

Conflicting Images and Lost Perspectives: Narratives on the Korean War in American Textbooks

Wonsuk Chang

This paper delineates the way in which the history of the Korean War is told in the received American history textbooks. In doing this, I compare descriptions of the Korean War in American textbooks with those in Chinese and Korean textbooks. I anticipate a contrast in the ways each textbook perceives the Korean War. At the same time, I focus on the relationship between the content and the most recent academic research on the Korean War, because the two are not always the same.

What I find is that the narratives in American textbooks, like in Chinese textbooks, tend to characterize one's posture as defensive and innocent and identify the other's ambition as the prime source of disorder and war in Korea. These defender-aggressor mirror images help them to view their own involvement in the Korean War as a morally rational decision. The topic of the U.S.'s failure to appreciate indigenous Korean national needs and alliance with colonial powers is largely ignored. While atrocities in the Vietnam War committed by the U.S. are being taught in the U.S. classroom, those in the Korean War are not mentioned at all.

Because textbooks are one of the crucial semiotic codes to construct society, we should allow multiple perspectives to understand historical events and encourage citizens to think about historical events critically. American symbolic code should be sustained and revised according to her value: democracy.

Keywords: Korean War, American textbooks, narrative analysis, war atrocities, modern Korean history

1. History Narrative as a Construction of Shared Memory

A historical narrative in textbooks is a construction of the collective memories of textbook authors rather than a mere description of given facts, *wie es eigentlich*

gewesen ist. Textbooks are written by authors under the influences of the nation-state, political pressure groups, publishers, and economic constraints. Because textbooks tend to define a nation-state's sense of identity, roles, and relationship with other nation-states through the construction of a shared historical memory, it is no surprise that textbooks have been and will be a battlefield where a variety of political and social forces compete to control the shared memory of the community.

Memory as knowledge of the past is not a copy of a blank slate representing objective things in the past but a semiotic construction framing past events with images and metaphors from a certain perspective as many philosophers today argue (Mead 1934; Bourdieu 1990; Whitehead 1985, Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). There are governing metaphors and ideas that organize the pattern of the historic event, and cast actors at play constituting relations among them in the historical narrative.

In framing an historical event, authors cannot but be selective. They both illuminate and obscure the state of events when configuring the complex sinews and muscles of historical events within their own predisposition and social power matrix.

To understand the Korean War narrative in American textbooks to the fullest, contemplating factors that shape the narrative such as American foreign policy, textbook policy and the selection process of the state board of education, publishing trends, and influential interest groups are necessary. However, I confine myself to delineating the way in which the history of the Korean War is told in the received American history textbooks.

The tool I employ here is an international comparison of textbooks on the Korean War. I would like to illuminate the Korean War narrative in American textbooks by doing tandem reading of how the Korean War is viewed by other countries who were involved in the Korean War. By comparing narratives on the Korean War in American textbooks with those in Chinese and South Korean textbooks, I intend to show the ways each textbook perceives the Korean War. The way in which the American textbooks contextualize the Korea War is opposite to how Chinese ones interpret it. American textbooks memorize what Chinese ones cannot and vice versa. Also there can be disputes in factual accuracy. It is also interesting to notice that the Korean War teaches different lessons to the respective countries.

At the same time, I focus on the relationship between the content of the textbooks and the most recent academic research on the Korean War, because the

two are not always the same. I selected student editions for use from the sixth to twelfth grades based on the textbook adoptions of California, Indiana, North Carolina, Florida, New York, and of metropolitan districts nationwide.

2. Mirror Image: Innocent “Us” and Aggressive “Others”

Contextualize the War

American textbooks tend to place the Korean War in the context of the expansion of communism in Asia and American intervention as a response to that threat. *American: Pathways to the Present* initially explains that the Chinese civil war and eventual victory of Mao Zedong is preliminary knowledge for understanding the Korean War. “The fall of China to the communists had been a shock to the United States; now it seemed as though communism was on the advance again” (Cayton, Perry, Reed, and Winkler 2003:654). Spielvogel puts an article on the Korean War in the section about Communist China; he wrote “some Americans began to worry about Communist desire for world domination” (Spielvogel 2008:776-81). Roger Beck arranges the section of “Wars in Korea and Vietnam” after the section titled “Communists Take Power in China.” He explains that just as the United States helped Chiang Kai-shek set up a Nationalist government on Taiwan, in fear of the expansion of communism, the United States supported a separate state in South Korea (Beck, Black, Krieger, Naylor, and Shabaka 2007:972-7).

