Given its profound and lasting effects on the lives of the Korean people, the postcolonial division of the peninsula has been one of the dominant themes in South Korean literature (han’guk munhak). Whether involved with the Korean War (1950–3) directly or collaterally, the authors who lived through that time chronicled, from their own ideological positions, the chaotic situation into which they were thrown. Carrying forward a sense of existential crisis, their postwar writings tackled the question of how to make sense of the unresolved past. Through an exploration of their first-hand memories of being uprooted, separated, and devastated during the wartime years, their works responded to the hardening division of the peninsula as a historical structure embedded in the world’s geopolitical economy. From among the works that constitute the tradition of “division literature” (pundan munhak), this chapter addresses the novels of Ch’oe Inhun (1936–2018) and Pak Wansŏ (1931–2011), both individually and comparatively. In tracing how each author recalled the war-without-an-end as a fundamental contradiction underlying South Korean society, I focus on the figures of “individual(s) on the border” (kyŏnggyein) who stand out in the evolving aesthetics of both authors. Embodying the memories of both contacts and clashes across the thirty-eighth parallel, kyŏnggyein have served to defamiliarize the inter-Korean border solidified during the Cold War era and thereby to stimulate visions of de-bordering in the divided world.

Both Ch’oe Inhun and Pak Wansŏ lived the life of a kyŏnggyein in the South, having lost their places of origin located north of the demarcation line. Their experiences of displacement and confinement during wartime, though different, kept them alert to the provisionality of settlement in 1953 while fostering the desire to transcend prescribed boundaries. Ch’oe, who had fled from the North during the war, continually returned to moments of migration in search of an alternative path beyond Cold War binaries. Pak, who had stayed behind in Seoul when it was under communist control, vividly narrated the infiltration of division ideologies into the mentalité of ordinary people. Looking into the void between extremes, their literature has thus charted, to borrow from Edward Said, “the territory of not-belonging.” In their writings on memory, the border that divides is not set as a default but rather appropriated for a critique of its dubious terms and illicit operations. By refusing
to belong exclusively to either side of the split world, their mnemonic practices enable the rearticulation of something evacuated or inaccessible from within and something withheld or banished in between.

Certainly, a sense of alienation was a vital force that gave rise to the novel in the modern era. György Lukács has accordingly defined the novel as “the literary form of the transcendent homelessness” in which “the contingent world” and “the problematic individual” are mutually constitutive.4 In the tradition of the European bildungsroman, it is commonly observed that young heroes are forced to take a journey, with their adventure tending to turn into a version of family romance in the end.5 Meanwhile, various migrant memoirs show that a return home—if it ever happens—hardly entails a recovery of what has been lost. As elucidated by immigrant artists, stories of exile often break “the illusion of complete belonging,” diverging from “the mythical biography of a nation.”6 Overlapping with these genres, the writings of Ch’oe Inhun and Pak Wansŏ call for a more historically nuanced approach to “symbolic forms of modernity” (Moretti) and “aesthetic individualism” (Boym) around the globe. Undeniably, the young protagonists of their novels are destined to escape, given that they seek refuge and autonomy. Nevertheless, the movement of the plot rarely fulfills the general teleology of development in Western novels of initiation. Fraught with scenes of separation and dissolution, Ch’oe’s and Pak’s family narratives do not quite maintain the fantasy of rehabilitation and rejuvenation, either. The nation’s colonial legacy and Cold War division situate the pursuit of individual freedom within a complex process of negotiating, and competing, with the statist interpellation of South Korean subjects.7 In this context, the liminal position that Ch’oe and Pak occupy is strategically employed to view anew the (b)order that divided the world. Shattering events are remembered as a way not so much to reassemble the fragments of the self, the family, or the nation but to reinscribe the very limits of those units. Memories of banishment, though painful and invasive, are reworked to think beyond and between the boundaries that enclose them.

For Ch’oe Inhun and Pak Wansŏ, the act of writing is inherently palimpsestic and translational. Born under Japanese rule, both authors were first enchanted by the world of literature through the language of the colonizer and then had to come to terms with the foreignness of their mother tongue. Pak recalls that it was at once liberating and frustrating to relearn Korean after she became fluent in Japanese.8 Calling her generation a “half-and-half generation” (ŏlch’igi sedae) whose language had been creolized, she thus reminded postcolonial writers in the new millennium of this contradiction, when South Korea’s drive for globalization (segyehwa) was in full swing: “The vestige of Japanese imperialism was . . . what we were to overcome by any means, whereas the culture of the Allies . . . was what to emulate. The grim reality, however, was that the [latter’s] literatures to be learned were not accessible without being mediated through the [former’s] language to be eliminated.”9 A comparable linguistic and cultural in-betweenness is echoed in Ch’oe’s Critical Phrase (Hwadu, 1994),10 a self-reflexive two-volume metanovel that interweaves accounts of his travels to the two former Cold War empires. Looking back on his first stay in the United States during the early 1970s, he describes an uncanny familiarity with this foreign land: “The Japanese books I had read were replete with ‘Western’ stories.”11 But precisely because he was “a slave philosopher” from a “peripheral colony,” he became sensitive to multilayered colonial relations, or, as he puts it, to “sorrowful lags” in the movement of human history.12 In addition, because he had a “crisis consciousness” about the linguistic medium, he came to take “infinite responsibility” in “responding to the powers determining literature internally and externally.”13 Indeed, without such an inexhaustible sense of responsibility, neither the
Division literature

