

Collective memory of the Korean independence fighter Beom-do Hong in Soviet Korean Literature

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Abstract: The study reveals the political and ideological journey of Beom-do Hong, a Korean independence fighter and general as reflected in the historical novel of Soviet Korean writer Kim Se-il. Due to the lack of historical records on Beom-do Hong, stories on his deeds before and after the Japan's annexation of Korea remained at the level of legends. In Korean society, his figure is seen within opposing positions and discourses; to some he is a national hero; to others a communist collaborator. This investigation of the historical novel as a medium for the transmission of shared memories based on the protagonist's battle diary and the recollections of his comrades will fill the gap in the historical memory and contribute to alleviating social political conflicts. Memorial heritage is closely linked to the intangible aspects of heritage, which is an essential driver of development.

Keywords: Collective memory, Korean independence fighter Beom-do Hong, Soviet Korean literature.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY BASED A FICTIONALIZED ACCOUNT

Beom-do Hong was known as a monumental figure in the history of the anti-Japanese independence struggle of overseas Koreans around the time of the Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula in 1910. However, there are constant debates about his achievements and ideological identity in South Korean society. At the initiative of the Korean government, the remains of Beom-do Hong, a 'hero of the struggle for independence', were repatriated to Korea from Kazakhstan on the occasion of the Independence Day of August 15, 2021. The repatriation of his remains, as a result of the controversy over the pros and cons and the struggle to remember history, further fueled the so-called *the South-South conflict*, that is, the conflict between ideologically different social and political actors.

According to the ideology pursued by the political subjects, this historical figure is either evaluated as a national hero, or branded as a

'communist collaborator' because he leaned on the side of the Russian revolutionary forces. This ideological conflict is deeply related to the history of the seventy year division of the Korean Peninsula into two Koreas, with different political systems and ideologies.

After its liberation in 1945, the Korean Peninsula, became the arena of ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism under the Cold War and the Korean War. The historical memory of Beom-do Hong in South Korea is seen as an extension of the political confrontation between the two powers; on the one hand anti-communism rooted in society, and on the other hand, nationalist discourse that aims for inclusiveness with North Korea.

French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is known for developing the concept of collective memory. In his book *La Mémoire Collective* (*The Collective Memory* 1950), he advanced the thesis that different social groups have collective memories that depend on the particularities of each group within the larger dominant society. That is, the collective memory is formed through communication and interaction among members, strongly linked to a sort of group consciousness. Therefore, each group can have its own collective memory that may be different from the memories of other groups in the same society (Kim 1999: 572-578). Commemoration is the expression of an affirmation of a particular culture and its collective memory, as Halbwachs also noted. In his subsequent study, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (*The Social Framework of Memory* 1952), the French scholar highlighted the significance of collective memory operating on the basic systems for the dissemination of values, such as the family, the education system, and so on.

The German scholar Walter Benjamin extended experience and memory to the theory of collective and social recognition of history and viewed it as a matter of group tradition and identity. In his *Das Passagen-Werk, Gesammelte Schriften* (*The passage work, Collected Writings*), he suggested that individuals cannot live in isolation from their historical and social relationships, and that fixed private experiences do not exist because personal experiences are mediated by historical and collective experiences (Benjamin 1982/2008: 490). In the case of the historical memory of Beom-do Hong, the lack of well-preserved historical records has complicated the reconstruction of his life, world view and ideological journey.

Se-il Kim's fictionalization of Beom-do Hong is based on the diary left behind and on the recollections of his comrades. As López-Varela stated in her paper "The Itineraries of Memory: Textual Hybrids and Intersubjective Experiences," narrative fiction can function as transitional realm that renders the representation of affective life experiences (2013: 105) alongside historical records. Intersubjective experiences were involved in the recollections gathered around the figure of Beom-do Hong because his comrades and the characters of Se-il Kim's narrative were war veterans, voluntarily organized toward a common goal for national liberation, sharing their memories of the fight to preserve their homeland. Thus, this semi-fictionalized account can help converge the opposing positions in Korean society by illuminating the silenced story of Beom-do Hong.

