

A young company employee described his experience in the army in a very concise way:

“I got beat up like hell, and later I beat the hell out; I tattooed the principles of hierarchical society into my marrow. Now I know how to do what is told, and how to tell what to do.”

In other words, he accepted the authoritative regime powered by violence, and became completely insensitive to coercive obedience and physical cruelty.¹

– Park No Jah, *Your Korea 01*

The purpose of military experience in Korea is quite unlike that in other countries. Not only is the military duty mandatory to every male, but it plays a central role in defining what is meant for one to be a Korean. Geographically surrounded by China and Japan, the Korean peninsula has made an extraordinary feat of developing and preserving its unique society, but at the cost of constantly fighting off the attacks from its neighbors. As a consequence, the tendency to welcome any form of power that would reinforce national dignity is prevalent in even today’s society. Though the official reason for the conscription is to be on alert against an invasion from North Korea, everyone knows that another primary function of the army is to mold each person into an obedient, controllable being who is comfortable with the notion of violence. Indeed, the entire country is unified with this common experience, and anyone who does not share it is mercilessly punished, from interpersonal relation to career.

For two years, a male Korean goes through an unbelievably primitive environment in which force, not reason, dictates what is right. Unlike in the United States, in which the main goal of training is to set soldiers ready for a battle, the draftees in Korea must first learn how to “fit” themselves into the micro-society in the camp – a natural setup to change one’s mentality from top to bottom. I have heard first-hand from people various accounts that illustrate how the system works. One had to clean up human excrement with a spoon; another had to run five miles to a village to bring back ice – unmelted – to his officer. This physical and emotional cruelty received from superiors in the early days will be imparted to inferiors later, continuing the vicious cycle.

A young secretary I met while I was working as an intern at the National Assembly told me a story that illuminates this aspect particularly well. After he had

¹ I have translated the quotes used in this paper to Korean myself – to the best of my effort to preserve the original meaning.

become a superior, he was bored one day. There was a rookie who entered his camp a few days ago. He secretly ordered everyone to leave the room to let him be with this rookie alone. He hid himself in a box, on which he punctured two holes so that he could observe the rookie. For the next twenty minutes or so, the rookie, uneasy and totally unaware of the secretary’s presence, stood in the room uncomfortably. But he started to relax, and finally lied on the floor. At that point, the secretary burst out of the box to chastise the rookie, who was shocked to the point of serious harm. The secretary further confessed to me that the army life starts out as a hellhole, but ends as a heaven. He predicted ominously that the conscription will not vanish even after the Korean peninsula is reunited, because it so fundamentally constructs the foundation of the society.

This military system is hard to criticize from the viewpoint of a Korean, since such a criticism may be dismissed as nothing but a selfish excuse to avoid the physical hardship at the expense of national security. However, there is a person who is in an ideal position to critically evaluate the system. Park No Jah, formerly named Vladimir Tihonov, is an immigrant from Russia during the end of the Soviet regime.² He was born in St. Petersburg and studied East Asia at Saint Petersburg State University. Deeply touched by the beauty of Korean literature and disillusioned by the Soviet government, Park decided to study abroad in Korea. He eventually married a Korean woman, obtained Korean citizenship, and converted his name to that of a preeminent scholar in Asia whom he admires, Lao Tzu – pronounced in Korean as No Jah. For over ten years of stay until moving to Norway to teach at Oslo University College, he wrote numerous books that analyze the contemporary society in Korea. His perceptive observations drew many people against him, yet his love for the country can be felt even within his criticism, which makes it so painful to read. Park’s unbiased and truthful report on the violence- and power-centered structure of modern Korea has opened the eyes of countless people on the issue of nonviolence – which is a rather exotic concept in Korea.

Park’s signature is a series called *Your Korea*, which is divided into two books. With supreme writing skill in Korean language, Park explains how the democratic country he had hoped to be different from the oppressive Soviet regime turned out to be even more permissive of the use of violence. As soon as he set his foot in Korea

² As in the convention in East Asia, the last name is written before the first name.

University, he realizes the first question to ask any male in introduction is “Have you gone to the army?” Confused by this phenomenon, he decides to delve into the topic. From the conversation with his friends, Park hears about how one was daily beat up in the bathroom, how one got tied to a tank by the feet and tortured, and how one lost a few front teeth for doing a poor job of cleaning his gun. He also witnesses how this military duty is regarded as “sacred” by the society; absolute obedience and loyalty to the country is expected for and augmented by the duty.

The mindset for critical thinking about the society, which is considered an obvious right in European nations and even some parts of Russia, is impossible for a Korean to have unless he utterly and completely belongs to the group labeled “rebellions” against the government.ⁱ

After he attains tenure at a college in Korea, he observes the negative impact of military experience in his students who come back after two years of training. Due to continuous dialogue on gender discrimination and sexual harassment, which is almost obligatory among soldiers, they lose the purity of love and hardly view relation with women anything more than “mating.” He also sees the beating experience in the army promotes violence on family members in the future. Once one learns to regularly beat the rookies, the mentality that it is not only permissible but justified to exercise unlimited amount of violence onto the weak and the low is deeply ingrained in his brain, and consequently it is infeasible for him to treat his wife and children (the weak and the low) with respect. Finally, Park explains how military experience fatally destroys the learning ability of his students. After returning to college, they suffer psychological and emotional trauma from the beating, and try to minimize their contact with professors whom they equalize with superiors in the army.

Park suggests a number of ways to extricate the Korean society from the evil of what he calls the “army culture.” First of all, the beating in the military must be strictly forbidden. The degree and frequency of beating are reported to be decreasing, yet it remains essentially unchanged as a primary tool to manipulate people’s mindset and is thus largely condoned. Unless the government imposes a severe restriction on the use of physical violence, the current state in which people are bodily abused will stay as an inevitable stage of life. Privacy and basic rights regarding human dignity need to be

better recognized. Instead of the traditional camp called *Nae Moo Ban* in which thirty people sleep together on the floor in one room, there should be a smaller, dormitory-structured system in which two or three people share a room.ⁱⁱ In addition, there must be a way for a person to replace the military duty with some nonviolent service. Right now, conscientious objection is not accepted, and a healthy male with able body is put to jail as a “criminal” if he refuses to enter the army for whatever reason. As a result, only a few privileged children of powerful politicians or wealthy family succeed in escaping this fate. Ironically enough, this kind of unfair procedure itself is widely looked over by the society because the hierarchical mentality injected by the military states the actions of the people of higher status must not be questioned. Park stresses liberation from this army culture should be one of the central goals of general human rights movement in Korea.

Park No Jah’s work in revealing the injustice of the society that values violence over the ideals is tremendously influential for three reasons. First, it is written very logically and reflects the reality of the society astoundingly well, leaving little room for objections. Second, his attachment to the country which can be felt in his writing assures readers that he genuinely hopes to enhance, not harm, Korea as a nation. Third, the fact he is not a native Korean (which is an extremely rare case in Korea) takes away the prejudice of people who might think it is always easy and pointless to criticize one’s own country. In addition to the army culture, he has written much about other human rights issues that infest the contemporary Korean society, including foreign workers from South Asia and refugees from North Korea (both groups are treated like dirt). Indeed, his books have broached the issues to the public that might not have been considered otherwise, and woken up the power-hungry society with no room for luxury such as nonviolence to see the meaning and need for alternative directions.

ⁱ Park, No jah, *Your Korea 01*, Hangyoreh publishing co. (2001), p. 104.

ⁱⁱ Park, No jah, *Your Korea 02*, Hangyoreh publishing co. (2001), p. 122.