multiple revisions of *The Square* (*Kwangjang*, 1960)—a founding text of *pundan munhak*—nor his unceasing literary experiments across genres, from poetry to drama, would have been made.\(^{14}\)

Stemming from the colonial condition, the *kyŏnggyein* sensibility of Ch’oe Inhun and Pak Wansŏ laid the foundation of their continual writings about Korea’s unfinished war. Neither author was a native Southerner; both had to take refuge there during wartime. While carving out their liminal positions in postwar society, their refugee experiences were noticeably dissimilar. Whereas Ch’oe’s family fled from Wonsan, a port city above the thirty-eighth parallel, by taking a landing ship tank (LST) toward Pusan, which was within the perimeter of the territory held by the UN, Pak’s family, with her brother injured, was stranded in Seoul during the period of North Korean occupation. Further inflected by their gender differences, each author has thus elaborated a distinctive aesthetics. Ch’oe, having crossed the fluctuating maritime demarcation line, exercises an oceanic imagination to navigate other possibilities. As discussed in detail later on, from *The Square* to *The Tempest* (*T’aep’ung*, 1973), the sea is used as a channel through which the protagonists can reach a third place where they can begin anew. In contrast, Pak, having witnessed the aftereffects of her brother’s escape from the front line, holds tightly to earthly “stakes”—a complex metaphor for a sign of belonging, among other things, as epitomized in the linked stories (*yŏnjak sosŏl*) “Momma’s Stake I, II, and III” (“Ŏmma ŭi mættuk,” 1980, 1981, and 1991)—for the family’s survival. Since her debut work *The Naked Tree* (*Namok*, 1970), Pak’s spirit of testimony has delved into home and body, in and on which the brutality of division was inscribed. If Ch’oe’s nautical vision drives his subjects to make an outward movement from delimitations on the land, Pak’s ground-level insight enables her narrators to uncover fractured memories buried below the surface of domestic tranquility. After all, both authors foreground characters on the border who, whether taking flight or at a standstill, defy the idea of exclusive belonging.

In the present examination of selected texts of Ch’oe Inhun and Pak Wansŏ, I therefore attend to how their liminal characters perceive, and react to, boundaries inside and beyond their own surroundings. Concerned with the specific bearings, including the gendered positions, of these authors, my analysis also notes their respective portrayals of bodies in pain. Briefly put, Ch’oe’s tormented heroes leverage moments of captivity and interrogation in order to be reborn in a new world. Pak’s vengeful female heroes can hardly conceive of such a rebirth and instead carry on the legacy of those whose death lacked a proper burial. Yet the aim of this comparative reading is not to flatten their particular aesthetics into a neat gender binary but rather to bring out aspects of *pundan munhak* that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

**Ch’oe Inhun and the dialectic of rebirth beyond the border**

Ch’oe Inhun (1936–2018) was born in the border town of Hoeryŏng, across the Tumen River from Jilin, China (a part of Manchuria). In 1947, two years after Liberation, his family was relocated to Wonsan, more than 600 km south, since Ch’oe’s father, who had been running a lumber mill, was categorized as a member of the hostile bourgeois class in Soviet-occupied North Korea. In December 1950, when UN forces were retreating under Chinese pressure, the family took an LST to Pusan. After spending one month in the provisional capital’s refugee camp, Ch’oe entered high school in Mokp’o, a city on the southwest coast. He came back to Pusan in 1952 to enter the School of Law at Seoul National University and moved to Seoul one year later, when the university returned to its original location. Without completing his undergraduate studies, he joined the army in 1956 and later during his term served as an interpreter and information officer. During his following seven years of service, he established himself as a prominent writer, especially with *The Square*, which was recognized as a “guidepost for our [han’guk] literature hereafter.”\(^{15}\)
Interwoven with Korea’s convoluted mid-century history, Ch’oe Inhun’s migratory experience during his youth seems to have shaped his kyŏnggyein consciousness. Moving from border town to port city, his “geographical rite of passage”16 probably gave rise to his oceanic imagination as well. Moored to traumatic memories from the past, however, his fugitive vision hovers around two primal scenes set in the North. In one, he is forced to castigate himself in front of his class at school for his “bourgeois” attitude, and in the other, he encounters an unknown woman who rushes with him to an air-raid shelter. The later, nauseating voyage to the South further marks an ambivalent watershed. Since this fortunate escape led to a refugee life, his crossing of the border intensifies, rather than alleviates, his sense of nonbelonging. Reactionary in the North and misfit in the South, his solitary heroes thus feel permanently exiled no matter which side they are on. Paradoxically, this sense of alienation renders them unafraid to traverse the boundaries determined by Cold War geopolitics and to maintain a critical distance from both blocs as well. Further hardening their outsider status and its concomitant imperviousness, the protagonists of The Square and The Tempest undergo surveillance, detainment, and interrogation—either as victim or as persecutor—before steering their way to new lives in neutral countries. Crucial to what Ch’oe has referred to as “the logic of rebirth,” this dialectical leap from the condition of captivity takes place in an extraterritorial space, such as in Panmunjom (The Square) or an uninhabited island (The Tempest). After being reborn as men whom Ch’oe might call “men of the world” (segyein), they envision their homeland at peace, but only from beyond its boundary—that is, from somewhere between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean.

