

Seashores of Narratives:
Collecting Conches in the Intertwined Korean World

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To my grandparents Wonhee Baek and Yonghan Park

And those courageous North Koreans

who left their homeland for a better life.

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Intro

This project is a linear-in-time story collection about the forced migration history of North Koreans toward northeastern China before and after the Korean War. This oral history collection contains stories from three migration surges from the last century (Kim, 2014): the Japanese colonization era (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), and the famine era¹ (the late 1990s). The age of my narrators ranges from 48 to 97 years old, which made me realize how urgent it could be to collect these fading memories. All of the narrators were former North Korean residents or witnesses of the North Korean human rights crisis. The stories they shared with me covered forced resettlement testimonies, war memories, and religious life after their displacement.

Inspired by my family migration history, I reached out to most of my narrators through family connections. The personal connection is why these powerful accounts occurred in intimate spaces: one was conducted in a church's kitchen, one was in a driving car, and most of them were conducted around dinner tables. Far beyond what I learned from the first semester's courses - I expected I would set up all the recording devices and room temperature, making sure the lighting was right, the seats felt cozy, and there would be a well-trained oral historian asking flawless questions. It turned out that every narrator I met called me "kiddo," and it took over 20 times listening until I finally got desensitized over the sound of my stammering voice.

¹ Since the famine in mid-1990s, numerous (estimated 600,000 to over 2 million) North Koreans were starved to death, it is also estimated that approximately 100,000–300,000 North Koreans moved to China (Kang, 2013).

As a descendant of a North Korean immigrant in China and a Korean War veteran, sometimes I wonder: What if my grandparents didn't get on the train taking them to a strange country? My life would be totally different from now. I definitely wouldn't be typing all those testimonies about that isolated land in an apartment in New York City. I wouldn't be watching North Korean escapees' memoirs or interview recordings from YouTube or somewhere else.

But my grandparents did get on that train. And I grew up in a strange country, and I still feel a complex set of emotions enveloping me, featuring the guilt for not being entirely familiar with Korean culture, a curiosity about that land I only visit in school breaks, and most importantly, a shameful fear of succumbing to the convert's fervor. I still feel their accounts and tears resonate with me, even though I was not born there at all. They're still my people. I recognize their dialect. That's the way my grandma talked. They could all be my grandmother's siblings, friends, and neighbors. They could be me.

The Abandoned Daughter, The Left-Out Son

- The North -

One of the biggest motives that drove me to start this project was my maternal grandmother. She was taken by my grandfather to China. He served in the Chinese Voluntary Army against South Korea and the United States during the Korean War. My mom said my grandfather (her father) fell in love at first sight when he saw my grandmother, a North Korean young lady daunted by that ongoing war. Her family was persuading her to leave with my grandfather, fearless lifesavers from China - they believed life would be easier marrying a medaled pilot compared with staying in North Korea waiting to be bombed. After unwillingly leaving her homeland at the age of 17, she hasn't gotten the chance to go back to North Korea ever since. Her memories of home stayed all about bombing and war.

After settling down in China she had to learn Chinese with no interest and no foundation. My mom told me that my grandmother memorized a whole dictionary to learn Chinese, just to prove to those strangers that she was capable of whatever she wanted. Everyone who knew her called her the toughest woman in the small village - the dictionary memorizer. But I never had the chance to understand what exactly made her as tough as she was. Was it the bombing, the arranged marriage with a stranger, or the forced displacement from one communist country to another? The answers could never be narrated since she has gone for somewhere better and became a star deep in the galaxy. In the last years she stayed with us I remember she lost all the Chinese she

learned. The only thing the poor lady could do was murmur in bed to her caregiver for water or a diaper in that North Korean suburban dialect. I lost the chance to talk to her in person about her experience though she was the person I wanted to talk to most desperately. In her late years, she could only talk to me in several Chinese phrases like “Here you come,” “You want snacks,” “Let me know if you’re hungry,” and “Be good at school.”

Again and again, years and years.

“Work hard!”

“Snacks?”

“Dress more warmly!”

... ..

“Snacks?”

But I did hear some anecdotes about her early years in China. The tough lady hustled the whole village with her weird broken Chinese knocked on countless unwelcoming doors and ended up miraculously collecting all the funding and licenses for the first Korean immigrant primary school in that town. Everyone called her Principal Baek, even after she retired. All my grandparents’ stories, like this, were just teeny-tiny snippets weaved in my childhood memories on both my mom's and dad’s sides. It was when I decided to go to OHMA that all those trails started to be mapped out clearly. That’s when I realized

that I was a third-generation immigrant from the Korean peninsula, I'm ethnic Korean, and most importantly, I see myself a part of the Korean Diaspora².

- The South -

Because of Japanese colonization in the Korean Peninsula back in the last century (1910 - 1945), my paternal grandfather's parents decided to escape to China from South Korea in the 1930s. His parents told him and his siblings that they would come back home when the mess was all over. My grandfather's parents were only able to bring 2 or 3 kids at a time, so they had to travel back and forth between China and South Korea. I always thought that traveling with all six kids was way out of their capability or economic situation. However, I learned from one of my narrators that most of the diasporan families wouldn't bring all the kids at one time in case one single accident took all their lives. In 1945, Japan signed the instrument of surrender, and all the kids but my grandfather were safely taken back to South Korea. For reasons that remain unknown, he was the child left alone in China. All we knew was that he only got letters from his parents after 12 years old, in those letters were his parents telling him to work hard at school and to stay healthy and strong.

² It is worth noting that some studies argue that the migration from North Korea to South Korea cannot be referred to as "diaspora" (Kim, 2014), because they share the same culture and language. Only in political context are they two separated countries. But the unresolved and mutually-opposing situation of South and North Korea left all the people especially in the North living in the consequences of that controversial and inconclusive ending (Chang, 2020).

A few years ago he finally got the chance to move back to South Korea and reinstate his citizenship. Unfortunately none of his siblings could reunite with him, as they had all passed away, in separate cities. The immigrant department didn't approve his application until confirming his identity by testing out that his DNA matched that of his South Korean nephew. An uncle we've never met proved his belonging to South Korea in the end. I did not get to know how he felt about resettling back in his homeland, and maybe my grandpa did not have a clue either - Alzheimer's had been tormenting him for years.

