In pursuit of a completed war

The people of the burned-in memory versus the society of the eternal present

BY MARTHA VICKERY

How to end the nation's longest-standing war by forging peace and normal diplomatic relations with our former enemy was the topic of a conference The (Unending) Korean War held at New York University (NYU) April 22 and 23, which invited a broad gathering of academics, filmmakers, visual artists, and peace activists to the table.

Bruce Cumings, Korean War historian, author and professor at University of Chicago gave the keynote address, focusing on the "unknown war," the name of a photo book he co-authored with Jon Halliday (and a 1988 TV documentary series by the same name), which has led to its being an "unending war," as well, fought actively from 1950 to 1953, halting after an armistice, and continuing as a cold war since then, Cumings said.

The unsettled nature of the Korean War's ending has impacted Americans and Koreans, North and South, up until the present. Several film documentaries illustrated how war tragedies were made personal and reverberate into the present. These include Tiger Spirit, by Min Sook Lee, which shows how ordinary people cope with their families' separation into South and North Koreans by the impenetrable 38th Parallel; and Grandmother's Flower, by Jeong-Byun Mun, which describes how the people of two small South Korean villages still strive to overcome a bitter ideological division that developed prior to the war — one pro-Communist, and one anti-Communist — a community split that had murderous results.

Filmmaker Deann Bershay-Liem screened and discussed her recent film, In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee, in which she explores how her name and identity was switched in the orphanage, and what

continued on page 84
In pursuit of a completed war

N.Y.C. Conference (continued) | BY MARTHA VICKERY

(continued from cover of the second section)

Bomber Germany was a high-risk proposition for the Allies, since the Nazis had a large and technologically-advanced air force to defend themselves.

What sets the air war over North Korea by the U.S. apart, Cummings said is the "fundamental disproportion of effort that compared with anything "Koreans could do to us." The U.S. had almost complete control of the air from the beginning of the war, he said. North Korea was virtually defenseless. In addition, destroying North Korea resulted in very little gain for the U.S.

The U.S. bombed population centers and also infrastructure, notably huge power-generating dams "comparable to the Hoover Dam" in North Korea, which resulted in destruction of population areas and farmland by flooding. Later on, the U.S. used new incendiary bombs, which could burn down whole cities. In the 22 main cities of North Korea, destruction was 40 to 90 percent, according to U.S. military estimates, he said.

Cummings showed slides of Pyongyang, literally flattened to ashes at the end of the war, and others of the major port of Wonsan, in similar condition. He also showed photos of Seoul just after the war, where many important institutional buildings, such as the Seoul railway station, were still standing. This indicated that although Seoul was subjected to some major bomb damage, the destruction was nothing compared with the scale in North Korea.

Underground facilities—military bases, schools, and factories—were built all over North Korea by the end of the war. People lived in mountainous dugouts into the ground, or in caves. Cummings said, U.S. military intelligence has estimated that there may be 15,000 military facilities still underground in North Korea today.

The introduction by the U.S. of hundreds of nuclear weapons after 1958 "upped the ante" of the war threat. North Korea's leader Kim Il Sung said in the 1960s that building underground was North Korea's only defense against U.S. nuclear weapons, he added.

In 1958, Cummings said, during the
Clinton Administration, there was a New York Times “front page leak” that the administration wished to investigate a North Korean underground facility because they thought it was a nuclear plant. After six or eight months, North Koreans finally invited State Department officials to visit the facility which sparked such intense curiosity.

“They wandered around a huge underground chamber but detected no radiation,” he said. They, the mainstream press virtually dropped the issue. When they didn’t find anything, it was a little story on page eight. The significance of these large underground developments received little attention after that.

Although it would be difficult for North Korea to attack any enemy and win, it would be extremely hard to attack North Korea and win, just because they are so deeply dug in,” Cummings added.

North Korea is “the world’s most amazing garrison state” where most of the adult population has considerable military experience. The U.S. has greatly influenced the shaping of this state but fails to grasp its own role in the state of North Korea today, he suggested.

DID THE U.S. BREAK UN CONVENTIONS?

Cummings emphasized that, during the time of the war, the U.S. became a party to two international conventions to regulate warfare. One was a genocidal convention, approved at the UN in 1948. Cummings argued that under part of the definition in this treaty, which describes genocide as “deliberately inflicting destruction on large groups,” the U.S. carpet-bombing of North Korea would constitute genocide.

Also in 1948, the U.S. became a party to a Red Cross convention designed to protect civilians during warfare. Neither of these measures seemed to have any effect on the pace or extreme destruction of the air war over North Korea, he said.

As modern historians and political scientists revisit this era, Cummings said, some, such as Michael Walzer, political philosopher and author of Just and Unjust Wars, are taking positions on the U.S. role in the war. Walzer supported defense of the South but deplored the invasion and destruction of the north, calling it “a clear war crime.”

