Throughout the summer and fall of 2000, the hottest trends in South Korea were those that hailed from the “Chairman of the National Defense Commission” on the other side of the 38th parallel, Kim Jong-il. During the days of and months following the historic inter-Korean summit talks in Pyongyang in June of that year, the South Korean public was afforded several looks at the infamous chairman on his own terms and discovered to its amazement that it rather liked what it saw. The man who appeared on their television screens and front pages of newspapers, suddenly stripped of years of demonizing propaganda, was “warm and cute,” “unexpectedly humorous,” and “shockingly likable.”1 From the large sunglasses he donned on the tarmac while waiting for the geriatric South Korean president to disembark from the plane to the elevator shoes he wore under his signature gray pants, and from his affable manner of addressing people by their given rather than
their family names to his charismatic calls to empty the glasses in “one shot” even when the glasses in question were filled with champagne, the immense popularity of that season of “all things chairman” mirrored the exact degree to which Kim had been vilified in the past. Even his storied fondness for women, so long the mark of a depraved sadist in South Korean portrayals of the North Korean leader during the decades of former authoritarian rule, suddenly seemed the natural outpouring of a great passion befitting a man of stature. “The Kim Jong-il Shock,” as the mass media called it, embodied the wave of popular feeling that inter-Korean reconciliation, if not outright reunification, was not only inevitable but also imminent.

Though this anticipation would be frustrated shortly by a subsequent sequence of political events on the global stage, the reigning mood in South Korea in the first year of the new millennium was undoubtedly one of reconciliation. And it was in this atmosphere that Hwang Sok-yong’s novel, *The Guest (Sonnim)*, made its timely, and critically acclaimed, appearance. Serialized during the fall and winter of 2000 in the daily newspaper *Hanguk ilbo* (and published as a paperback the following spring), the novel immediately generated a number of scholarly responses united in praise. At a time when critics who were raised on the weighty fare of “politics” and “history” were bemoaning the unbearable lightness of literature in postauthoritarian South Korea, here was a work of fiction that brought back the weightiest subject of them all, the Korean War and the division of the peninsula, and made it freshly relevant. “Deconstructing the structures of division engendered by the Cold War” and replacing a “half-nation perspective” with a “whole-nation perspective,” The Guest moved “beyond the metaphysics of division” to recover a “polyphony of voices as a principle of reconciliation” and “illuminate a path leading to national reconciliation.” The author himself acknowledged in the epilogue that reconciliation had been foremost on his mind in writing the book: “It was this author’s original intention . . . to urge us toward the beginning of a new century, a century of reconciliation and coexistence.”

Such statements about the novel raise an obvious question. What does national reconciliation mean in twenty-first-century Korea? And in the dozen years since “the Kim Jong-il Shock,” the questions have become more agonizing, not less. The figure who had seemed, for that brief moment in
2000, to combine urbanity, a sense of humor, and backbone in a way that no man dressed in such drab outfit had any business commanding (and who might, therefore, make a surprisingly sensible partner in a dialogue) reverted with stunning rapidity to being a dictator holding up one nodal point of the global “Axis of Evil” when the White House turned especially hawkish under the George W. Bush presidency; since coming to power in 2008, the Lee Myung Bak Blue House also steered a speedy course away from the hopeful declarations of the 2000 inter-Korean summit talks. After declaring the ill-fated and short-lived “Vision 3000,” which would provide aid to North Korea contingent upon two conditions unacceptable to the North Korean regime, namely immediate denuclearization and “opening,” it piled up one roadkill after another in its haste, from the cessation of Diamond Mountain tours to the imposition of a fresh slate of sanctions against North Korea in the wake of the alleged torpedoing of a South Korean navy corvette.5 Today, after Kim Jong-il’s death, the clock seems to be moving back in time. In the North, Kim Jong-il’s son and successor consciously styles himself in the image of his grandfather, and in the South, accusing someone of harboring North Korean loyalties has emerged once again as a prominent, and highly effective, political tactic.6 As we approach the sixty-first anniversary of the armistice that suspended active hostilities without ending the war in Korea, what South Korean thinker Paik Nak-chung has called “the division system” in and around the peninsula appears to have renewed its lease on life.7

With these contexts in mind, I take Hwang Sok-yong’s novel as a site from which to think about, once again, inter-Korean reconciliation, its terms, its conditions of possibility, and its limitations in the troubled present. The Guest may be said to offer a sustained meditation on reconciliation on at least three interconnected levels. The story of one Ryu Yoseop (Korean transliteration of the Biblical name “Joseph”), an elderly Protestant minister living in New York who travels to his birthplace in North Korea, The Guest first follows the process by which one man achieves reconciliation with both the living members of his extended family and the ghosts of his war-torn past. But since his hometown is not just any old place but a village in Sinchon (Sincheon), Hwanghae Province, the site of an estimated thirty-five thousand civilian deaths during some fifty-plus days of US occupation in the
early months of the Korean War, reconciliation must occur not only at the level of contested personal memories but also at the level of ongoing history war. On the second plane, following upon the first, the novel explores the relationship between different versions of official histories (and the national logics on which they are grounded), as well as the relationship between official and unofficial narratives of the Korean War, by foregrounding testimony. Finally, the novel moves beyond representation of a massacre and revision of history to a performance of reconciliation by turning the space of the novel into the space of a funerary rite. With its adoption of the twelve-act structure of *Jinogui gut*, a shamanic ritual whose purpose is to lead the dead safely to the next world, *The Guest* has been hailed as a novel that creatively reinterprets, and indeed reinvigorates, the most “native” of Korean traditions. According to the author in his commentary on the novel, this is a performance designed to exact reconciliation with tradition in a manner that finally overcomes the twentieth century, which was pursued to horrific ends in Korea, as elsewhere, in the name of modernity.