Opening with the image of the deep blue sea, The Square (1960) recounts the memories of Yi Myŏngjun, who is one of a group of prisoners of war (POWs) heading to India on board the ship Tagore. We learn that he was a college student in the South, majoring in philosophy, when his father in the North appeared in a propaganda campaign for the Communist Party, which resulted in Myŏngjun being hauled in by a detective and beaten for being a “son of commies.”17 Because of the violence inflicted on his body, Myŏngjun realized that his life had been thrown “outside of ‘the law.’”18 Yet through the experience of bleeding, he could grasp “the way revolutionaries would suffer.”19 This dialectical movement from alienation to awakening is inverted negatively in his experience during the Korean War. When the Korean People’s Army occupied Seoul, Myŏngjun, then an officer serving for the North, confronted his old friend T’aesik, who had been taken into custody for espionage activities for the South. After torturing T’aesik in the place where Myŏngjun had once been interrogated by a southern police detective, as if “the police detective had returned to be incarnated inside his [Myŏngjun’s] body,” Myŏngjun attempted to rape Yunae, his ex-girlfriend and T’aesik’s current wife.20 But his scheme to be reborn as an evil person by “committing a sin that would inevitably confine him” proved a failure.21 Unlike the time when, as the victimized hero, he had been led to “the body’s way . . . the most visible way in life,”22 now as a perpetrator he could just bear witness to his own defeat.

The last instance of the life-death-rebirth dialectic in The Square unfolds after Myŏngjun is taken prisoner. Brought to the negotiation table for POW exchanges after the ceasefire, Myŏngjun says only one word, “chungnipkuk” (a neutral country), when asked his preference during the protracted and contentious process for repatriation. Not surprisingly, it is at Panmunjom that the protagonist chooses neither the North nor the South but a third possibility instead.23 While Panmunjom is now a historical site that is a symbol of Korea’s enduring division—and thus a barrier to movement—it is reconfigured in the novel as an exit where Myŏngjun, the individual on the border (kyŏnggyein), declares his decision to pursue a new life. Precisely because the in-between zone does not entirely belong to either side, and also because it permits only temporary expedients—like the Armistice Agreement signed there—Panmunjom is imagined as a locus at once liminal and transitional, from which an uncharted
route is to be taken. Thus, only after leaving the volatile area does Myŏngjun come to envisage Korea’s utopian future free from war. But this wishful dream barely registers as he disappears into the South China Sea in the end.

Taking up Myŏngjun’s unfinished journey from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean, The Tempest (1973) adds to the territory of not-belonging in Ch’oe’s literature. Set in a tropical archipelago during the final years of World War II, the novel depicts an alternative history of twentieth-century Asia by using anagrams: Aerok’ŭ (Korea), Nap’ayu (Japan), Aisenodin (Indonesia), and Nibūrit’a (Britain). The protagonist, Ot’omenak’ŭ (Kanemoto: a Japanese variation of Korea’s most common surname Kim), is an Imperial Nap’ayunian (Japanese) Army officer of Aerok’ian (Korean) origin. Currently stationed in Aisenodin’s (Indonesia’s) POW camp, he is given a special order to transfer by sea indigenous political detainees, along with Nibūrit’an (British) female internees, for negotiations with the anticolonial forces based on the other side of the archipelago. This special mission falls through due to the mutiny of the captives on board; subsequently, the transport vessel is overtaken by a typhoon and marooned on a desert island. Although he is among the survivors, Ot’omenak’ŭ (Kanemoto) nevertheless decides to die by suicide upon learning about Nap’ayu’s (Japan’s) defeat. But then, a third option is suggested by another survivor, K’arŭnosŭ (Sukarno), who had been a political prisoner under Ot’omenak’ŭ’s own supervision: become an Aisenodinian by contributing to its postcolonial rebuilding instead of remaining a Nap’ayunian war criminal or returning to Aerok’ŭ as a national traitor. While evocative of the Panmunjom scene in The Square, this dialectic of rebirth in effect diverges from the earlier vision of de-bordering. Confined to the island, Ot’omenak’ŭ’s metamorphosis is preordained by the laws of nature, like a typhoon suddenly appearing in the middle of the ocean, rather than being tenaciously pursued by the protagonist himself, as was the case with Myŏngjun at the negotiation table between the two Koreas.