Fictionalized narratives have mechanisms to enhance empathic connection to current cases where similar dramas are unfolding. Thus, using fictionalized accounts in the teaching of collective memory as part of national heritage is a valuable tool to enhance an integrating, democratic and humanitarian vision, in line with the spirit raised by the philosophy of the 2030 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

This paper presents a Cultural history of memory that looks at historical accounts from a hybrid perspective in order to fill the gap created by the severance of social memories of this period of Korean history. This approach emphasizes subjective aspects such as the meaningful network of life events and the media that reconstruct and transmit them. As noted by Yun-Jeong Joo, the study of daily experiences is "an act that emphasizes the heterogeneity of social life, seeking the meaning of diversity" (Joo 2006: 93), which might have been overlooked by focusing on the objective elucidation of the social structure (Hunt 1996). Alf Ludtke explains that in order to hear the true voice of others, it is necessary to pay attention to the "multi-layered network of practices" and to the "context of experience and daily practice" (Ludtke 2002: 15). The semi-fictional account of Beom-do Hong's reconstructed memories of combat experiences, long struggles and agony emerges at the crossroads of the ideological journey of Koreans in the border area.

THE NARRATIVE OF BEOM-DO HONG AS SOVIET KOREAN LITERATURE

The narrative Beom-do Hong is a semi-fictional account of the anti-Japanese independence struggle for the liberation of Joseon (the name of Korea before colonization) as seen through the lens of the Korean diaspora in Soviet society. It was serialized in the Soviet Korean newspaper *Lenin-Kichi* from October 23, 1965 to May 24, 1969, including 124 issues. This study analyzed the five volumes that were published in the late 1980s, based on narratives serialized in newspapers.

Writer Se-il Kim collected historical data and evidence about Hong for 7 years, between the summer of 1959 to 1965 (Kim 1989c: 304). The materials used for this narrative included articles from scholars, archives and photographs owned by private collectors, a diary written by Hong himself, recollections of his comrades from the army pro-independence, who lived in the 1960s, and also articles from North Korean publications. The range of activities of these units pro-independence took place in the northern border of the Korean Peninsula, Manchuria, and Maritime Province in Russia, where Hong and his comrades fought against Japan in the 1900s. The need for publication of the account of these struggles was raised by South Korean readers after the weakening of the Cold War structure and the end of the Soviet Union. Five series of books were published between 1989-1990 with the help of Korean scholar Song-Mu Ko, the Hangeul Society, and Jesam-munhagsa, a publishing house in Seoul.

Existing studies regarded these narratives as nothing more than ideologically tailored Soviet literature for Soviet readers. In other words, although Hong's story claims to be a historical novel, it is also a political account, and the portrayal of the protagonist as the hero of the Korean people and a hero of the Soviet Union is a reflection of the author's desire to defend the Soviet system (Im 2014: 247; 2018: 262). However, this interpretation, which looks at the novel only through a political and ideological lens, also misses the complexity of the historical context and phenomenon. This study puts weight on the context of the narrative and on the meaning of the reproduction of collective memory from the perspective of Soviet Korean Diaspora, rather than from the coloring of Soviet ideology.

HONG'S VIEW OF JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE: THE POOR AND THE RICH

Hong's narrative reveals the formation and flow of the protagonist's beliefs from his youth and growth to his becoming a member of Soviet society. Through the experiences of poverty and misfortune while growing up, Hong began to perceive the world as a dichotomous one. Eventually, he felt he was the 'Apostle of Justice', destined to condemn the aggressors and fight against the forces of evil during the crisis of his homeland.

Hong's low social status and poor material conditions became the driving force that reversed his fate. He endured extreme deprivation at a young age and survived the exploitative social structures. His parents' misfortunes were due to the tyranny of those in the privileged levels of society. Seven days after he was born, his mother, a peasant farmer, died of starvation, unable to pay off her debt to the landlord. His father worked his entire life as a servant for the landowner and died when Hong was nine. He himself could not escape the bondage of slavery and poverty.

