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Language and Family Dispersion: North Korean Linguist Kim Su-gyŏng and the Korean War

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Abstract

This article analyzes the unpublished memoir of Kim Su-gyŏng (1918–2000), a linguist who was active in North Korea from the mid-1940s until the late 1960s, and situates his account of his experience of the Korean War within the context of his linguistic essays and correspondence. In doing so, the article considers the role that the personal and the social play in language, utilizing Saussure’s theoretical framework, with which Kim himself was well versed. Kim wrote his memoirs in the 1990s to his family, from whom he had become separated during the Korean War and who now lived in Toronto. In this text, he writes in “personal” language that reveals his uncertainty and his feelings for his family, but then immediately negates these feelings through the use of “social” language, which resonates with his interpretation of the linguistic thesis that Josef Stalin developed during the Korean War on language and national identity. For Kim, the relationship between language and nation was not at all self-evident, but something that he idealized in response to the dispersal of his family. By offering a reflexive reading of a memoir written by a North Korean linguist, this article makes a breakthrough in the investigation of North Korean wartime academic history, which has not risen above the level of analyzing articles in the field of linguistics that were published at the time.

Keywords: North Korea, linguistics, family dispersion, Korean War, Kim Su-gyŏng, Ferdinand de Saussure, Josef Stalin

Reading a Linguist’s Text Reflexively

This article examines the memoir written by a North Korean man of his experience during the Korean War (1950–1953). On the book’s cover are three titles, each written in *han’gŭl* characters.

These titles read, from top to bottom, “7,000 *Li* across North and South Following the Party Devotedly,”¹ “Opening the Notebook in my Knapsack,” and “An Intellectual’s Memoir of Participating in the Fatherland’s War of Liberation (August 9, 1950–March 3, 1951).”² The author is Kim Su-gyŏng, a linguist who was born in 1918 in Korea under Japanese colonial rule and who died in 2000 in Pyongyang in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. He played a central role in the field of linguistics in North Korea from the latter half of the 1940s through the 1960s.³ The only existing copy of Kim’s memoir, a handwritten copy of the original kept in his second wife’s home in Pyongyang, is in the hands of his family in Toronto. The story of this memoir, which Kim started writing at the outbreak of the Korean War, when he became separated from his family, and concluded when the text reached his family in Toronto—speaks to the harsh reality of the north–south division of the Korean peninsula during the Cold War. In this article, I attempt to reveal a hidden side of the history of linguistics in North Korea through Kim Su-gyŏng’s experiences of the Korean War and his separation from his family.

Kim Su-gyŏng’s family was one of an untold number of families that were torn apart and dispersed by the Korean War.⁴ During the war, Kim lost contact with his wife, Lee Nam-jae, and their four children. He completed his memoir in 1994, more than forty years after the end of the war. Almost as if to fill in the space and time dividing him from his family, he enumerates his experiences of the Korean War across six hundred pages of manuscript, with two hundred characters on each page. Essentially, the Korean War produced the phenomenon of family dispersion, and that dispersion in turn produced this memoir of the Korean War. This memoir has never been published and is not known to the academic world. Therefore, in this article, I concentrate mainly on introducing the content of this text and the process by which it came to be produced, and describe what the experiences of the Korean War and family dispersion meant for its author.

Before embarking on this discussion of Kim's memoir, however, it is necessary to point out that in North Korea during the Korean War the field of linguistics was undergoing a major change. On June 20, 1950, exactly five days before the outbreak of the war, Josef Stalin, the supreme leader of the Soviet Union, printed an article in *Pravda*, the chief organ of the Soviet Communist Party, with the title "On Linguistics in Marxism."⁵ This article criticized the very foundation of the theories of the linguist Nikolai Iakovlevich Marr and his followers, who had heretofore occupied the mainstream of Soviet Marxist linguistics, and indicated the adoption of a new framework. One of Stalin's main assertions was that, in contrast to Marr's position that language had a class character and therefore belonged to what historical materialism refers to as the superstructure of society, "national languages are not class languages, but are common to the whole people, common to the members of nations, and one and the same for the nation" (Murra 1951, 71). For a national leader wielding great influence to publish an article addressing not language policy, but the very academic field of linguistics itself, is extraordinarily unusual. For this reason, Stalin's article had an enormous impact on academic fields within the socialist sphere. As I have argued elsewhere, Kim Su-gyōng was one of the leading figures that introduced Stalin's article, and the changes that followed in its wake in Soviet linguistics, into North Korea and signaled a new program of Korean linguistics based on it. The central point Kim extracted from Stalin's article was that of the logic of "the national autonomy of language" (Itagaki 2014). What must not be forgotten is that Kim's work was undertaken in the midst of the Korean War.

During the three years of the Korean War, there was virtually no region in the Korean peninsula, which extends 1,100 kilometers north to south, that the war front did not pass through. The societies of North and South Korea both underwent tremendous change in the process of this war's development on such a total scale. Much recent research has been devoted to this change.⁶ Moreover, studies of North Korean linguistics have been accumulating since the 1980s.⁷ However,

the investigation of North Korean academic history within studies of the Korean War has been insufficient, and studies of the history of North Korean linguistics have not risen above the level of analyzing the articles published at the time. Within the context of this current state of research, I attempt to use Kim's memoir, written by a North Korean linguist for personal purposes, to connect individual, social, and academic history.

Memoirs are, however, heavily influenced by the period and circumstances in which they were written and also by the position of the author; thus, Kim's memoir cannot simply be said to be a primary source recording the experience of the Korean War. I therefore first reveal the process of how this memoir came to exist, based on information obtained from both Kim's letters and those written by his surviving relatives. Nevertheless, to claim to comprehend this memoir's character by simply clarifying how it was made would be insufficient. Constructing a theoretical framework is indispensable in analyzing this text. I explain this framework below, before entering the main body of this article.

