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# The War for the Inner Self: *A Review of* The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History

## The Interrogation Room as Laboratory of the Cold War

In 1953, on the eve of the armistice, a prisoner of war—Lee Myung-jun—enters an interrogation room. "Comrade, which side will you choose?" he is asked. His reply is terse: "A neutral nation." Communist officers attempt to persuade him, praising him as a "hero of the people" and insisting that even the grass and trees of his hometown would rejoice at his return. Yet his answer does not waver: "A neutral nation." This well-known scene appears in *The Square* (1960) by Choi In-hun. The novel's conclusion is equally familiar. Rejecting both South and North Korea, the young intellectual ultimately takes his own life aboard a ship bound for a neutral country. A searing portrayal of ideological skepticism and existential anguish, *The Square* has long stood as a canonical text of Korea's literature of division.

The controversy over prisoner repatriation fundamentally altered the character of the Korean War. As negotiations over the issue intensified, the armistice was delayed for approximately eighteen months, during which hundreds of thousands lost their lives. Yet much of the existing scholarship has treated the prisoner repatriation issue primarily as a propaganda maneuver exploited by the belligerents to gain diplomatic leverage.

In *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History*, Monica Kim, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, reinterprets the Korean War through the unfamiliar yet revelatory lenses of "prisoners" and "interrogation rooms." The war began in June 1950 as a military conflict that shattered the boundary of the 38th

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parallel. By early 1952, however, it had evolved into a struggle over the rights of human subjects—specifically, the right of prisoners of war to self-determination and choice. On January 2, 1952, the American delegation advanced phrases such as "the principle of freedom of choice" and "individual self-determination," framing the debate as one between "voluntary" and "forced" repatriation. The Chinese and North Korean delegations, by contrast, insisted on the immediate exchange of all prisoners in accordance with the 1949 Geneva Convention.

As Kim argues, the repatriation controversy demonstrates how the Korean War transformed from a war over geopolitical territory into a war over the human interior (p. 19). Prisoners of war (POW) became beings who compressed the relationship between the state and its people (p. 22)—living embodiments of identity politics in the Cold War order. In conventional interstate wars, prisoners return home once hostilities cease. The Korean War, however, disrupted this expectation. For both South and North Koreans, decisions made in the interrogation room were anything but straightforward.

At the Geoje Island POW camp, for example, North Korean prisoners, Chinese prisoners, and civilians were further divided into pro- and anti-communist factions. Among the North Korean prisoners were South Korean youths forcibly conscripted into the People's Army; among the Chinese prisoners were many who refused repatriation to the mainland.[1] As armistice talks stalled, violence erupted daily within the camp. Brigadier General Francis Dodd, the camp's commandant, was eventually taken hostage by prisoners. The repatriation issue soon gradually attracted global attention, drawing in the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and neutral nations such as India, Mexico, and Brazil. The "interrogation room"—an exceptional, tightly controlled space—thus emerged as a central site of diplomatic struggle and ideological contestation at the intersection of the Cold War and decolonization.

[1] In the case of Chinese prisoners, the number those refusing repatriation was in fact greater than those opting to return. As a result of their individual choices, 6,670 Chinese POWs chose repatriation, while 14,692 refused repatriation and chose relocation to Taiwan. Among those who selected Taiwan were numerous Kuomintang officers as well as members of the educated intellectual class. Mao Zedong, angered that more than two-thirds of the Chinese POWs had chosen Taiwan and further provoked by Syngman Rhee's unilateral release of anti-communist prisoners, launched a large-scale military offensive shortly before the signing of the armistice agreement. The stated aim of this offensive was to inflict upon South Korea casualties equivalent to the number of prisoners who had refused repatriation. Meanwhile, the internal conflicts among Chinese prisoners within the Geoje Island POW camp are vividly portrayed in *War Trash* (2008), a novel by Ha Chin, a Chinese-born writer who later emigrated to the United States.

## Ordinary People Who Defied Classification

Part 1 of Kim's book examines the colonial legacy that shaped Korean subjectivity from the Japanese colonial period through the Korean War, as well as American counterintelligence operations and racialized perceptions of Asians, reflected in slurs such as "gooks." The Korean War was a civil war that unfolded after decades of colonial rule and trusteeship. Japan had deemed Korea unfit for sovereignty and annexed it; American attitudes during the post-liberation trusteeship differed little. Koreans were widely viewed as incapable of autonomous political judgment and therefore in need of supervision by external powers.

