Writing under wartime conditions : North and South Korean writers during the Korean war (1950-1953)

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Chapter Three

North Korean Wartime Literature: Rousing the Reader to Action[1]

In this chapter I look at several North Korean short stories and novels that were written during the Korean War (1950-1953) with a special interest in the way North Korean writers stressed the function of literature in society as a means of rousing readers to action, or to support the war effort. Korea's wartime literature has, in general, never been valued highly or been worthy of much consideration by literary scholars. The lack of literary qualities in these wartime stories - with their one-dimensional approaches to the stories' characters or plot - have deterred many from looking more seriously at this type of literature as its heroes, seemingly without any obstacles in their way, defeat the enemy and attain victory. It is because of the above attitude that North Korean literature in particular has never been appreciated, due to the view that the stories perform a subservient role to the Communist Party which prescribes the subject of literature and the manner in which a story should be written. Even when made the object of study, North Korean literature is analyzed for its inherent political message rather than its literary qualities, in order to look at what

[1] An abridged version of this chapter has been published as "Rousing the Reader to Action: North Korean Wartime Literature" in Andrew Jackson (ed.), *25 Years of the SOAS Centre of Korean Studies* (Leiden: Brill/Global Oriental, 2013).

sort of idealized image the Communist Party wants its people to believe or be persuaded by. Many earlier studies of North Korean literature, therefore, focuses on how closely the literary work in question follows the prescribed party directives.[2]

However, Stephen Epstein, in his article *North Korean Short Stories on the Cusp of the New Millennium,* has shown that even under such conditions of prescribed rules and top-down directives, the writer still needs to imbue the story with sufficient literary qualities to make it interesting to readers. As Epstein explains: "the success of any given story will depend on the skill with which the author can manipulate these conventions while still remaining within a rigid structure."[3] Furthermore, even if the writer wants to write completely within the guidelines of the official ideology, he is still constrained by the fact that the novel should not stray too far from reality. This is because a story can never be too far-fetched or the reader might stop reading, as he will not accept the events being described as true or believable. The author, therefore, cannot ignore political or social issues, but needs to address these. Condemnation of these issues in itself is not enough: to make an ideological claim the issue needs to be foregrounded, and the author must give a satisfactory interpretation of the issue.

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[2] Studies of North Korean literature's relation to ideology in English are Marshall Pihl, "Engineers of the Human Soul: North Korean Literature Today", *Korean Studies* 1 (1977), pp. 63-110, Kwon Young-min, "Literature and Art in North Korea: Theory and Policy", *Korea Journal* 31.2 (1991), pp. 56-70, Vladimir Pucek, "The Impact of Juche upon Literature and Arts", in Han S. Park (ed.), *North Korea: Ideology, Politics, Economy*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall. (1996).
[3] Stephen Epstein, "North Korean Short Stories on the Cusp of the New Millennium," in *Acta Koreana* 5.1 (2002), p. 37.

In North Korean wartime literature this is done primarily by depicting heroic, down-to earth and honest characters who contrast sharply with the cruelty of the American enemy characters that appear. This basic plotline of the heroic figure fighting against a cruel enemy is fixed, but in the sub-plots of the story the author is able to make more use of literary strategies to explain certain wartime events or social issues that were uppermost in the North Korean reader's mind during the Korean War.

First I will look at how the stories function and how they are written to evoke a certain emotion that rouses the reader to action. I will do this by focusing on Han Sŏrya's story *Jackals* (Sŭngnyangi, 1950) and make use of North Korean literary critics' essays that review this story to explain what the reader-response to this story was in wartime North Korea. Both during and after the Korean War this short story was considered by many critics to be a model example of a successful story, and therefore it is interesting to examine in more detail why they believed this to be so. I will then focus on the characters appearing in the North Korean wartime works and make use of Martin Hurcombe's observations in his analysis of French patriotic novels written during the Great War. Hurcombe points out that even in the nationalistic stories, the writer cannot solely paint an extremely positive picture of war, and is also obliged, if he wants to be taken seriously by the reader, to address issues that deal with social concerns. This aspect is also visible in North Korea's wartime literature, as the characters are imbued with heroic but down-to-earth characteristics that portray

both the wartime experiences of North Korean soldiers and citizens, but at the same time also express some of the readers' wartime concerns.

The function of North Korean wartime literature

Kim Il Sung laid down his directives of what in his opinion the form and function of North Korean wartime literature should be in an official speech on the topic on June 30, 1951. Here he praised writers and artists for their achievements, but also mentioned several shortcomings in the topics and themes that the writers thus far had chosen for their works. He stressed that writers and artists "should see that their works serve our embattled people as a powerful weapon, and as a great inspiration spurring them to ultimate victory."[4] Furthermore he added that "Writers and artists must produce works which will help the men of our People's Army and will strengthen the confidence of the entire people in victory."[5] He then went on to enumerate several broad themes that writers should address in wartime. These included how the writers should present the patriotism of various groups (soldiers, civilians in their own territories and also those in enemy-occupied areas) through the thoughts, feelings and lives of real people to make their works

[4] Kim Il Sung, "On some questions arising in our literature and art: talk with writers and artists," in *Kim Il Sung: Works* 6 (Pyŏngyang: Foreign Language Press, 1981), p. 336.
[5] Ibid., p. 339.

true to life.[6] What he stressed most in his speech was the need of the writers to arouse hatred for the enemy through their works.

Kim Il Sung's words were interpreted and reinterpreted differently by writers themselves to fit their own personal views. The predominantly older generation of writers, who controlled the North Korean literary scene, had their own ideas of what wartime literature should be like, and also had previous experience of wartime writing as many of them had promoted the Japanese war effort from 1937 onwards. Until Kim Il Sung's speech, the government had not concerned itself too much with literary matters. Now that the war had become more protracted it was necessary to gain the support of all citizens by mobilizing literature and the arts.