- The Disc -

I remember we always had a whole shelf of Trot discs at home since I was born. Those singers were dressed in iconic sequin blazers from the last century, singing in such a flamboyant and affected way, with the most straightforward lyrics I've ever heard (they could repeat "All I have are yours! I will give whatever you want!" Or "I like you!," "I love you!" for the whole songs). All the Trot songs just passionately sang about love or heartbreak. I madly hated these songs when I was little because they couldn't be more cheesy and noisy. But my dad always had these songs playing in his car - they were background music while he picked me up from piano class. If I didn't perform well he would yell at me with the music passionately playing. When we went out for a family road trip, the the annoying music was playing while mountains and trees would flee backward outside the car window. Sometimes I felt so embarrassed by those repeating cloying lyrics. My understanding of Korean was the most broken among all the family members and relatives, but those lyrics were still straightforward and sticky enough to be

understood. This might be the first time the mother tongue shyness took me down - you won't be as embarrassed as Americans by a cheesy love song if English is not your first language. But Trot just created such a shadowy space where I feel related and belong to. I stepped into a record store in Seoul to pick up some gifts for my dad during high school spring break. When I asked the owner if they had records for some Trot singers from our home, he laughed and said, "Are you buying albums for your grandparents, kid?" I was speechlessly stunned hearing his question, realizing my dad's homeland memory was forever stuck in time. The physical bond between home was broken before he was born. For my dad, it was like a Gen X stuck in a strange land; his favorite song collections were always the Elvis Presley and Simon & Garfunkel his dad left him. I couldn't help wondering what if my grandfather had not separated from his family and my dad had been born in South Korea, what songs would be played in my family's first car? My dad was born and raised in China, aging day by day here, but the spiritual world, at least the music world in him was destined to coagulate the moment his dad was left here.

The Bridge

My family migration history is undoubtedly my primary motive to start out this oral history journey. With all the steps and stops I took during the past years, I've encountered so many unexpected places and incredible stories. Before I left for the very first field trip, I once vaguely imagined its endpoint. Someone might tell me where we were from or how we left our own place. But I never had a clear image of what kind of guide I would meet.

There must not be many people like me in OHMA who started to work on their thesis two years after their interviews. When my cohort friends sometimes complained that they got such a limited time to write their thesis while constantly searching for other potential narrators, I felt a secret jealousy sprout deep down in me - everything still was still unknown and mysterious to them! Any surprising encounters could bump into them. I was the one holding my yellowed recording collection (I prepared backup recording copies on every device multiple times, fearing that they might magically sneak out sometime, or realistically if I got robbed). With these swiftly aging archives, I found that the experience of conducting my own oral history has become a part of history itself. After re-entering these interviews, the memories didn't stay as fresh and dynamic as I expected, like they were conducted yesterday. Tons of details have evaded me. Luckily over these years I also transformed from the nervous and meticulous questioner, into the recordings' first audience.

Methodology And Keywords

- Intergenerational Conversations -

Thanks to my passionate family members who were all thrilled about their lives becoming institutionalized academic work, I was lucky to speak to those amazing people after my dad made several phone calls. Phone calls and phone calls. The Piaos were seriously hunting available narrators. Some people even reached out to me hoping to share their migration stories with me.

That's how a voluntary audience appeared for the interviews I conducted. My aunt and dad were both so interested in witnessing the interview process, and they promised me they would JUST interpret if I needed them without any extra interruptions. But when they came, it turned out everyone was talking over each other at some point. I remember kicking my dad under the table when he couldn't help but ask his own questions, but he ignored my kicks. That was how I unwillingly obtained these adorable, annoying, intergenerational conversations.

The keyword "intergenerational" definitely ranges beyond my aunt and dad. In East Asian countries, family roles outweigh individual identities. It's weird merely calling the elders by their first names. That was the first difficulty I encountered when translating the interview transcription. I called my narrators aunt/grandma/uncle/grandpa though none of them were my relatives. To reinstate and emphasize who they truly were and to

distinguish them from my aunt/grandma/etc., I decided to translate with their own name instead of what I called them in the original recording.

This naming not only affected my translation word choices, but the positioning of the whole interview collection. My interviewees all called me kiddo and treated me like kiddo right after I meticulously introduced the whole legal release and consent form thing to them. It's in Koreans' blood to take things intergenerationally. The young show respect and modesty, and the old give fatherliness and edification in return.

This intergenerational dialogue gave the whole collection a distinct Confucian hue. Rather than an oral historian, the interviewees were putting me into the role of a curious child who gratefully tried to learn things from them (which I truly was). When I talked to a lady in her middle nineties, she stuffed me with handfuls of snacks several times while talking. This project was not about victims crying themselves out to activists or scholars, it was like an intimate life story passing down. So soft and gentle. In their speech acts, my narrators intuitively positioned themselves as sophisticated and more robust, since our culture endowed them with responsibility and the ethics of seniority.

- Language to Language -

Since all the interviewees were immigrants from North Korea or South Korea, the dialogues were all conducted in Korean and Chinese - These two languages are concurrently intertwined in most of the lives of Korean Chinese. The Korean Peninsula

was never a land with much mobility within the nations, and it remained a homogeneous nation until now. For Boomers and Gen X in the Korean Peninsula, accents vary radically from state to state, even town to town, since population mobility is relatively low in areas with low levels of industrialization. In the interview recordings, not only were they composed of precious memories and testimonies, but it's also worth diving into "how they said. The languages and the accents mark who they were and where they have been, enriching the whole account with information outside the words.

The audio materials were hard to translate smoothly into English because of its complexity. I decided to introduce where they were from in detail when I started to write the thesis to make the narratives more sensory and accessible. Mansoo mentioned during the interview that there was a hill full of pear trees behind her house in North Korea. Korean pears can be so round and large, with coarse brownish skins and a strong fruity fragrance. She also mentioned people had to greet the Japanese officers with tedious formal greetings if they wanted to get on public transportation like trains. She bowed deep down when she showed me the complicated greetings. The Japanese left our land 78 years ago, but those greetings and bows and the pear trees became the last silhouette of her homeland memories after resettling down for half a century in China.

Another challenge of bilingual interviews was translation. I was not quite confident processing my narrators' accents while intensely thinking about their accounts, and I was not sure if my Korean would accurately convey my questions to my narrators (in fact because of the language barrier and some physical reasons a few senior narrators did

misunderstand my questions). In the process of interviewing in two languages, information got lost and new information was generated.