How is it possible to connect the reorganization of linguistics carried out during the Korean War with Kim Su-gyōng's text narrating his personal experiences of the war? While Kim's texts concerning linguistics were written under the absolute imperative of pursuing national unification under circumstances in which the Korean people were engaged in fratricidal warfare, his personal experiences were recorded through the circumstance of family dispersion. He spoke of the former as a national experience and the latter as a personal experience, shared with family and very close friends. The relationship between the national and the personal resembles the duality of language (*langage*) that Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure described as the collective and systematic *langue* and the individual utterances of *parole*. According to Saussure, *langue* is "social" and "essential," and it is "external to the individual, who by himself cannot either create it or modify it" (1995, 31). On the other hand, *parole* is "individual," "accessorial," and "accidental" (1995, 30).

Saussure (1995) saw the two as deeply interlinked and made the abstraction of *langue* itself the primary subject of linguistics. The linguistics texts that Kim Su-gyŏng wrote during the Korean War, and the Korean language that he argues for in them, were very much “social” in character and “external to the individual.” By contrast, the language he used in speaking of his experiences of the Korean War was “individual” and “accidental.” Hence, it is possible to see his articles on linguistics and his memoir as sharing a relationship that is precisely akin to the one between *langue* and *parole*.

However, in terms of their actual relationship in Kim’s writing, the positions of *langue* and *parole* are reversed. In language, the individual *parole* is the sequence of sounds that language users hear directly. In this sense, if we call *parole* the “surface level” of language, then the social *langue* is the structure that lies at the “deep level” of language. In Kim Su-gyŏng’s case, however, the opposite is true: the “social” text appears at the surface, while the individual is buried in history.

I refer to Saussure here because Kim Su-gyŏng himself was well versed in his writings. At Keijō Imperial University under colonial rule, Kim Su-gyŏng frequented the office of Kobayashi Hideo, a translator of Saussure who introduced a wide range of Western European linguistic theories to Japan. At Keijō, through his outstanding abilities in language learning, Kim came into contact with the latest trends in linguistic studies written in French, German, English, and Italian. Starting in the 1930s, he eagerly immersed himself in structural linguistics and phonology and attempted to construct a new Korean linguistics. After moving to North Korea in 1946, he adopted Soviet linguistic theory, but he never entirely left structural linguistics behind.⁸

We tend to think of “theory” as something divorced from the “object” of research. In other words, the people who are the “objects” of research do not know “theory,” but “we,” the researchers, do. Premised on this imbalance in knowledge, do we not see ourselves as somehow analyzing “them” “from above”? In the case of Kim Su-gyŏng, however, we encounter a scholar who was deeply involved in structuralist theory long before the “linguistic turn” occurred in the human sciences

under the impact of Saussure. Here the distinction between “theory” and “object” is blurred considerably.

The project of reading the language of one involved in studying the problems of language inevitably takes on a dimension that may be called self-referential. While keeping in mind the reflexivity of Kim’s memoir, I decode the language of his “personal” experiences as they relate to the Korean War and family dispersion. I then consider the meaning of Kim’s “social” linguistic theory written during the Korean War.

Generating Parole: Remembering the Origins of Family Dispersal

First, let us look at how Kim Su-gyŏng came to write his memoir of the Korean War and how this memoir reached his family in Toronto. To describe this process is not to provide a simple annotation of a text, but to produce what is itself a narration of family dispersal during the Cold War.⁹

In 1950, Kim Su-gyŏng was an associate professor at Kim Il-sŏng University and the chair of the lecture course in Korean linguistics. He lived with his wife and four children in university housing. Then, on June 25, the Korean War broke out. At the beginning of the war, the North Korean People’s Army advanced unopposed into South Korea and occupied it. On August 9, the teachers at Kim Il-sŏng University were sent to the south to give political lectures and participate in the Korean Labor Party’s activities in the southern “liberated zone.”¹⁰ (The description of these events takes place on page 10 in the memoir. Below, whenever quotations from the memoir are included, page numbers from the original text are given in brackets, as in [10].) Kim writes that, as he left Pyongyang, “I had no idea the war would continue for so long” [5]. It would not have occurred to him, then, that this might in fact be the last time he would be together with his family before the war split them apart.

Finally, in September, Kim was sent south to faraway Chindo Island, where he was given the responsibility of delivering five-day political lectures to classes of fifty people at a time. These classes were made up of those who had been tested and registered as members or candidate members of the Korean Labor Party [23–24]. However, with the landing of the American military–led United Nations Army at Inch’ŏn, the tide of the war had already been reversed. All at once, the United Nations and South Korean armies pushed the war front that had descended as far south as the Pusan area up to the border region between China and North Korea. After having taught just three courses, Kim Su-gyŏng was ordered to retreat to Pyongyang.

During his retreat, Kim began to feel that, even if he could not keep a diary, he should still make a record of the places he was passing through. He did not have access to writing implements, however, so at first he simply committed to memory all of the names and dates of the places he had passed through since leaving Pyongyang. He thereafter made a point of remembering the places he left in the morning and where he arrived at night. Then, one day, he acquired a notebook and the remainder of a pencil from a farmer. Having written down everything he could recall, he began to keep a daily record using the notebook in his knapsack. After many twists and turns, Kim finally reached Pyongyang on March 3, 1951. But his family was no longer there. I will have more to say about this later.