When one reads the essays on literature published during the Korean War, one sees that they focus on diverse topics. The literary critics weighed in with their own ideas about a suitable direction for North Korean literature; a direction that would help them implement their personal view of socialist literature. In order not to offend the party line, the strategy they adopted was to use Kim Il Sung's speech, quote a sentence from it, and then started interpreting that sentence to their own liking. Yi Wŏnjo, for example, picked up on Kim Il Sung's extensive plea to depict the country's wartime heroes correctly, and focused on explaining several writing strategies that used lifelike heroic figures. An Hamgwang picked up on Kim's discussion of the still prevalent

[6] Ibid., pp. 337-339.

use in literary works of "naturalistic techniques" and used this to criticize several writers for their naturalist and formalist tendencies, while writer Kim Namch'ŏn extrapolated from Kim Il Sung's argument on the "shortcomings in the literary field" that he was hinting here at the remnants of colonial thought in North Korea's literature and that writers should focus on eradicating these colonial elements from their writings.[7]

What the writers and critics all agreed on was the functionality of literature in a wartime society. Many literary critics mentioned that the writer's main goal should be to instil patriotism in the reader's mind, and the portrayal of the North's heroic characters would have just such an effect. An Hamgwang, for example, mentions that "writers enhance the noble patriotic spirit in the people and their fighting spirit, stir up hatred towards the enemy and strengthen the resolve for their righteous struggle and ultimate victory."[8]

The main tenet of this wartime literary paradigm, though, was that literature is most effective in enhancing feelings of patriotism or the will to fight when the main focus in a story is on the cruelty and barbarism of the enemy. Literary critic Ŏm Hosŏk summed up this role of literature: "The spirit of hatred shines through in our writers' works like a sharp bayonet and has become an effective

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[7] An Hamgwang, "1951nyŏndo munhak ch'angjo-ŭi sŏnggwa-wa chŏnmang," *Inmin* (January 1952). Kim Namch'ŏn, "Kim Ilsŏng changgun-ŭi 'hyŏn'gyedan-e issŏsŏ chibang chŏnggwŏn kigwandŭr-ŭi immu-wa yŏkhar-e taehan kyoshi-ŭi malssŭm-ŭl chakka yesulgadŭr-ŭn ŏttŏk'e shilch'ŏn-e omkil kŏshinga," *Munhak yesul* 5.3 (March 1952), p. 1-3.
[8] An Hamgwang, p. 143.

weapon to support the people [….] Through this spirit of hatred our literature has become an unprecedented fighting force."[9] The element of hatred was therefore seen as the most important element of a wartime literary work, and a work was therefore judged to be effective and well written when it had the function of rousing the reader to action.

This kind of attitude towards literature may seem counterintuitive to modern observers of North Korean affairs, where the literary work is mainly appreciated for its ideological quality, and especially for its adherence to the Juche doctrine.[10] Even before the Korean War the main criterion a literary work should abide by was its correct depiction of communist ideology. Wartime literature, however, required a completely different attitude, and the North Korean writers knew this very well, having had first-hand experience with war at the end of the colonial period (1910-1945), when they had actively helped to shape the role of the wartime writer and his literature. Their experience had taught them that in order to sustain the morale of the population, and to (re)gain the reader's trust in and support for the war effort it was not enough to repeat slogans about the certainty of victory or the brilliance of Kim Il Sung *ad infinitum*. This approach was certainly not unique to North Korea and is seen in many other modern

[9] Ŏm Hosŏk, "Choguk haebang chŏnjaeng shigi-ŭi uri munhak" [Literature from the Fatherland Liberation War,] in *Hyŏndae munhak pip'yŏng charyojip (Ibukp'yŏn/1950-1953)* [Sourcebook on modern literary criticism (volume North Korea/1950-1953)] edited by Yi Sŏnyŏng et al. (Seoul: T'aehaksa, 1993), p. 189.
[10] Juche is a political doctrine which stresses economic and political self-reliance, and was developed by Kim Il Sung from 1955 onwards. It has been a guiding principle in North Korean policy making until at least the mid-1990s.

wartime societies as well. Katherine Hodgson, for example, says of the Soviet literature of the Second World War:

> "It was clear […] that the war effort would demand real popular commitment which could not be won by mouthing empty slogans about the might of the Party, or by making groundless claims that the war was going well, when large numbers of people had direct evidence to the contrary. […] Literature in wartime was preoccupied with giving an immediate response to events while they were still in progress: the broader perspective had to wait. Most prose fiction written during the war was short and focused on a single limited aspect of the war"[11]

The fact that North Korean literary critics argued that the function of the literary work was to stir the reader into action through hatred instead of ideology may seem to be contradictory to the original explanation of the purpose of propaganda, which has frequently been defined as "a manipulation of changing ideas or opinions, of making individuals 'believe' some idea or fact, and finally making them adhere to some doctrine."[12] In his study on propaganda, Jacques Ellul agrees with the North Korean view that it is not the manipulation of ideas and thoughts that is important in

[11] Hodgson, Katherine, "The Soviet War," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* edited by Marina Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 112, 119.
[12] Ellul, Jacques, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 25.

modern propaganda, but that propaganda can be deemed effective when it is able to rouse the target individual to action. Ellul states that "the aim of propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action. It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine, but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action. It is no longer to lead to a choice, but to loosen the reflexes. It is no longer to transform an opinion, but to arouse an active and mythical belief."[13] North Korean writers during the Korean War were thus to concern themselves more with the effectiveness and the emotions that their work should evoke than with the specific content. Arousing feelings of hatred towards the enemy, like Japanese writers did during the colonial period, was an important way North Korean authors attempted to rouse readers' feelings during the Korean War.