My Mind (accepting accounts and generating new questions)

My Words (conducting the questioning)

Interpreter's Mind (processing my question)

Interpreter's Words (passing it down to the narrator)

Narrator's Mind (accepting the interpreted question)

Narrator's Word (Accounts)

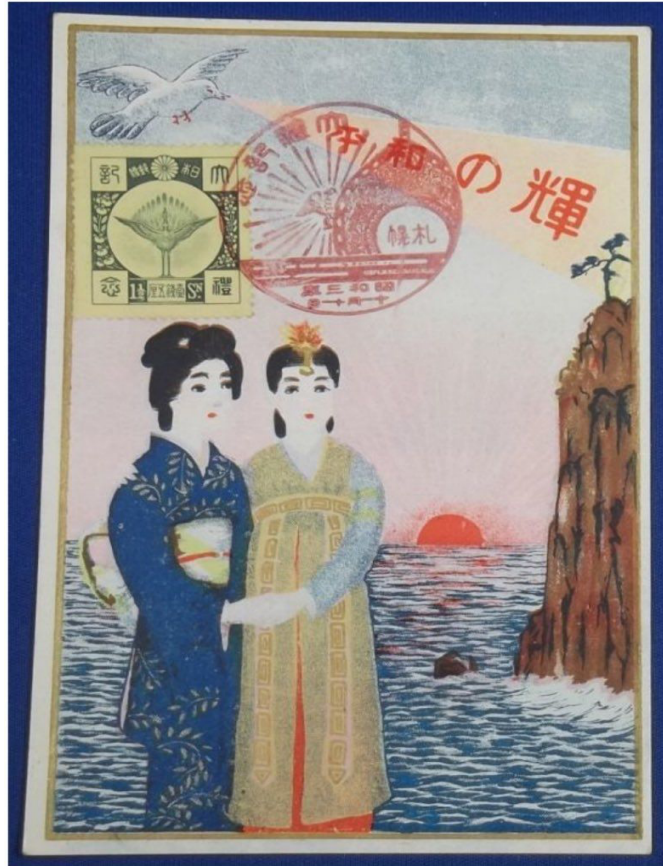
(And it's going all the way back)

But no one's mind is an open book waiting to be browsed freely. Sometimes memory fails and sometimes we surely just did not get the full accessibility. After the oral history interviews, I'm always thinking about how their memories meandered, were expressed, and how the stories became the way they are. And all these were tightly attached to the people as individuals. What's more important than narratives were the narrators themselves. They were the Christian worshipping in the church every week, the father of two sons, who wore military-style clothing until his 80s, and the son of a commie who went to seminary.

Pear Tree Hill

Japanese imperial colonization era (일제강점기) indicates the 35 years (1910-1945) when Japanese colonization took over the Korean peninsula. The colonial policy was an attempt to erase the original Korean cultural identity in all dimensions as Naisen Ittai(内鮮一体) — “Japan and Korea as one body”(Chee, 2020). In schools, students were educated in the Japanese language and society, and people were deprived of their Korean names (Jeong, 2021). Additionally, Japan implemented extreme economic policies such as radically developing forestry (Pogrmic,2020). The intensive forest exploitation led to flood and starvation, especially in North Korea, which is characterized by mountainous terrain and abundant forests. Koreans who were deprived of their land, homes, and even their names, resorted to suicide, while some others were forced to leave their homeland.

A poster depicting a women in kimono hand in hand with a women in hanbok



젤리깅, 2020, <https://www.artofit.org/image-gallery/777856166915544604/%EC%A0%A4%EB%A6%AC%ED%82%B9%F0%9F%90%B0-on-x/>

Mansoo lives in Qingdao, where dozens of flights from South Korea take less than two hours every day. She resides in a Korean community in the city, where numerous Korean Chinese and South Koreans call home. My friend drove his grandmother and me to an old, run-down neighborhood. Through the car window, I observed a middle-aged woman bowing from a distance to greet us. She turned out to be Mansoo's daughter-in-law.

During our interview together, Mansoo was already 94 years old. Despite her age, her mental acuity remained remarkable. However, we all had to raise our voices slightly to

communicate with her. Once I set up all the recording devices on the sofa, Mansoo and her daughter-in-law graciously brought us freshly brewed tea and fruits. Just like all those old-styled Korean seniors, Mansoo chose to sit on the floor with her back leaning against the sofa legs. My friends and I were genuinely flattered, expressing our thanks in Korean, and hurriedly rolling off the sofa to make eye contact with her at eye level.

Due to their age, the generation that experienced the Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula is fading away. (I couldn't be more grateful that Mansoo and her family were willing to give me a chance to interview her.) Her narratives were surprisingly eloquent and lucid - to the extent that I didn't even have many opportunities to ask follow-up questions. In other interviews, I typically started with a warm-up question. It just felt wrong to intrude into people's privacy and ruthlessly ravage for whatever you need for a master's degree. The way she told her story was cathartic and chaotic. Sometimes it was about her memories in North Korea, and sometimes about the resettlement in China. She traveled back and forth, willingly and unwillingly. The journey of her recalling also swayed back and forth. That's why I decided not to organize the transcription into a timely linear one. I just felt that I needed to respect her reaction to victimhood: one pain always triggers another pain, and one loss connects to another loss. Colonization, like other forms of collective victimization, has a profound impact on colonized groups' identity, culture, and inter-group relations (Bulhan,2015). Mansoo still clearly remembered all the Japanese greetings she needed to say when Japanese soldiers broke into their houses.

70 years of life experience in China didn't change Mansoo's North Korean accent at all. So, my friend and his grandmother suggested coming with me in case I missed some of her accounts. Needless to say, that brought unexpected chemistry into the dynamics of the conversation. When I asked Mansoo in Korean, 'Why did you come to China?' my interpreter grandma added, 'Did you move here because of food shortage in North Korea? Life must be tough there, right?' This interjection made the whole question more suggestive (Chinese people call this questioning style 'stuffing the answer into the other person's mouth'). However, it also revealed my interpreter grandma's own interpretation, turning this interview into an inter-group conversation: Korean Chinese and North Korean immigrants. Then Mansoo misheard the question, taking 'Why did you come to China' as 'How did you come to China'.

So she eventually answered, 'By train.'

About Mansoo

Mansoo's name was a common Korean male's name. She had had several brothers, but all the male siblings died before she was born. So her parents gave her a boy's name, hoping she could become the male symbol in place of her brothers. When she described her rural memories, Mansoo repeatedly mentioned her elder sister, she was the second oldest child in the family. After her elder sister got married and moved out, Mansoo had to take responsibility as the oldest child in a traditional Korean family.