Four years post-war in Pyongyang, photographer/filmmaker Chris Marker took photos that were published in a book entitled simply Coreenness (in French), printed in 1961. People are shown still engaged in construction activities, literally rebuilding the city one brick at a time, and the cityscape is still almost non-existent.

Tens of thousands of widows and hundreds of thousands of orphans were left in post-war Korea; Marker documented some of them in his book. Leader II Sung Kim set up a special school for orphans, Cummings noted, and was regarded as the father of all the orphans. The orphans “eventually became part of the elite in North Korea and were key to Kim Jong II’s succession in the ’70s and ’80s as the most avid supporters of the regime,” he said.

In 1999, the Clinton Administration had a visit from a high-level North Korean military official, during which time a plan to eliminate North Korea’s medium- and long-range missiles was worked out. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright traveled to North Korea in a much-publicized state visit two weeks later, to seal the deal.

After that, Cummings said, the presidential election happened, accompanied by much controversy, recounting of votes, and ultimately a decision by the Supreme Court that Bush was the winner.

“No one calls us, we are not in the business of running the government, we don’t want to go through with this deal,” Cummings said.

This was “one of the most astonishingly stupid decisions that I’ve ever seen,” he said, “because we had the ability to take away the delivery capability of North Korea’s nuclear weapons long before they had any. And then through inaction, action and provocation, the Bush Administration pushed North Korea into becoming a nuclear power, keeping all their missiles.”

CAN THE U.S. LEARNER?

North Korea’s leadership “is the party of long memory, and there’s nothing we can do about it, except learn to talk to these people,” he said.

In contrast, the U.S. mainstream media “operates in an eternal present,” Cummings remarked. In 2005, North Korea tested a nuclear bomb on Memorial Day, and fired a long-range rocket on July 4. This meant to be symbolic for Americans, Cummings said, “but everyone was at the beach and nobody noticed!” News reports at the time did not even register the implied symbolism of the dates. Further, there were stories throughout the summer of 2009 on “the North Korean threat,” and little else about North Korea was discussed, he said. The military clashes in the West Sea that occurred in 2010 got relatively less press attention, Cummings said, because media attention has been recently focused on the Middle East.

To a question about parallels between the Korean War and the recent wars in the Middle East, Cummings remarked that the U.S. went into Korea to keep Leader II Sung Kim from taking over the country, and ironically, 66 years later, we are still there, with 35,000 troops, with the same goal.

“There’s a certain absurdity to the media’s obsession with an exit strategy [for the Middle East] — you have to look at Korea. No exit. For 66 years,” he said. A recent article in The New York Times questioned whether the U.S. should keep bases in Afghanistan after the 2014 alleged removal of the troops. It is predictable that troops will stay in Afghanistan, in fact, it is almost inevitable, Cummings said. “If some of the wars we’ve fought in, except for Vietnam which we lost, have troops ever come home.” There are still tens of thousands in Japan, U.S. marines were sent in to do rebuilding of the Sendai Airport. There are troops in England, Spain, Germany, and Italy also.

“And why? We are so over-extended, and so many people are jobless.”

“If you think you can get into a war quickly, win it quickly, have an exit strategy,” this scenario is very unlikely when one uses modern history as an indicator, Cummings suggested. If there is any lesson to be brought to bear on the Middle East crisis from the Korean War and other wars in recent history, Cummings said, it is that it is apparently not possible to win a war and thereafter get the troops out.

Despite a change of U.S. presidents, virtually nothing has changed in U.S. policy toward or understanding of North Korea, Cummings reflected. “The Korean War could break out tomorrow. It almost did last December. People were talking about the possibility of war because of the shellings around Yeonpyong Island. And Americans would still be in their original state of overwhelming might and unfathomable cluelessness,” he said. “Armies ignorant of each other would clash again. The outcome would reveal its central truth. There is no military solution in Korea, and there never was.”

The (Unending) Korean War conference was presented by several organizations including Third World Newsnet (TWN), New York University Asian/Pacific American Institute and Department of East Asian Studies, Nodutdol for Korean Community Development and the Korea Policy Institute, with support from the New York Council for the Humanities. More information is available at www.unendingkoreanwar.com.
EXAMINING THE CURRENT CRISIS

The military clashes that have resulted in torpedoes and captured ships, artillery exchanges, loss of life and property destruction on islands in the ocean off the west coast of Korea were the subject of discussion in an expert panel convened recently at The (Unending) Korea War conference in New York.

This topic and the ongoing food supply crisis in North Korea were discussed by a panel of experts from academia, political activism and policy institutes at the event, held April 22 and 23 at New York University (NYU).

