

IN THE MIDST OF SHIFTING ANXIETIES

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Around 1982 I was attending a public middle school in Seoul. One day, an English teacher, a short and slim Korean male in his early thirties, told our class a joke about an American politician's visit to Japan. During a press conference reporters asked the politician, "How often do you have elections in the USA?" To which he replied, in laughter, "Oh, everyday!" The teacher explained that the politician apparently thought that the reporters were asking him, not about elections, but "erections." Nobody laughed at the joke and there was an awkward silence in the classroom.

In hindsight, the joke was indicative of the historical and political contexts of the South Korean military – putting aside the vulgarity and inappropriateness of the joke in the school context. While the teacher intended to illustrate the difference in pronunciation between the English alphabet letters, "L" and "R," given that the "R" consonant sound does not exist in the Korean and Japanese languages, he inadvertently revealed his own internalized and militarized mentality at work. I doubt whether the teacher meant the joke as an example of a Freudian slip on the part of the Japanese reporters. Rather, he probably meant to deride the Japanese speakers' perceived incompetent skills in English pronunciation. It was clear to me that, as Japan was a former imperial power that subjugated Koreans for nearly four decades, there was a subtext of anti-Japanese sentiment clearly underlying the joke. It was also curious that the American politician was portrayed as relaxed and confident enough to disclose his virility at a public event. The implication is that the Japanese reporters would be perplexed by his answer, or, finding out what the politician meant, they would be relegated to the position of penis envy, as though they had been subject to castration. The joke, in this regard, signals the history of American condescension toward the Japanese, in particular, the codename for the Hiroshima atomic bombing: "Little Boy," which represents the U.S.'s belittlement of the masculinity of the Japanese male. However, what was crucial was that it was a Korean male who told the joke, having completed his compulsory military service, and aligning himself with the supposedly virile Americans.

Under the Korean military regime many teachers at public boys' schools habitually exercised violence. The teachers displayed no emotion as they beat their students, for they made the beatings a kind of public ritual and a "necessary" part of education, and hence rendered it legitimate. There were few virtuous teachers, such as my chemistry teacher, who did not use physical violence or verbal abuse. The English teacher stands out in my memory, not because he did not exercise brutal violence, but rather because he occasionally shocked the students through outbursts of anger. He would waver between calm and tension, at times throwing a piece of chalk at the students in nervous fits of anger. At other times he would manifest a perverse sense of humor. Through the aforementioned joke he was implicitly transferring to the students the demand that he received during his military service: to be masculine, potent, and virile, and to use that energy in service of the nation. But then again, the joke might have also stemmed from his defiant and iconoclastic attitude towards the army that he may have harbored during his service, but he could release only outside the military. Whatever the case, the joke was a manifestation of a complex internal entanglement of anxiety, frustration, and fear in having been forced to become manly and powerful enough to withstand the daily exposure to organized violence that is called the military. In my reflection, he was still coming to terms with the trauma from violence, years after his discharge from the military.

The reason why I dwell on my school experience is not because I want to discuss the Korean military based on my service, or, because I have never served in the army, attempt to substitute for it despite my lack of direct experience in the military. Rather, it is in order to emphatically stress that violence was pervasive in South Korean society under the military regime, that it was accepted as a norm, and schools were an extension of the military, or its preparatory ground. In fact, through military training in high school, discipline and surveillance of the body was inculcated in the young minds quite early on. The ongoing logic of the cold war provided a ready rationalization for the state and its employees to mobilize youth and validate militarized patriotism.

The joke, which stayed with me for some reason but I now begin to unravel, stems from the fact that South Korean military is tied to the complex historical processes of humiliation from national subjugation to the Japanese colonial power, followed by the U.S. occupation, the proxy war in Korea, and the communization threat from North Korea. During the Japanese occupation, Japanese military officers exercised cruel forms of corporal punishment coupled with racial discrimination against the colonized Korean subalterns. The former military dictator Park Chung Hee, who had been trained under the Japanese Imperial Army, and his successors, inherited the severe corporal discipline of the soldiers from the Japanese military.¹ Given the still unresolved disputes over the legacy of colonialism, it is ironic, to say the least, that the ways in

which the higher-ups treat their subordinates in the South Korean military still follow the racist and oppressive rule of the colonial era. Indeed, the aforementioned joke embodies a conflation of the notorious legacies of both Japanese and American imperialism. The symbolic severance of Japanese masculinity through annihilation of a large population overlaps with the dominant masculinity of the U.S. that still looms over the psyche of South Koreans. That South Korea is practically a semi-colony of the U.S. is evidenced in the teacher's inadvertent envy of American masculinity, that is, their male potency is implicitly equivalent to their military prowess.