Arousing Anger: Han Sŏrya's "Jackals"

One wartime story that North Korean critics believed provoked such a reaction in the reader is Han Sŏrya's "Jackals" ("Sŭngnyangi", 1951). Literary critic Ŏm Hosŏk singles out Han's story specifically because of its ability to incite feelings of hatred for the enemy: "The spirit of hatred for the enemy is one of the important topics in our wartime literature and has become a catalyst that fuels our fighting spirit. […] One could say that this

[13] Ibid., p. 25.

hatred for the enemy is the *leitmotiv* that guides our writers in their energetic writing. The *leitmotiv* that Han Sŏrya was guided by until the very last sentence when writing his short story "Jackals" came from his spirit of hatred for the enemy."[14]

The setting of Han's story is the colonial period and concerns Sugil, a young boy who lives with his mother in a missionary's home, who finds a rubber ball and starts playing with it. One day when he is playing with the other children of the village, Simon, the missionary's son, recognizes the ball as his own and beats Sugil severely. The missionary, having witnessed the scene from a distance, admonishes his son for sullying his hands by touching a Korean. Sugil is in bad shape and his mother is desperate. On the advice of the missionary's wife, he is admitted to the church hospital. Here the missionary and his wife plot with the hospital director to kill him by injecting him with germs.

The next day, Sugil's mother tries to gain access to her son, but is refused by the nurses, who tell her Sugil has contracted a contagious disease and therefore no one is allowed to see him. She returns home where the following day a man from the hospital brings her the news of Sugil's death. She realizes that this must surely be the doing of the story's eponymous jackals (the missionary family and the hospital director) and runs to the hospital where she receives her son's ashes. She returns to the missionary's home and tries to get even by demanding the life of Simon. Her attempt is in vain, however, as she is quickly

[14] Ŏm, p. 189

apprehended by Japanese police officers. As she is dragged away she swears that someday she will get her retribution.

A previous analysis of this story has been undertaken by Brian Myers in his book *Han Sŏrya and North Korean Literature*. The way Myers reads and analyses Han's story is to see whether his short story fits the definition of a socialist realist novel in the strict (and in Myers' idea, therefore, correct) sense[15], and he comes to the conclusion that it does not, and speaks very dismissively of the story:

> "The racist character depiction, the fairy-tale remoteness of the setting, and the triviality of the incident that sets the plot in motion (a children's squabble over a ball!) combine to disabuse the reader of hopes for a 'social' storyline. […] Han makes his usual halfhearted nods at socialist realist convention."[16]

He especially has qualms about the story's ending: "Sugil's mother is dragged away…before exacting even token revenge. This

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[15] Socialist realism is a style of realist art whose aim is the furtherance of the goals of socialism and communism. Socialist realism holds that successful art depicts and glorifies the proletariat's struggle toward socialist progress. Socialist realism was adopted as the official aesthetic doctrine after the Congress of 1934 and was implemented in cultural policies by Andrei Zdhanov in particular until the late 1950s. It influenced or was adopted in official literature of other Communist countries as well. For a detailed account of socialist realism see Robert Stacy, *Russian Literary Criticism: a short history*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975).

[16] Myers, Brian, *Han Sŏrya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK* (New York: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1994), p. 97.

only underscores the impossibility of regarding Han's work as significantly closer to socialist realism than the first clumsy efforts of colonial proletarian writers."[17] Myers does mention that Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* (1906), which is regarded by many as the first socialist realist novel, has a very similar ending, but regards the ending of Gorky's story as a "classical transposition of spontaneity-consciousness dialectic" by which the main character overcomes her naiveté and attains political awareness. Han's attempt to do this in "Jackals" is in his eyes the opposite: "the death of her son…induces her to slough off the remains of the un-Korean 'consciousness' and heed her 'spontaneous,' i.e. ethnic, aversion to the white race."[18]

A key element that Myers does not consider in his analysis of the story is that Han Sŏrya wrote it during the Korean War for wartime readers. Myers mentions literary critic Han Chungmo, who reviewed the story in 1959, six years after the war had ended:

> "[Han Chungmo] bravely tried to show the story had an uplifting message, mainly by emphasizing the missionaries' fears of a village uprising and interpreting the heroine's last words—'But just you wait! Not all Koreans have died' —as a powerful threat. The critic seemed not to care that the Yankees' fears prove completely unfounded, which in turn makes the heroine's parting shot sound downright

[17] Ibid., p. 100.
[18] Ibid., p. 99.

pathetic."[19]

This does not take into account the fact that the wartime stories in North Korea are written to address problems or concerns that are present within a society. The life of a particular story after its publication is therefore diverse, as it serves various different purposes at different times, its longevity depending on how contemporary readers may identify themselves with the contents or the message. This is an important reason why many socialist works were rewritten, sometimes several times, to better reflect and address contemporaneous issues. This phenomenon of rewriting in socialist literature relates to what Wolfgang Iser calls the dynamic interaction between text and reader. Through rewriting, the ´reality´ that was created in the literary work is reformulated to communicate a different message to the implied reader, since he will read the work under different historical (and social) conditions.[20]

Han Chungmo, therefore, may have had different reasons in mind when he chose to read the story in a different way in 1959, for example by highlighting the possibility of a pending uprising of villagers, which in Han's story is indeed not well fleshed out.

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[19] Ibid., pp. 100-101. During the war there are some North Korean literary critics who, like Myers, criticized the story's weakly written ending. Ŏm Hosŏk for example wrote: "When one ignores the fact that the mother figure in Han Sŏrya's "Jackals" is excessively idealized politically and is exaggerated character-wise, one can still call this Han's best work yet from after the Liberation period." In "Chakkadŭr-ŭi saŏp-kwa chŏngyŏl" in *Munhak yesul* 4.4 (July 1951), p. 76.
[20] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Literary Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 29.