Hwang Sok-yong’s commentary suggests that it is on the last of these planes that reconciliation at a national level would finally become possible. In suggesting this, Hwang is certainly not alone, nor has he been the first on the scene. As every Korean high school student who has ever been tested about the theme of Yun Heung-gil’s *Jangma (Monsoon)* knows, tradition (especially of the folk, shamanic variety) as a medium of reconciliation for war-torn and ideologically divided Korea has been a familiar trope in Korean literature for many decades. What makes *The Guest* such an interesting case to consider, however, is that the vision of tradition-mediated national reconciliation that the author puts forward in his own reading of the novel contradicts the vision of reconciliation worked out in the text on the other two levels of personal revelation and historical revisionism. Resisting the temptation to fold one into the other, I would like to insist on the difference between these two visions and explore the premises and conditions of possibility of each. I argue that this gap forces into visibility the structural constraints and critical misrecognitions that complicate inter-Korean reconciliation.

Central to the article’s analysis will be the question of reconciliation’s relationship to truth. As numerous truth and reconciliation commissions
around the world from South Africa to Canada have shown, the general insight in postconflict societies has been that the establishment of truth is a necessary, though not adequate, precondition for achieving reconciliation. Kim Dong-choon, the former chair of South Korea’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), has summarized this relationship succinctly in setting out the agenda for the Korean TRC: “By verifying the truth of historical events, the Commission seeks to foster reconciliation between victims and perpetrators.”9 The Guest forces us to consider scenarios in which truth may be decoupled from reconciliation. Where truth may actually hinder reconciliation, what is the price of insisting on truth without reconciliation, and of implementing reconciliation without truth? Attentiveness to this question might allow us to reframe reconciliation not as the natural consequence of establishing truth, incontrovertibly and once and for all, but as an agonizing attempt to close the gap between truth and justice.

“Sinchon, 1950”: Histories at War

For nearly two months in late 1950, residents of Sinchon, a major district in South Hwanghae Province just north of the 38th parallel, slaughtered one another, leaving an estimated thirty-five thousand dead. Neither the perpetrators nor the victims of the violence were soldiers in the strict sense. The killings occurred not as a part of some tactical battle maneuver, essentially a confrontation between strangers, but as a series of reprisals within a well-established community with a long shared history. As such, the massacre bore the intensely personal character of violence articulated at a close range on the bodies of people intimately known. Some of the killers were equipped with modern firearms, but many others with only simple farming implements; slitting throats and hacking off limbs with hoes and sickles, these men literally bathed themselves in the blood of their neighbors or childhood friends.

The violence was a result of a fierce struggle between communists and Protestants, a conflict whose origins were deeply rooted in the turbulent history of early modern Korea. An area of vigorous missionary activity since the 1880s, Hwanghae Province boasted a sizable population of Korean converts to the Protestant faith by the end of the Japanese colonial period,
the majority of which came from families of mid-sized landowners. When colonial rule ended in August of 1945, Protestants in North Korea’s five provinces moved quickly to organize a united front, with the goal of ensuring a noncommunist government in their region. The Communist Party, on the other hand, recruited heavily from the classes of tenant-farmers and impoverished peasants and established the Interim People’s Committee in 1946 as the provisional governing organ. In the years of growing political polarization that ensued—a polarization that ultimately resulted in the establishment of two separate regimes on the Korean peninsula in August of 1948 and the outbreak of full-scale war in June of 1950—Protestants in the North came to feel that a communist government would threaten the very grounds, literally, of life as they had known it. Sweeping land reforms that did away with the category of landlord altogether left many Protestant landowners disaffected, as did the persecution of the church. To add insult to injury, representatives of the Interim People’s Committee entrusted with the authority to carry out the land reform at the local level were often poor peasants or farmhands from the area, well known to Protestant landowners as their social inferiors. Enmity between the groups thus became personal. Mounting tensions led to several violent episodes, and young Protestant men organized themselves in an armed retaliatory unit called the “Protestant Young Men’s League” (Gidok Cheongnyeonhoe), aided by secretly dispatched members of anticommunist groups from the South who would later go on to organize a guerrilla army that remained active in North Korea until 1952.

It was this group, then, that was primarily responsible for the massacre in Sinchon. The success of the Incheon Landing had turned the tide of war against North Korea, and by October of 1950, US forces were pushing northward. As the Korean People’s Army beat a hasty retreat, those who had aided the communist government were stranded. Protestant young men came out of their hiding to “secure” individual towns in preparation for the arrival of the US forces. They also meted out their own brand of justice. The struggle between the communists and Christians, when all was said and done, left a quarter of Sinchon’s entire population dead. By December of 1950, following the Chinese entry into the war, US forces were once again in retreat. Facing the inevitable return of Hwanghae Province to communist
control, Protestant participants in the massacre left their homes and fled south, never to return.