In Hein-kuhn Oh's new work, *Middlemen*, we confront the subtle signs of anxieties in the faces of the soldiers, which trace back to the legacy of trauma from the colonial era and the decades of military regimes. However, the photographs do not show any direct acts of violence. Rather, they represent the collective trauma of soldiers who grapple with the premonition of violence. Crucially, the series also presents unexpected kinds of ambiguous anxieties, which are induced by conflicts arising from the shifting condition of the military culture, wherein blind loyalty to national security coexists with secular values of youthful soldiers.

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A slim soldier, wearing his short-sleeved service uniform, stands as if he is poised at the cusp of descent into the water, as only the soles of his polished black shoes are submerged. The lush green of a deeply forested mountain lies in the far background, with its reflection in a pool of water. The image obliquely suggests death by drowning, perhaps unbeknownst to the photographer and his subject. The pictorial division of the dark green mountain and its reflection in the water is reminiscent of some of the sublime moments of modern abstract art by Mark Rothko or Blinky Palermo. Against the backdrop of a perfect and rich composition, the belt's loose fit around the soldier's abdomen compels my attention. The solemnity of his gaze, which is surrounded by the pale and greasy skin of his face, refracts the perfect shine of his shoes. Somehow I am concerned about his shoes. (Plate No. 50)

The *Middlemen* presents a large social landscape in which South Korea's officially sanctioned "manhood", in all its complexities, presents itself for the camera's gaze. In photographing the *Middlemen* Hein-kuhn Oh moved from the close-up portraits of his previous works to maintaining a physical distance from the soldiers, in order to include in the pictures the contexts of the military training grounds. In this sense, the new work has made a full circle to his even earlier work, such as the *Gwangju Story* or the *Itaewon Story*, in that they situate the subjects within the specific place they inhabit.

Some years ago Hein-kuhn Oh became interested in creating portraits of groups, not simply in plural, but in terms of collectivity, or more precisely, of "us," or "woori," a commonly shared Korean sentiment. Although he initially failed at obtaining permission to photograph soldiers, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Korean War, the Ministry of National Defense invited Hein-kuhn Oh, along with nine other photographers to undertake a project. Hein-kuhn Oh explained that each of the photographers was assigned to focus on a certain facet of the military: portraits, facilities, landscapes, etc. After completion of the three-month state-commissioned project of photographing soldiers, Hein-kuhn Oh obtained permission to photograph them for an additional year, which resulted in the present series. Hein-kuhn Oh speculated that the government officials might have selected him based on his earlier series of portraits of middle-aged women, *Ajumma*, or *Cosmetic Girls*, that is, they may have regarded him simply as a portrait photographer, or perhaps as a photographer who happens to take photos of people. What they may have overlooked is that his portraits demonstrated his probing insights into the psychology of the subjects.

Although Hein-kuhn Oh never takes an explicit stance in terms of sociopolitical critique, he certainly does exercise great control over how his photographs are to be read by choosing his thematic and formal options, such as the selection of subjects and physical contexts, manipulating light, darkness, and colors for the background, cropping and blowing up the scale of the visages, for example, as in the case of *Cosmetic Girls*. If Thomas Ruff's "passport-style" series are anti-psychological because of the abstract qualities as a byproduct of the large scale, in contrast, *Cosmetic Girls*, despite their monumental scale, seems to retain, if not amplify, the anxieties of the teenagers about their appearances.

Indeed, Hein-kuhn Oh has remarked that he is interested in representing the subtle anxieties of his subjects. Many of the subjects included in the *Middlemen* have a blank stare on their faces, such as the man standing by the water, as if the military instructed them not to reveal any emotions. However, despite the blank masks, their anxieties cannot be concealed. Another representative image of soldiers with an impenetrable gaze would include the one appearing to caress a dog in a cage. His cold and suspicious gaze is in strong contrast with his caring gesture for the animal, thus making an indelible impression.² (Page 125, Plate no 60)

One of the most dispiriting images depicts a soldier dressed in a camouflage uniform, with a pistol under his armpit, a beret on his right thigh, and his left hand by his crotch, seated against reddish brown earth. Behind him lies what seems to be a noose, and to its left, a broken part of a tree branch. He gazes straight into the camera, perhaps penetrating through the lens, as if he is not looking at anything. His mind seems elsewhere. The sad gravity of his gaze conjures up the tragic, and recalls the *Portrait of Lewis Payne* (1865) – the unforgettable image reproduced in Barthes' *Camera Lucida* – of whom Alexander Gardner photographed, as a young unsuccessful assassin was awaiting execution by hanging.³(Plate no 2)