That communism is inherently expansive is a basic assumption of the Truman Doctrine, a U.S. foreign policy of “containing” communism in areas of crucial strategic value to the United States. Communism as a contagious disease seems a pervasive metaphor during the Cold War period. For instance, the American economist and strategist W. W. Rostow defined communism as an opportunistic virus that took out infant nations in a transitional period to a mature industrial society (Gilman 2003:195). It provides us with images of the self and others. The United States is portrayed as a doctor, the new developing countries are infant patients, and Communist countries are contagious diseases. It implies that the U.S. as dispassionate doctors should “contain” and prevent infant nations from spreading communist diseases. Later this American foreign policy included the domino theory, which meant that an entire region would collapse to communism if one country in that region fell to communism. History

neither proves nor refutes this theory. With victory of Northern Vietnam, two dominos, Laos and Cambodia, toppled. But Thailand and Malaysia remained non-Communist countries. A Sino-Soviet split in late 1950 and the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979 put an end to the western idea that there is a single form of communism directed by Moscow. Spielvogel is adamant in saying, “the domino theory proves unfounded” (Spielvogel 2008:671).

It is quite interesting to compare narratives from American textbooks with those presented in Chinese history textbooks because we are able to see a mirror image. History textbooks in China contextualize the Korean War in relation to the U.S. policy of containment, the blockade of socialist countries in America’s pursuit of global hegemony. According to them, the U.S. intention to maximize national interests in Asia prompted the military involvement of the United Nations in the Korean War. From the beginning of the war, the U.S. threatened China with dispatching the American Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait. Finally ignoring warnings from China, approaching the Apnok River (Yalu River), North Korea’s border with China, and even bombing northeastern China,¹ the U.S. army imperiled the security of China (Renmin jiaoyu chupanshe 2005:109).

While the U.S. textbooks’ perception of communism as inherently expansive seems to be influenced by George Kennan’s investigation into the Soviet Union and later Truman Doctrine, the Chinese perception of America as a self-interested aggressor may be due to Lenin’s definition of imperialism as the last stage of capitalistic development. However, Lenin’s theory, like the domino theory, is inconsistent with historical and documentary records that show communist countries, like the Soviet Union and China, without a capitalistic mechanism could be imperialistic aggressors.

Outbreak of the War and Intervention

Today there is no doubt that North Korean troops did a surprise attack on South

1. The U.S.’s bombing of northeastern China, which caused China’s involvement in the Korean War, is repeatedly claimed by Chinese textbooks, *Renminribao* and the government, but is not mentioned in any documents or textbooks in the U.S. For example, *History of Modern and Contemporary China* shows a picture of the ruined city of Andong caused by a U.S. bombing (Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe 2003).

Korea on June 25, 1950. American textbooks remark that the Korean War broke out when North Korean troops streamed across the 38th parallel in June 1950. Maps in the Korean War section of the five textbooks indicate the invader, North Korea, and exhibit the back and forth of opposing troops (Beck, Black, Krieger, Naylor, and Shabaka 2007:976; Spielvogel 2008:781; Cayton, Perry, Reed, and Winkler 2003:654; Ellis and Esler 2003:810; Bulliet, Crossley, Headrick, Hirsh, Johnson, and Northrup 2005:826).

It is notable to see the metaphor of a policeman and criminal used when describing the involvement of the U.S. and UN in the Korean War as a “police action” (Cayton, Perry, Reed, and Winkler 2003:654). It implies that the intervention of the United States and the United Nations was a corrective action intended to put right that which was wrong according to the law. That is to say, the narrative implies that the U.S.’s and the United Nation’s intervention in the Korean War was like a police action while communists were seen as criminals or rogues brought to justice.

