

Taewoo Kim. *Naengjön-üi manyödül: han'guk chönjaeng-gwa yösöngjuüi p'yöngghwaundong*
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The Cold War and “Witches”: An Awkward Coexistence

When Koreans hear the phrase “Cold War,” they think of the Korean War. Of course, the Korean War is very different from the Cold War, which refers to the “war without gunfire,” but we Koreans still end up thinking these two in concord despite their dissonance. It is not only because the Korean War and the Cold War are inseparable events in world history but also because, particularly from the Korean people’s point of view, the Cold War was embodied in the post-liberation period and the Korean War.

During this period, men were at the center of almost every event and story, while women were relegated to the role of “victims” or “tools” of war. This reviewer had never imagined encountering the word “witch” in the context of the Cold War, let alone the Korean War. Perhaps that’s why I felt a new sense of curiosity when I saw the title of this book, *Naengjŏn-ŭi manyŏdŭl: han’guk chŏnjaeng-gwa yŏsŏngjuŭi p’yŏnghwaundong* [Witches of the Cold War: The Korean War and feminist peace movement].

When we hear the word “witch,” we usually think of a woman or a group of women who use mysterious magic to get what they want. Historically, however, the “witches” we are most familiar with are not those who use magic, but those who were victims of witch trials that ended with them being tortured to death or burned at the stake. What kind of witches is the book *Witches of the Cold War* talking about in modern times?

While the witch trials are often thought of as the product of religious madness, there is a strong argument to be made that they were not the result of such madness, but rather an organized campaign carried out by the intellectuals of the time—religious figures, politicians, and lawyers. Of course, whether it was religious madness or an organized campaign, the important thing is that the witches who were tried and executed were not really “witches.”

In fact, the women who were labeled witches were often lower-class women, wealthy widows, or those who

expressed opposition to those in power. Indeed, the more witch trials were used as a tool for maintaining power and as a distraction, the more they became “witch hunts” rather than real trials of alleged witches. *Witches of the Cold War* tells the story of “witches who were not witches” who were tried and eliminated in this way. The book focuses on a group of women who went to North Korea in 1951—then the site of a terrible clash between capitalist and socialist ideologies—and tried to spread the truth about what was going on there. Ultimately, however, they became the target of a “witch hunt.”

Who Were the “Witches”?

Witches of the Cold War tells the story of 21 women from the Women’s International Democratic Federation who traveled to North Korea in 1951 on a research project. By following their activities and examining the context in which they worked, the book gradually reveals that the 21 women were “witches” forced to face witch hunts and trials during this period of the Cold War. The first emotion that I experienced was a sense of unfamiliarity with how the book was written.

Like its title, the book is written in a unique format, though it is not so much that the format is new; rather, I found that I wasn’t used to having a book on this type of subject written in this way. Rather than having the cut and dry sentences of a report, the book reads more like a novel, as if trying to convey as much as possible the emotions of the 21 women. The author of the book states that he wanted to write the book with a “literary” quality. Of course, the author also reveals that all the dialogues in the book are based on historical sources, and it was a nice feeling to read what seems to be a fictionalized version of a true story.

However, I felt a sense of pain while reading the book and after putting it down. The author describes the conditions of the Korean War based on the reports written by 21 women after their field research, as well as later published articles and memoirs. The reader is confronted with a brutal portrayal of the war that is nauseating. Researchers or those who are

frequently exposed to war and state-sponsored violence may not bat an eye at this account of the horrific atrocities of war, but most readers will find it upsetting.

The fact that these stories are often told from the perspective of one of the 21 women, Monica Felton, is a distinctive feature of the *Witches of the Cold War*. The author focuses on Felton because her research has been published by scholars abroad; second, because she suffered tremendous personal hardship after her fieldwork in North Korea; and third, because, despite the hardships she faced, she never changed her mind about her Korean War research.

Of course, many of the 21 women share these characteristics. So, one might wonder why Felton is the main character of the story. However, when one considers that Felton had no experience in the women's or peace movements prior to her investigative work—and that she was a prominent female leader in the ruling British party at the time—one has to give the author kudos for his choice in selecting her.

In the United Kingdom, Monica Felton chaired the Supply Committee during World War II, worked for the Ministry of War in the provision of wartime civilian supplies, and later served on the Housing and Public Health Committee of the London City Council. In 1951, during her fieldwork in North Korea, she played a key role in the establishment of the New Towns, one of the most important aspects of post-war national reconstruction in the United Kingdom. Of particular interest, she was a governor of the Stevenage Development Corporation, which was responsible for the first New Town development in Britain.

From another point of view, the author chose to draw heavily on one of Monica Felton's published works, *That's Why I Went*. But perhaps the most important reason is that Felton's personal story is a stark reminder that any public figure, even one in a position of importance or "patriotism," can at a moment's notice become the victim of a "witch hunt" and transformed into a national traitor punishable by "death."