To see the intertextual relationships between The Square and The Tempest requires broader contextualization of Ch’oe Inhun’s oeuvre. Published thirteen years apart, the two works are considered by the author as the first and the last, respectively, of a group of novels that he hoped would be read sequentially.24 To use Ch’oe’s own words, whereas the former guided him to “discover a very important terrain . . . on the map of literature,”25 the latter allowed him to experiment with “a principle for creative life on the earth” that he could not present before—that is, “the logic of rebirth.”26 Building on this account, critics have drawn a “direct connection” between the two texts.27 But the gap between the two novels is not negligible. During the writing of The Square, Ch’oe enjoyed the freedom ushered in by “the glorious April [Revolution in 1960]”,28 during the serialization of The Tempest in the 1970s, he faced the repression inflicted by Park Chung Hee’s military dictatorship. Feeling lost “in the world where authoring something wrong could lead to death,”29 Ch’oe seems to have arrived at a “path toward self-redemption”30 in The Tempest, as encapsulated in its epilogue. After being reborn as Panyak’im in Aisenodin, the protagonist Ot’omenak’ŭ is seen as an honorable man of the world (segyein) who has contributed to the independence of former colonies and to the unification of his divided homeland and its subsequent prosperity.

Although more concrete than Myŏngjun’s dream, fleetingly sketched at the end of The Square, this romantic closure of The Tempest has received mixed responses. In a contemporaneous review, Kim Yunsik considered its epilogue “unnecessary” (sajok), aside from the significance of Ch’oe Inhun’s anthropological methods.31 More recently, the fast-forwarded ending has been criticized for its “abruptness,” with the writer’s “anachronistic” attempt amounting to “a deception.”32 At issue is not only Ot’omenak’ŭ’s dramatic metamorphosis but also K’arŭnosŭ’s idealized mentorship. Generally interpreted as representing Sukarno, the leader of Indonesia’s independence struggle and a key figure in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), K’arŭnosŭ
is portrayed in the novel as a seasoned politician and a messianic advocate for the principle of rebirth. Intriguingly, Sukarno's leadership had already diminished both on the domestic and the international level by the mid-1960s; hence, argues Kwŏn Potŭræ, The Tempest could not be an “epic of possibility,” as in The Square, but rather a “eulogy to its blockade.”

Indeed, the discourse of Korea’s unification through neutralization (chungniphua t’ongillon) was widely circulated after the 1960 revolution, but it did not last long. Despite the temporary thaw between the two superpowers and the emergence of NAM at the turn of the decade, the Cold War (b)order was reinforced rather than reduced in the 1960s. Far more crushing, the promise of the April Revolution was usurped by Park Chung Hee, who came to power through a military coup d’état one year later. The incomplete task of Korea’s decolonization was pushed to the side, once again, by state-led anticommunist developmentalism. With the expansion of US intervention in the third world, South Korea eventually settled into the global capitalist order by normalizing its diplomacy with Japan and dispatching troops to support the United States in the Vietnam War, for instance. Meanwhile, the rift between the two Koreas deepened further, as each was on its way to consolidating its own form of authoritarian regime. Several months after issuing their first joint statement in 1972, both adopted new constitutions that fortified the rule of their respective dictators. Serialized in a major newspaper during the first year of the tyrannical Yusin (Restoration) era, The Tempest thus pushed Ch’oe Inhun to “take the word ‘fiction’ as an experimental condition to the purest degree” so that the novel could be read not as a story of any particular country but of all countries and not as a story of any particular individual but of all people.

Written when individual lives were contained under the banner of national restoration, The Tempest’s redemptive fantasy untimely presents revolutionary solidarity among the weak across Cold War borders. Through the rebirth of its protagonist, whose collaborative past has parallels with Park Chung Hee’s personal history, Ch’oe Inhun further writes back to the nation’s return to coloniality thirty years after Liberation. But such a critique could be made only from afar. Projected into an alternative space and mediated by transnational encounters, his imaginative flight from divided Korea holds onto metaphysics more than ever under the Yusin system. Since The Square, Ch’oe Inhun’s dialectic of rebirth has involved border crossing (or border blurring) movements, while death in the ocean, either biological or social, hardly leaves bodily traces. This is not the case with death on land, however, as Pak Wansŏ’s war narratives, to which we turn now, make plain. Correspondingly, they present different types of kyŏnggyein.