However, Hong was trained for survival, and his sense of justice sprouted from persecution and injustice. He also had an innate talent for martial arts. These attributes turned him into a heroic warrior. As a young man, he learned from the patriotism of the righteous masters who fought the Japanese and saved the country for seven years during the *Imjin War* (1592-1598). Gradually, Hong grew into an even stronger warrior through the cultivation of morality, his own personality, and through his training in military techniques.

Hong began to be known as the 'righteous', fighting against external aggressors who had turned his country in crisis. When the Japanese took control of Joseon, his voluntary corps were organized and grew to a size of thousands of members. According to Japan's official statistics (Kim 1990a: 25), during the 1920s, there were 1,651 anti-Japanese guerrilla battles fought by Koreans in Manchuria. Hong's unit fought mainly guerrilla warfare in the rugged mountainous terrain in northern Joseon, a border area difficult to control by the Japanese. His victories in the Battle of Bongo-dong and in the Battle of Cheongsan-ri, with the combined operation of General Jwa-jin Kim, are considered a landmark in the history of the Korean struggle for independence.

All those who were with Hong were poor and exploited and became anti-Japanese soldiers voluntarily. Each had their own story to join; some driven out by their landowners, others by hunger, poor peasants and mine workers. Among the national leaders who waged the anti-Japanese struggle, the rich were not considered patriots but rather those who raised power for personal achievement. For example, Jwa-jin Kim, the commander of the independence army, was a yangban bureaucrat, and Beom-yun Lee, was a liberation activist from the royal family of Joseon. They were reluctant to fight the Russian white faction on the side of the tsarist government and were portrayed as those who dreamed of an aristocratic world of vested interests, ignoring the poor.

For Hong, injustice also included superstitions and feudal customs that exploited women, buying and selling them as slaves. Tansil, who was going to marry Hong, ended her life by suicide after her father and brother sold her to a rich family to pay off their gambling debts (Kim 1989a: 65 -71). Young-ran Park, a woman who became a member of Hong's unit wearing a man's uniform, had been humiliated and sold as servant at an early age. She almost became the victim of having to have her organs removed for the son of a wealthy family. Luckily, she escaped (Kim 1989a: 250-258). Hong's wife, Ok-nyeo, was forced by a shaman to become a female monk and was also exploited. Hong considered shamans and corrupt monks as exploitative figures seeking money and power.

Hong's most difficult problem was raising funds to maintain his troops. The procurement of weapons and ammunition was mainly funded from the loot captured in battle. It was always in short supply, and his soldiers were often sent into battle without sufficient armament. Since his corps was a military organization made up of voluntary individuals, the responsibility for financing rested on Hong's shoulders as unit commander. Sometimes funds were donated. At times, his troops also stole money. The targets were those who persecuted and viciously harassed the members of the unit in the past, the corrupt, the powerful and the rich, as well as the pro-Japanese forces.

Hong's belief system of justice and injustice determined his struggle and missions. His enemies were not only the Japanese army, but also the corrupt privileged class, Chinese bandits, hired assassin agents, and the Russian white supremacists. His moral responsibility was also to protect and support the family members of his units, who were also the targets

of massacre by the Japanese army. Hong's sense of justice separated those who cooperated in his 'sacred' armed struggle to save the country from those 'wicked' ones who interfered or rejected this struggle. Thus, he justified the use of violence in the name of justice.

RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS AND THE KOREAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

The controversy over Hong's ideological identity is linked to his joining the Russian Revolutionary Army. Hong came to recognize that the ideology of the Russian revolutionary regime was consistent with the mission and values he pursued; national liberation and a society free of corrupt classes.