The World and the Korean War as Viewed by the “Witches”

The book focuses on Monica Felton’s life story and also draws on the lives of the other 20 women. The first three chapters, “Facing the Backlash,” “Listening Hard,” and “From Prague to Sinuiju,” focus on exposing the existence of the witch hunts. In fact, the witch hunt recounted in the *Witches of the Cold War* was also a witch trial against the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF). There was a lot of anti-communism sentiment in the Western world at that time and the WIDF was accused of being a pro-communist organization. This happened even before the women’s fieldwork in North Korea, and the fact that the accusations were even stronger after the investigation suggests that the organization was facing a witch trial.

Was this all because of Felton’s life or a distorted view of the organization? The author shows in Chapter 3 that the organization cannot be called a pro-communist organization in many respects, especially considering the time period in which it was founded and its activities. Based on this observation, the author goes on to show that none of the 21 women who participated in fieldwork in North Korea could be called “witches” and subjected to witch trials. Here, *Witches of the Cold War* lives up to its title.

Chapter 4, “Children in the Basement,” Chapter 5, “The Scorched People,” and Chapter 6, “On the Mountain of Mass Graves,” focus on the horrors of North Korea during the Korean War. At the heart of Monica Felton’s account are her notes and the WIDF’s field research report. In particular, the many interviews in the report convey the suffering of the people who lived through the war. The way the 21 researchers empathize with this pain and change can be contrasted with our modern-day cynical approach to past events.

Felton’s trip to North Korea was prompted by the then-ruling Labor Party in Britain backtracking on expanding social security. Britain’s acceptance of U.S. Marshall Aid and the massive increase in defense spending due to the Korean War had led to a retreat from social security expansion. This

was, in Felton's view, a "step backwards," and she accepted the position of commissioner to find out what the debate over defense spending was really about on the ground.

Not all of the commissioners shared Felton's views. Among the 21 commissioners were several from Communist countries and a significant number who were members of the Communist Party or at least held social democratic views. In fact, there were few who shared Felton's views and many who wanted to hold the UN forces and the United States accountable for what they saw in Korea. As a result, there were disagreements and conflicts among the commissioners from their first meeting. These conflicts were sometimes resolved by a consensus to "depoliticize as much as possible the investigative process and the gathering of testimony."

By the end of the investigation, however, the investigators could no longer keep politics out of the discussion. Investigators from different political backgrounds wanted to be able to coexist, either by ignoring or accepting the views of others. However, the accumulation of evidence showing the full extent of the war's damage inevitably led to the raising of pacifist and feminist concerns.

Chapter 7, "In My Name," and Chapter 8, "Repressed Perspectives," illustrate the problems the investigators faced in translating their concerns and perceptions of reality into a report. They also reveal, through concrete statements and examples, the victimization of women in the tragic context of war.

Does the Book Redress the Injustice Suffered by the Witches and War Victims?

One can only imagine that if Felton had read *Witches of the Cold War*, she would have found considerable comfort in its understanding of her life's twists and turns, as the book focuses on the stories of Felton and those who were accused and condemned alongside her. Indeed, one could argue that the book succeeds to some extent in peeling back the layers of injustice experienced by Felton and others and in revealing

their bravery.

But what about the women of North Korea whose stories are told by the investigators? What about the countless North Korean women who told the 21 investigators about their suffering in the horrific reality of war, where “the bodies just kept piling up”? Since Felton is the centerpiece of the book, does it end up portraying North Korean women only as “victims” of the war? Even though the book portrays North Korean women showing the world the pain of war and creating friendships between women from different countries, it seems difficult to go beyond the limitation of portraying the women as just victims of war.

Of course, while this reviewer recognizes the limitations present here, I wonder if the book should have included the stories of North Korean women so that we could see their lives in more detail. All people who lived through the war, whether men or women, did their best to survive; however, women in particular must have suffered more and made greater efforts to survive in the extraordinary circumstances of war, overlapped and intertwined with patriarchal and misogynistic social structures. And this would be reflected in the way they themselves portrayed their lives.

I don't think the investigative report prepared by the women could be improved now because the purpose and methods of research were different then. However, with the accumulation of studies on the Korean War, especially those that reproduce the voices of women who lived through it, it is regrettable that the book could not compensate for the limitations of past research and help overcome them. Perhaps we should consider this one of the tasks that *Witches of the Cold War* leaves for future scholars to build upon.

Nevertheless, *Witches of the Cold War* has the power to make us question why wars continue, why wars are brutal, and why the Korean peninsula is still in a state of tension. By unraveling the injustices suffered by the witches and making us ask questions about the war, *Witches of the Cold War* succeeds in being a powerful addition to the literature on the Korean War.