Written during the Korean War, however, the story served a completely different purpose as we have seen: to instill the wartime reader with hatred towards the enemy and thus stir them to take up arms and exact the revenge that Sugil's mother was denied.

This is how the story was likely read by readers during the war and it is exactly this response that is mentioned in literary critics' wartime essays. The critics judged the work to be an effective story and an example to follow. Ŏm Hosŏk highlights the story's ending in particular and has the following to say about it:

> "'But just you wait! Not all Koreans have died!' Life has not ended. Life goes on and the sad history of Sugil's mother has continued through the War for the Liberation of the Fatherland. The tragedy of Sugil's mother is not an unresolvable grief that is forever denied closure, but has now found a way for a resolution through the Korean people's heroic struggle. When readers have read the last sentence of this story, therefore, they will, out of their own accord, turn their attention to fighting for revenge against the American imperialists for the sake of our people in this war. Owing to this positive prospect that is embedded in the story's ending, the story has the effect of activating a resolve for revenge in the soul of our people in today's war."[21]

[21] Ŏm, p. 188.

Ŏm Hosŏk regards the story's conclusion of denying readers a happy ending to be a suitable literary device as it denies the reader a satisfactory conclusion to the story, stirring them to take up arms to fight against the wartime enemy. He also connects the colonial setting in which the story is placed to contemporary wartime circumstances.

Ŏm is not the only one who praised the story for these reasons. Literary critic Han Hyo also argued that the story's ending was effective because it encouraged the reader to link the colonial setting to the present wartime situation:

> "People may have qualms about the fact that Sugil's mother cannot, despite her insuppressible anger, get revenge for her son's death at the hands of the enemy and is captured by the Japanese police. It should be understood, however, that through this work the writer aims at a bigger judgment and more severe revenge. The crimes of the American missionaries that this work exposes evokes feelings of hatred in the same degree as those of Sugil's mother in all Koreans who are today fighting against the American robbers, and raises their thirst for revenge even higher. […] It is imperative for authors that they concern themselves with how they are able to create a lasting effect in the minds of readers when writing a work for raising morale."[22]

[22] Han Hyo, "Uri munhag-ŭi chŏnjaengjŏk mosŭp-kwa chegidoenŭn myŏtkaji munje" [Some problems arising from the war-related features of our literature] in *Munhak yesul* (1951), pp. 95-96.

Now that we have discussed views on how the story was interpreted by literary critics during the war, we can examine the elements Han Sŏrya used in his story to create this effect, by looking at how he shaped his narrative to fit the wartime reader's expectations.

Creating an effect: The echoes of the total war ideology

The function of literature was, as we have already seen in writers' essays and the speeches of Kim Il Sung, to maintain high morale among the general population in order to continuously maintain their support for the war, as well as to enhance the soldier's fighting spirit. This view is strongly connected to the experiences of Korean writers in the last eight years of the colonial period, when the Japanese propagated the ideology of total war from 1937 onwards. This ideology informed writers of their role during wartime and the way they should approach their work. After being exposed to these ideas for many years, readers must have been well acquainted with the ideology of total war, an ideology which reappeared during the Korean War. Such ideas informed both writers and policy makers as to what course of action they should take, and may also have influenced the expectations with which the reader approached a story. Therefore, even though "Jackals" is set in the colonial period, it contains imagery and allegories that the reader can relate to the Korean War.

The first thing that stands out in this regard is the obvious lack of the Japanese presence, except at the end when the colonial police drag Sugil's mother away. In Han Sŏrya's depiction of the colonial period it is not the Japanese but the American missionaries who have designs on Korea, while the Japanese just appear amenable to American demands. The total war element here is revealed when the missionary convinces the director of the hospital to inject Sugil with bacteria, as he mentions that the whole of society should play its part in establishing American 'virtues.'

> "For American virtues and Americans we do not only need churches. The Lord has given us bullets. He gives us airplanes and battleships. What do you think the bible is that missionaries carry with them? What do you think of the syringe that doctors are holding? They are weapons [to be used] for America and Americans."[23]

It can even be argued that the reason for killing Sugil, which is depicted here as stemming from the innate evil of the Americans, could be related to total war ideology, since this ideology explains that a nation's fighting strength relies for a large part on how big its population is. Young people are therefore the future fighting strength of a nation. Indeed, because of the setting in the colonial period, a reader might well make the connection that Sugil would most likely be a young soldier in the North Korean army fighting

[23] Han Sŏrya, "Sŭngnyangi" in *Munhak yesul* (April 1951), pp. 23-24.

the Americans, had he lived. This thought process can even be extended to the story's ending. When Sugil's mother goes to the missionary's house, she specifically asks for the death of the missionary's son Simon to get her revenge, and not for the death of the missionary and his wife. Just as in the case of Sugil, Simon would probably have reached such an age that he would be fighting in the Korean War at the time when the reader is reading Han's story. This turns Simon into a metonym for the American soldiers that are present in Korea at the time the story was published and is supposed to affect readers in such a way that they take action to fight the presumed injustice and enact the revenge that Sugil's mother is denied as she is dragged away. This is why the ending, even when one considers its drawn-out description of the mother's emotions, is effective in terms of the purpose of the story.

To enhance this effect, Han inserted several examples of the author speaking directly to the reader; one such example appears when the mother asks herself "Who gave Americans the right to kill Koreans? Do Koreans always have to let themselves be killed by others?"[24] As several North Korean literary critics have already mentioned, the mother's parting words as she is dragged away also serve to reinforce the effect Han is trying to create, by hinting at future retaliation against the missionary's family: "Where do you bastards get the right to come to other people's land and kill people?

[24] Ibid., p. 13.