Yet the peninsula after liberation was vibrant with aspirations for self-rule. Anti-trusteeship demonstrations erupted daily across the country. Even before the outbreak of war, the U.S. military government had organized counterintelligence units to root out members of the South Korean Workers' Party and closely monitored the press and educational institutions. In this sense, an intense intelligence war was already underway prior to the outbreak of open hostilities.

**Figure 1**. Photographs of the Geoje POW camp during the Korean War, first released by Geoje City Hall. A detainee with both hands raised is being searched for weapons, while a military policeman seated on the left completes a "POW registration card" (Source: Geoje City Hall).

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Even after the war began, American forces often classified prisoners simply as "communists." Yet Korean identities were far more complex. Koreans had to navigate survival through the Japanese colonial period, trusteeship, division, and war. An ordinary Korean might become a spy by circumstance, or serve in either the People's Army or the Republic of Korea Army.

The case of Seoul National University student Oh Se-hŭi, introduced at the beginning of the book, is emblematic. Traveling home during the war, he carried four different documents: his student ID, a notebook listing the registered names of his students, a leaflet dropped by UN reconnaissance planes, and a "patriot certificate" issued by the People's Army—prepared for whichever authority he might encounter. When he eventually met ROK forces, none of these documents protected him. He was sent to the Geoje Island POW camp.

The camp's population defied simple categorization: civilians forcibly conscripted into the People's Army; former ROK soldiers captured by the People's Army and later recaptured by U.S. forces; ROK soldiers misidentified as enemy troops due to dialect differences; refugees swept into prisoner columns; and civilians arrested on suspicion of espionage. These were individuals who could not be neatly labeled as "the enemy."

Through Oh Se-hŭi's story and the broader landscape of the camp, Kim argues that to grasp the essence of the Korean War, one must enter the "interrogation room" rather than remain on the battlefield. As she writes, "the people who are navigating global geopolitics within the calculus between life and death are ordinary people" (p. 416). These "ordinary people" include not only Koreans but also Japanese and Japanese Americans. Japanese Americans classified as "enemy nationals" during World War II and detained in camps in the United States were later drafted during the Korean War and mobilized as prisoner interrogators. These Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans)—who had spent their adolescence in camps—now assumed the role of interrogators in Korean camps. Some prisoners, upon learning that their interrogators were Japanese, reacted with fierce hostility and refused to give statements. Such scenes compress the layered

tragedies of colonial rule and war into a single, ironic tableau.

## Four Camps, Four Political Theaters

If Part I centers on "people" of ambiguous identity, Part II turns to four distinct camp sites as political theaters.

The first is the Geoje Island POW camp. Kim reconstructs the kidnapping of Brigadier General Dodd almost hour by hour, delving into the inner lives of the People's Army prisoners. By tracing their conversations, movements, and negotiations, she shows that the kidnapping was intended to secure international recognition of their system's legitimacy.[2]

The second category encompasses POW camps throughout South Korea that primarily held anticommunist prisoners from the South. These prisoners struggled to have their identities recognized—writing petitions in blood pledging to return to the front lines or tattooing their bodies. They benefited from President Syngman Rhee's unilateral release of anticommunist prisoners shortly before the armistice. Kim raises a provocative question: how did their struggle for recognition shape the formation of the anticommunist collective consciousness in postwar South Korea?[3]

The third site is the camp near Panmunjom, established at India's suggestion. There, prisoners were granted the right to choose repatriation, refuse repatriation, or relocate to a third country. Kim traces the trajectories of those who rejected both Koreas, stayed temporarily in India, and later moved to Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and elsewhere. Seventy-six Korean prisoners—whether from ROK or North Korean forces—opted for neutral nations rather than return to either South or North. They served as historical models for Choi In-hun's novel. Kim portrays them as autonomous individuals who despaired over their newly liberated homeland remaining under American or Soviet influence, and who consequently sought to forge alternative futures on their own terms.