During the Japanese colonization era, Mansoo's father worked in the fish trade between Japan and North Korea. However, life never went easy on them. Not long after the family

resettled in northeastern China, her father chose to abandon the whole family and move to Japan. In 1950, the Korean War broke out. Like many other North Korean diasporas in China, Mansoo and her husband decided to return to North Korea to fight against the Americans. After the war, Mansoo lost many close friends and family members, including her married elder sister. She returned to China as the only surviving sibling. In her narrative, there were witnesses of homeland, patriarchy, war, and diaspora.

Transcript

Keren: Could you tell me something about your memories in your homeland?

Mansoo: I lived in Cheongchon, which was about 18 miles away from Pyongyang. My oldest sister was already married when I was born. Besides where my sister lived, there was a hot spring called “the Wish Spring”. My sister told me that, a long time ago, there was an injured tiger who got its broken leg cured, bathing in the Wish Spring. That tale was widely believed in my hometown. People visited and bath in the spring. That’s where I grew up.

Keren: Who took you from North Korea to China?

Mansoo: I came to China with my dad. We took a train traveling from the North to mainland China. We moved from place to place and traveled separately since I was little. I lived in Pyong-An Do and then moved to Wonsan. When we were still in North Korea, my parents told me that we were moving to China in a couple of years. But they left without me. My mother brought my younger brother and left me alone. They settled down somewhere in Northeastern China. My parents didn’t come back to North Korea and took

me to China until years later. My sister was not able to come because she had been married. My younger brother, who moved to China before me, drowned himself accidentally when swimming in a river. My mom was cooking in the kitchen and didn't take care of him at that moment. He was only 8 years old. My mom passed at 59 because of illness.

When we were still in North Korea, my dad worked in Japan and he imported some fish and seafood from there. I remember living a decent life when we were in North Korea. But my dad wanted to leave the family, he escaped from us and moved to Japan. Since then, my mother had to take care of the whole family. Life was tough for her.

Sometimes, the Japanese would just randomly break in; it could happen anytime. We didn't have any clue when they would just, kick in. At that time, young people all had a self-made flagpole cause we had to hang the Japanese national flag in every house. If Japanese soldiers broke in, we had to sit in the yard. People could only talk in Japanese when they arrived. (saying Japanese greetings) and then we had to salute and bow.

North Korea could have been a good place to live in. We had all kinds of fruits there. Jujubes, peaches, apples, and a kind of little red fruit that melts the second you put it in your mouth and bite. We heard that life in China could be a little better off, that's why we decided to run away. We wanted an easier life, but the Japanese were also colonizing China at that time. I had to study Japanese in China and North Korea, every day.

I came to China at the age of 19. It was winter solstice when I arrived. It might be 1946. I couldn't really remember things clearly. I'm already 94. I went to West Pyongyang by car and then traveled to China by train from there. Japanese officers

didn't allow people to get on their train unless they spoke at least one greeting sentence in Japanese. We had to take a train to bus station, and then take bus to my uncle's house, and spend a night there. My uncle had a large, large apple orchard.

After the Korean War broke out, I joined the Chinese Voluntary Army back to North Korea to fight against the Americans. A lot of North Korean people like me served in the Chinese army. We came back to fight for our homeland. But I heard almost all of them died in the war.

Keren: Was your husband born in North Korea as well?

Mansoo: Yes. My husband was from North Korea. My in-laws were pretty wealthy. They could afford cigarettes. But the Japanese came and killed all the people who had cigarettes in their houses, The Japanese wrapped them in burlap sacks and buried them deep high in the mountains.

That's why we named our son 봉 Bung (which means "Peak" in English). Cause his grandpa was buried somewhere high³. We were about to name him 도산 (Blade Mountain) at first, but our son didn't like it. I didn't go to school and got much education. He didn't like the Blade Mountain name.

Keren: So you went back with your son and husband?

Mansoo: I was back in North Korea for a long time with my husband. He was serving in the North Korean military. He was enlisted for 8 years. During the war, the main jobs for

³ The performance of Confucian commemorative practices such as ancestor worship are common in the resettled North Koreans (Bell, 2021), but unlike the Western World, it is inappropriate to name children directly by their ancestors' name in Korea.

women were basically cooking and spinning. Me and other girls were spinning and weaving on a spinning wheel day and night. I heard that a pregnant woman spinning really hard and ended up giving birth to a child with crooked legs.

Keren: How old was your son when you went back to North Korea?

Mansoo: Our oldest son, did you see his photo? It was like this ... (measuring the height of a 1-to-2-year-old child), and we brought him back to North Korea. I remember taking him to the army to see his dad. I asked him do you know who was your dad? And he couldn't recognize him. I had to tell him who was his dad.

When we were living in China, a teacher brought a whole class of kids to go for a walk near the railroad. 5 kids got killed (by the Japanese) there. That teacher was killed as well. The surviving kids were all from rich families. My friends and teachers escaped to China all went back to North Korea. But they all died in the war.

Keren: Do you know any of your relatives still live in North Korea after the war?

Mansoo: My uncle, his name is Changshil, I think he survived the war. But I'm the only kid of my dad who was alive after the war. I didn't hear from any of them (my siblings). I'm the only one alive. If I die our family will come to an end.

Keren: Have you connected to your relatives in North Korea?

Mansoo: Of course not. My sister had five kids. They all called me "Auntie, Auntie" when I was with them.

The last time I came to North Korea was visiting a doctor. I lived in my sister's house when I was back in North Korea. But she had already passed away when I was there. She died in the war. Her family volunteered to cook for Chinese soldiers. American bomb

blew up my sister's yard when she was cooking. She was only in her 30s. But at least she got kids. She got married at an early age and had five kids. Her kids called me auntie and said, "Auntie, please let us be your kids. Please stay and take care of us." But they all went to South Korea. And we were also struggling for our lives here in China.

I stayed in North Korea for only 35 days. I really wanted to stay but my husband didn't want us to. I begged and persuaded him badly but he still disagreed. That's how we eventually came back to China. The troop awarded my husband over ten medals in the war but we couldn't find them anymore. They might get lost on our way here. If we kept them, maybe the government would give us some subsidies or something. But we lost them.

Keren: Your name is Mansoo; sounds like a boy's name.

Mansoo: There was another Mansoo in our village, a little boy. If people called out "Mansoo!" in our small village, both he and I would reply.

Keren: But why did your family give you a boy's name?

Mansoo: My brother was named Manyuk (ten thousand jade), my sister was named Manbok (ten thousand luck), my brother was called Manweol (ten thousand moon), and both of the boys died young. My parents wanted me to be a boy, at least namely.