An encounter with the Russian partisans, who were being pursued by the White Army, convinced him that the Russian Revolutionary Army would become his comrades in the fight against injustice. While advancing and retreating in the struggle against the Japanese in Manchuria and Mt. Baekdu, Hong rescued six Russian partisans who were being chased by Tsarist soldiers and confirmed their identity as Bolsheviks. They lived in the barracks at Hong's unit for one year. They introduced Russian warfare to Korean soldiers, giving them a taste of the fighting ways of their army. In addition, they gave access to fresh information about the international situation as well as the International Communist Party, the Bolsheviks, and the revolutionary regimes (Kim 1989c: 183).

The troops began to use the term *tovarishch* (comrade) which the Russian partisans used to refer to each other. Calling each other *tovarishch* meant that everyone is equal, no matter if they were rich or poor. Even Lenin, the head of the Bolshevik regime, was called *tovarishch*. This was unimaginable in Joseon, a feudal class society. If the Bolsheviks used the title "Your Excellency" to Lenin as Koreans called the king in Joseon, it would mean an insult to him (Ibid.). For Hong, this was a transformational experience, and he recognized this as the ideal society he had dreamed of.

Hong also received a new Russian machine gun Maximka from the commander of the Russian Partisan unit. Maximka became a big topic among the Korean units, and the problems of the Korean troops who had had to fight with outdated weapons in the Battle of Bongo-dong was

resolved at once. Maximka was given the name “5th Company” (Kim 1989c: 243). When the Hong’s unit was on the brink of defeat at the Battle of Cheongsan-ri, Maximka showed the power to lead to victory.

In spite of this achievements, Japanese troops attacked Korean villages and indiscriminately slaughtered Koreans complicating things for the forces on the border with Manchuria. Faced with the sacrifice of troops and the exhaustion of weapons and funds, Hong decided that the only alternative was to go to Russia and join the Russian Revolutionary Army, expecting that they could rekindle the war by armed with new Russian-made weapons (Kim 1989c: 274-275). In the atmosphere of the large-scale March 1st Independence Movement in Korea in 1919, Lenin's proposal of union and the provision of funds to the independence army played a decisive role in leading the Korean troops from Manchuria and China to the Maritime Province of Russia (Kim 1990a: 27). However, the catastrophe and the failure of the great unification in the city of Svavodny in Amur Oblast of Russia blocked the fate of the Korean independence units.

THE CATASTROPHE IN SVABODNY AND THE END OF THE KOREAN INDEPENDENCE ARMY

The gathering of Korean independence units in Svovodny ended with the sacrifice of Korean soldiers and without unification. This was due to infighting and strife among the leaders of the Irkchuk faction and the Shanghai faction of the independence army. The Jayu Battalion in Irkutsk belonged to the Red Army and had the Russian command and the Korean deputy commander system. The Sakhalin Volunteer Army in the Shanghai faction, an integrated Korean unit in the Far East, advanced towards Svabodny to unite with the Jayu Battalion (Kim 1990a: 107). Kim 1990a: 107). Thousands of Korean soldiers in Svavodny received an order for disarmament from the commander as it was under the jurisdiction of the Revolutionary Army. The Hong’s unit, which had arrived in advance, accepted disarmament. However, Sakhalin Volunteer Army refused to follow the order and was surrounded by the Jayu Battalion and attacked in surprise by the cavalry unit of the Russian commander (Kim 1990a: 197-229).

About 100 Korean soldiers were killed in this Svabodny disaster, and soldiers captured as prisoners of war had to be judged by the revolutionary

government. (Kim 1990a: 197-229). Hong and his crew were not directly involved in the incident. He tried to persuade the commander and deputy commander to suspend the disarmament and prevent an unfortunate incident. However, this was not accepted, and Hong declared that his troops would not participate in battles between Koreans (Kim 1990a: 189). Hong eventually succeeded in obtaining a promise from the Korean Deputy Commander whose unit would not attack the soldiers on the other side (Kim 1990a: 191). Hong's mediating role prevented larger casualties by blocking attacks between Korean soldiers in advance.

However, this incident left irreparable scars on the achievements and reputation the independence army had built up over the years. Following the incident, the independent unit with the 4000 Korean fighters was completely disbanded due to the Soviet's stabilization policy of the Far East (Kim 1990a: 249).