Pak Wansŏ and witnesses of the bodies from the border

Pak Wansŏ (1931–2011) was born in Pakchŏk-kol, a small hamlet on the outskirts of Kaesŏng. Once the capital of the Koryŏ dynasty, the area became a shifting borderland following the 1945 partition. Located at the waist of the peninsula, it was part of the South at first and then of the North as the war raged back and forth in 1950. Integral to Pak’s down-to-earth acumen, her direct exposure to the Kaesŏng locality was limited to the prewar period. Her mother, after having lost her husband in the early 1930s, took Pak’s elder brother to Seoul for his education, leaving little Pak in the hands of her grandparents. A few years later, the daughter was also brought to the colonial capital to attend a school in the downtown area. The family actually lived away from the main district in a rented room in Hyŏnjŏ-dong, which was outside the city gates. As detailed in her autobiographical works, such as “Momma’s Stake I” (Ŏmma i mulltuk, 1980) and Who Ate Up All the Shinga? (Kŭ mant’ŏn singa nŭn nuga ta mŏgŏsŏlkkka, 1992), Pak’s rural–urban migration during her childhood was fundamental to the shaping of her kyŏnggyein sensibility. Missing the borderless paradise that she had left behind, the girl from Pakchŏk-kol...
had to follow discriminatory rules in Seoul, such as using the toilet only after the landlord’s family had done so.39

Pak Wansŏ’s awareness of social boundaries was enhanced through modern education, for which she had to commute from the periphery to the core. Attending a prestigious school was a primary step toward becoming a new woman, according to Pak’s mother—who, as an “old-fashioned woman” herself, could barely grasp what such newness meant.40 With her daily boundary crossing for the purpose of accessing enlightenment, however, little Pak acquired a sense of only partial belonging. Going to a school inside the gates, she held onto her pride of having roots in the countryside so that she could differentiate herself from her classmates, who were contained within the modern Japanese-speaking sphere. Nonetheless, upon returning to her hometown for vacation, she boasted about her Western fashions and imported goods, even though they were nothing but imitations. Under the shadow of the mother’s contradictory attitudes toward traditional norms and the ideals of modernity, the daughter thus cultivated in Hyŏnjŏ-dong what Pak Wansŏ described as an “awareness of being outside the gate” (mun pak ŭisik).41 Straddling the two coexisting worlds without being absorbed into either, Pak could see through not only the duplicity engendered by the process of modernization, but also the rupture produced by colonial mimicry. She soon sensed the hypocrisy of the new woman personified by her teacher and eventually veered away from the fantasy that had been instilled in her by her elderly mother. In 1953, instead of finishing her college education, Pak chose to marry a man with whom she was acquainted from her work at the US Army PX. He was a contractor who did not belong to that “humiliating” workplace, and more importantly, he was from a chungin (“middle people”) family without a noble lineage.42

Pak Wansŏ’s interstitial position was further complicated as she bore witness to the worst of humanity, including her own, during wartime. When the UN forces retreated from Seoul less than four months after recapturing the capital, the family tried but failed, once again, to flee southward. Because her brother, having escaped from the People’s Army, had been inadvertently shot in the leg by a South Korean soldier, the best they could do was to hide in Hyŏnjŏ-dong.43 Seeking refuge outside the city gates, Pak suffered through, to use her own phrase, “the time of the worm.” Already treated as subhuman by their aggressors, she transgressed moral standards in order to support her family: without any qualms, she broke into evacuated houses to steal food.44 Meanwhile, as the front line moved back and forth, the division between the two ideologies became indiscriminate. At times invisible, the bordering power was contingent and ubiquitous, thereby consuming from the inside out the lives of those who had narrowly survived. Pak’s brother was “a classic case” of those beings who were degraded after crossing the line of fire. It did not take long before the “miracle” of his return dissolved into a “nightmare” for the women at home.45 With symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, he was gradually reduced to a bestial being, losing all the virtues he once embodied. To see the fall of the lofty brother was all the more appalling, since the family’s young patriarch had been the “religion” of the mother and an “idol” for the sister. Looking over the unfathomable wound on his leg, the sister felt that “It was really hard not to wish the bullet had penetrated his heart.”46 When he drew his last breath, his family did not spend even one single day in mourning. More anxious about decomposition, they “threw out” the dead body and “rushed to eat red bean porridge.”47

The figure of the brother in Pak Wansŏ’s autobiographical fiction has been identified by scholars as one of the many who were abused, deserted, and then forgotten by the two regimes on the Korean Peninsula.48 Unable (but not unwilling) to claim any political belonging, he is caught in between, similar to Ch’oe Inhun’s heroes on the border—but not quite. Unlike those who could imagine a new life beyond the polarized land, the brother is left to die in obscurity. Determined to testify about “the time of the worm,” Pak has thus invested her writing with...
We Jung Yi

the wound inflicted by the division, even though doing so requires painful remembering.49 Far from offering a utopian third space, her testimonial writing unearths war-scarred bodies, which are bleeding, broken, or animalized. With no promise of reparations, they rather invite the reader to mourn the bodies hurriedly buried after their undeserved deaths, in addition to reconnecting with each other those who have survived without speaking about their sufferings. And if we read, from this perspective, “Momma’s Stake II” in juxtaposition with Pak’s debut novel The Naked Tree and with her later Korean War narratives, the evolving mother–daughter plot suggests another kind of solidarity among the weak grounded in the realm of domestic life. Bound up with daily concerns and translated into interpersonal terms, this solidarity is distinct from Ch’oe’s metaphysical route toward the redemption of the masculine self. Related to spectral or heterogeneous figures haunting Korea’s division, Pak’s female subjects come to share, piece by piece, what they have witnessed—if not verbally then physically.