Korea is our country…. But just wait! Not all Koreans have died!"[25] This hints at future retribution, and that this retribution would take place in a war, and is reinforced in the text when Sugil's mother dreams of bayonets and artillery fire, and that thieves will be chased away.[26]

Han Sŏrya's story was regarded as one of the most exemplary short stories in North Korea. One reason for the story's success was Han's use of narrative strategies to weave current ideological practices into his story that were prevalent in North Korea's wartime society. By placing the story in the colonial period, Han Sŏrya also made use of the way readers interpret history, in order to try to evoke certain emotions. The author does not try to give an accurate portrayal of the period he deals with, but instead skillfully uses the time he writes about functionally, to stir up hatred towards the enemy. This functional dimension touches on the way people interpret history, using historically interpreted time for the orientation of their own contemporary actions and understanding their predicament. The past becomes significant for the reader's existential orientation only when this past is *made* relevant to suit explanations for the reader's current circumstances. The reader should experience such an expectation when reading a historical novel and therefore historical fiction should provide answers to questions that are shared by writer and reader alike for the stories

[25] Ibid., pp. 33-34.
[26] Ibid., pp. 20, 28.

to hold meaning.[27] In "Jackals", many elements within the text show that the story is more about the importance of present concerns than it is about a truthful depiction of the past. They do this by focusing solely on the cruelty of the American missionary family, the metonymical use of Simon who represents the American soldier fighting in the Korean War, and by denying the mother her revenge to maintain the momentum for future retribution.

The shared experience of war

Like "Jackals", many stories written during the Korean War had the express purpose of arousing hatred for the enemy. This hatred is what motivates the majority of the characters appearing in North Korean wartime stories to take up arms and join the brave struggle. In "The hunter" ("Sanyangkkun", 1951) written by Kim Mansŏn we follow the overwhelming ambition of farmer Kim Ŭisŏng, who became a soldier after he witnessed the deaths of countless farmers and a seven-year old child due to American bombing raids. His ambition is to one day shoot down an enemy airplane to get his revenge. After fighting fiercely for months, he hears a rumor that every soldier above the age of forty is to be discharged. He is not

[27] This "sense-making" of history is an issue Jörn Rüsen deals with in "Sense of History: What does it mean?" in *Meaning and Representation in History*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008) where he defines historical sense as having three components: context, form and function, that are interrelated, but among which the functional aspect is ultimately crucial: the pragmatic coherence of the past made significant for the present in relation to the existential needs of the present.

able to sleep that night, and the next day he goes missing. The day afterwards he returns to his squad carrying a wheel. The squad leader thinks Kim has lost his mind, but Kim argues that this wheel comes in handy to shoot down airplanes, as a gun can be rested on top of it making it easier to aim. At that moment an American airplane flies over, but is too far away to be shot at. Despite the warnings of his squadron commander, Kim waves a towel in the hope that the airplane will turn around. He is noticed and three enemy aircraft approach his position. Kim manages to shoot all three of them from the sky. His squadron commander is pleased and tells him that the rumour of the forced discharge of soldiers was just hearsay.

Having seen American bombs kill several fellow farmers and a child, Kim is spurred into action to fight against the Americans. In most stories, American cruelty or bombing prompts the characters into action. One feature that defines North Korean wartime stories is the fact that the characters' drive and desire is focused solely on their hatred for the enemy; neither Kim Il Sung nor communism appear in the vast majority of the stories. The war needed an immediate and honest response to the dramatic shifts in the North's fortunes, and the focus needed to be elsewhere. The earlier slogans extolling the might of Kim Il Sung or the party, and the slogan of "driving the enemy into the sea" that abounded during the initial phase of the war, had lost currency after the UN counterattack. After the frontline stabilized in the spring of 1951, a new rallying cry was desperately needed to motivate the

population. The incessant bombing campaign by the Americans provided such an opportunity as it had an immense impact on the North Korean people's normal way of life. South Korean journalist Pak Chinmok[28] remembered staying in Pyŏngyang for around forty days in July 1951: "Several times a day I had to rush out of my room because of the air strikes. This life was truly a living hell. During the Korean War, I was so weary from the bombardments that whenever I heard the sound of an airplane my heart would be pounding and I would feel stressed. Every day I had to live in fear due to the incessant bombings."[29] The daily American bombardments became an element of the wartime writers' stories as readers would find it easy to identify with the main characters' experiences.

In Hwang Kŏn's novel *Happiness* (*Haengbok*, 1953) the female protagonist's principal reason for fighting and becoming a nurse is her firsthand experience of the American bombings. Before losing her family to an air raid, Sŏ Ryeju was an innocent school teacher. With the help of her friend Chŏngim and her thirst for revenge, she quickly regains her zeal for life and becomes a nurse. She meets a wounded soldier, Chŏngho, with whom she falls in love with.

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[28] Pak Chinmok (1918-2010) was a South Korean journalist who went to Py'ŏngyang with the help of the American Information Agency in an attempt to persuade the North Korean leaders to cease the internecine war. During his stay in the city from July 1951 he met several times with North Korean minister of Home Affairs Yi Sŭngyŏp. See http://terms.naver.com/entry.nhn?docId=1353657&cid=40942&categoryId=33385

[29] Han Sŏnghun, *Chŏnjaeng-gwa inmin* [War and the people] (P'aju: Tolbegae, 2012), p. 198.