Roger Beck, citing Truman, aligns the invasion of North Korea within the aggression of fascist countries in World War II. He describes Truman’s understanding of the situation as follows: “The North Korean aggressors were repeating what Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had done in 1930s” (Beck, Black, Krieger, Naylor, and Shabaka 2007:976). This shows the American perception of the Korean War as an extension of World War II, a battle against fascists. As the U.S. and Allies struck back against the aggressors in World War II and finally won the war, it seems that it was the U.S. and the United Nations’ responsibility to enter the Korean War and rectify the situation.

While the current Chinese government admits to North Korea’s initial penetration on June 25, 1950, the textbooks seem indifferent as to who attacked first. Its expression is that “The Korean War broke out” (Renmin jiaoyu chupanshe 2005:108) without mentioning invader. A map in the textbook does not indicate who invades first. Instead, it contains a map that shows Chinese territory struck by U.S. planes (Renmin jiaoyu chupanshe 2005:110).

The narrative on the progression of the Korean War in Chinese textbooks tends to prove that Chinese intervention was mainly a defensive measure. The Chinese perception of the Korean War is captured in the Chinese rendering of her involvement in the Korean War into “War resisting America and Assisting North Korea, Defending our Country and Safeguarding our Families.” By and large, Chinese involvement in the Korean War is illustrated as a defensive battle. Accordingly, textbooks which quote the commander-in-chief of the People’s

Volunteer Army Peng Dehai allude to the Korean War as, in fact, “an invasion of imperialism” (Renmin jiaoyu chupanshe 2005:110).

Were Chinese innocently defensive? Historical documents are not congruent with this innocent image of China that the textbook provides because we have enough evidence to show that Mao Zedong was supportive of Kim Il-sung’s plan to invade South Korea. Mao Zedong had already acknowledged the North Korean invasion and allowed trained Chinese-Korean troops to participate in the North Korean forces prior to the outbreak of the war.

Effect of the Korean War

What is the consequence of the Korean War? Cayton states that it was frustrating to Americans because Washington proved unwise enough to invest considerable military might in the struggle, but had a “limited result.” The fear of communism and lack of self-confidence may have sparked the anti-communism hysteria known as McCarthyism in the 1950s. The Korean War brought a huge increase in military spending, and reinforcement of the military-industrial complex ensued (Cayton, Perry, Reed, and Winkler 2003:656-7).

We can find a mirror image again when we look at the Chinese appraisal of the Korean War. For the Chinese, the Korean War was convincing evidence of the growing power of China because the newborn country could end in a tie with the superpower America (Renmin jiaoyu chupanshe 2005:110).

Cayton reported that 54,000 U.S. soldiers were killed and 103,000 wounded during the Korean War. Generally, Korean textbooks exhibit a more detailed record of war damages like casualties, devastation of industry, psychological injuries, and lament over the fratricide tragedy. “Due to the Korean War, Koreans were wounded so seriously that hatred and distrust among people grew. At the same time, there emerged awareness that war and fratricide should be avoided” (Kim, Yu, Sin, Kim, and Choi 2007:280-1; Kim, Hong, Kim, Lee, Nam, and Nam 2007:272-3; Han, Kang, Kim, Kim, Cho, and Chae 2007:263).

3. Lost Perspectives in American Textbooks

Vietnam War and the Korean War

Spielvogel, introducing Vietnam’s communist leader Ho Chi Minh, raises an

interesting point that history might have been different if Woodrow Wilson had not ignored Ho Chi Minh at the Paris Conference after World War I. Ho Chi Minh tried to give U.S. president Woodrow Wilson a list of Vietnam's grievances against French colonial rule, but Wilson and the Allies declined to grant his petition (Spielvogel 2008:595). The author seems to mention in an indirect way that the United States mistakenly ignored Vietnamese nationalism. Moreover, he suggests that had the United States sought to encourage Vietnamese nationalism instead of attempting to perpetuate colonialism, Vietnam might have become a non-communist country. Ellis and Esler write that America failed in Vietnam because it supported an unpopular leader of a corrupt government and was ignorant of Vietnam's wish to be independent. Ho Chi Minh was admired by the Vietnamese people as a hero who had fought Japanese and French imperialists rather than as a communist leader, and many Vietnamese saw the United States as another foreign power trying to dominate Vietnam (Ellis and Esler 2003:874). Cayton writes about the atrocity committed by American soldiers at My Lai as much as about communist brutality (Cayton, Perry, Reed, and Winkler 2003:803).