In a bare-bones summary, this is the account *The Guest* gives of what happened in Sinchon in the autumn and early winter of 1950, an “internal affair” through and through, a tooth-and-nail struggle for survival and control waged between Korean Protestants and Korean communists. In providing such an account, the novel revises existing historical narratives of “Sinchon 1950,” especially those that have been officially sanctioned in North and South Korea. Referring to the event as the “Massacre of Sinchon Civilians by American Imperialists,” North Korean history has long claimed that a mass murder took place at the hands of US soldiers acting under the order to obliterate the popular base for communist support. In the South, the dominant narrative has been the right-wing view that the “incident” was “patriotic” in nature and “defensive” in origin. Men under the banner of “Save Our Nation” (*Guguk dongjihoe*) and security forces seeking to restore order (*chiandae*) in their hometowns were responsible for the violence that started on October 13, 1950, but this violence was an uprising rather than a massacre, a heroic attempt to liberate Sinchon from the communists and prepare the way for the northward advance of the US forces. While the violence went through five different cycles at least, during which the left and the right alternated in commanding the upper hand, the guilt of provocation lay with the communists since they had earlier committed systematic preemptive violence against “persons under suspicion”—former landlords, intellectuals, churchgoers, and rightist students and teachers (each party member had been given a quota of “four reactionary heads”). An early history of the event to come out of South Korea is tellingly entitled *Flames of Anti-Communist Struggle: The History of the Worthy and Heroic Student Uprising against Communism in Hwanghae Province on October 13, 1950*.

The sharp divergence in these histories suggests that there is much at stake here. As the culmination of Korea’s colonial history or as one of the starting points for the history of modern Korea’s division, the event can influence whether subsequent developments in each state could be seen as a process of decolonization or neocolonization. Indeed, in the North, the physical target of a raid that started the bloodbath in Sinchon—the People’s
Committee Headquarters, later the US Army Headquarters—is today a museum that highlights wartime atrocities committed by the United States. If vivid murals showing “American imperialist beasts” (Mije yasu) burying babies alive, dragging bound women with bared breasts, and branding old men with hot irons are any indication, the museum is devoted to ensuring that Sinchon remains the cornerstone of a national history that debunks US justification of its interventionist role in Korea and of its self-representation as the guardian of civilian lives around the world in political systems less humane than its own. This is a national history that also presents the Korean War as a war of liberation against imperialism waged in continuation of the struggle for independence first begun against the Japanese.

Sinchon has been much less prominent in South Korean public memory. Except for two early accounts (1955, 1957) compiled by men who had participated in the so-called “righteous uprising” (euigeo) and subsequent guerrilla warfare against the communists, and a treatment in the Hwanghae Province volume of the Bukhan minju tongil undongs (History of the Democratic Unification Movement in North Korea) series, published by the government-affiliated Institute of North Korean Studies in 1990, Sinchon received little academic or popular attention until after the publication of The Guest.12 It is not difficult to guess why. As an “uprising” against communists, it may merit the praise of any regime that sees anticommunism as sufficient justification for right-wing violence, but it was ultimately a failed one whose leaders had to flee south to save their necks. While North Korea can claim the moral legitimacy of pure victimhood in their historical narrative—as represented by the voices of children, for example—the South Korean position is still that of a perpetrator, even if it is to be granted that anticommunism provided nationalist justification. Sinchon also brings up the highly sensitive subject of right-wing violence committed against civilian populations, numerous instances of which were simply buried and banned from public memory during South Korea’s authoritarian decades. The subject of civilian massacres committed during the Korean War still divides the political field in South Korea today, such that it has become one of the markers of political identity along the left-right spectrum.13

Where history remains deadlocked, Hwang Sok-yong’s novel suggests, fiction must come to the rescue. “The novelist must also take up the duties
of a historian,” writes Im Hong-bae, “when uncovering the truth behind the massacre which occurred in Sinchon, Hwanghae Province, a matter over which the left and the right still remain stridently at odds.”14 As a historian, the author of *The Guest* dismisses North Korean history as simply untrue (by presenting a narrative of Sinchon in which US troops are nowhere to be found) and undercuts South Korean history as grossly unjustified (by identifying the right wing as specifically Christian, not nationalist). Though a work of fiction, *The Guest* gathers empirical validation for the version of Sinchon it offers by employing several of the strategies associated with documentary novels.15 One such strategy derives its effect from the assertion of extra-textual verification. For instance, the second chapter of the novel traces the origin of Protestantism in Korea to the proselytizing efforts and martyrdom of Robert Jermain Thomas, a Welsh missionary who was killed during the General Sherman Incident of 1866. Unattached to any single character’s perspective, the section mimics historical writing in its mode of objective presentation and makes references to documents and photographs available in Korean church archives. An even more prominent strategy designed to further the text’s claims to truth, in which truth is associated with empirical validation, invokes experiential authenticity generally attributed to autobiographical writings. Hwang has been explicit about the close link between the fictional world of *The Guest* and his personal experiences in North Korea.16 In one interview, he remarked that the seeds of doubt about the history of the Sinchon Massacre were first sown in his mind during his extended stay in Sinchon, where he spent two months recovering from a back injury during his last North Korean trip in 1991, and that the text’s reconstruction of the massacre derives its authority as historical truth from the combination of archives and personal testimonies of those who had actually lived through the horrors of Sinchon, 1950. In fact, Hwang identified the narrator of the novel as modeled after a certain Reverend Yu, whom he met during his years of political exile in the United States. (This Reverend Yu would go on to give an interview of his own, as we shall see shortly.)17 The reading experience *The Guest* offers is thus built upon the author’s privileged access to what lies north of the 38th parallel.

