the reified habitus of a woman who had endured foreign domination in postcolonial Korea. I chastised myself, as many Koreans would do under such circumstances, in order to overcome that persistent specter. I muttered to myself, "Wait! You no longer need to act like this. You are not a young girl. You are a professor. Besides, this is America."

Values and culture have evolved a great deal since midcentury, and those changes have been global in their scope. But they have not always been easy to assimilate. As Hong Sung-Won goes on to say in his essay on "The Korean War and the Lives of the Koreans," "Korea's unique sexual traditions, in which men and women were not even allowed to sit together from after age seven, completely disappeared in the raging torrent of war." Such a reaction may seem ingenuous, but there is little doubt that the sentiment itself is genuine.

In the same essay, Hong writes, "The major events of a specific period have been voluminously recorded, but information on the everyday lives of ordinary people is typically limited to fragmentary, incomplete sources." (Hong, Sung-Won. "The Korean War and the Lives of Koreans," *Korea Focus* 8:4 (2000), pp. 75-84.)

The pictures in this photo album are, to me, as shards to an archaeologist. Small clues to an elaborate, complex reality. As such, they may also serve as triggers to the creative imagination, particularly to an imagination already aroused by an interest in the period. They serve as testimony to the power a single image may render.

### **PROCEDURE:**

The unit may be utilized in either the Social Studies classroom or the English classroom. The photograph album here presented serves only as an example of the kind of visual material that might be utilized. My "find" may be unusually provocative—and fortuitous—but teachers can use a wide variety of sources. For the purpose of this lesson, however, I will address myself to the set of photographs at hand.

(The attached bibliography on the Korean War is compiled from amazon.com. It is included here to illustrate the enormous amount of material that is available. I use amazon a great deal in my teaching. Although a commercial site, and students should not be encouraged to rely on such sources entirely, it is a great source for instant bibliographies accessed through their search engine; it contains reviews of material and photos of book jackets; and it even invites visitors to the site to add their comments and reviews.)

The photograph album can be shown to the class as it was found in its original form. As such, it serves to demonstrate to students an example of living history. Students can then be asked to consider other such historical sources, e.g., photographs and memorabilia of different historical events in their own families, or even relatives and friends who might be interviewed about their experiences.

The photos may be duplicated and treated as a set that tell a story, or individual photographs may be utilized. These can be photocopied and distributed or projected on a screen in front of the class as a whole.

### Sample Questions

1. Who are the individuals in the pictures?
2. Where and when were the photographs taken?
3. What clues exist in the photographs as to their time frame and setting?
4. Taken as a group, the photos in this album seem to tell a story. Can these images, taken obviously both here and abroad, be woven into a coherent tale?
5. Which of the pictures most provokes your interest? Why?
6. What emotions seem to emerge? Is there a prevailing mood?
7. Would it be possible to find out who the men and women in the pictures really are?
8. How would you go about attempting to contact these individuals?
9. Do these photos bring to mind any works you have already read or seen portrayed in film?

### Activities

1. A poem
2. A short story
3. A one-act play
4. An essay
5. A book report
6. A classroom debate

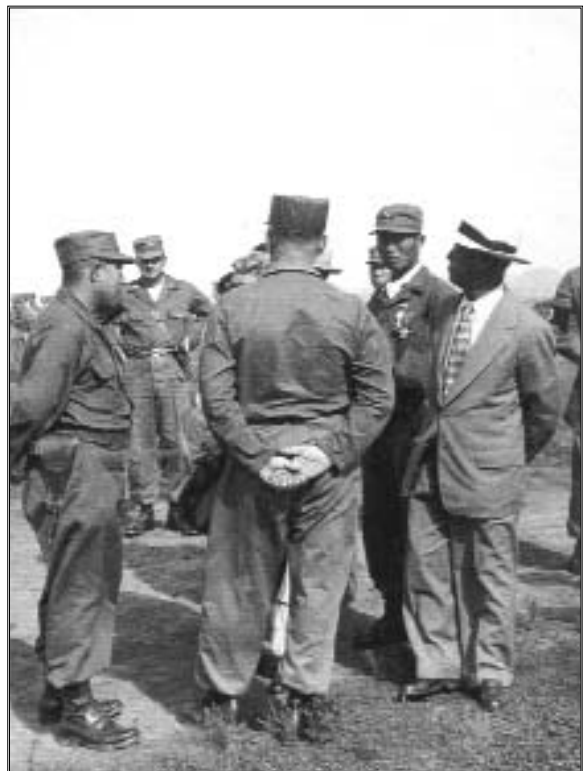
7. An interview
8. A photo collage with accompanying text

#### Class Discussions and Further Reading

1. History of the Korean War
2. Korean fiction in translation
3. Korean American fiction
4. Historical method
5. Interracial relationships
6. The unique history of Black American servicemen and women
7. Relations between American troops and local populations abroad
8. War brides

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