On another note altogether, a tall young soldier with camouflage pants and black long-sleeved top stands in a narrow pathway between two rows of tents. With his hands in pockets, grinning, he displays a level of confidence, albeit with some gawkiness and a slight shyness that belies his masculine physique and casual demeanor. That he is sporting a North Face shirt, a brand that the military does not officially endorse, may signal a privileged position in his unit. (Plate no 27)

Usually there is no intimacy in the photographs, as most soldiers do not reveal themselves. However, some do reveal themselves and offer moments of intimacy. On some occasions, soldiers inadvertently reveal their vulnerable states. In one photograph, a topless handsome soldier boastfully displays his muscles, standing before a fully blossoming pink magnolia tree. The image is at once masculine and effeminate, strong and vulnerable. (Page 125, Plate no 54) In another instance a soldier is shedding tears before the same tree. (Page 125, Plate no 55) Why he is crying one could not tell. Perhaps he was sad for some reason; perhaps he was prone to be emotional, as if he were a character in a melodrama. But one thing is certain; the image may well be one of the first publicly displayed photographs of a soldier in tears. Could the fact that such an image was permitted, beyond the confines of the military base, be regarded as an indication of the turn of the tide? (Plate no 24)

Yet in another image, two MPs (military police), in dress white uniforms, stand before a closed shutter door. Bright red and yellow tassels and glistening brass buckles stand out against the perfectly clean, bleached white uniforms. An officer stands awkwardly off-balanced at the moment of reaching for his helmet that is held by another. The image takes on a rather theatrical moment. Perhaps the lack of urgency makes them look appear as though they are engaged in some kind of masquerade. (Plate no 37)

Clearly, Hein-kuhn Oh was not interested in creating images of a group of figures within the framework of a single picture, but rather discrete images of each individual that constitutes a specific group. The fact that he chose to photograph soldiers individually, with some exceptions of double portraits or a group of a few figures in action, was to accentuate the individuality of the soldiers within the collective organization of the military.

While a photo shoot can be construed as simply an encounter between Hein-kuhn Oh and the soldiers, many photographs are a result of their "collaboration." He photographed the soldiers after lengthy and careful observations of the minute details of their motions and actions. The series is a quasi-documentary in that the images are results of multiple shootings over an extended period of time, and at times Hein-kuhn Oh attempted to reconstruct particular moments by requesting that the soldiers resume their specific actions, which he found compelling. He also consciously used the military equipment and backdrops as *mise en scène*. The subjects were entirely aware of the photographer, and almost all subjects gaze directly at the camera. After the photographer's request to the soldiers, they all complied and presented themselves, but many endeavored not to disclose their "real" faces. Yet, at times, despite their awareness of the camera and their deliberate posing, they unconsciously reveal themselves.

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At the most fundamental level, soldiers may be characterized in terms of uniformity and differences. Hence, we simultaneously see the obvious sameness of the uniforms, through which dissimilarities of each soldier emerge in terms of distinct particularities: their physiques, gazes, and psychological states. Despite the inherent nature of the military that negates individuality, the photographs reveal a wide range of ways in which the soldiers find themselves in the military. There are those who seem to fit into the military quite naturally, exuding confidence; those concerned about their appearances; those vulnerable, fearful, and angst-ridden; those seemingly distrustful; and those somewhat indifferent to the inherently oppressive nature of the military culture and perhaps even accepting of it.

A recent promotional poster issued by the military has a caption that reads: "Land Military Festival 2010 – Strong Military, Friendly Army. Together with the Citizens!" Behind the caption are poorly collaged images of children making a salute, other kids trying out helmets and weapons, musical parades, and parachute troops, among other things. From the website,

one gets the impression that the event is like a military amusement park, complete with fun rides and mascot characters posing for souvenir photographs. This family-friendly long weekend festivity to entice the general public is a far cry from the stern and overtly masculine images that the military exhibited for the Military Day Parades in “the May 16 Revolution Square” in Seoul during the decades of dictatorship.