Every day her eagerness to go to the front to fight becomes stronger, and eventually she is allowed to become a frontline nurse. Among her fellow comrades-in-arms she feels like a true Korean. Soon she is joined by her friend Chŏngim, and Chŏngho, who has recovered from his wounds. One day they are suddenly ordered to retreat, which comes as a terrible shock to them. During the retreat they encounter large enemy forces and take many casualties. When the group's machine-gunner succumbs to his wounds, Ryeju heroically takes over and kills many enemies before she is fatally wounded. When Chŏngim finds her, Ryeju is barely alive. Just before dying, Ryeju tells her: "Don't think that I am an unlucky person. I am very happy now. Go now, tell our story and hate the enemy even more."[30]

The loss of Ryeju's family to an American air strike serves as the catalyst to become a nurse and seek revenge for their death. She feels that working behind the front lines is unsatisfactory, and she keeps yearning to be a frontline nurse to fight side by side with other comrades. When this wish is finally granted she regains joy in her life, and this experience makes her feel "truly Korean". The singing of the soldiers, the slogans they shout all lend joy to her existence and make her realise that dying for the fatherland brings peace of mind. The narrative that appears in Hwang's work is that in war the feeling of comradeship between fellow soldiers trumps ideology, and even relegates the figure of Kim Il Sung himself to

[30] Hwang's novel makes references to and borrows some passages from Alexander Fadeev's 1945 novel *The Young Guard*.

the background. It is the shared experience of combat that serves as the true yardstick for belonging to the Korean nation.[31]

This feeling of being part of a community of soldiers is even perpetuated in death. With Ryeju's dying words to her friend that she should "tell our story," her individual death attains meaning because the combat group that she had joined perpetuates her memory and incorporates her heroic actions into a larger picture.[32] The incorporation of the death of the individual in the national narrative by commemoration is not only a feature of North Korean wartime literature, but has also been described by Martin Hurcombe when he analyzed the French patriotic novels of World War I. He mentions that "while individual characters are able to perceive their living actions in terms of being-towards-death, outside the group the individual's death risks losing all meaning since it is only the group that can place it within the wider context of the continuing community of the nation."[33] This aspect can for example be seen in Hyŏn Tŏk's short story "Revenge" ("Poksu", 1951), where the death of the main character's comrade in an American bombing raid seems very random and meaningless to him. Before his death his comrade had spoken many times of his hometown and the story's protagonist is curious to see where his

[31] This focus on comradeship between soldiers is not only found in *Happiness*, but is an important element in many other North Korean wartime stories as well. The heroic actions of the commander in Yun Sejung's "Comrades" ("Ujŏng", 1951), for example, are explained not as individual acts of courage, but as stemming from his feeling of comradeship for his fellow soldiers.

[32] Another story in which this aspect is shown is Yun Shich'ŏl´s "The bugler's merits" ("Nap'alsu-ŭi konghun", 1952).

[33] Martin Hurcombe, *Novelists in Conflict: Ideology and the Absurd in the French Combat Novel of the Great War* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 157.

friend grew up. When travelling there, however, he finds out that all the citizens of the village have been massacred by the enemy. Taken aback, he visits a small hotel in a nearby town and asks the manager whether he knows exactly what happened. A young boy who happens to be his friend's younger brother is the only survivor of the massacre and tells him the gruesome story, pointing to the Americans as the perpetrators. When his comrade's younger brother has finished telling the story he says that his wish is that the evil deeds of the Americans will be avenged.

Through the younger brother's wish for revenge, the protagonist is finally able to find meaning in his comrade's death. The desire for vengeance allows him to view it not as a single cessation of life, but more widely as meaningful for the benefit of the community. He and his comrade had been fighting for the protection of not just this home town, but for his whole country. In *Revenge* the writer uses the protagonist to invest his comrade's death with meaning and he does so by inserting his sacrifice into the narrative of the national community. This can of course only be realised through the survivors who are able to tell the story of the other individual's death. Martin Hurcombe has observed similar narrative techniques:

> "Without the presence of others the individual can only consider his death as the interruption and the negation of his life. It is the group that is able to consummate the death of the individual into a meaningful whole. […] the living, in their remembrance of the dead, are able to anticipate the

possibility of meaning and completion in their own deaths in the way that their memory will be perpetuated among the survivors of the nationalist community."[34]

It is this aspect that enables the heroic characters in North Korean wartime literature to face their own deaths with courage as they feel safe in the knowledge that their last actions will be perpetuated in the memory of the nation.[35]

It is worth noting that in the moments when the main characters face mortal danger, the description of the enemy is noticeably different. While depicted as pure evil in their deeds off the battlefield, the stories do not ridicule or downplay the enemy's strength when they are fighting in battle, as is the case in the vast majority of South Korean wartime stories. These passages in the North Korean stories serve to show the main character in a better light, as this is their moment of glory for which they get their fame, but they also imbue the story with a layer of realism, making the battle scenes more gripping as it is highly uncertain whether the main character will come out of the encounter unscathed.

The hero's faith in living on in the memory of the wider community in case of his death is strengthened by the presence of side characters in the stories. These extra characters are sometimes not, as one might expect in wartime literature, described in a one-dimensional way. This feature brings more realism to the stories

[34] Ibid., p. 157.
[35] This aspect can be seen in Im Sundŭk's "Cho Okhŭi" (1951) and Yi Pungmyŏng's "Daughter of Korea" ("Chosŏn-ŭi ttal", 1952).

and demonstrates that the main character feels being a part of a wider community. Through these methods the wartime writers present periods of hardship as a shared experience of war endured by all the characters together.