The fourth is the camp where UN forces, including American soldiers, were held. While most American POWs chose repatriation, twenty-one opted to relocate to China. The

[2] The prisoners who abducted Brigadier General Dodd presented two principal demands: "recognition of a People's Army and Chinese Army prisoner delegation" and "the provision of 1,000 sheets of writing paper." These comparatively modest demands, seemingly disproportionate to the dramatic act of kidnapping a camp commandant, underscore the depth of their desperation for official recognition of their political identity.

[3] In this work, the author implicitly suggests that the fundamental mentality of the Korean far right—one that persists to the present—was consolidated during the struggle for recognition that unfolded in the context of the Korean War.

U.S. government characterized them as psychologically "weak" and sought to neutralize the political implications of their decision (p. 355). Their choice was attributed to communist "brainwashing," a concept that unsettled American military authorities who regarded such susceptibility as incompatible with the moral clarity of a "just war." Even returning POWs were subjected to investigation under the suspicion that they, too, might have been compromised. Kim further examines racial discrimination within American POW camps, where soldiers formed quasi–"KKK"-like circles and systematically abused fellow prisoners accused of yielding to Chinese influence. The victims were disproportionately working-class soldiers, including Black, Filipino, and Puerto Rican troops.

## Omitted Truths and Voices

Viewing the Korean War through the lens of the "interrogation room" reveals complex subjects who were never fully subordinated to Cold War binaries. States weaponized the prisoner issue to challenge each other's legitimacy. If prisoners refused repatriation, the moral authority of their home state was undermined; by portraying the opposing state as coercively mobilizing unwilling soldiers, one could strike at its war-fighting capability. Few conflicts illustrate so starkly how prisoners became instruments of political strategy and governance. Beneath these strategies lay unrecorded individual truths.

The book's subtitle, "Untold History," is particularly apt. True to its title, the book reconstructs prisoners' experiences, the multiple layers of interrogation they endured, and the fraught conflicts over repatriation—stories largely absent from battle-centered narratives of the war. Kim draws on rare and revealing sources: interrogation records from the Geoje Island POW camp, prisoner identification photographs, and U.S. counterintelligence reports on American POWs repatriated after captivity in Chinese and North Korean camps. By assembling a wide range of stories seldom visible in official archives or conventional accounts, the author

demonstrates the inadequacy of interpreting the Korean War solely through Cold War dichotomies.

In Kim's portrayal, the interrogation room was not a battlefield with clearly demarcated front lines but rather an inner battlefield. It functioned as a grand theatrical stage upon which prisoners were repeatedly confronted with the question: "What are you?" The seemingly simple query—"Which side do you support?" or "Which country will you belong to?"—was also a rhetorical device embedded in American Cold War governance. By framing anticommunist prisoners' choices as expressions of "freedom," the United States sought to construct a new discourse of sovereignty. The moral binary of capitalism versus communism was rehearsed repeatedly within the confines of the interrogation room.

The landscapes Kim excavates continues to resonate. "Who are you, and where do you want to go?" Since 1945, Korean society has rarely been able to answer this question on its own terms. The interrogation room thus becomes a powerful metaphor for modern Korean history—a space where identity is demanded and enforced. One enduring dimension of the Korean War was the violence of a collective imagination fixated on national security, compelling ordinary people to conform to rigid identities. The "untold history" Kim brings to light shows what tragedies unfold when the capacity to imagine the other collapses. When inclusive thinking about ethnicity, ideology, race, and nation erodes, anyone may become complicit in exclusion or violence. In this sense, the book offers not only a historical reconstruction but also a warning about a contemporary "crisis of political imagination" (p. 41), at a moment when voices of discrimination and exclusion are again on the rise.

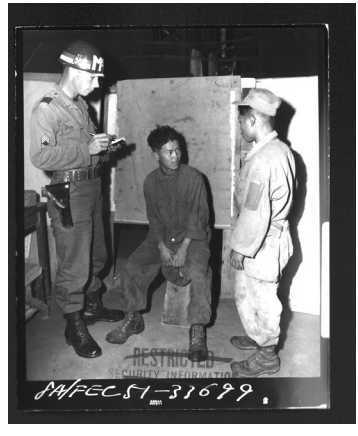


**Figure 2.** On September 18, 1951, soldiers of the U.S. 57th Military Police Company interrogate a prisoner from the People's Army with the assistance of an interpreter (Source: Geoje City Hall).

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