Kim was granted no pause to grieve over having been separated from his family. His work in education and research at Kim Il-sŏng University awaited him urgently. At that time, the Kim Il-sŏng University campus had temporarily relocated from Pyongyang to Namgot-myŏn in Chunghwa-gun, South P’yŏng-an Province. Kim bought a notebook at a market near the university. In the first half of this notebook, he excerpted sections of the books on linguistic theory that he was studying. In the other half, he copied the contents of the notebook that he had carried back with him from the war. There, over ten pages of dates and places above and below the 38th parallel that he

had traversed over seven months and 7,000 *li* (or approximately 2,800 kilometers) are recorded. The record consists mostly of dates and places, but here and there we also find the birthdays of his wife and children written down: “Tae-sōng’s first birthday,” “Nam-jae’s birthday,” “Hye-ja’s birthday,” and “Hye-yōng’s birthday.” Later, Kim entitled this part of the notebook “For the Unity and Independence of the Fatherland: The Path I Walked during the Fatherland’s War of Liberation.”

In his memoir, Kim wrote that he would later take out the notebook occasionally and remember his war days [6]. However, he lacked a space in which to share his experiences. He got remarried around 1953 to a female graduate of Kim Il-sōng University. In a letter he later sent to his first wife in Toronto, he explains his reason for remarrying: “Having been left alone, I needed someone to assist me with life so that I could do my work.”¹¹ It is likely that, in addition, for those with relatives living in the south, failing to build a new family in the north might be seen as suspicious. In any case, Kim occasionally called to mind his experiences in the Korean War, but mostly kept those experiences secret.

Over thirty years later, in November 1985, Kim Su-gyōng suddenly received a letter from his first wife, Lee Nam-jae, who was now living in Toronto [149]. She had given this letter to Ko Yōng-il, a historian at China’s Yanbian University, who was visiting Toronto in order to deliver a lecture (Kim HY and Kim TS 2015, 19). While it took time for the letters to be sent by mail, and these had to pass the censorship inspection of the North Korean authorities, it now became possible for Kim Su-gyōng and his wife and children to engage in direct correspondence with one another (see figure 1).

In August 1988, Kim was finally able to reunite with his daughter Kim Hye-yōng in Beijing. The two of them planned to participate together in the second Korean Studies Academic Debate Convention. During the convention meeting, one of the event organizers arranged for Kim Su-gyōng to stay in a single room at a separate hotel. Every evening after the convention dinner had

ended, he and his daughter spoke together in his hotel room. Each time she entered the room, Kim Su-gyŏng said, “Well, let me continue my war diary,” and told stories of the Korean War (Kim HY and Kim TS 2015, 21). In this space, alone with his daughter, he told of the experiences during the Korean War that had torn them apart. These visits planted the seeds for his memoir.



Figure 1. Photo of Kim Su-gyŏng enclosed in a letter addressed to his wife, dated January 15, 1986. Reprinted courtesy of Kim’s family in Toronto.

This period marked a comeback for Kim Su-gyŏng as a researcher as well. After being transferred from his position as a researcher at Kim Il-sŏng University to one as a librarian at the National Library in 1968, he had become distanced for a time from the fields of education and

research. In fact, for about twenty years, his list of research achievements was blank. The reasons for this gap are still not clear. Whatever the case may have been, he only resumed presenting research papers in public settings after he was reunited with his daughter in 1988 (Itagaki and Ko 2015, 206, 217).

While exchanging letters with his family in Toronto, Kim gradually began to recall his memories of the past. In 1993, he wrote in a letter to Lee Nam-jae that “there seems to be buried in my chest the deep structure and surface structure that is recently spoken of in linguistics. I sometimes trace over bygone days while ruminating over the feelings I have buried deep inside the deep structure of my heart.”¹² The “deep structure and surface structure” of which Kim writes are terms from Noam Chomsky’s theory of generative grammar (Chomsky 1965). While he does not say so explicitly, what Kim here calls “deep structure” comprises the memories that had constantly given meaning to his speech and actions. This “deep structure,” however, had not yet been generated as a text.

In July of that year, a National Veteran’s Rally was held in Pyongyang to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the ceasefire agreement of the Korean War.¹³ Kim Su-gyōng attended this event, where he says he was encouraged by other attendees to write a memoir about his experiences of the Korean War.¹⁴ He began writing on August 15, 1993, and had produced a clean manuscript by November 20, 1994 [7]. He entitled the memoir “Opening the Notebook in My Knapsack.” Soon after finishing the manuscript, Kim Su-gyōng wrote in a letter to his Lee Nam-jae: “If you were to have a chance to read it, you would find moments here and there that would make you cry. This is because the memoir reflects how much I missed my family from time to time.”¹⁵

However, the memoir was slow to reach his family in Canada. In July 1995, Kim Su-gyōng suffered a stroke. Although he survived, he suffered from paralysis thereafter, and his health gradually declined. In July 1996, his eldest son, Kim T’ae-jōng, visited Pyongyang for the first time.

There, he was reunited with his father and received a copy of his father's memoir, transcribed by Kim Su-gyŏng's second family. At that time, the main title was given as "7,000 *Li* across North and South Following the Party Devotedly"; the original title, "Opening the Notebook in my Knapsack," had been demoted and placed in parentheses. In other words, the title was changed to one typical of North Korean publications, but the reason for this is unclear. There may have been plans to publish the memoir, or it may have been disguised to ensure that there would be no difficulties if it were inspected by North Korean censors.

In any case, this is how Kim Su-gyŏng's memoir finally reached his family in Toronto. They have not yet published the memoir because to do so could have repercussions for families living in North and South Korea. There do not seem to be any passages in the memoir that would be politically disadvantageous to families on either side of the peninsula; however, I understand their reluctance to publish the entire memoir while the tension between North and South Korea remains unresolved. This is why I have decided, with the family's permission, to first publish only a part of the memoir in fragmentary form in this English-language essay.