This was already clearly visible in the aforementioned story "Happiness," when the heroine states she feels "truly Korean" when fighting alongside her comrades on the battlefield, but also appears in other stories as well, such as Kim Yŏngsŏk's "The army cook" ("Hwashikpyŏng", 1951). Pak Sŏnggŭn is an army cook stationed near P'aju. He is not considered to be very smart by the rest of his division and all have nicknamed him Pak the Panter, for his tendency to pant heavily when he gets angry about something. Once he had been searching for over five hours for a cook that had ran away from an enemy aircraft. One of the people making fun of him is O Kyŏnghwan. Sŏnggŭn feels offended by O's jokes and tells him that he is just as much a fighting soldier as he is. One day the division arrives at Ilsan and waits for reinforcements as they do not have enough food to mount a counterattack. The cooks are all nervous, as the enemy is firing shells just behind their lines, making it difficult to get more food supplies. Two cooks are sent on a mission to find food, including Sŏnggŭn. After a few hours Sŏnggŭn is still not back and a few soldiers are sent to search for him. They find him with a large supply of food which he can hardly carry by himself. On the way back to their division they are fired at and Sŏnggŭn is hit in the arm. Still he manages to get the food to the hungry soldiers. In the meantime the troops had fought

off three enemy counterattacks and had downed sixteen enemy aircraft. When a grenade explodes only five meters away from Sŏnggŭn, he gets so angry that he runs to a nearby hill. His antics draw away the enemy fire, and not long after the battle is over. After forty hours without food the soldiers can finally take a rest. O Kyŏnghwan is just eating some leaves, when suddenly food arrives. When they see Sŏnggŭn appear with food and his bandaged arm they all praise his courage. Not long after the soldiers' bellies are filled the enemy is surrounded and soundly beaten.

Besides the candid depiction of food shortages and supply problems for the North Korean army, the story puts the character of Pak Sŏnggŭn in perspective by focusing on the comrades in his division and the opinions they hold of him.[36] By focusing on the character of an army cook, Kim Yŏngsŏk shows that even people who are not directly participating in the actual fighting play an important part during the war.

The appearance of different, heterogenous characters in the North Korean wartime stories serves the function of depicting a national community that shares a common wartime experience in which through hardship the pure and caring nature of the Korean character shines through. Han Sŏnghun has argued that the experience of the Korean War has had a forming influence on the identity of the North Korean people.[37] With bombing raids being common all throughout the country, the soldiers were not the only

[36] The wartime story "My old comrade" ("Na-ŭi yet ch'inu", 1951) by Yun Shich'ŏl is another story with a scene in which the soldiers suffer from food shortages.
[37] Hang Sŏnghun, p. 24.

ones who were confronted daily by the war. Instead of Kim Il Sung or the communist ideology, it is this shared experience of war that shines through in the North Korean wartime stories and served as the theme with which writers tried to incite their readers.

Addressing present concerns

Another method used to draw in the reader into the stories was to address acute wartime concerns that were present in North Korean society during the Korean War. One might be surprised, for example, that the vast majority of the wartime works are set in the time period around or during the UN amphibious landings at Inch'ŏn on September 15, 1950.[38] This turnaround in the war was an immense disaster for the North Korean army which changed their fortunes from virtually being on the verge of victory to facing total defeat, all in the span of a few weeks. For writers to ignore this disastrous issue altogether, however, was not an option as a lingering doubt about the regime's capabilities could have dire consequences to society and the war effort as a whole. The explanation that the writers put forward for the turn of events was that the UN army had not managed to beat the North Korean army through strategic means, but thanks to their strength in numbers. The North Korean army was said to have made a successful "strategical retreat" after which the war could be waged in full

[38] "Happiness", "My old comrade", "Revenge", "The citizens of Seoul", "Cho Okhŭi", "Daughter of Korea", "Pobi" are just a few examples of the wartime stories that are set in this time period.

force again. The amphibious landing and its aftermath serve as a backdrop for the heroic characters to show their resolve even when facing overwhelming odds.

Pak Ch'anmo's "Grenade" ("Suryut'an", 1951) is one such story. It deals with student volunteer Yi Yŏngu who is guarding the retreat of the communist army in Seoul on the 25th of September 1950. His fellow volunteers fear the coming battle. Yŏngu encourages himself by thinking that he is dying for a good cause. He thinks of his mother who died a few days before during an attack, which is the reason why he volunteered in order to take revenge. He also thinks back of his time in prison when he was arrested by henchmen of the party of Syngman Rhee.[39] The North Korean Army released him from prison, for which he was grateful. Five tanks are attacking their position. After a short but fierce fight Yŏngu only has two grenades left. He sets the grenades and runs towards one of the tanks, managing to destroy it. Heavily wounded, he sees the enemy fleeing and being shot at by North Korean artillery. This makes him happy. He hears the soft voice of his mother calling him. One more time he looks up to the sun rising over Seoul, after which everything becomes quiet.

As with other stories, what motivates Yŏngu to fight against the numerically superior enemy that faces him is his thirst for revenge. The main character finds strength when faced with his own death in the knowledge that he will have helped his country by stalling the enemy advance, so that the army can regroup and fight another

[39] Syngman Rhee was the first president of South Korea from 1948-1960.

day. His courage, however, does waver before the fight begins as he is just as scared to fight as the other students around him. In other stories as well, like in the aforementioned "Happiness," the characters are shocked and surprised to hear about the turn of events and fearful for the things that come when they had expected the war to end in victory soon.

Whether such a poorly substantiated explanation, which can be found in many of the wartime stories, genuinely convinced the North Korean wartime readers is of course a mystery, as there is no data on how wartime readers read or valued these stories. While it would be easy as a contemporary reader of the stories to dismiss the North Korean interpretation of the events surrounding Inch'ŏn as too feeble, one must not forget that giving a satisfactory answer to wartime events whose ramifications are still unknown is not an easy task to begin with. It is difficult for the writers to weave this narrative into their stories in a convincing way, as their realist mode of writing demands of them that they have an all-knowing narrator present in their stories who can confidently guide the reader through the wartime events. This difficulty has also been noticed by Hurcombe when he analyses France's wartime literature of World War I: "Even though the aim of the writer is to assure meaning through the narrator of the story, or its characters, this attempt is flawed by the very knowledge of the reader that this narrator, along with his characters, is in-history."[40] The realist

[40] Hurcombe, pp. 219-220. In my opinion it is this aspect of writing literature during wartime that makes the task of the writer so difficult and has led to the many complaints among South and North Korean writers that writing "an instant

mode of writing demands that the writer constantly maintains a complete and authoritative command of the whole storyline.[41] From the outset, however, the wartime stories are set in an unfinished and developing historical event. The reader shares the same historical space as the writer and therefore knows that the writer as well will not be able to know what the future will look like. Therefore, even though the author still tries to mold his work with an all-knowing narrator who proclaims confidently that ultimate victory will be on the horizon, this optimism may not be automatically shared by its readers.