You wanted to go to North Korea? Promise you'll never go there little girl. Only one person got to handle the destinies of all. North Korea could be a wonderful place. Got perfect water. Japanese used to build their houses on top of the mountains. It was the most habitable place ever. If you brought a big basket and shook a pear tree, huge pears would fall down. Put them into the baskets and they would be ready to eat when it goes

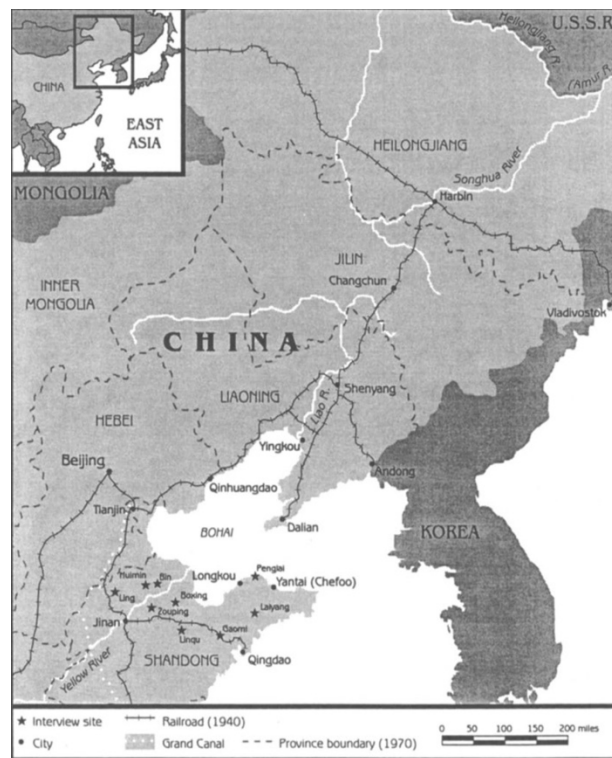
soft. It's called watery pear. So tasty, so juicy. North Korea has all kinds of fruits and veggies. But the Japanese and landowners took them all. They took them all that we had to starve.

Keren: Could you still connect to family members in North Korea?

Mansoo: My nephews, kids of my oldest sister contacted me once. They wanted me to send them a radio and a bicycle. I remember buying all the things up but couldn't afford the tax and shipping fee. It was too expensive. Now all of my children have moved to South Korea, it becomes even harder for us to contact family members in the North. I'm too old to take care of these things. All I know is I have some relatives still alive. I've always felt sorry for my nephews in North Korea these years. My hometown was such a beautiful place. There were full of pear trees and apple trees on the hill. But now you could never go there anymore.

Mama! Mama!

Hong was born in a landlord family in Pyongyang, in 1936. His dad and grandfather were born in Shandong, China. A series of severe floods destroyed most of the arable lands in Shandong and caused epidemics. The loss of lands and homes drove millions of people heading to the north, Manchuria (Northeastern China). The venture to Manchuria was considered one of the biggest human mobilities in East Asian history. People believed that Manchuria had more fertile land and a less dense population. But some of the people, just like Hong's ancestors, accidentally crossed the border and settled down in the Korean Peninsula.



(Gottschang, Lary, 2000, Map 1, p. 12)

After a significant influx into North Korea, those Chinese immigrants were not granted North Korean citizenship. Thousands of immigrants lived in North Korea for generations; some of them had never been to China in their entire lives. They lived as outsiders from birth to death, with the Chinese Immigrant Association being their primary management throughout their lives. This association established Chinese schools and also assisted them with paperwork for travel between China and North Korea. After the Korean War broke out, the Chinese schools in North Korea had to shut down the campus. With the Chinese immigrants gradually moving out of North Korea, the North Korean government started to take over the schools by designating their textbooks and teachers (Mu, 2001).

Hong once led a relatively decent life in North Korea. His father was friends with the president of the Chinese Immigrant Association. Within the entire neighborhood, Hong was one of the few who had no worries about life - the surrounding North Koreans often struggled for food, while his family had a vast farm. Several years after Hong was born, Japan surrendered, and the Soviets took over North Korea. His family was designated to deliver vegetables and wheat to the local Soviet Army. Before the Korean War broke out, the president of the Chinese Immigrant Association found Hong's dad, hoping Hong would serve as an interpreter and local guide for the Chinese Voluntary Army. The president reached out to four kids for the Chinese Army, but only 2 of them agreed. Hong was only 14 years old when he was chosen. As a young witness of colonization and war, he went back to China with the Chinese Army after the war. That was the first time he returned to his homeland.

Hong and I met at a food place in Qingdao, where Hong settled down after returning to China. My dad's Korean Chinese friend reserved the place for us, so we could have dinner together after the interview. When Hong arrived, I saw him in a military-styled coat with his younger sister, greeting me with a strong Shandong accent. His voice was loud, clear, and friendly. His sister sat silently around the table during the whole interview and only chimed in once when the conversation turned to North Koreans—when Hong said that North Korean women were more capable than Chinese women because North Koreans believed men were destined for significant tasks. She interrupted and said, 'That's just gender bias!'

Hong didn't like the Soviet people and Americans. He claimed Americans only cared about their own lives and money, showing no patriotism in the war. According to him, Soviet people were all drunken animals without courtesy. In his narrative, North Korea and China were both his homes, but they were both torn apart again and again.

Transcript

Keren: Did you have passports at that time?

Hong: No. Nobody knew what passport was when I was there. We were just like beggars fleeing around due to the famine. I went back to China in 1954 after the Korean War ended. The government sent me to Mohe, because of the Soviet Union. They sent me to Old-golden-gully. I barely remembered any Korean, but I was an interpreter for the Chinese Voluntary Army during the war. I heard that you were studying in America. I

don't like Americans and the capitalist things. They judge people simply by how much money they make.

I was born in the Japanese colonization era. But I'm Chinese, and we were only North Korean residents, not citizens. So the Chinese Immigrant Association was in charge of everything. After Japan surrendered, the Soviet Union took over North Korea. A president of the Chinese immigrant association found my dad and wanted me to deliver vegetables to the Soviet soldiers. Cause my family owns a big farmland. We grew crops and veggies on our land. At that time, the Soviet Army was all corrupted in North Korea; they ate so much food each day and threw waste and leftovers on the roadside. The cabbage is perfectly edible; they only want the core and discard the fresh outer layers. Lots of North Koreans had to pick their waste to live.

North Koreans were so poor at that time. They didn't even have a bag for food. Straw-weaved bags wrapped everything. But North Koreans were all resilient. The housewives always wiped the kitchen perfectly clean. But men didn't do any chores. Women said they are born to handle big tasks. I remember seeing North Korean women carrying babies on their backs and large basins on top of their heads.