Hong's choice to set foot on Russian soil was based on his belief that the world realized by the Russian revolutionary regime was an ideal society. Hong considered the borrowing the power of the more 'civilized' Soviet revolutionary forces as a best alternative to ensure the continuity of his struggle. However, this journey completely deprived Hong of his presence and dreams.

The memories, in a thick description based on the Hong's experience of the disarming of his unit and the deprivation of his command by the revolutionary army leadership, which he had to endure for the sake of great unity, and his efforts to persuade and negotiate to prevent each other's attacks, were not known to the South Koreans, even to other groups of the Korean unit. Likewise, the history of the complex conflicts and dynamics of the various actors such as the Russian Red Army, the Korean leaders of the Jayu Battalion subordinated to it, the units of Shanghai faction, and Hong's unit, which were involved in the Svavodny disaster.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Agenda 2030 focuses on three dimensions that affect sustainable development: economy, society and environment. The mission of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to confront global challenges

around these three dimensions. Within the UN framework SDG 16 “Peace, justice and strong institutions” seeks to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies to achieve sustainable development, provide access to justice for all people and develop effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals n.p.). SDG 16 seeks to emphasize that only in the framework of peace and respect for fundamental rights, can the well-being of people, the prosperity of societies, and sustainable development be achieved.

Although collective memory can be understood in reference to the recent past of a given community or nation, it is often obscured with traumatic events, violence, repression and other extreme forms of injustice have taken place. Through acts of reparation in collective memory, ideological and political divides can be overcome in order to guarantee the non-repetition of terrible past events. The process of recovery of memorial heritage in Korea refers to the demand for truth, justice and reparation. Memorial heritage is closely linked to the intangible aspects of heritage, which is an essential driver of development. Recovering memory implies confronting the harsh reality of a recent past replete with pain and violence, but it is an act of extreme necessity if the aim is precisely to put an end to the structures that make or have made this violence possible. Thus, collective memory can serve to preserve the past in order to subsequently use it for the cultural construction of the present. This use of collective historical memory has a utilitarian function that can serve to promote essential values.

Institutions around the world promote the teaching of memory with the aim of preventing future humanitarian disasters, positioning knowledge of traumatic past events and building a framework for peaceful and democratic coexistence. In this regard, narratives can be seen as evocative elements of knowledge with the capacity to connect with readers and audiences. Narratives of memorial heritage appeal to emotions that make the experiences narrated more meaningful.

CONCLUSION

The historical figure Beom-do Hong was recognized by Soviet Koreans as a hero in the anti-Japanese struggle and as a Soviet revolutionary. However, in South Korea, two different historical memories coexist: a

national hero and a communist collaborator. By analyzing the novel Beom-do Hong, a hybrid narrative based on the historical records of battle diaries and reminiscences, the study revealed the collective memories from the journey of struggle and ideology shared by Korea's Voluntary Independence Army around the border in the crisis of their homeland.

Reconstruction of memory awakened a sense of ethnic identity and pride in Soviet Koreans who suffered oppression by Stalin's regime. However, different aspects of memorial heritage also emerged after South Korea was cut off from the Soviet Koreans after Japanese colonization. The historical value of Hong's fighting spirit lies in his pursuit of democracy, human rights, and peace, and voices in South Korea have been raised that the history of the former Soviet Koreans should be embraced as Korean history (Gwangju Ilbo August 15, 2022). The great unification of the Korean units failed, and their realization of national independence was hindered, but the value of their struggle was oriented toward the universal ideology of mankind, that is, independence of the country from aggressors, liberation and freedom from the structures of corruption and exploitation of society, and the realization of an egalitarian society.

In this regard, the memorial account dictates that the history of the independence army should not be simplified as an anti-communist discourse. More weight should be given to the journey of values they pursued. Restoring this collective memory will contribute to bridging the historical severance of two Korean groups that were historically and ideologically separated, and contribute to moving away from conflict towards harmony, with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in mind.

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