Failure to Appreciate the Korean Independence Movement

The above mentioned contents about the description of the Vietnam War are missing when it comes to writing about the Korean War. But we can find similarities in the war experience of both countries. Like Ho Chi Minh, Kim Kyusik, a graduate of Roanoke College in Virginia and a Korean independence activist inspired by Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of self-determination of nations, also went to the Peace Conference and submitted a written petition for Korean independence. But the U.S. and the Allies were not interested in supporting the independence of Korea. As Roger Beck puts it, "The rest of the world clearly saw the brutal results of Japan's imperialism. Nevertheless, the United States and other European countries largely ignored what was happening in Korea. They were too busy with their own imperialistic aims" (Beck, Black, Krieger, Naylor, and Shabaka 2007:813).

Even today, American textbooks do not pay attention to the Korean people's independence movement to the extent where indigenous Korean efforts are properly appreciated. This point is important because awareness of the development of Koreans' struggle for independence permits readers to look at the Korean War from another angle. Narratives of the Korean War in American text-

books tend to begin with an explanation of the Cold War, the intervention of superpowers, and end with the armistice in 1953 between the United Nations and North Korea. One of the major, yet unnoticed, actors in the Korean War must be the Korean people who aspired to build an independent nation-state.

Unfortunately, Spielvogel ignored the Korean independence movement entirely in the section titled “Nationalism in Africa and Asia” in which Vietnamese and Indian independence movement were illustrated (Spielvogel 2008:592-7). Ellis and Esler do the same in the chapter titled “Nationalism and Revolution around the World 1910-1939” in which Korea is merely shown as one of the nations seeking self-government at the end of World War I without any written explanation (Ellis and Esler 2003:720-43). Roger Beck allows himself to report the predicament of the Korean people under the brutal rule of Japan and the creation of a strong nationalist movement. But he does not give an account of the uninterrupted resistance of the Korean people against Japanese colonial rule throughout 1910-1945 (Beck, Black, Krieger, Naylor, and Shabaka 2007:813). Bulliet has a chapter titled “Striving for Independence: Africa, India, and Latin America, 1900-1949” in which Vietnamese nationalist and communist movements for independence is explicated over two pages. But the textbook fails to take the Korean independence movement into account (Bulliet, Crossley, Headrick, Hirsh, Johnson, and Northrup 2005).

This topic constitutes an important part of textbooks in South Korea. Modern and contemporary Korean history textbooks show rich evidence of strong independence movements, covered in considerable length (Han, Kang, Kim, Kim, Cho, and Chae 2007:131-235; Kim, Yu, Sin, Kim, and Choi 2007:132-244; Kim, Hong, Kim, Lee, Nam, and Nam 2007:142-242).

Division at the 38th Parallel

The U.S. Military Government’s failure to appreciate Korea’s indigenous nationalism and its consequences are an unpopular topic in the American textbooks. Though today many researchers see priority was given to an anti-communism policy rather than responding to the Korean people’s national needs or democracy during the U.S. occupation period (1945-1948), this issue is never touched upon in the textbooks.

For example, the 38th parallel division decision was made between the U.S. and Russia without consulting Koreans. This dividing line did not have any his-

torical foundation in the history of Korea and Koreans were not even capable of being aware of the possibility. In general, Korean textbooks describe that the fratricidal conflict began with the unilateral 38th parallel division by the superpowers.