*The Guest*’s emphasis on empirical validation is coupled with a trenchant critique of the North Korean state for foregrounding ideological utility in its
presentation of what happened in Sinchon. In the early part of his trip, Ryu Yoseop is given a tour of the aforementioned Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities and presented with overwhelming physical evidence that proves US culpability in the massacre. Walking through galleries wallpapered with photographs of mutilated corpses, and faced with victims’ shoes and clothing, broken M1s, and scratch marks left by human nails on walls of air-raid shelters, Yoseop feels a growing sense of nausea at the discrepancy between his memory of the event, which does not implicate US troops at all, and the version that is imposed on him, which places the entire blame on their shoulders. His distress reaches a climax when the highlight of the compulsory tour brings Yoseop face to face with North Korean survivors of Sinchon. Gathered there to give Yoseop—in the North Korean tour guide’s words—“the vivid truth of what happened,” these witnesses enliven the historical event with details of US violence and Korean suffering:

Kim Myŏngja. Currently employed in sales at Pyongyang Department Store. Eight years old at time of incident. First-grade student at local elementary school. Father was supervisor of People’s Military Committee . . . . American soldiers came and checked the girls’ faces with flashlights, shouting, “Sexy, sexy.” Big sister was dragged away. A female teacher from the elementary school was dragged away. They did not return. Harrison decided mothers and children would enjoy being together. He gave orders to separate them and let them die of worry, crying for each other . . . . (99–100)

Oh Ûnsun. Ten years old at time of incident. Currently employed as guide at the Sinch’ŏn [sic] Museum, exposing imperialist America’s crimes to the world. Father was a Party member . . . . Father was tortured in front of small daughter. Daughter fainted. They buried the father alive in a dugout. Ûnsun crawled out. Approximately twenty of Ûnsun’s close relatives were killed . . . . (101)

Ri Inhwa. Nine years old at time of incident. Father was Committee Chairman of District Party Cell. Four men in village, including Inhwa’s father, were dragged by wire pierced through their noses. When father refused to respond to interrogation, they trampled her younger brother to death. Inhwa hid underneath the wooden floor. (102)
The more successful these accounts are in enlivening the historical event, the more troubled Yoseop becomes, not simply because of the obvious gap between his own experiences of the event and the memories of Ri Inhwa, Kim Myôngja, and the like, but also because of the patent transparency of the ideological investment on the part of the state in this particular inscription of sense to the event. The testimonies affront both Yoseop’s sense of morality and his notions of how truth claims are to be evaluated. The state mediation makes it impossible for Yoseop to get the inside story, and the emotional nature of the delivery, which highlights the testimonies’ effectiveness as “performance,” drains Yoseop in light of his own experience, which contradicts these accounts. In an ingenious turn, then, the text edits out performative aspects of these eyewitness accounts by presenting them to the reader in the form of an outline. Ostensibly for the purpose of economy, the novel rewrites each survivor testimony in the language of police reports, trimming the narrative to the bare essentials. The personal account is reduced to a collection of sentence fragments conveying the impression that what is being transmitted is just the unembellished facts, as if to combat the manipulation of affect that had so repulsed Yoseop. But when “Sinchon, 1950” thus becomes a long list of brutalities from which the singularity of the individual experience has been bleached out, the effect of the resulting transformation of lived experience into an archive is just as obscene as the performance of suffering. It is this recognition that leads Yoseop to exclaim, “How weightless are the words that have lost their vivid presence! Words repeated hundreds and thousands of times, like sheets of paper half-burned, fluttered up to the sky. Any meaning they once contained had turned long ago into ashes and dust” (108).

The overall effect is doubly damning to the particular history on display at the Sinchon Museum of American War Atrocities. We are told that that the survivors’ testimonies play on emotions in a way that sickens Yoseop. The suggestion is that affect compromises the validity of these testimonies as a cognitive genre. At the same time, however, we are robbed of narrative, treated to an outline, and barred from forming any affective relationship through the testimonies at all, except perhaps, disgust. The quasi-juridical framing, the language of police reports, presents the survivors’ words solely as a cognitive genre, but since Yoseop’s disbelief has already conditioned
us to doubt their truth claim, there is no other way for us to process their words than to dismiss them altogether. In such a context, the child survivors can be seen only as brainwashed puppets of the state or coconspirators in a colossal lie. It goes without saying that such a perception reconfirms the two categories through which the bewildered citizens of liberal democracies have always sought to understand the enigma of “the North Korean people.” The operation is central to the rhetorical strategy of The Guest. Like the bad fictions of official national histories of North and South, which must be combated by the historical truth that can be revealed only in the form of fiction, The Guest implies that the testimonies of the actual survivors of Sinchon must be thoroughly discredited before the “real” testimonies of Sinchon can begin.

**Ghostly Truths: Testimonies at War**

The writer-historian’s strategy of compensation for the impossibility of being fully contemporaneous with what happened in Sinchon, perceived here as a historical object, takes the form of testimonies from beyond the grave. Ghosts are everywhere in The Guest, haunting the living as apparitions, in dreams, and in moments of supernatural encounters such as the one that Yoseop has with a homeless spirit-medium in the opening pages of the novel. We hear their stories in bits and pieces throughout, but it is not until the crucial eighth chapter of the novel that we get the full revelation of whose blood they have on their hands in the voices of the ghosts themselves. The chapter’s title, “Ten Kings of Hell” (“Siwang”), invokes the Buddhist-Daoist deities in the Korean shamanic pantheon said to be responsible for passing judgments on individual souls of the dead in order to consign them to different kinds of hell. Standing before the postmortem tribunal of Ten Kings, the dead must speak the absolute truth. Their lives, moreover, are recounted not from memory but as a real-time unfolding of the “once-having-been” in the present. The chapter takes this idea of “Ten Courts of Hell” and fashions it into a congress of dead souls, exhuming the voices of perpetrators and victims on both sides of the ideological divide.