The Naked Tree (Namok, 1970) tells the story of Yi Kyŏng, a salesperson at the US Army PX, and her nameless mother, who had lost her two sons (i.e., Kyŏng’s elder brothers) when their home was bombed during the war. With the extinction of the male family members, the remaining family has broken apart. While the mother gives up any desire to continue living, the daughter clings to the possibility of moving on. After multiple failures to stop the mother from fixating on her deceased brothers, Kyŏng thus plots a revenge scenario in which she becomes a “Yankee slut” by bringing an American GI home. In making use of his orientalist gaze, she also wishes to exteriorize her suffering, which cannot be expressed otherwise: “It wouldn’t be my responsibility if I were broken apart. . . . I wanted to shout it, so everyone could hear.”50 Like Myŏngjun’s attempted rape in The Square, or Ot’omenak’ŭ’s suicide attempt in The Tempest, Kyŏng’s attempt at self-mutilation here is a desperate gesture to break through the condition of confinement. Like Myŏngjun, her attempt ends in failure, but unlike Ot’omenak’ŭ, she is not offered a new life by the foreign military man. Instead, Kyŏng’s sexual encounter with the racial other triggers, over “the bedspread dyed in a deep blood-red,” her memory of witnessing the torn-apart bodies of her brothers. Storming out of the hotel room in tears, she soon begins to recollect the fragmented past of her family.51 Nevertheless, unlocking the hitherto-blocked trauma does not itself lead the young hero to reconcile with the other survivor at home. On the contrary, now that she clearly remembers, the daughter cannot forgive the mother, who laments, “The gods are so cruel. Why did they take all my sons, leaving only the girl behind?”52 If, as Dori Laub observes, “bearing witness . . . is a process that includes the listener,” Kyŏng’s testimonial practice in The Naked Tree remains incomplete without forming an intimate bonding with “an other—in the position of one who hears.”53

But it is also this incomplete witnessing that drove Pak Wansŏ to rework the mother–daughter dynamic throughout her mnemonic writings. In “Momma’s Stake II” (1981), the daughter narrator is now a middle-aged woman with five children and has a comfortable middle-class home in Seoul in which she is able to support her aged mother with the utmost care. Beneath their seemingly stable everyday life in the present, however, lies the unspeakable loss of their brother/son during the Korean War. Set three decades after the traumatizing event, the belated process of witnessing unfolds in the story as one that is mediated and transferential. It is also triggered by bodily wounds and psychic symptoms, as in Pak’s first novel, but it is the mother, this time, who re-enacts the repressed memory. Hallucinating after surgery, she treats her bandaged leg as if it were the body of her son. Forced to watch the mother’s imaginary reunion with the dead brother on a blood-soaked hospital bed, the daughter trembles in terror at first.54 Recalling the crimson hotel room from which Kyŏng fled in The Naked Tree, this hospital scene in “Momma’s Stake II” adds another layer to the moment of re-experiencing the violent past. Transformed into an eyewitness (chŭngin) to the mother’s struggle, a struggle that is sensible only
Division literature

to the daughter, the daughter can finally see that the mother has, silently yet persistently, been battling against the monstrous division. After all, the mother had engaged in her own way of de-bordering by having the cremated body of her son drift away to the other side of the DMZ. In asking her descendants to do the same thing with her own body after her death, she calls for responses from the living to the still-divided Korean Peninsula.

Originating from the outside consciousness that had been formed through her experience of colonial modernization and war atrocities, Pak Wansŏ’s boundary sensitivity did not dwindle away with the end of the global Cold War. On the contrary, she plunged even more deeply into her testimonial practices in the post-authoritarian era. Admittedly, ideological and discursive shifts in the democratized South eased the burden of censorship, on the one hand, and improved the position of female writers, on the other. Yet she felt that “the force of forgetting” became more “frightening” in such an “age of peace and prosperity.” “For the things that have not been restored,” she thus wrote over and over again about how ordinary people, who could not take flight from the divided peninsula, had lived through the time of the worm. And with more proximity to the bare truth of what happened during the war, her autobiographical works written in the 1990s—such as Who Ate Up All the Shinga? and Was There Really a Mountain? (Kŭsan i chŏngnal kŏgi issŏsŏlka, 1995)—further compel us to witness the everyday operation of Korea’s division in the so-called post–Cold War world.