A Linguist's Korean War

Kim Su-gyŏng's 173-page memoir comprises forty-five chapters arranged mostly in chronological order, with the forty-three chapters that follow the first two divided into five sections. Appendix 1 is a manually transcribed copy of the "diary" that Kim carried around in his knapsack; appendix 2 contains four handwritten maps plotting the route Kim traveled. Table 1 reconstructs from Kim Su-gyŏng's descriptions the main places through which he passed. It is impossible to introduce all the details of these contents here. Instead, let us start by tracing the outline of Kim's route over the five sections that make up his memoir.

Table 1. The Path Traveled by Kim Su-gyöng during the Korean War

I. The First Southern Advance (August 9–September 28, 1950)	
1950 Aug.	Pyongyang (Aug. 9) → Sinmak Station (Aug. 11–14) ~ [Aug. 16] ~ Kaesöng ~ Seoul (Aug. 20–22) ~ Suwön ~ Chönju (Aug. 28–30)
Sept.	Chönju (Sept. 1) ~ Chindo (Sept. 4–21) ~ Kwangju (Sept. 25–28)
II. Temporary Retreat (September 28–October 31, 1950)	
1950 Sept.	Kwangju (Sept. 28 departure) ~ Tamyang ~ Sunch'ang ~ Chinan ~ Changsu (Sept. 30)
Oct.	Changsu (Oct. 1 departure) ~ Yöngdong ~ Sangju ~ Mun'gyöng Saejae (Oct. 9) ~ Tanyang ~ Yöngwöl ~ P'yöngch'ang ~ [Oct. 25] ~ T'ongch'ön (Oct. 29–30) ~ Hwaeyang-gun Tonam-ni (Oct. 30–Nov. 1)
III. Joining the Korean People's Army (November 1–28, 1950)	
1950 Nov.	Tonam-ni (Nov. 1 departure) ~ Kowön ~ Chöngp'yöng ~ Yönghüng ~ Nyöngwön ~ Changjin ~ Chönch'ön-gun Namhüng-ni (Nov. 15–28)
IV. The Second Southern Advance (November 28, 1950–February 17, 1951)	
1950 Nov./ Dec.	Namhüng-ni (Nov. 28 departure) ~ Nyöngwön ~ Yönghüng ~ Kowön ~ Munch'ön ~ P'yönggang ~ Kimhwa ~ Hwach'ön (Dec. 20) ~ Yanggu ~ [Dec. 22] ~ Ch'unch'ön ~ Hongch'ön (Dec. 26–Jan. 1)
1951 Jan.	Hoengsöng (Jan. 1 departure) ~ Yöngwöl ~ Tanyang ~ Yöngju (Jan. 17–18) ~ Tanyang ~ Yöngwöl ~ P'yöngch'ang ~ Ryup'o-ri Quarters (Jan. 31–Feb. 2)
Feb.	Ryup'o-ri (Feb. 2 departure) ~ P'yöngch'ang ~ Hoengsöng ~ Pyöngch'ang Noe-ul-li (Feb. 16–18)
V. After Leaving the Korean People's Army (February 18–March 3, 1951)	
1951 Feb.	Noe-ul-li (Feb. 18 departure) ~ Hwaensöng ~ Hongch'ön ~ Ch'unch'ön (Feb. 26–28)
Mar.	Ch'unch'ön (Feb. 28) → [] → Hwach'ön → Ch'ölwön → Pyongyang (Mar. 3 arrival)

Notes: These routes are based on the table of contents from Kim Su-gyöng's memoir.

~ indicates walking

→ indicates travel by train or car

[] are added for points above the 38th parallel, and dates have been included wherever they are ascertainable.

To the South

On August 9, 1950, Kim Su-gyŏng departed from Taedong-gang Station with fellow university teachers, having received an approximately week-long political training in Sunan and Party Central Committee credentials dispatching him to the South. It could not have occurred to him when playing with his children in a small stream on the outskirts of Pyongyang just prior to his departure that this would be the last time he would see them.¹⁶ Indeed, he left carrying only a small knapsack that most people would use to carry summer clothes and a change of underwear [10]. He managed to reach Sinmak Station (present-day Sŏhŭng Station), but there the locomotive engine and freight car carrying political educational materials were hit by American aerial machine-gun fire, leaving the train unable to go any farther. Thus, Kim and his fellow passengers headed toward Seoul on foot.

In People's Army-occupied Seoul, Kim Su-gyŏng visited his older brother Kim Pok-kyŏng, who lived in a house in Hyehwa-dong. His older brother told him, "I thought you'd come and so I've been waiting for you." Kim thus spent two nights there talking and catching up with his brother's family [14–15]. Later, while visiting the Education Department at the headquarters of Seoul University in Tongsung-dong, Kim was ordered, along with other Kim Il-sŏng University lecturers in the Language and Literature Department, to go work in South Chŏlla Province [15]. After reaching the South Chŏlla Province Korean Labor Party in Kwangju, Kim Su-gyŏng was informed that he and two other teachers were being sent to Chindo Island, which had been newly occupied by the People's Army [19–20]. The work Kim did on Chindo Island has already been described above.

On September 20, word suddenly arrived from the South Chŏlla Province Party recalling Kim to the Kwangju City Party [24]. For reasons that are unclear, a colleague of Kim's at Kim Il-sŏng University, who worked in the South Chŏlla Province Party Propaganda Department, had

become anxious after discovering Kim's name on a list of the Chindo-gun Party and made a request to the South Chōlla Province leadership for Kim to be transferred. Three days after Kim arrived in Kwangju, however, all of those who had arrived from the North were instructed to return to Pyongyang on their own. Kim Su-gyōng, along with others affiliated with the party, headed north on foot, not knowing at the time that the tide of the war had been reversed.