Roger Beck and other American textbook authors say Korea become a divided nation. North of the 38th parallel, a line that crosses Korea at 38 degrees north latitude, Japanese troops surrendered to Soviet forces. South of this line, the Japanese surrendered to American forces in a dispassionate manner (Beck, Black, Krieger, Naylor, and Shabaka 2007:976; Bulliet, Crossley, Headrick, Hirsh, Johnson, and Northrup 2005:826; Ellis and Esler 2003:870; Spielvogel 2008:781).

But it must sound too cold to Korean ears. Let us compare statements in American textbooks with Korean textbooks about the division at the 38th parallel. Korean textbooks allot enough space to elucidate the entire process of division and its consequence on the Korean people. Kim Kwangnam first explains that there were persistent Korean independence movements that contributed to the victory of the Allied forces and the Allies promised Korea would be free and independent in due course as declared at the Cairo Conference (1943) and in the Potsdam Declaration (1945). They also mentioned extant political groups, such as the Korea People's Republic organized by Yo Un-hyoung, throughout the Korean Peninsula. America and the Soviet Union, ignoring native political groups, enacted policies promoting their own influences. As a result, "Though we Koreans were capable of founding an independent government, Korea was divided by America and the Soviet Union. As separate governments emerge in the south and north, Korea underwent the tragedy of a division of the nation" (Kim, Yu, Sin, Kim, and Choi 2007:258-9). Kim Heungsu's description of the 38th parallel is not so different. The textbook also reminds us that there was preparation on the part of the Korean people for establishing an independent government and a series of promises for Korea's independence on the part of the Allied forces. The section ends with the following: "We sought ways to found an independent government after August 15, 1945, and organized the Preparation Committee for Founding a Korean Government. Nevertheless, the territory is divided because of the superpowers' own interests...the 38th parallel became a hardened line irrespective of our will" (Kim, Choi, Han, Park, Kim, and Kim 2002:270).

U.S. Occupation of South Korea from 1945-1948

The U.S. and Russia as occupants of the Korean Peninsula officially did not recognize any Korean independence activist groups including the Korean government-in-exile, and could reshape the political landscape according to their own strategies. Later, this neglect may have prevented Korea as member of the Allied Powers from participating in the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951 (Park 2006:69).

Predominantly, the U.S. military government policy during 1945-1948 was to bolster the status quo and resist a thorough reform of colonial legacy. Restoration of colonial structures, including collaboration with fascist collaborators hated by most Korean people and (sometimes violent) suppression of the people's resistance, forms a larger pattern of U.S. policy in South Korea during this period. Undoubtedly, communists sought to take advantage of the pervasive discontent and gain political momentum. An American alliance with former colonial powers had something to do with the intense anti-American sentiment in liberated Korea. Though rich declassified documents and scholarship are available, this topic is not properly dealt with in the American textbooks. Unanimously they point out that U.S. forces, ignorant of Korea, committed an error by retaining pro-Japanese collaborators (Han, Kang, Kim, Kim, Cho, and Chae 2007:249; Kim, Yu, Sin, Kim, and Choi 2007:259; Kim, Hong, Kim, Lee, Nam, and Nam 2007:257).

Voice of Civilians and Atrocities in the Korean War

Atrocities committed by South Korean and U.S. forces are a crucial topic in the study of the Korean War these days because while atrocities committed by the North Koreans and Chinese army were well documented, those by U.S. forces and South Koreans seem unfamiliar. For example, with the full investigation under the Clinton administration, some U.S. veterans admitted atrocities of machine-gunning hundreds of helpless civilians under the railroad bridge at No Gun Ri on July 16, 1950, and destructing two strategic bridges at Nakdong River, thereby killing hundreds of civilians (Gittings and Kettle 2000). South Korea's Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, established on December 1, 2005, has investigated numerous atrocities committed by South Korean and U.S. forces during the Korean War. The commission estimates that at least 100,000 people, possibly 200,000 or higher, were executed in the summer of 1950.

American and Chinese textbooks do not reflect uncovered atrocities and civilian casualties committed by either side. Korean textbooks refer to the fact that there were civilian casualties and statistics during the war without specific information (Kim, Yu, Sin, Kim, and Choi 2007:280; Kim, Hong, Kim, Lee, Nam, and Nam 2007:272-3).