In the West Sea only, there have been at least four military clashes since 1999 involving U.S., South Korean and North Korean military, according to Jae Jung Suh, director of the Korea Studies and Southeast Asia Studies programs at Johns Hopkins University, in Washington, DC. The armistice is not a real peace agreement, Suh emphasized. The parties of the armistice are still reacting to military activities as though they are at war.

The other panelists were: Christine Ahn, executive director of the Korea Policy Institute (and Korean Quarterly contributor); Hyun Lee, executive director of Nodulot for Korean Community Development, a New York activist organization; and Stephen F. Noerper, assistant director for the New York-based Korea Society, a cultural and research organization. The moderator was Henry Ezr, conference co-organizer and NYU professor of Korean Studies.

The event drew participants from academia, the peace movement, artists, and students for two days of lectures, films, and discussions around the increasingly urgent topic of how to end the Korean War. The Saturday panel, The Current Crisis in Korea, asked discussants for peaceful future alternatives to shelling islands, sinking ships, and holding U.S.-South Korea war games in disputed maritime areas.

The four military incidents included a boat sinking by torpedoes in 1999 and an exchange of military fire in 2002, both in the Yeonpyeong Island area; a 2009 exchange with damage to a North Korean ship near the island of Daeyangjin (north of Yeonpyeong); and the recent shelling on Yeonpyeong Island November 23, 2010, which was followed by threats of war by South Korean president Myung Bak Lee.

A common understanding of the recent military clashes in the West Sea is that North Korea fired on South Korea in actions that were unprovoked, Suh said. "The reality is much more complicated," he said.

At the root of these attacks is each side's understanding of what waters in that area are territorial waters. Off the west coast of North Korea, well north of the 38th Parallel, are certain South Korean islands, some of which are occupied by UN forces. Yeonpyeong is one of those.

The armistice agreement of 1953 makes "no provision for the delimitation of territorial seas" Suh said. The Northern Limit Line, was simply declared by the U.S. and South Korea in 1965. North Korea, however, considers the waters south of Yeonpyeong as its own territory. This leaves a wide swath of ocean north of the 38th Parallel in overlapping jurisdictions, and therefore, as a potential conflict zone. The NLL however, "has no legal basis in international law," Suh said.

Stephen Noerper said discussion of the NLL is worth undertaking, but that the larger issue is the "persistence of the deadlock" between the two Koreas. There is intransigence in the positions on both sides. Noerper said. "It's an entirely 60 years of accumulated hostility, mistrust, and a need to see the priorities" recently manifesting itself in conflicts over the NLL, he said. Hyun Lee said the Myung Bak Lee administration has upped the tenion in recent years. There was an effort in 2007 to designate this area as a "peace and cooperation zone," she said, and an inter-Korean summit at that time between then-South Korea President Moo-Hyoun Roh and North Korean leader Jong-Il Kim, in which they agreed to set aside jointly designated fishing areas. Once in office, Myung-Bak Lee refused to implement the 2007 inter-Korean summit.

Lee said Myung Bak Lee's stance has exacerbated an already tense diplomatic situation in North Korea. The Obama Administration has been persuaded to go along with the Myung Bak Lee administration's stance, she said, "and this is a recipe for disaster."

Noerper discussed the probable resumption of the Six-Party Talks, and how he is hoping for other diplomatic initiatives that "may well go beyond the Six-Party Talks, which were designed to be specific to the resolution of the nuclear issue in North Korea." The Six-Party Talks have been effective primarily in that they have "allowed North Korea and South Korea to talk on the sidelines," he said. Other multi-lateral efforts are needed to find solutions to some of North Korea's many challenges, including infrastructure, agriculture, and energy.

Similarly, the Six-Party Talks were designed for getting to long-term solutions, not for resolve a crisis like the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island or the sinking of the ship Cheonan, he said. The process needs other diplomatic tools "to move beyond the Six-Party Talks to a much larger agenda that encourages discussion and enhances understanding."

Christine Ahn discussed the anticipated crisis in North Korea's food supply and the cancellation of food aid since 2008 by both South Korea and the U.S. From a global standpoint, Ahn said, North Korea is in a better situation than some countries, in fact, among all Asian countries, North Korea is "right in the middle" in terms of need, she said.

There is, however, an immediate food crisis. The causes of the current food crisis, Ahn said, are related to bad weather during the 2010 growing season, including flooding last fall that took out an estimated 40 percent of the growing crops. A global food and fuel shortage exacerbated the situation. "Even though they doubled the money they usually put in, they only received a little bit more, because of the 30 percent jump in fuel prices and the 80 percent rise in corn prices," she explained.

North Korea has also been subject to drastic cuts in trade from South Korea and to cuts in foreign aid, both put in place by the Lee administration. Rice food aid was cut 70 percent last year, compared to 2008 levels (just prior to the Lee administration). The U.S. has also cut food aid since 2008.