A wartime story showing the ambiguity that remains when the true feelings of the protagonist are not properly addressed is Han Pongshik's "The mother" ("Ŏmŏni", 1951). A sixty year old mother lives together with her son, her daughter-in-law and her grandson in a small mining village. The peace in the village is brutally disturbed when the Americans bomb their town. Her son is infuriated by this and decides to take up arms against the Americans. After her son's departure to the front the mother takes great care of her grandchild. Her daughter-in-law is convinced that the Americans will be chased from the peninsula and that the son will return safely again. One day, however, the mother hears the strange news that the People's Army is retreating. She cannot believe her ears and exclaims: "You are saying our army is

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classic" on the war was so difficult, if not impossible. When the war is over it is much easier to regain this authorative voice as it is possible to reflect on a "finished" historical period.

[41] See Lilian Furst, *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

retreating? Impossible!"[42] She falls in despair and even though her daughter-in-law tries to persuade her that this is all part of a "strategic retreat" the old mother is not convinced. When the North Korean soldiers pass through the village the mother gives them a piece of her mind: "Why on earth are you letting yourself be chased away by the enemy?"[43]

Soldiers asking whether she is willing to prepare some food for them are also scolded. "How can you shamelessly ask such a thing when you are cowardly running away?"[44] Her daughter-in-law invites the soldiers into their house, nonetheless, and the mother reluctantly prepares some food for them. The mother does not let them have a quiet dinner, though, as she keeps scolding them:

> "Please cook some food for us? How dare you! You bring the enemy on your tail and you expect me to laud this effort? My son will probably be doing the same nonsense at this very moment somewhere. Since you brought the American bastards to my doorstep, would it not be possible for you to take up your gun and go out to fight them?"[45]

After the soldiers have retreated further northwards, the American soldiers take over the village and start their reign of terror. Men, women and children are murdered, while Korean

[42] Han Pongshik, "Ŏmŏni", *Chosŏn yŏsŏng* 2 (April 1951), p. 59.
[43] Ibid., p. 59.
[44] Ibid., p. 59.
[45] Ibid., p. 59.

women are raped. The daughter-in-law and her grandson are also murdered one day which makes the old mother burst with anger. The only thing keeping her alive is her wish that her son will avenge what the Americans did. One day her son arrives at her house, but she is shocked when she sees he is wearing a South Korean army uniform. Her son acts to her as if nothing is wrong and asks her to prepare some food for him. She obliges but she is stupefied with what she is seeing. Her son leaves soon after starting his dinner, but promises her that he will come back in the evening. For the whole day the old mother is in an existential crisis over the apparent collaboration of her son with the Americans. Happily the story ends with the plot twist that the son was wearing the uniform for a surprise attack on the enemy. After the village is retaken the mother is proud of her son and feels happy now that she is safe in the knowledge that he will take revenge for her.

The retreat of the North Korean army is woven into the text and the mother vehemently reprimands the soldiers passing through the village. The mother in the story certainly is not convinced by the excuse that the soldiers are making a retreat for strategic reasons. It is the retreat that sets all the subsequent tragic events into motion and it is directly responsible for the deaths of her daughter-in-law and her grandson. Even though the son's return encourages her and makes her feel confident that the North Korean army will win victory in the end, the feelings the mother has about the retreat and the consequences the North Korean army' decision had for the life of this mother are not brought to a satisfactory or a

convincing conclusion in the story. The issue is raised in the beginning of the text, but it is not touched upon again in what follows in the rest of the story. The mother's admonitions add a strong perlocutionary force to the text, one that must surely have reverbated with the wartime reader. With the anger of the North's retreat fresh in the reader's mind, and knowing that the author of the story also does not know how the war will conclude, the wartime reader would have easily sympathized with the mother's admonitions to the North Korean soldiers, but would probably find it difficult to identify with her apparent conviction of victory at the end.

Summary

This analysis of North Korea's wartime literature has shown that there is more to these stories than initially meets the eye. The straightforward narrative of the stories and the characters' obvious heroic features did not mean that the writer only painted a too-good-to-be-true picture of the war. Instead, the writers during the Korean War saw their literature as a tool that could perform a specific function, namely to boost morale and to exhort the readers to come into action to fight for their country, and they wrote their stories with this intention in mind. Next to this, they inserted passages in the text where explanations and commentary on sensitive issues were made in an effort to imbue meaning to the wartime sacrifices of soldiers and citizens. Depictions of difficult times like the landings at Inch'ŏn, therefore, served to explain

setbacks, but were also used in an attempt to fortify the resolve and will to persevere. The themes of hatred for the enemy, comradery and hardship that are found in the North Korean wartime stories served as an instrument to mobilize the spirit of the North Korean people. The narrative strategies and themes utilized by the North Korean writers affected the way the Korean War was viewed and experienced by both writers and readers. Their literature helped to give voice to the wartime hardship that the North Korean population had to endure, and must have had a formative and lasting influence in the creation of the shared experience of the Korean War in North Korea's national discourse. To what degree this is true, however, requires further investigation by looking at the way the Korean War has been interpreted and presented after the war ended in 1953.