Keren: Did you go to schools in North Korea?

Hong: Not for many years. I spent three years at school. My school was located in east Pyongyang, built by Chinese immigrants. Besides our school, it was a big airport. Kim Il-sung went to our school to give us a speech. I saw he got a big hump on the back of his head, haha. The Chinese Immigrants Association also provided us with food. If we called

them, with that kind of, crank telephone. If we asked for soy sauce they would send us a whole wooden barrel of it.

I remember it was wintertime, I saw a family escaping from the Americans. The man was dragging an ox, the ox was carrying his parents and their luggage. His wife was following them, with two kids on her back. And the bomb was dropped off, bombed up all of them. The ox died, the whole family died, and only a kid survived and cried out, “엄마! 엄마!(mama! mama!)” Then one bomb was dropped near me, I was, blasted away and landed in a pile of dirt. Deep in the dirt pile. It took me an hour and a half to climb out.

You might think North Korea had good relationships with China, but they weren't that good. The weapons we used were all borrowed from the Soviet Union. When Kim Il-sung was still in charge, the Soviet Union told us to pay the weapons back. But North Korea was thinking of dodging the bill. So the Soviet Union sent us back to China, northeastern China, paying Soviet commies by transporting soybeans. Every day I have to load eight trucks of soybeans leaving for Russia. And I don't like Soviet commies too. Sometimes, we hate the Soviet people more than the Japanese. Soviet people could rape women right on the roadside. They were beasts, not human beings. When they were in North Korea, they asked local people for liquor. If they didn't get liquors they might just kill people randomly. They killed whenever they wanted to. No brains. Soviet soldiers could get drunk and wasted when they were on duty. Drunk like they wouldn't even recognize their parents. Cause the Soviet Union was too cold, people had to drink to keep warm. A place full of alcoholics.

Pyongyang was so small. The Americans drove the plane all around in the daytime. Sometimes, when they saw us, they would fly down and stick their heads out to laugh at us. North Koreans were unlucky. Japan humiliated them for 30 years, and then the Soviet Union, then the Americans. The Chinese and North Korean Army could only operate in the nighttime.

Keren: Did you have any contacts with Americans during the war?

Hong: Any contacts? I contacted them the most! I delivered food for the Chinese Army. The people who drove the carriage sat in the front. My sister and I sat behind. The U.S. military established four checkpoints in 5 kilometers. When we were going through the checkpoints, Americans were searching for us. I was wearing my sister's floral coat, with hand grenades in the pocket. They searched us and I was, so nervous, I was afraid that the grenades would explode. But they thought I was a girl so they didn't search carefully.

North Korea got bombed every day. When I was still in school, I saw some black sticks on the playground. Some were long and some were short. So I went to ask the teacher what those were. His name was Mr. Zhang. Before he answered me the sticks exploded and blew up the airport next to our school. That's my last day at school. The school had to be shut down cause it was too dangerous. I heard they had to go into the woods, somewhere quiet. All the students went into the mountain to study.

When the U.S. military withdrew, I saw a truck following a truck. At that time the winter was so cold. They had to take off everything in the car that could be burnt. Their cars didn't have any metal, just canvas. They took all the canvas off the cars and burned it to

keep warm. You didn't know. Life matters the most for them. And we tried to ambush them in the middle of the night. We only operate at night, 2 A.M. I was wearing a North Korean coat, holding a sickle and scouting ahead. They were all slept in sleeping bags, they didn't have a pillow or comforter. Then I yelled out, "Freeze!" and the Chinese Army broke in. We took everything in the room. Coats, food, and guns. They just didn't fight back. We didn't even have handcuffs at that time. So we took their shoelaces. They wore long leather boots with long shoelaces. We took their shoelaces and tied them up. Two people as a pair. Some of the American POWs even came back to China with us. 34 of them. They didn't wanna go back to America. They stayed in Shandong and got married. They didn't love their country. Some of them were here just for money.

I Believe in Whatever I Want to Believe

The city where I did the interview was a small border town in the northeastern part of China, situated in a declining old industrial state, somewhat like the Chinese version of the Rust Belt. In the early days of the People's Republic, this region was hailed as the "eldest son" of the country. However, with China's rapid development, the region that nurtured the early economic growth started to experience the fastest economic decline domestically. As the reform-and-opening-up economic policy continued, state-owned old steel factories closed one after another, and the people here bid farewell to their status as witnesses of the "glory of the Republic." A wave of layoffs swept through Northeast China.

The old buildings and factories, still in the same appearance as decades ago, were once thriving and vibrant before I was born. Now, these structures remain unchanged, refusing to transform into something new. Children here are told, "You need to try your best to get yourself out of here." The people who stayed are still warm and enthusiastic, but compared to Shanghai and Guangzhou, everything here seems too bleak.

When I was in the United States, I was often asked, "Where are you from?" People assumed you were from Shanghai or Beijing. In reality, most of the Chinese international students I met in the U.S. did come from here - Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. They can board a plane, cross the ocean, and immediately meet family members welcoming them with bouquets. But I had to rush to the train station, watching the tall buildings gradually fade away outside the train window while mountains

approached close. Outside the window in the Northeast, there are tall and straight poplar trees. Seeing these gray and bare trees, that's the moment I realized that home was coming close.

Dandong is located in the southern corner of the Northeast, just a river's distance away from North Korea. My aunt's home was by this river, and at night, you could see North Korea on the opposite side, pitch dark due to power restrictions, while our side of the river was brightly lit. It is more like a sanctuary for senior Korean Chinese citizens and North defectors. It is a place of word-of-mouth anecdotes.

Due to its unique geopolitical position, Dandong is often the first stop for many North Koreans arriving in China, even though they won't be taken as refugees (Kang, 2013). Jung is the first one in her family to return to China after three generations. As a North Korean resident, she witnessed the political violence, planned economy, and North Koreans' mundane lives. These all called out my curiosity and excitement so bad. Since I am studying in the United States, I felt even more remorseful when realizing that I might be peddling people's suffering in my writing towards those who created the suffering, as oral history might potentially act as a crucial conduit by which trauma is being returned to the public domain (Rickard, 1998). Mining the memory treasures out of this barren land, would the stories be tributing the moment they are transcribed into English? I discovered her as my first narrator through my aunt, who met her at the church they both attended every week. Before meeting her, my aunt briefly introduced her background: Chinese, born and raised in North Korea, just like all the ethnic Chinese settled down there, Jung's ancestors left their home in Shandong because of severe famine. After the

deteriorating political and economic conditions in North Korea, Jung decided to return to China and engage in small-scale trade between China and North Korea using her status advantages (North Korean residents with Chinese citizenship). By chance, she was brought to the church by a friend and soon became a Christian. Although she had seen churches in North Korea, the general public was not allowed to attend religious practices. She mentioned that these churches were only for show to foreign officials visiting North Korea. Therefore, after becoming a Christian, Jung decided to leave North Korea and settle down in China.