The two main voices to be resurrected in The Guest are those of Yohan, Yoseop’s older brother and a leader of the Protestant youths, and Sunnam,
an agricultural laborer turned People’s Committee leader who died at Yohan’s hands. At the novel’s opening, Yohan is living alone in New Jersey. After fleeing Sinchon in December of 1950 and leaving behind his young wife and newborn son, Yohan remarried in South Korea, had two more sons, and moved to the United States, eventually becoming a US citizen. Now a widower sealed off from the world in a house fortified by heavy drapes and an elaborate system of locks and bolts, Yohan does not speak of the past. The drapes and bolts function as much to keep the dangers of the streets out as to distance Yohan from memories. He maintains his thin grip on sanity by repeating the litany that he “fought as a soldier of the cross against the commies, the spawn of Lucifer” (22), and he cannot tolerate any attempt to contextualize his participation in Sinchon differently. When Yoseop visits him to inform him of his upcoming trip back to Sinchon, Yohan remains stubbornly resistant to Yoseop’s efforts to draw him into emotional or moral investment in revisiting the past. Yohan dies before his brother’s trip to North Korea begins.

Yohan’s death is not simply a prelude to his brother’s journey with which the rest of the novel is concerned but a necessary precondition for it. We might even argue that it is Yohan—present throughout the trip as a piece of bone carried in Yoseop’s jacket pocket—who represents the principal traveler in the text. Appearing first to his brother on the plane bound for a transfer point in China, Yohan’s ghost remains in attendance for the entire length of the journey and is finally laid to rest in Sinchon when Yoseop surreptitiously performs an abbreviated burial. The Guest begins with Yohan’s death and ends with his burial; if the novel is the story of a journey, it’s a journey that properly ends only when a piece of Yohan finds “eternal home” in his native soil.

Yohan’s death is a precondition to the journey that takes place in The Guest since, as one of the main perpetrators in the massacre, his account of the event is absolutely indispensable to establishing what happened but unavailable while he is alive. Desperately clinging to the position that he and his fellow Protestants had God’s sanction on their side, Yohan, the living man, cannot admit the event back into his conscious thought, let alone narrate it. His feverish testimony from beyond the grave, however, recounts how the violence grew and changed its character over the course of the night-
marsh month and a half, from retaliatory counterstrike at first to mindless slaughter by the end:

Shouting war-cries, we ran in and clubbed him senseless, bringing the butt of our rifles down on his head, back, it didn’t matter where. After a while, the man lay there on the ground, a bloody lump of flesh; if his legs twitched, one or another of us would put a couple of bullets in his back. We shot the woman too. In the beginning there were no rapes of women. In fact, we would gather around the bodies we killed and offer up prayers. But it was a slaughter now. And the slaughter continued all around the town’s periphery until light broke in the east. (209)

The passage highlights the increasingly anonymous, indiscriminate nature of violence that came to characterize the massacre, the loss of human personality that accompanied the “mob” violence that affects both the perpetrator and the victim. Back, neck, head—it hardly matters where. One or another of “us” had to put a bullet through the victim—it hardly matters who. There were no rapes of women at first but there are now, and as his testimony reaches its violent climax, Yohan describes how the attractive women captives were taken to the old Japanese resort at a nearby hot spring to be raped before being killed. Yohan comes across several of his friends taking turns raping a pretty female teacher whose crime was that she had once read out loud an official announcement urging young men to enlist in the People’s Army. Looking down at her body visible under his friend’s, Yohan remembers how the scent of apricot seeds emanating from that same body used to make him stop in his tracks and stare at her disappearing figure with a vague sense of poetry and yearning, suddenly feeling as though “he were standing in the middle of an orchard in spring” (237). The only mercy he can show that body now is to put it out of its misery as quickly as he can. Yohan kicks his friend, Sangho, off the teacher and pulls the trigger with the knowledge that there can never be a springtime orchard for him anymore.

In the terrible denouement that follows, the soldiers of the cross turn on each other’s families. Sangho kills off Yohan’s sisters in a “fit of youthful rage,” and Yohan pays him right back, barging into the house of Sangho’s fiancée and shooting everything in sight, including the fiancée’s four little
sisters. As he leaves his homeland behind, Yohan sheds no tears, so estranged he is already from his feelings. He curses his homeland as a “living hell overrun by the devils,” but he carries the living hell with him to South Korea and then to the United States. Yohan’s postmortem testimony finally forces into articulation the powerful truth that had remained repressed during the half-century of his life after Sinchon: “We hated each other. We hated ourselves” (248).

Sunnam’s testimony presents a perspective from the other side of the ideological divide. Born into a family of humble farmers who first lose their land and then their tenancy under the economic contradictions pervasive during the colonial period, Sunnam works as a hired hand on the Ryu family’s orchard. Kind-hearted, humorous, and good with his hands, he is a great favorite among the children of the neighborhood, including Yohan. He leaves Sinchon six years before the liberation and returns shortly after August 1945 as a member of the Communist Party, having become, during his time away, a firm believer in the historical necessity of a class revolution. His testimony traces various conflicts big and small that alienated the two groups from each other until the differences became irreconcilable, and it narrates the events that led to his gruesome death at the hands of young men who used to beg him for piggyback rides when they were children.