Retreating North through Self-Reliance

In order to retreat to Pyongyang, however, Kim had to avoid passing through areas occupied by the United Nations Army and the South Korean Army and areas where anti-Communist forces were strong. Thus, instead of advancing directly north through the main roads on the plains, Kim and his fellow travelers headed northeast through the small paths between the mountains [30]. Also, upon hearing along the way that there were "Democratic Villages" (*minju purak*) where North Korean supporters were strong and "Reactionary Villages" (*pandong purak*) where there were many South Korean supporters, they advanced by passing through the Democratic Villages [34]. While making his retreat, Kim Su-gyōng thought that he could reach North Korea by getting to the 38th parallel, but when he passed that point at Yang-yang on the east coast of the peninsula, he noticed that it had already become an extension of South Korea.

From there, Kim advanced farther north and reached his hometown of T'ongch'ŏn. Believing that an older cousin would still be living there, Kim supposed that he might be able to get winter clothes and shoes. But the scene he saw in his home village was quite different from what he had hoped for [61–62]:

When I reached my home village the shops around the station were broken down, electric poles lay collapsed on the roads, and electrical wires were tangled together and strewn in all directions. From somewhere on this silent deserted street came the smell of burning and charring. When the falling flare bombs illuminated the area in a

flash, it was just like what the Belgian author Rodenbach described in *The Dead City*.¹⁷

Grief-stricken, Kim began to walk once more, resolving for the time being to make reaching the area under North Korean control his top priority. And then, upon reaching Tonam-ni in Hwaeyang, Kim encountered the People's Army [67].

Advancing North with the People's Army

A high-ranking officer of the Second Division of the People's Army urged Kim Su-gyōng to join them as propaganda personnel. He accepted this position. The unit proceeded farther north and continued its retreat. During this time, the Korean War entered its next phase. At the end of October 1950, and under the slogan "Resist America and Aid Korea," the Chinese People's Volunteer Army entered the war and advanced southward through the peninsula. Kim and the rest of the unit in the Second Division settled in Namhŭng-ni in Chōnch'ōn, where the Chinese Army had already made camp [75].

On November 25, General Chief of Staff Nam Il visited Namhŭng-ni and communicated the new orders of Supreme Commander Kim Il-sōng. These were to make Ch'oe Hyōn the commander of the Second Corps, to make an about-face and head back toward the south, and to form a second war front by penetrating into the enemy's flank [77–78]. According to this strategy, university teachers and civilians were to return to their normal places of work. However, the Second Division's political director said that this strategy "will put us in direct combat with foreign armies and at those times we need someone in our unit who can speak foreign languages," and so "Professor Kim alone will have to stay and act in cooperation with our unit." Kim struggled with the decision, but he finally agreed to stay in the unit. He was now headed south once again.

Back to the South

The unit began advancing south on November 28. However, while cotton clothes and military caps from China and woven shoes from Czechoslovakia were distributed to each of the soldiers, they suffered from a severe shortage of rifles and other weaponry, and were only given the command to seize weapons from the American army in combat [76–77]. Except for one or two platoons that had rifles, they advanced southward as an unarmed unit [92]. It was only at the beginning of the following year that an American handgun reached Kim in the political unit, but in the end he never fired a weapon in this war [114].

Making their way past various dangers, the farthest south the unit penetrated was Yŏngju in North Kyŏngsang Province on January 17. From there, the unit made its way north and moved around the area of P'yŏngch'ang. Kim writes that it was when they took thirteen American prisoners that he had his first and only moment of working as an interpreter during the war [122–125].

On February 16, Kim's unit merged with the corps command unit at Noe-ul-li in P'yŏngch'ang. At that time, they heard something from the army leadership that was entirely unexpected: the political director of the Second Division had kept Kim in the division despite the fact that Supreme Commander Kim Il-sŏng had commanded all writers, artists, university teachers, and students to return to Pyongyang [127–130]. The next day, Kim and a reporter for the Labor Newspaper (*Rodong sinmun*) were discharged from the army and had a thirty-minute interview with Corps Commander Ch'oe Hyŏn. Ch'oe apologized sincerely to Kim, gave him the necessary money to return to Pyongyang, and wrote several letters ordering that he be given permission to use clothes, shoes, and military vehicles [130–136]. Thus, Kim was formally discharged from the army.

Discharged from the Army, Returning to Pyongyang

On February 18, Kim set out from Noe-ul-li. He reached Ch'unch'ŏn, where the Second Division had its transportation unit. Kim left the war front with other soldiers in a car thatched with straw. On March 3, at 5:00 a.m., Kim finally reached Pyongyang. Having learned that university personnel were gathered at the official residence that Hŏ Hŏn was using in his capacity as president of Kim Il-sŏng University, Kim headed there. But he did not find his family at either the university or his old house. Finally, he found his aunt, the wife of his maternal uncle, Lee Chong-sik, who was a Kim Il-sŏng University instructor. From her, Kim heard about his family's journey south.

The details of what Kim's aunt told him are as follows [146–147]. In October 1950, the families of Kim Il-sŏng University teachers all evacuated to the north. As United Nations parachute units descended, Kim's wife concluded that there was nowhere left to run and thus made an important decision. Around October 20, she headed toward Seoul in search of her husband. Upon reaching Seoul, she found Kim's older brother Kim Pok-kyŏng's family, having fallen on hard times, about to abandon their home and evacuate to Okku, in North Chŏlla Province. She therefore took refuge with them in the countryside.¹⁸ While she was still in Seoul, on January 4, 1951, the city fell under the control of the People's Army again, so she returned to Pyongyang.

This recollection of the Korean War ends abruptly with Kim Su-gyŏng's newfound determination to throw himself back into his research. This is also because his diary ends in March, when he reaches Pyongyang. In that sense, it may be said that this memoir is literally a fleshing out of the bland, dry dates and place names in Kim's diary, "Opening the Notebook in my Knapsack."