Compared to the promotional photographs disseminated by the Ministry of National Defense, which typically portrays soldiers as tough, courageous, and invincible, often engaged in risk-taking military training, the *Middlemen* might at first appear to be not so powerful, given that the soldiers are depicted during a “downtime” from war. (Actually, some of the promotional photographs of soldiers in training border on the ridiculous as they try too hard to act tough.) Even though the two Koreas are technically still at war, in the *Middlemen* there seems to be the conspicuous absence of a sense of urgency, or imminent danger from the threat of North Korea. However, the photographs of *Middlemen* powerfully convey the sense of disturbance and inhibition among the soldiers.

Indeed, one of the common threads among the disparate registers of the complex gazes is the sense of fear, insecurity, and vulnerability embodied and repressed in these individuals. Other points of convergences are, surprisingly, the subtle signs of casualness and indifference. The series as a whole is a synecdoche for the military, for each of these individuals exemplifies countless others in the army. That is to say, the photographs represent specific individuals but they also take on abstract and universal qualities. Although they are portraits, they also represent a kind of typology, not so much in terms of the men with different occupations à la August Sander, but in terms of an examination of the soldiers’ psychological responses as variables in reaction to the military as an external constant, which is arguably beyond the control of the subjects.

Hence, the series reflects Hein-kuhn Oh’s ambivalence towards the military today: it is an organization composed of individuals who share a certain set of objectives but also of others who are reluctant to be a part of it. For example, Hein-kuhn Oh alludes to the generation gap between the officers of his generation and the youthful soldiers, the latter who may not necessarily share an unquestioning allegiance to and duty to serve the nation. In this regard, the “middle” of *Middlemen* means, according to Hein-kuhn Oh, between civilians and soldiers. I view the implications, as something in the sense of “in the middle of a process,” not quite formed, hence abstract and universal: “middle” as in-between, in-between youth and adulthood, malleable and rigid, and abstract and particular. That is, in-between ambiguous individual values and the official mission of the military.

Clearly, the military is at a juncture today: although it was established under the Japanese colonial regime, it now exists in the era of a democratically elected government, globalization and consumption, and a high tech network society, which allows soldiers to remain closely linked to the outside world. And yet, its basic premise continues to be based on anti-communism, with excessive corporal punishment and verbal abuse. In the shifting geopolitical order and sociopolitical contexts, soldiers are caught between the demand to become an undifferentiated unit of collectivity and their desire to retain their sense of self as an individual.

In the midst of such tension, they are frequently exposed to violence and the suicides of their fellow soldiers. Military suicides have become one of the most serious South Korean social issues in recent years. It is said that many suicides are unreported. Whenever suicides do occur, unfortunately and crucially, the South Korean military almost invariably blames the soldiers themselves who commit suicides. The military usually cites the following motivations of the suicide victims: betrayals by female lovers outside of the military, family problems, financial problems, and introverted personalities, etc. Unofficially, however, suicides are largely attributed to bullying internal to the military base. The media coverage often mentions the sources of the crimes that lead to suicides, such as hazing, beatings, verbal abuse, etc. Although the military officials claim that the use of violence is under control, the suicide rates of soldiers is on the rise and there is no sign of it subsiding. While they will not admit the fact, the military is tainted with their continued failure to investigate or prosecute crimes that lead to suicides.⁴

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After my middle school teacher distributed the report cards, for several days my classmates and I were all fascinated by the wide range of colors of the wounded areas from blows, how the colors changed from day to day after the beatings. We would show each other our wounds to compare them, and it was a daily conversation subject during recess. The blows that I received from the teachers’ habitual beatings were certainly painful. In some ways, however, the pain was confined to the corporal realm. As it was a norm, and as it became repeated, I also became sort of desensitized; I would go through a routine

when it happened. By comparison, I am struck by the fact that I suddenly and all too clearly remember the aforementioned joke after some three decades of forgetting, which seems to have made a greater impact on my psyche than corporal punishment. For the joke appears to be more indelibly imprinted on my mind than the “regulated” beatings.

The photographs of the *Middlemen* disturb me. Indeed, it is traumatic for me to regard many of the photographs. In his interview, Hein-kuhn Oh explained that the reactions to *Middlemen* were radically different based on the gender of the viewer. He attributed that reaction to the fact most Korean men have some form of traumatic experience during their military service, and they are bound to read the photographs in terms of their own punctum, or what Barthes refers to as that which pricks the viewer, a detail that attracts, distresses, or wounds the viewer. I recognize that the punctum in the photographs is none other than their gazes that reflect their experience of ongoing trauma. However, in this particular instance, I confirm that the punctum is not only personal but can be collective as well.⁵