To a question about why there are continued pleas for aid by North Korea, Ahn said that we do not understand the extent of the devastation during the famine years of the '90s and that the North is still recovering in some ways from that era. Suh said he has heard allegations, but seen no evidence from talking to people on the ground, that food aid is not getting to needy people. "Everyone who has been involved in food aid has testified there has been no diversion," she said.

The group briefly discussed the planned trip by former President Jimmy Carter with other former leaders to North Korea, at North Korea's invitation. The goal of the meeting, Carter has said, is a demilitarization agreement, and a peace treaty. Meanwhile, the Obama Administration's attention is on Libya and pressing domestic issues. The panelists discussed how they can help Carter's effort.

There is a "campaign of disinformation" about Korea in the U.S., Lee said, which must be opposed with facts. "We have to start pointing out how much money the U.S. is spending on wars abroad, on occupation and military bases," in relation to the budget, she said. This includes $20 billion spent annually to keep troops in South Korea, according to Lee.

Noerper said there should be an effort to enhance a Korean-led process to a "democratic, prosperous and nuclear-free Korean peninsula" in the future. Suh added that the Obama Administration should not sit back, "President Obama campaigned on the pledge that he would engage in dialogue with leaders of Iran, North Korea and other countries. What happened to that pledge?"

Ahn all must consider "what are the costs of division?" There are other consequences, including hunger and instability, in addition to monetary costs. As a member of Campaign to End the Korean War, Ahn said, it is important to enhance awareness about the ongoing war as a root cause of the military and other crises we are seeing today.

ENDING THE KOREAN WAR THROUGH EDUCATION

More than 75 professors sign on to teach war-era history, literature, and social sciences

More than 75 professors nationwide in Korean Studies, Asian Studies, Asian-American Studies, and history-related areas of political science, literature and social science have signed on to an agreement to help end the Korean War by arming the next generation with knowledge.
The effort, the Teaching Initiative to End the Korean War, was begun, according to co-organizer Christine Hong, because of the “profound lack of awareness and knowledge in the general public when it comes to U.S.-Korea relations and the Korean War.” A few academics signed on their own, and the organizers found there was a lot of enthusiasm for the idea. “The response has been overwhelmingly positive,” she said.

Hong, a literature professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said she spoke about the Korean War on the late-night television show *Tavis Smiley* a couple of years ago, and mentioned that the war is still not over. Smiley then asked her “Do you mean philosophically, psychologically, or what do you mean?” Hong said she answered “No, I mean like it’s a fact, legally, that the Korean War is not over.” And he was taken aback.

Scholars and activists, aware of that this lack of historical information is typical among Americans, launched the Teaching Initiative through a collaboration of the National Campaign to End the Korean War and the Alliance of Scholars Concerned About Korea (ASCK).

The program launched in time for the 2010 academic year, to parallel the 60th anniversary of the war. Members pledge to teach courses wholly or substantially about the Korean War. Since the member professors are from various disciplines of Asian studies, including American studies, Asian American and ethnic studies, as well as history, sociology, anthropology, and literature.

About 75 academics have signed on so far, and more are joining over time, Hong said. Some of the professors will discuss the initiative at a roundtable meeting at the Association for Asian American Studies annual meeting in New Orleans May 18-21. There is also a website set up with resources for instructors, from curriculum models, to links to literature, film and other materials to use in coursework.

Once courses are formalized at an institution, Hong said “they will be on the books forever,” which will permanently influence the quality and quantity of instruction about the Korean War on college campuses.

More information on the Teaching Initiative to End the Korean War visit www.ascck.org

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This was excerpted from the Spring 2011 Edition (Volume 14, Issue 3) of Korean Quarterly.

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For information about the (Unending) Korean War conference, films, art: www.unendingkoreanwar.org

For information about the multimedia art exhibit, STILL PRESENT PASTS: Korean Americans and the “Forgotten War”: www.stillpresentpasts.org

Information about the film "Grandmother’s Flower” and Third World Newsreel, progressive media and workshops: www.twn.org

Information about the films by Deann Borshay Liem and Ramsay Liem, “In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee” and “Memory of Forgotten War” www.mufilms.org

Information about the film "Tiger Spirit” and Women Make Movies: www.wmm.com

Information about Korea Policy Institute and progressive analysis on Korea: www.kpolicy.org

Information about Nodutdol for Korean Community Development: www.nodutdol.org

Information about the National Campaign to End the Korean War: www.endthekoreanwar.org

Information about the Teaching Initiative to End the Korean War: www.asck.org

Information about the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU: www.nyu-apastudies.org

Information about the East Asian Studies Dept at NYU: www.eas.as.nyu.edu