Jung has a quiet and somewhat shy personality. When asked about her childhood memories and past, she often just smiles and says those were the days of hardship for the poor, not something worthy of talking about. When I politely asked if she could share some details with me, she chose to evade. This made me feel a bit uneasy: she is only my first narrator, are my questions too acerbic, or is there an issue with my questioning? What should I do with the upcoming interviews? However, as my conversation with her developed deeper, Jung shared so many anecdotes about life in North Korea. When discussing sensitive topics, she still lowered her voice and carefully avoided using risky words. Even that was in a living room far away in China. She grew up in that isolated land, and that incorporeal high pressure there still followed her across the river. This trauma was carried as a legacy after leaving the experiences, which turned out to be shared among North Korean immigrants (Clifton R., Yoo, Lieblich, Hansen, 2018).

Transcript

Keren: Do you know any North Koreans in China?

Jung: people I know are mainly Chinese immigrants or Korean Chinese. I don't have much contact with North Koreans generally speaking. I gotta be careful cause I still have family members there. If I said something inappropriate here, it might have a negative impact on them. A North Korean did, intentionally trying to fish for information from me.

Keren: Oh my god.

Jung: Yeah. I said I believed in God. Some North Koreans know about this, that I go to the church. I don't care what they think of me. I just answer carefully if they ask. I'm still a Chinese citizen even if I was born and raised there. They couldn't stop me from believing in God. They asked me if I spread the faith to North Koreans when I went back to the North. They know that I'm single. It was like, five years ago. And they asked me what I did when I went to the church. I don't think I've said anything negative about North Korea. Anyway I just keep my distance from them these years.

Do you know the North Korean restaurants here in China? The young ladies work as waitresses, they are all spies. They treat you, so attentively to get words out of you.

Keren: How...?

Jung: Like if North Koreans come, or South Koreans, they were born and educated in North Korea right? The waitress would wanna see if they get degenerated or corrupted in China if their beliefs turned unfaithful. Or the waitress might try to set them up to say something bad about North Korea. Or South Koreans, they may get baited in as well. I

heard a North Korean spy caught a couple of South Koreans. And I knew someone, whose brother-in-law got caught here. North Koreans caught the person because he was a preacher who helped North escapees settle down safely and helped them escape to South Korea⁴. He was killed by North Korean spies. The preacher did so many good things but got killed. Dandong is a small city but it could totally be a mess. There are Korean Chinese, Chinese immigrants (from North Korea), South Koreans, North Koreans... You gotta be careful. Cause Dandong is so close to North Korea. No matter if it's for your personal safety or your family's.

Keren: I heard that South Koreans in their 40s or 50s were all told at school when they were little, that North Korean spies were killing people randomly in their country. And they were all afraid of North Koreans at that age.

Jung: We were educated this way as well. Our teachers would tell us that South Koreans all live in hell. And they don't have food to eat; they could just search through the garbage for food. We called them South Choson. Even though I went to a school for Chinese kids, we still learned that. We thought they were all living a tough and poor life, that we should be grateful and, feel fortunate to live in North Korea. It turns out that was all nonsense.

Keren: Is there anything that North Koreans like about South Korea?

⁴ As China refuses to admit the refugee status of North Korean escapees, there're no asylum or government-established protective center for North Koreans in China. Therefore most of the North Koreans have to contact illegal brokers or voluntary Korean Chinese preachers to help them proceed to South Korea or other countries (García, 2019). Meanwhile, the brokers also created severe human trafficking and other exploitations toward North Koreans, especially women (Lankov, 2004).

Jung: Sure. They like products from South Korea. But you cannot tell anyone about that preference. Imported products you can find in North Korea are basically from China. South Korean products are hard to find. You gotta find those in the black market. They know for sure that stuff from South Korea is way better than those... "made in China" stuff. They particularly like rice cookers from South Korea. Do you know Cuckoo (a famous South Korean brand manufacturing rice cookers)? North Korean people just, love it. And they know the rice cookers make sounds like "koo koo" when the rice's ready. They love South Korean appliances.

The South and North are still, against each other right. Even products from Japan are better than those from South Korea. They know, that "made in China" is not as good as others. But no other countries are providing, or exporting things to North Korea.

Keren: How about American stuff?

Jung: That's more than a no-no (laughs). We barely got anything but Chinese products. You cannot talk about opinions about America... even the bad ones. If you said it and someone reported it, you'll be treated as a traitor, a betrayer. Don't think about it, talking about America or South Korea.

Keren: What's gonna happen if people get caught (talking about South Korea or America)?

Jung: People who got reported would be arrested and put in jail. And they'll get fined. If the circumstances are very severe, they may get the death penalty. Their family would be exiled in the mountains.

Keren: To what extent would it be considered severe?

Jung: if you said something against the country, or you said something good about South Korea or America. Cause you live here, you live in North Korea. Then you should only believe in the Kim family. You shouldn't get any, unnecessary, rebellious thoughts. That's serious. If you live in North Korea you really gotta be careful. So people just don't talk about politics. They only talk about things like, romantic relationships or daily life stuff. Those are fine. Sensitive topics should just be kept to yourselves, even kept from your closest family members or friends.

Outro: Little Ants in Oral History

I started the field tripping after the first-year oral history training at OHMA, Columbia. After almost a 2-year-diving in oral history, I found massive, layered introspection re hearing my conversations with those venerable, munificent individuals. Doing family migration history often comes with extra self-consistency meanwhile mission and responsibilities, doubtlessly. Elaborating me and my people's own stories in this project, as a toddler in oral history, rendered more obligation and timidity during the field tripping. I felt born to tell this, and born to tell this right.

The dinner table in the home kitchen could be such a common place for family history accounting to happen. It's a space of warmth, sureness, consanguinity, inner peace and repletion. People share food and emotions there, within their familiar mouth-watering aroma. My dad poured me my first drink when I was 16. He started to talk about how we ended up settling in this southern city of mainland China as diasporans of the Korean War. This turned out to be my first exposure to oral history and family migration history. And the conversation soothed some of the crumpled parts in me, the parts that felt as if they belonged somewhere else.