However, as someone who has never served in the military, how is it possible that I find these images so familiar yet so disturbing, so uncanny? The concept of uncanny entails re-experiencing a disturbing memory after a period of delay, or, to borrow from Freudian theory, latency. While Freud explains latency in terms of linear progression from an event to its repression to its return, its significance lies not just in the forgetting of an event but rather the fact that a traumatic event is not grasped at first, that it resides in the unconscious memory, that the subject is never fully conscious during the event itself. It is latency that characterizes trauma, thus not knowing or an inability to fully perceive or experience an event. But to accept the images of the *Middlemen* in terms of the “return of the repressed” after a temporal delay implies that there lies an equivalency between something in my formative years and my act of facing images of the *Middlemen*. Not having served in the military, the only experience of mine that remotely resembles it is my schooling under the military regimes. To expound on my earlier statement, an implication, of considering the school as a preparatory ground for the military, is that it was a site of both explicit and insidious trauma, the latter being a form of violence inflicted not on the body but to the soul and spirit.⁶

To get to the point, in the joke told by the English teacher, thereof runs the death drive. An ability to correctly pronounce English, the official language of American imperialism, revolves around “erection”, which translates into masculine power, and the capacity to kill. Confronting the photographs of the Middlemen I also recognize the death drive in the faces of many soldiers, as they are subject to an ongoing confrontation with the repetition of trauma, as they attempt to survive. The soldiers themselves may be subject to traumatic occurrences, and they are also direct or indirect witnesses to the suicides of their fellow soldiers. For the soldiers, trauma is none other than placing a psychic shield against exposure to the impact of the direct experience of violence, or witnessing, or even gaining sheer knowledge of their fellow soldiers taking their own lives. As profoundly disturbed as they may be, most of them would be determined to survive the terms of their service. Significantly, trauma is experienced not merely as repression or a defense mechanism, but through a temporal delay that moves the individual beyond the impact of the initial event. Which is why the traumatized commit suicide in safety, long after the first moment of trauma and its repetition, in the moments of calm and quietness. Therefore, what is traumatic is not only the first tragic moment, but also moving beyond it; that is, survival itself can be crucial.⁷

The *Middlemen* is traumatic for me in that it awakened my memory of the aforementioned joke and the wounds in my unconscious. Encountering the *Middlemen* allowed me to open up to, borrowing from Cathy Caruth, “a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, of impossibility,”⁸ of knowing the first moment through its latency and return. However, while the trauma is painfully experienced through repetition of the unknown first moment, it is “also a continual leaving of its site.”⁹ The critical question is how to listen to the survivor’s departure from the crisis of trauma. How do we listen to the voice of the Others, the countless soldiers as vulnerable subordinates who become subject to trauma and must struggle to leave its site?¹⁰

Somehow, the pine trees and other well-pruned shrubbery in the photographs of the *Middlemen* remind me of a sheet of bright green artificial felt, pressed down by a thick pane of glass, as found on every single civil servant’s desk in public administration buildings throughout South Korea. Even nature is manicured to the extent that it seems to bear the sign of state control. The landscape seems like a stage set from out of nowhere, and the soldiers like actors on a stage, following some bizarre scripts, with their berets pressing down on their eyes, and the uniforms against their bodies. In this suffocating spectacle, any subtle traces of sensitivity and signs of life pierce my being. (Page 125. Plate no 63)



Plate no 60.
A private playing with
a dog in a cage
April 2010



Plate no 54.
Flowers and a soldier
April 2010



Plate no 55.
A marine sitting alone
April 2011



Plate no 63.
Two honor guards wearing black
formal dress uniforms
October 2010

¹ Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Duke University Press, 2005), 48.

² Photographer Sandra Matthews pointed this out for me.

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981), 95.

⁴ Increase of suicides is not particular to South Korean military alone, as it is a major issue across the nations. In the case of the U.S., however, the media widely reports that there are no conclusive causes for suicides in the military. Many of those who commit suicides in recent years do so after their tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, suggesting the gravity of the post-traumatic stress disorder from the experience of the wars. The suicide of U.S. Private Danny Chen in 2011, however, was related to racially discriminatory violent hazing and bullying, and the eight soldiers responsible for his suicide have been charged for involuntary homicide, but not surprisingly, the charges were dropped.

⁵ I am taken aback by South Korean women's reaction to the *Middlemen* photographs that Hein-kuhn Oh identified through his "monitoring" process. Apparently, many women find the images "exotic." It is indicative of the extent of the gender-based separation of conscription and domestic labor.

⁶ Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 107.

⁷ Caruth, 9.

⁸ Caruth, 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.