Accessorial and Accidental

Kim Su-gyŏng's memoir is rich in concrete detail, and by comparing the dates, place names, and personal names included in the memoir against other historical sources, we can see just

how accurate a record it is. In the book, Kim references many researchers, making it an invaluable source for learning about their activities during the Korean War.¹⁹ In this sense, it is also a historical source that can be used in a number of ways.

In this section, I focus on Kim's "personal" narration and, in particular, on his indecision and wavering feelings. Kim's memoir exhibits the characteristic of recording such "personal" feelings immediately followed by descriptions of how he shook them off and conquered them. For example, when the steam engine breaks down at Sinmak Station, he writes, "What many people (including myself) were hoping somewhere in their hearts... was that maybe the Party Central Committee would tell us to go back to Pyongyang and carry on with our own work." Instead, however, the Party Central Committee orders them to walk if the train will not move, Kim records, thus destroying the idea to which he had become accustomed that one must ride a vehicle in order to go somewhere far away. "I was reinvigorated," he writes [11–12]. Throughout the memoir, a writing style is apparent in which "personal" feelings and thoughts about what might conceivably have been a possible future—when seen from where Kim stood at a given point in time—are conquered by "social" and "essential" elements and then erased as something merely accessorial and accidental. However, it is precisely these "personal" elements that contain the moments of vacillation in which I think we can glimpse Kim Su-gyŏng's experiences, including the latent possibilities they suggest.

In fact, Kim Su-gyŏng himself wrote an essay that uncovers possibilities in "personal" texts. In "The Author's Individuality and Language," Kim's only literary study, he examines the question of what an author's "individuality" is (Kim Su-gyŏng 1964). First, he distinguishes between the "functional style" (*kinŭngjŏk munch'e*) used in public documents and opinions and the "personal style" (*kaeinjŏk munch'e*) of the individual system that organizes the linguistic devices that authors use in works of literature. Kim does not conceive of the relationship between functional

style and personal style as a hierarchy between whole and part, general and particular, or superior and subordinate. To the contrary, according to Kim, the personal style, which is seen in the literary works that take every area of human activity as their objects, possesses a “comprehensiveness” (*p’ogwalsǒng*) in its use of literary and colloquial styles and its ability to use words that are alien to the standardized language. By contrast, the functional style obeys the demands of a given field or purpose. Kim sees possibilities for language specifically in the personal style. He writes that “when [the writer] is unable to grasp the details of things, when he does not begin from life, but only mechanically repeats already-existing expressions, the tone becomes antiquated, bland, and dry.” “The workers and farmers—when these regular people speak, they certainly do not express themselves in a clichéd style,” so that “when we form an organic connection to the life of the people and immerse ourselves deeply in their lives, then for the first time, individuality can also be made clear in language.” Compared to a linguistics article, which makes clear statements about a given theme according to a predetermined focus, Kim’s memoir employs a highly varied vocabulary and writes about a wide range of phenomena. Leaving aside the question of whether this can be called a personal style of narration, let us emphasize that Kim’s view reads individual narrative styles as being more “comprehensive” than the “functional style” of writing.

On Chindo Island, completely cut off from outside information and with no way of knowing about the current state of the war, Kim Su-gyǒng and his fellow scholars saw, for just a brief moment, a different vision of “Seoul.” When Kim was recalled to Kwangju on September 20, two of the university teachers with whom he worked concluded that “clearly the war has finally ended” and guessed that “Kim has been called to Kwangju so that he may be appointed as an instructor at Seoul University when the universities reopen.” They also asked Kim to request the Department of Education to allow them to go to Seoul too. Article 101 of the North Korean Constitution, enacted in July 1948, states that “Seoul is the capital of the Korean Democratic

People's Republic"; therefore, Kim and his acquaintances thought that, after the war ended, North Korea's highest institution of learning would be in Seoul. Kim Su-gyōng calls this "an overblown fantasy," and, given the state of the war, it truly was an impossible fantasy. He also expresses, however, an understanding of his friend's desires, writing that "they thought of how nice it would be to be university teachers in a liberated Seoul" [24–25].

We may perhaps consider these scholars' hopes as a pipe dream enabled by their inability to see the conditions of the time, but Kim's memoir has another passage describing alternatives in a situation where surrounding conditions were clearly visible to him. This is a scene in which Kim is called to join a unit about to reattack Namhŭng-ni from the south. He obeys the command but also confronts the alternative of refusing and returning to his work at the university [80]:

Yes. As we made our retreat, we had merely joined the army and temporarily acted jointly with them. The retreat has now ended and therefore we, who had not originally been in the army, ought to continue retreating and go back to our own institutions.... At that moment, I felt nostalgic, thinking of the faces of my friends at the university and wondering about where they were now. In the next moment, it seemed to me that if I met some people from the university, I could learn from them my family's whereabouts, and that I could get this information by leaving the unit and advancing a little farther northwards [to where the university had evacuated]. But in the next moment after that, I wondered whether, under these harsh conditions, I could turn down a sincere request made by the unit's leader.

Even if Kim had refused to join the army at this time, it is more than likely that he still would not have been able to reunite with his family, but there is nevertheless a feeling of reality in this situation that allowed him to imagine a time at which that might have been possible. But this thought was buried under the logic of "harsh circumstances." Below, he describes the situation that follows after he agreed to join the army [81]:

On my way back to the lodging, while gazing at the shining stars in the night sky, I

felt the faces of the teachers with whom I worked and the students at the university coming back to mind. And then I worried about where and how my mother, wife, younger sister, and the children were living in this cold winter. But what I said that evening in front of the comrade political chief was entirely correct. I was not unsure at all.