He also tells the story of Ichiro, little more than a slave communally owned by the village during the colonial period, who returns as the despised Comrade Illang appointed to oversee the task of enforcing land reform. Comrade Illang is merciless at carrying out the task entrusted to him—arresting Yohan’s father, for example, and beating him up in a particularly humiliating manner to bring him to compliance. The concrete details of his life as Ichiro that Sunnam’s “inside” account offers, however, have the effect of humanizing him. We learn, for example, that Ichiro never had a blanket to sleep on in all his years of hard labor, never even thought that he should be given one. Even the youngest of the village kids talked down to him without thinking it strange. His heartfelt wish, finally realized on a train bound for a People’s Committee meeting in Pyongyang, was to gorge himself on hard-boiled eggs, which he had tasted only once during a village feast. These details reveal the extent to which Ichiro was exploited during the colonial period. Sunnam’s testimony also offers a simple but powerful
definition of what liberation meant for the most oppressed of Korean society: “Ichiro who used to gather firewood and labor like an ox while you were all eating bowls of rice, sleeping under a warm blanket, learning your letters at school, reading the bible, singing hymns and praying at church, that Ichiro learned how to read and write the words ‘land reform.’ If this isn’t liberation, what is?” (138). For people like Yohan’s parents, however, the transformation of Ichiro into Comrade Illang is not liberation but a betrayal. “You, an ingrate, how dare you?” shouts Yohan’s mother when Illang comes to confiscate the family’s land deeds. How dare this slave, a rootless vagrant whom they had taken in, provided a roof over his head (albeit without anything for him to sleep on), and given him food to eat and even allowed him to have a single boiled egg (albeit only during the village festivals), pay back their kindness by taking their land away? Illang’s cold response to the old woman’s trembling indignation is, “Comrades, arrest this enemy of the people” (135). Yohan’s mother and Illang speak two different languages. Between the two designations “ingrate” and “enemy of the people”—and the systems of thought and structures of feeling that engender each—lies an abyss. In that abyss, an “ingrate” becomes a “son of Lucifer,” and Illang dies a ghastly death at the hands of the Protestant Young Men’s League after being dragged through the village by a wire threaded through his nostrils.

Ironically, the central presence of ghosts and the important role they play as narrators in The Guest may be seen as springing from the desire to enforce the strictest application of what Syed Manzurul Islam has called “protocols of autopsy.” It is an attempt to leave nothing to distortions that might be introduced in the process of transmission by getting directly inside the skin of the past. Rather than serving as the ultimate barrier to the “true past,” death is transformed into the ultimate guarantee of testimonial truthfulness. Since ghosts speak from beyond the grave, their utterances are seen as being free of motivations or failings all too human—faulty memory, as well as political, ideological, and libidinal investments. The version of Sin-chon that The Guest gives us thus stakes its claim to validity on the promise to take the investigator to the absolute inside of experience. But we might ask: what does it mean that this promise is fulfilled by the voices of ghosts? A paradox unfolds when we stop to consider that the novel establishes cog-
nitive superiority over official accounts of the event only by admitting the supernatural into the court of empirical evidence.

What are the implications of this paradox? Ghosts perform a split role in *The Guest*. On the one hand, they are an important part of the text’s strongly mimetic referential strategy and remain deeply implicated in the claim that the presentation of “Sinchon, October 1950” the text offers is valid under empiricist criteria. The text’s emphasis on this mode of apprehending the event is important since it serves as the basis for presenting a strong critique of ideologically motivated narratives that have traditionally been embraced by the states of North and South Korea. On the other hand, as scholars have noted, ghosts also function in a manner already familiar to scholars of magical realism by embodying “the fundamental magical realist sense that reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove and that the function of literature is to engage this excessive reality, to honor that which we may grasp intuitively but never fully or finally define.” At the level of the plot, ghosts in *The Guest* allow the reader to entertain and fulfill the impossible desire of exhausting the knowledge of the past event. At a more figural level, ghosts plead for the recognition of the legitimacy of experiences that cannot be represented exclusively within the empirical domain. The split role ghosts play in relation to the novel’s truth claim responds to the dual demands of fiction and history, law and narrative.

**The Work of Reconciliation: Identity and Proximity**

With all the blood accounted for and buried truths forced into the open in the postmortem tribunal of the eighth chapter, mortal enemies in life—Sunnam, Illang, Yohan, and a host of unnamed others—are reconciled in death. As Sunnam’s ghost puts it succinctly, “Over there, ain’t no such thing as your side or my side” (26). But for the living who do not live in a transcendent realm where all material differences dissolve into nothingness, reconciliation is hard work, a process of continual negotiation of difference. In *The Guest*, the one character who exemplifies that work ethic is An Seongman, Yoseop’s maternal uncle from Some. A model party member and a faithful Christian in a world that posits these identities as mutually exclusive, An tells Yoseop that he would not have become a party member at
all had it not been for the unspeakable violence of 1950. After the bloodbath of that winter, An decides to remain in North Korea as “a repenting Christian” (174) and earns the right to keep Sabbath by working three days for the one he missed. He wins the respect and love of his camp mates through physical work—filling the work quota of his neighbors after completing his own, doing laundry for the sick. An’s labor creates a space of religious practice that did not exist and which, strictly speaking, still cannot be recognized within the party structure.

An’s work of reconciliation is also based on the recognition that no one can claim immunity from the horrors of Sinchon. When Yoseop tries to assert that neither he nor An are responsible for what happened since they did not directly participate in the killings, An responds with a rare show of anger. “No one is innocent” (175), he barks. The novel reinforces this lesson by introducing an episode that implicates Yoseop in the deaths of two young women, both musicians attached to the North Korean army band. Coming across the young women wandering lost and scared in the hills behind his village, Yoseop helps them hide and feeds them with food taken from his family’s kitchen, a basket of steamed sweet potatoes and a bowl of rice with pickled vegetables. Though “communists,” the women play Christian hymns on the violin for Yoseop, and the music creates a moment of poetry and beauty amidst the madness of war. Yoseop, however, is forced to reveal the women’s whereabouts to his brother when he’s caught taking food from the kitchen, and his brother violates the promise he makes to Yoseop that the women will remain unharmed. Yoseop returns to the hut to find two hacked bodies and a violin with a broken neck. With the best of intentions, Yoseop thus becomes responsible for the deaths of two “young enemies” who had become his friends and whose saved lives may have opened up a possibility of redemption for him. Unlike his brother, Yoseop has never threaded a commie’s nose with wire or pissed on the violated body of a Red’s wife, and throughout the rest of his life, Yoseop insists on this difference between the perpetrator and the bystander, and between witting and unwitting participants in violence, as a way of dealing with the trauma of what he experienced in Sinchon. What An Seongman’s message suggests, however, is that responsibility does not end where culpability might. The vehemence of his response to Yoseop’s attempt to deny complicity means
that for An, the starting point for thinking about reconciliation must be a sense of profound despair about the possibility of safe judgment rather than a precipitate hope in it. The despair echoed in the raspy voice of the now-aged Yohan’s wife who declares, “I think, even God was guilty then” (152), underscores the impossibility of maintaining the safety of distance that safe judgment requires.