Rereading division literature in the post-Cold War era

Acknowledged as representative writers of han’guk munhak, Ch’oe Inhun and Pak Wansŏ have expanded its territory through their mnemonic works about national division. Born under Japanese colonial rule on the northern side of the DMZ, both writers became estranged from their places of origin through war, and their experiences of migration and containment in a divided Korea cultivated their sense of nonbelonging. By countering the official historiography of the authoritarian regimes during the Cold War, their novels have thus established cultural legacies of kyŏnggyein, each in a distinctive manner. Ch’oe’s dialectic of rebirth explores the third way beyond a polarizing world as it transforms the male protagonist, through the crossing of borders, from a prisoner to a segyein. In comparison, Pak’s spirit of witnessing recollects the bodies, caught between the hard-edged boundaries of ideology, that, in turn, pose the question about the limit of humanity. Whereas the former’s external movement, driven by a metaphysical dynamic, offers an oceanic vision for an alliance of weak countries across the Pacific, the latter’s internal observations, combined with her outside consciousness, gesture toward domestic reconciliation among survivors through collective mourning. While taking different directions, when juxtaposed, the liminal individuals featured by the two authors reveal a more layered picture of pundan munhak. As a privileged site of memory, the literary space has expanded beyond the geopolitical delimitations during the Cold War by invoking the imagination of de-bordering.

In twenty-first-century South Korea, figures of kyŏnggyein are foregrounded, more widely than ever, in the culture industry. Now that the two states on the peninsula have entered a new phase, the people in the South habitually encounter characters from the North in everything from blockbuster films to mobile content. However, reminiscent of the images of captives and exiles inherited from pundan munhak, in the post–Cold War era the increase of onscreen bodies from the other side of the demarcation line still seems mired in the nation’s geopolitical impasse. To better witness the lasting effects of the division embedded in the fabric of everyday life, and to revive a vision for de-bordering beyond state-led rapprochement, it is time to reread the works by Ch’oe Inhun and Pak Wansŏ.
Notes

1 Paik Nak-chung has elaborated a theory of the “division system” (pundan ch’eje) on the Korean Peninsula, in which he emphasizes the system’s colonial origin and structural relationship with the world economy. “Coloniality in Korea and a South Korean Project for Overcoming Modernity.”

2 For recent approaches to Korea’s division in terms of border(ing), see De-bordering Korea and Kyŏnggye esŏ pundan ŭl tasi poda.


4 Lukács, Theory of the Novel, 78, 121.


6 Boym, The Future of Nostalgia, 255.

7 See Hughes, Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea, chapter 3.

8 Pak has also recounted how difficult it was to learn Japanese when she entered elementary school in colonial Seoul, writing, “It was rather a disadvantage to have mastered the Korean alphabet already.” Pak Wansŏ, “Sŏgyang ŭl tŭng e chigo kŭrnja rŭl paptta,” 30.

9 Pak Wansŏ, “’P’osŏt’usinyaingminjŏkkŏng sanghwang esŏt’ kŭl sŏngi,” 653, 656.

10 I translate the title Hwadu as “critical phrase” here, but the literal meaning of the word is “head of speech,” which has a Buddhist connotation that comes from the practice of Zen meditation.

11 Ch’oe Inhun, Hwadu I, 139.

12 Ibid., 413, 139, 149.

13 Ibid., 484, 119.

14 Ch’oe Inhun has revised The Square ten times since its first appearance in 1960, for a total of eleven versions (Kim Pyŏngik, “’T’eksŭt’’ŭ chinhwawŏŭmimun the hwakchang,” 412). In this chapter, I am using the 10th edition published by Muhak kwa chisŏngsa (“the 6th Muhak kwa chisŏngsa edition”) in 2008.

15 Paek Ch’ŏl, “Uri munhak ŭl top’yo nŭm sewŏjida’,” 4, as quoted in Chŏn Soyŏng, “Ch’oe Inhun yŏnbo.” 31. For biographical information about Ch’oe Inhun, see also Chŏn, 19–31.

16 Regarding his “geographical rite of passage,” see Ch’oe Inhun’s essay “Wŏnsin i toegi wihan munmuyŏnghan ŭisik” (1979), 20.

17 Ch’oe Inhun, Kwangjang, 77.

18 Ibid., 80.

19 Ibid., 77.

20 Ibid., 171. In Ch’oe’s last revision (the 7th Muhak kwa chisŏngsa edition in 2010), this scene has been changed into a dream. See Kim Pyŏngik, “’T’eksŭt’’ŭ chinhwawŏŭmimun the hwakchang,” 413–15; and Ch’oe Yun’gyŏng, “Kwangjang kaejak ŭl ŭ-ui,” 369–70.