Moreover, upon realizing that the day he left for the South was his second-born son's first birthday, he writes [93]:

As we retreated and made our way everyday up and down the mountain roads, whenever I would think of my family, I would anticipate being able to reunite with them before T'ae-sŏng turned one year old and thought that I would be able to celebrate his first birthday, and yet this was the reality. On cold winter days, my chest would fill up whenever I wondered how my family was living and how T'ae-sŏng was spending life as a one year-old. But I renewed my determination with the thought that all things are for the sake of victory in war, and that we must sacrifice for the unification and independence of the Fatherland, and I resolved not to think of my family or of one year-old T'ae-sŏng anymore and quietly descended the Namhŭng-ni mountain ridge.

In this way, there is a narrative here of confronting one's duty to the war for the fatherland and stopping one's thoughts about family.

There are numerous other examples of similar passages, but here I will quote one last section revealing Kim's state of mind when he finally returns to Pyongyang and learns that his family is no longer there [147–149]:

Not a single day went by while I had gone to the southern half [of the peninsula] that I did not think of my family, and so how could it be that, in spite of my determination that, if I were to be able to return home, I would love my family even more, and live an even happier life with them, my family had now gone far to the south?...

On the other hand, listening to the stories of many people around me, how many people had experienced unspeakable misery at the hands of the American

army and their running dogs? My misery was only that of being alone, having been separated from my parents, siblings, and wife and children. Compared to the miseries of other people, this was nothing at all, wasn't it?

From then on, I swore and swore again my determination to put the painful experiences tearing my chest apart deep inside my chest and to live each and every day happily and optimistically, and to perform the work assigned to me with an even greater sense of responsibility and passion.

Here Kim relativizes his own “misery” by comparing it with the “misery” of others. Moreover, he attempts to shut his feelings for his family inside and look only to the future, by immersing himself in research, education, and work. This must be exactly what he expressed fifty years later in a letter written to his first wife as “the feelings buried deep inside the deep structure of the heart.” This memoir is the text that Kim wrote by inserting here and there the feelings that he had long kept secret.

Having returned from the war, Kim Su-gyōng devoted himself to founding the linguistic theory of the nation, while at the same time pushing the “personal” into something accessorial and accidental.

The National *Langue*

Stalin's famous linguistic study was translated and printed in *Külloja*, a magazine belonging to the organ of the Korean Labor Party, at the end of July 1950, only a short while after it was first published in the USSR (Ssuttallin 1950). However, it is likely that scholars were unable to engage with this study at that time since they were mobilized for war soon thereafter. Moreover, even after Kim Su-gyōng returned from war, Kim Il-sōng University continued evacuating its students and personnel. In May 1951, those affiliated with the university were transferred from Chunghwa to Chōngju in North P'yōng-an Province; in September, they were dispersed and transferred to various areas of Kusōng; and in February 1952, they were transferred to the People's

Army Corps garrison in Sunch'ŏn in South P'yŏng-an Province. It was only after September 1953 that the academic departments of Kim Il-sŏng University began to return to Pyongyang, and not until September 1954 that the university facilities were completed (Kim Il-sŏng Chonghap-Daehak 1956, 79–94).

In the interim, in July 1951, Soviet-born Korean Ki Sŏkpok, who at the time was vice director of the Department of Cultural Propaganda, wrote an article that introduced Stalin's theory (Ki Sŏkpok 1951); however, due to his lack of training in linguistics, Ki did not have a proper understanding of it.²⁰ It was not until two years after Stalin's article was published that North Korean researchers, including linguists, began to engage with it head-on and produce results from it. Kim Su-gyŏng was at the center of this movement. Contemporary Soviet linguists also reported that Kim Su-gyŏng was a central figure in using this theory (Mazur 1952, 121). As I have already discussed the process and content of this movement in a separate context (Itagaki 2014), I will focus here on Kim's most comprehensive work written before the university returned to Pyongyang, and the points most relevant to the concerns of this article.

Stalin argued that language does not change in response to the stages of economic development, but that the accumulation of fundamental vocabulary and the structure of grammar only change gradually. This, he said, is precisely why “language is extremely resilient and has colossal powers of resistance against coercive assimilation” (Murra 1951, 74). Kim Su-gyŏng viewed this part of Stalin's argument as the most important, and he used it to establish the foundations of the “national autonomy” (*minjokchŏk chajusŏng*)²¹ of the Korean language (Kim Su-gyŏng 1952, 335). Essentially, Kim argued that the Korean language had survived and developed by maintaining its fundamental vocabulary and grammatical structure in spite of the rule of the culture of Chinese characters and the coercive assimilation of the Japanese Empire. Moreover, he viewed this “national autonomy” of the Korean language as the basis for fighting against “the

assimilationists and colonialists of today and the new instigators of war, the Anglo-American imperialists” (Kim Su-gyŏng 1952, 337–338).

Kim did not think, however, that the uniformity of the Korean language already existed. In an essay written before the Korean War, Kim Su-gyŏng said of the Korean people that “our 30 million brethren still do not have a completely unified language or a completely unified writing system” (1949, 140). This, he argued, was precisely why it was necessary to establish an orthography and to compile grammar books and dictionaries; in fact, he was avidly involved in these projects. Even in his essay on the Stalin article, he calls at the end for the establishment of a consistent orthography (Kim Su-gyŏng 1952, 353–354).

Precisely by using a “functional style,” Kim produced a clear introduction to the significance of Stalin’s essay and from it derived the future issues facing Korean linguistics. What is most necessary to bear in mind, however, is that Kim wrote under circumstances in which his own family had been torn apart and his countrymen were killing one another in fratricidal warfare. In other words, “national autonomy” was not an extant and self-evident presence, but an unfinished project that, under the circumstances that prevailed during the Korean War, he had no choice but to wager on.