I landed at OHMA to be trained, to be capable of preserving the invisible legacy from my family and my people. For most North Korean immigrants, the forced migration story was a closed book, never to be mentioned. Sometimes, they chose not to see themselves because their accounts of life after forced migration situate them as diasporans and

exiled. But those winter gales and bombers imprinted in us, leaving us all as individuals bearing witness and pain that never faded away.

My first hearing started at a church. Unlike all the churches I've ever seen in the United States, the church in Dandong was nothing Western; there was just an unassuming cross embedded onto the top of a regular, dated Chinese building. I felt somewhat guilty the first time, realizing I was filtering the church with a presumed, exotic image before I was there. Maybe imagination comes from the expectations and curiosities of the religious world I've never encountered. The process of disenchantment, self-abashing, and un-abashing permeates the whole re-entry into the conversations. The emotional transference of fear, sorrow, and pain occupied most of my imagination toward life as a North Korean resident, which impacted the whole listening to a large extent in the climate of reflexive sensitivity (Roper, 2023). After so much reading and training disciplining me to be objective, I'm still expecting one or two testimonies as a victim from my narrator. In an Western context, the emblematic topics of North Korean culture could be political persecution or a destitute, frugal secular life. I'm dragged into this force of the field, where there are interweaved external manifestations and internal monologues, where there are countless myths and fixed ideas people have about North Korea, and where I should be working hard to represent as an insider. The gravity of the mainstream world still grabs me.

As of now the narratives are still calling me. I am unsure at what point oral historians would feel like "it's all done." Finishing the editing or transcribing is definitely not the end, neither is when we get a bouquet from beloved ones celebrating our project

exhibition or thesis submission. All the conversations, silences, and emotions still call me, mulling them over and over again, leaving me feeling like the ending point is never close. That's how this re-entry essay came to my mind: I'm no longer the person in that space ever again. The discourse clotted in that day, in the apartment filled with the aroma of Korean tea. That snippet of time gradually drifted away when I clicked on the stop button of recording. What I carried with me was the specter of that space. What I attempt to retrieve now is reentering into the relics to delve into the traces we left over.

I tried to open up all the interviews with a childhood memory question. This is a prequel filled with my assumption: I was somehow suggesting people all feel nostalgic and talkative when asked about their childhood memories. As Alexievich believed that the quotidian ordinariness of these testimonies makes them such unique human documents (Alexievich, 2005). Most of us tried to ask people's life history and early memories as the opening questions when we first performed as an oral history practitioner. But talking to a North Korean resident is nothing like a peer interview. We were told to be professional and facilitative whether we were being questioned or questioned. We are the people paying tuition to learn how to make others communicative and relaxed. Nonetheless, narrators are never obligated to do so. No one should ever feel responsible for talking about their privacy to a microphone or a camera, especially when a large part of the stories will inevitably be painful and unspeakable for years. Hearing her feeling embarrassed and avoidant when asked about her childhood memory humiliated me when I re-entered the audio recording for the first time to transcribe. I surely felt bad embarrassing people (and with my discomforting radio voice) and started

to feel anxious being an “ignorant” interviewer - what should I do if I mentioned something people feel uncomfortable talking about?

This oral history collection is probably what an American tabloid reporter would be expecting: it satisfies all the imagination where people are patronizingly showing their compassion to this dictatorial Asian country. But this snippet touched me for its non-hatred. We were talking about it like a jest or anecdote. Some of the folks from the class thought it was disassociation - that she must be telling this in a flat tone to protect herself from being traumatized. But does it originally have to be a tearful testimony? I found myself unconsciously exploiting my narrators’ agency of identifying themselves as traumatized by solely naming their emotions with the idea of “collective numbing and indifference.” Expecting and imposing the trauma onto the witness and layering or structuring them with my laptop could be inherently arrogance. After all the process of building and deconstructing my feelings during and after the conversations, what only remained in me was gratefulness and respect. For Jung the afternoon was more an intergenerational talk than a painful confession. I was brought there by her Christian sister. The ambiance made her the one accounting the stories of our common forebears. She’s passing it down the pervasive legacy to me, and passing down the unspoken obligation of remembering.

And then 2 more summers passed through me. I took a miserable leave from school and felt myself stuck in a stagnant bubble where everyone was moving forward. All the suffering during the leave made my life back on campus incredibly refreshing and healing. That is the time I found echoes and feelings in human encounters, could be such

a sparkling symbol of vitality. I found so much glee in me discerning those lively, lovely timidity and awkwardness re-visiting the conversations with my narrators. And that was the point I reconciled with my ignorance of those narrators. We are all the compound of what we perceived and experienced in our previous life. What's built in me forms the way of my questioning. People are performing their reality.

The intention of the oral history project, from the very bottom of my heart, is never about an Asian student from the States holding a newly-purchased Zoom recorder enthusiastically flying across the continent to try to validate some confidential scandals or to verify if people in North Korea are risking their lives to sneak into another country just to live a mundane life without tyranny. I felt it would be a betrayal if the project turned out to be an establishment of suffering, the suffering of my people. Before I knocked on the door of the narrator, what I had with me was just pure curiosity and sincerity for people who shared the same context with me, for those who lived through the bombing, and for those who climbed out of the shell hole. Just like two ants gently greet and sniff with their tentacles when they run into each other. We take, and we understand each other through inhaling and exhaling, from moves and dormancy. We co-create the intimacy where we cry out, are heard out, and engender structures of feelings. And for the narrator, they had to leave the embodied story of the teller and return to his or her own life story (Clark, 2005).

During all these interviews or small conversations I've conducted, I came up with so many questions. All those people sat across the table and eloquently shared their memories and sentiments with me. But many of those questions were not answered directly, but were generously replied. In all those blanks filled with silent awkwardness, embarrassment, distress, and sentiment, many things were like empty conches that washed onto the shore for the first time. Maybe that was when we came to realize that all those questions cannot be answered. The answers were sealed tight in the past; only people alive went off the boat that drifted them away from home. They left their memories like conches on the seashore. May this article become a little windchime, crafted by a lucky beachcomber from the conches gathered.

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Once, while hanging out with Kyunghee, my “Korean Korean” friend from OHMA, I told her that sometimes I felt kind of regret that I wasn’t born in Korea as they were. And

she told me that only the truly courageous people could choose to leave their homeland for somewhere far and strange in that chaotic past. She playfully said that she and other Korean people who stayed were the descendants of the cowardly. Thank you, Kyunghiee, for being the first Korean to make me feel proud of who I am.

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