One piece of poetry from a Korean textbook may demonstrate the self-pity of Korean civilians in a proxy war of the superpowers and the resistance against foreign powers. To view that the Korean War is not an intrinsic but a surrogate war from the standpoint of Korean civilians is not common in the American textbooks.

There is no reason
 Please, leave and go to your own home
 You, Americans and Russians. Please leave immediately.
 There is the slightest difference between “to leave” and “go home”
 Likewise, for pure and authentic minds of the common people
 Americans and Russians are all the same
 Please leave and go home.
 Don’t you feel sorry about the grandfather of Myeongsu?
 Don’t you feel sorry about the grandfather of Jaenim?
 Americans and Russians, Leave.
 With Chocolate, Coffee, Patch Coats, Military Uniforms, Hand
 Grenades, Russian submachine guns..
 As quiescence approaches
 Please leave and get out silently.

(Poem by Kim Suyong: Kim, Hong, Kim, Lee, Nam, and Nam
 2007:257: Translated by Wonsuk Chang)²

A story, an excerpt from K. Connie Kang’s *Home Was the Land of Morning*

2. Some Korean textbooks tend to use the dichotomy of We-Koreans and Other-external powers. Sometimes Korea is viewed as a victim of a power struggle between the superpowers. However, it is far from the truth. To accuse external powers of tragic fratricide is not consistent with available historical data. The Korean people were leading and supporting actors in the political struggle from the South-North division to the end of the Korean War. Frequent uses of the first person point of view like “We Koreans” and “Our nation” rather than the third person in Korean textbooks may show the author’s strong intention to instill patriotism into students’ hearts.

Calm, about those not involved in the politics and how they were drawn in as war refugees when the Korean War escalated is told in the American textbook. It is a story of those who risked a train ride south out of Seoul to escape the advancing North Korean army. Though emphasis is different from the poem in the Korean textbook, it is valuable to include the civilian experience during the Korean War.

4. Concluding Remarks

The narratives of American textbooks, like Chinese textbooks, tend to characterize one's posture as defensive and innocent and identified the other's ambition as the prime source of disorder and war in Korea. These defender-aggressor mirror images help them to view their own involvement in the Korean War as a morally rational decision. It is famous that Manichaeian images between "us" and "them," i.e., defender and aggressor, doctor and contagious disease, and good and evil, energize conflict by fortifying borders.

Meanwhile, American textbooks, like a medical file written by a doctor, do not contain the client's own explanation. The textbooks do not give sufficient account of the uninterrupted Korean desire to establish an independent government during Japanese rule (1910-1945) and how Korean political groups interacted with the conflicting superpowers during the U.S.-Soviet Union occupation period (1945-1948).

The textbooks tend to make the Korean War not only forgotten but a lesson unlearned. The topic of the U.S. failure to appreciate indigenous Korean national needs and alliance with colonial powers is largely ignored. While atrocities in the Vietnam War committed by the U.S. are being taught in U.S. classrooms, those from the Korean War are not mentioned at all.

To produce a sort of synthetic textbook which would satisfy all parties concerned in the Korean War sounds charming yet seems improbable in the near future because every single nation fears that a single perspective will dominate the static picture of the Korean War. We may consider the possibility of making an international Korean War database in which various perspectives, for example, the Korean War from the standpoint of nations, of civilians, of woman, and of soldiers, are allowed and available for educational use. It may not replace national textbooks but would be used as a supplementary resource. It would encourage classroom teachers and students to exercise critical thinking and prac-

tice tolerance to allow multiple perspectives when fashioning historical events.

The American philosopher Alfred Whitehead once commented that the art of free society for its progress consists first in the maintenance of a symbolic code and secondly in the fearlessness of revision (Whitehead 1985:88). Textbooks as one of the crucial semiotic codes have to allow a pair of eyes to construct historical events and encourage citizens to forge their common views in conversation. American symbolic code should be sustained and revised according to her value: democracy.

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Wonsuk Chang is Senior Researcher at the Academy of Korean Studies. He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. His recent works concentrate on intercultural philosophy between East and West.