21 Ch’oe Inhun, Kwangjang, 170.

22 Ibid., 77.

23 Ibid., 196–99.

24 In the essay mentioned earlier, Ch’oe Inhun writes, “In the final analysis, I would like Kwangjiang (The Square, 1960), Hoesaegin (A Grey Man, 1963–64), Sŏnyu (Journey to the West, 1966–67), Sŏsŏga kubossi ŭiril (A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist, 1970–72), and T’aep’ung (The Tempest, 1973) to be read as a series.” Ch’oe Inhun, “Wŏnsin,” 29.


27 Chŏng Kwari, “Morŭgi, morŭryŏ hagi, morŭn ch’e hagi,” 114.

28 The preface to the first printing of The Square in November 1960, collected in Kwangjang, 21.

29 Conversation between Ch’oe Inhun and Kim Inho, “Kiŏk iranin kŏt,” 330.


32 Sŏ Ŭnju, “Ch’oe Inhun sosŏl yŏn’gu,” 116; Pak Insŏng, “Ch’oe Inhun ŭi T’aep’ung e na’an ɾidae ch’ago wa p’yŏnghaeng segye ŭi sangsangnŏk,” 96.


34 Hong Sŏk-ryul, “4-wŏl minju hangjaenggi chungnipha wa tongil.”

35 Ch’oe Inhun, “Wŏnsin,” 30. Except for the final installment to “The Voice of the Governor-General” (“’Ch’ongdeok ŭi sori,” 1967–76), Ch’oe Inhun stopped writing novels after the serialization of The Tempest until Critical Phrase, which was published in the early 1990s. Instead, he wrote multiple plays after the mid-1970s, in which he dealt with the world of myths and folktales.
Division literature

36 See Hughes, Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea, chapter 5.
37 In fact, Ch’oe’s metaphysical logic in The Tempest is layered with an orientalist gaze at the primitive island(ers) in the South. Regarding the East Asian fantasy about South Asian countries that is implicit in the novel, see Sunyoung Park, “Dissident Dreams,” 172–73.
38 Regarding the evaporation of Myŏngjun in The Square, Kim Hyŏn says, “There is a death but there is no dead body,” Ch’oe Inhun, “Pyŏndong hanŭn sidae ŭi yesulga ŭi t’angму,” 79.
39 Pak Wansŏ, Who Ate Up All the Shinga? 39.
40 Regarding the different images of the new woman figured by the mother and the daughter in “Momma’s Stake I,” see Kyeong-Hee Choi, “Neither Colonial nor National.”
41 Pak Wansŏ, “Momma’s Stake I,” 137.
42 Pak Wansŏ, Was There Really a Mountain? 289, 302.
43 Pak Wansŏ, Who Ate Up All the Shinga? 241–46. With the exception of The Naked Tree, in Pak’s earlier works, including “Momma’s Stake II,” the North is held accountable for the direct cause of the brother’s death. In this regard, Kang Jinho observes the operation of the anticommunist unconscious in Pak’s writings during the Cold War period. Kang, “Pan’gongju wa chajŏn sosŏl ŭi hyŏngsik.”
44 Pak Wansŏ, Who Ate Up All the Shinga? 247.
45 Pak Wansŏ, “Momma’s Stake II,” 171–76.
46 Pak Wansŏ, Kŭ san i, 11.
47 Ibid., 181.
48 Yi Kyŏngjae, “Pak Wansŏ sosŏl ŭi oppa p’yosang yŏn’gu,” 368.
49 Pak Wansŏ writes, “The division of our people is now acknowledged as a fact. It has stopped bleeding long ago, and become a hard scab . . . The people for whom reunification is their true dream [however] cannot help picking at the wound of division so that it bleeds painfully.” Pak Wansŏ, “Mich’ŏ ch’amanæji mot’an t’onggok,” 161–62.
50 Pak Wansŏ, The Naked Tree, 127 (emphasis added).
51 Ibid., 134–35.
52 Ibid., 148.
53 Lab, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” 70.
54 Pak Wansŏ, “Momma’s Stake II,” 169.
55 Ibid., 182–83.
57 This is the title of Pak Wansŏ’s short story “Pogwŏn toeji mot’an kŏttŭl ŭi wihayŏ” (1989).
58 Seung-Hee Jeon notes “a chronological movement from a more fictionalized narrative to a more factually accurate one” in Pak Wansŏ’s autographical writings and emphasizes that Pak’s literary search for truth is more than the production of factual accuracy. Jeon, “War Trauma, Memories, and Truths,” 632.

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Chŏng Kwari. “Mor’ugi, mortoryŏ hagi, morŭn ch’e hagi: Kwajang esŏ T’aep’ung ūro, hognun chabaljok muj ū saengjon sul” [Not to Know, Intend Not to Know, or Pretend Not to Know: From The Square to The Tempest, or the Survival Tactics of Voluntary Ignorance]. Sihak kuwa onhak 1 (2001): 111–43.


Division literature