Instead of distance, An’s practice highlights proximity. Echoing his middle school teacher, whose philosophy was simply that “people must, no matter what their views, do good by those who are close at hand” (173), An is a good neighbor first and foremost, before he is a Christian and before he is a communist. For An, coexistence is simply what there is, not an end to be achieved, and his humble and open-ended philosophy implies the necessity of engaging daily in negotiations occasioned by contingent and ever-changing conditions of communal life.25 Here, it may be useful to consider An’s neighborliness as an ethics of proximity in the sense that Dipesh Chakrabarty has theorized in *Habitations of Modernity*. Writing about growing up in postpartition Calcutta where an influx of refugees from East Pakistan had intensified ethnic, religious, and class tensions in the community, Chakrabarty identifies “identity” and “proximity” as the two principal modes of living with difference in a postconflict society: “By *identity*, I mean a mode of relating to difference in which difference is either congealed or concealed. That is to say, either it is frozen, fixed, or it is erased by some claim of being identical or the same. By *proximity*, I mean the opposite mode, one of relating to difference in which (historical and contingent) difference is neither reified nor erased but negotiated.”26 An’s insistence on “doing good by those you see every day” is also an insistence on proximity, a refusal of the labels of abstract belonging in favor of the affective relationship forged face to face in the here and now. Moreover, his example occasions further negotiations of difference by those who would otherwise have adhered to the principle of identity. An’s supervisor at the labor camp, for example, is moved to abandon the epithets with which he had policed the distance between the desirable and undesirable elements of the society in the brave new North Korean world, “the new era’s trash, an addict of the opium called religion” and concede to An in the end that “comrades like you are the ones with real faith” (180). The concrete details of the life of a Christian,
this Christian who is also an exemplary comrade, interferes with an ideological attempt to reify the difference between the two identities. Life ends up congesting labels.

For the readers of *The Guest*, ghost testimonies enable a similar rewrit-ing of identity into proximity. If the congealed difference between men like Sunnam and Yohan, and the concealed difference between men like Yohan and Sangho lie behind the tragedy of Sinchon, then this is a tragedy that has been reduplicated in the statist narratives of North and South Korea in which “identity” continues to serve as the structuring principle. The narrative is echoed in the voice of the North Korean guide whose easy reas-surance of reconciliation leaves Yoseop feeling uneasy. “Between us, the wounds will heal,” the guide tells Yoseop. “Let’s just say that all blame lies with the foreign powers” (91). In *The Guest*, the hard labor of dismantling these structures begins with stories and their singular insistence on irreduc-ible details—the history of oppression packed into a half dozen hard-boiled eggs, the act of mercy that rescues a woman from disgrace only to deliver her unto death. These details that give us a sense of the men we know as “a ruthless enforcer of inhumane law” or “a killer of his neighbors in the tens” in excess of these designations are the very sites where an act of reading turns into the work of affective engagement. At the end of *The Guest*, when a bone of Yohan’s finds eternal rest in his native soil, we do not begrudge him this peace for having been his companion on his long journey there.

Having made this journey, we might, therefore, be justified in feeling some surprise at coming to the end of the book and finding a very different reading of the text in the author’s afterword. Hwang’s reading of his own text analyzes the meaning of Sinchon in terms that reprivilege identity over proximity. After revising the North Korean version of Sinchon, which places the blame for the massacre squarely on the shoulders of US imperialism, and offering in its stead a version of the event that acknowledges the shared criminality of both the Left and the Right within Korea, Hwang brings back Western imperialism and implicates it at the level of ideas:

Subjected to colonialism and national division, we failed to arrive at our own modernity. We accepted modernity that was imposed on us from the outside, and Protestantism and Marxism were aspects of this moder-
nity. In North Korea, where the class legacy of traditional status society was weaker relative to the South, people embraced these two ideologies and equated them with “enlightenment.” Protestantism and Marxism were thus two branches of a single tree. In medieval times, Korean people understood smallpox as a disease with Western origins; they called it “mama” or “sonnim” and created a form of shamanic ritual designed to ward off this unwanted visitation. In my text, this unwanted “guest” wears the double masks of Protestantism and Marxism.

The history of modern Korea read in terms of the unwanted “guests” succumbs to the nostalgia of precolonial, and pre–Cold War unity. The all-too-familiar colonial allegory of an organic body of the nation vulnerable to penetration by foreign agents underlies Hwang’s prescription of the shamanic cure. If Hwang’s commentary is taken at face value, The Guest becomes an uncomfortably ideological text. As Kim Mi-hyeon has noted, the authorial intention to exorcise the demonic faces of heteronomous (read: Western) modernity from the Korean historical experience by reinvigorating some essentialist notion of native tradition is at best an example of “strategic essentialism” and may even be panned as a case of “ethnocentrism” at worst.