Conclusion

A True-Story Novel: The Summit of Life (Ri Kyu-ch’un 1996) is a novel in which Kim Su-gyŏng appears as the main character. The author is Ri Kyu-ch’un, who also worked as a university instructor in Kim Il-sŏng University’s Literature Department. Ri wrote this novel on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the university’s founding, based on his interviews with former university teachers and students.²² This lengthy novel depicts Kim Su-gyŏng in the Korean War, and, judging from its content, it seems likely that the author created this work while referencing

Kim's memoir. Its content, however, has been boldly rewritten. For instance, in the scene where Kim determines to join the Korean People's Army's reinvasion of the south, there is no mention of the uncertainty he felt (Ri Kyu-ch'un 1996, 124–125). An ailing Kim Su-gyŏng read over a copy of the book just after it had been written and wrote about it in a letter to his wife in Toronto. In this letter, we find no words indicating his frank impression of the book; he summarizes it by writing that “its content is based upon me, who gave everything to the founding and development of Korean linguistics while staunchly defending a revolutionary faith and sense of duty, with loyalty to our great leader.”²³ As Kim's evaluation indicates, this novel is a national story that is told by disposing of “accessorial” and “accidental” elements.

By contrast, Kim Su-gyŏng's memoir, whose point of origin is his family and its dispersion, depicts the wavering uncertainty and the feelings that his experience during the war entailed and even the dreams of the future that, in reality, end up disappearing like bubbles. However, the moment Kim's memoir expresses these “personal” feelings, he follows them up with narration that attempts to overcome them with the “social.” In this sense, his memoir is connected, without contradiction, to his argument for the “national autonomy” of the Korean language that made under the influence of Stalin's article on linguistics. In making this observation, however, I do not wish to evaluate Kim's feelings for the “nation” that he describes in his memoir and articles on linguistics as merely false fabrications or to say that he only wrote them as a perfunctory part of his occupation. It is altogether possible that for Kim Su-gyŏng, whose nation was rent apart by violence and hatred and who was torn from his family and left alone in North Korea, a language that he imagined to belong to “the whole people” was the only real thing left to which he could entrust his desire to join together everything that had fallen apart. This was a desire that would not be realized within his lifetime.

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Notes

- 1 One *li* is approximately 400 meters.
- 2 In Korean, these titles read “오직 한마음 당을 따라 북남 7천리,” “배낭속의 수첩을 펼치며,” and “한지식인의 조국해방전쟁참전수기 (1950.8.9~1951.3.3).”
- 3 Kim Su-gyŏng's linguistic work was first seriously discussed in Ch'oe Kyŏng-bong (2009). See Itagaki and Ko (2015) for a later and more comprehensive volume of essays on Kim's work that also includes a contribution from Ch'oe.
- 4 See Kim Kwi-Ok (2004) for an academic work discussing the Korean War and the dispersion of families that occurred around that time.
- 5 The Stalin essay and other related articles were translated by the Department of Slavic Languages at Columbia University with financial assistance from the Rockefeller Foundation and published in 1951 (Murra 1951).
- 6 Kim Tong-ch'un (2006) and Han Sŏng-hun (2012) are representative works on the impact the Korean War had on South Korean society and North Korea, respectively.
- 7 See Ko Yŏng-gŭn (1994) for one of the achievements in the history of North Korean linguistics.
- 8 I have discussed this point in detail in Itagaki (2015). The list of linguists Kim Su-gyŏng read in the original prior to 1945 includes F. de Saussure, C. Bally, A. Sechehaye, J. Vendryes, V. Brøndal, E. Benveniste, W. v. Wartburg, and E. Lerch.
- 9 The facts pertaining to the dispersal of Kim's family presented below have been reconstructed based on the testimony of his wife and children living in Toronto and on his memoir.
- 10 This fact is corroborated in the decade history of Kim Il-sŏng University (Kim Il-sŏng Chonghap Taehak 1956, 74).
- 11 Kim Su-gyŏng, letter to Yi Nam-jae, January 15, 1986. All letters from Kim Su-gyŏng that I refer to in this article are kept by his family in Toronto.
- 12 Kim Su-gyŏng, letter to Yi Nam-jae, March 21, 1993.
- 13 These events are reported in *Rodong Sinmun*, July 23–26, 1993.
- 14 Kim Su-gyŏng, letter to Yi Nam-jae, November 27, 1994.
- 15 Kim Su-gyŏng, letter to Yi Nam-jae, November 27, 1994.
- 16 Kim Su-gyŏng, letter to Hye-ja, T'ae-jŏng, Hye-yŏng, and T'ae-sŏng, January 15, 1986.
- 17 Kim's identification of the scene at T'ongch'ŏn with Georges R. C. Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte* appears to have made a powerful impression on him, as his daughter Kim Hye-yŏng relates that he used this same metaphor to describe the conditions of the time of

- his reunion with her in 1988 (Kim HY and Kim TS 2015, 21).
- 18 See Kim Hye-yōng and Kim T'ae-sōng (2015) for a detailed account of how they emigrated to Toronto.
- 19 For example, Kim Su-gyōng [97–98] recalls meeting Chōn Mong-su, who is known to have died in the Korean War, at the army's command unit in Kimhwa, Kangwōn-do on December 18, 1951. To my knowledge, this is the last record made of Chōn's whereabouts and activities during his lifetime. Also, a whole chapter (chapter 22) is given to discussing Ryōm Chong-nyul, then a junior in Kim Il-sōng University's Department of Russian, and later a colleague of Kim's at the university who would be active as a linguist until the 1990s.
- 20 On the career of Ki Sōk-pok, see Ki Eduarūdū (2006).
- 21 Stalin uses the term “natsional'naia samobytnost,” the English translation of which is “national originality” (Murra 1951, 75).
- 22 Ri (2001) has also written a historical novel centered around the historian Kim Sōk-hyōng, a classmate of Kim Su-gyōng's at Keijō Imperial University who also defected to North Korea.
- 23 Kim Su-gyōng, letter to Yi Nam-jae, May 9, 1997.

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