Hwang Sok-yong’s commentary can also be critiqued for the short shrift it gives to not only the vision of reconciliation elaborated in his text but also the very shamanic ritual he invokes. Sonnim gut or Mullim gut, the ritual that would be performed in response to an outbreak of smallpox, is not necessarily the violent affair that the word exorcism suggests. As implicit in the honorific title of “guest,” the ritual provides many different ways of interacting with the unwanted and fearsome visitor, including cajolery, praise, offering of food and gifts, and entertainment through music and dance. The “guest” is a spirit endowed with the power to kill but also the power to bless. The ritual is therefore less a way of purifying the body and returning it to a prepossessed state of cleanliness than a way of managing the presence of foreign gods already in the communal midst and influencing their actions in such a way as to benefit the community. Similarly, the concept of “cleansing” or “purification” (ssikkim) is not one of erasure or restoration but of dealing with loss and of making habitable once again the imperfect and impure world.
It may also be important to note that *Jin jinogui gut*, on which the narrative structure of *The Guest* is modeled, is a funerary rather than a “guest” rite. Accordingly, the novel ends with a sustained verse that mimics a shamanic chant and that cajoles all the spirits of all the Korean War dead—ghosts of maidens, bachelors, widows, and widowers, “ghosts of those shot, pierced, even battered” and “ghosts of those bombed by planes overhead”—to eat their fill and be on their way (233, 234). As an officiator of a funerary rite, “a modern-day shaman who listens to grievances of the dead, consoles their spirits, and guides their souls to the next world” in the words of one Korean critic, the author of *The Guest* may be seen as less an exorcist who purifies the body and rids it of disease than a mediator between worlds.30 But in conflating a funerary rite and a “guest” rite under the broad heading of “shamanism” and putting shamanism forward as a rediscovered technology of overcoming the antinomies of Western modernity (i.e., Christianity and Marxism), Hwang’s commentary reinstates the logic of identity earlier highlighted in the North Korean guide’s recipe for reconciliation. As we have seen, the recipe consists of externalizing and reifying difference (“foreign powers”), while both naturalizing and neutralizing the real conflicts that had ravaged the community (“wounds will heal”) within the national body that is supposed to stretch organically from Mt. Baekdu to Mt. Halla (“between us”), whether or not a “blade of [political] disgrace” has cut it at the waist.31

Why does Hwang insist on a reading that shackles *The Guest* to a nationalist framework and the logic of identity when the novel he has written appears to move so far beyond them? To my mind, the answer lies in the pregnant statement he gives toward the end of the commentary concerning the geopolitics of Korean division: “Already a decade has passed since the end of the Cold War in the West, but ice is just beginning to thaw in the peripheries. The fearsome *sonnim mamanim* is still America.”32 The statement is important to consider carefully. In 2000, the famous image of North and South Korean leaders shaking hands in Pyongyang, the “Kim Jong-il Shock,” and the moving spectacle that followed of athletes from the two halves of the peninsula entering the Olympic Stadium together in Sydney under a single banner helped create the illusion that inter-Korean reconciliation is a truly inter-Korean affair. The perception was that the political
(in Carl Schmitt’s sense of the term) century that was the twentieth has finally given way to a postpolitical one, and the deconstruction of the friend-or-enemy dichotomy has opened up less tortured categories with which to conceptualize “the other,” such as a neighbor, for example. And in this new century, it may just be possible to be postnational, that is, to unhinge reconciliation from the demand to elevate the ethnonation as a transhistorical essence. As analyzed at length in the preceding pages, *The Guest* is a product of this time, a text that sketches the necessary precondition for pursuing inter-Korean reconciliation as an inter-Korean affair. Reconceptualizing North and South Korean people as neighbors—that is to say, bringing them into a relationship of proximity—requires the dismantling of state narratives on numerous historical events like Sinchon, acknowledgment of mutual complicity in the Korean War and subsequent division, and affirmation of the need to enter into affective relationship with each other without the guarantee of ever arriving at a satisfactory cognitive judgment on the question of culpability. Hwang’s commentary retreats from this vision as if to suggest that the time for such reconciliation is not yet, that inter-Korean reconciliation is not yet an inter-Korean affair since *sonnim, mamanim* is still America. The decade since the publication of *The Guest* has proven the prescience of Hwang Sok-yong’s commentary. As far as North Korea is concerned, the enemy has always been and continues to be the United States. It has never recognized the South Korean “puppet” as an opponent, however hostile in nature, worthy of the respect that a proper enemy might command. For its part, South Korean society has suffered from the Red complex, which has functioned to shield from view the reality that a country that has never had wartime operational control of its own military cannot be considered the proper antagonist in war, just as a country that has never been a signatory of the armistice agreement to suspend the hostilities cannot be considered a proper partner in any dialogue for peace. Hwang’s comment suggests that the Cold War that continues in the “peripheries,” albeit with some minor thawing here and there, pivots around the structural impossibility of pursuing inter-Korean reconciliation as an inter-Korean affair, an impossibility sustained by the simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility of the United States in the historical legacy of the Korean War. “At this historically critical time,” writes the Taiwanese scholar and activist Kuan-
Hsing Chen, “to de-cold war is to de-Americanize.”

Until that happens, efforts that might have seemed to herald the age of postnationalism in South Korea, as the sequence of events in the early years of this century certainly did, can be only that many more examples of postponed nationalism, of proximity that must ultimately serve the cause of identity.

**Truth without Reconciliation, Reconciliation without Truth**

The verdict of history continues to be divided on Sinchon. The publication of *The Guest* in 2001 certainly generated both academic and popular interest in Sinchon in South Korea, which led to a handful of studies and a television documentary. These have tended largely to corroborate the version of Sinchon told in *The Guest*, weaving together an archive of declassified military documents housed at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and interviews of eyewitnesses.

North Korean history remains what it has been, and its archive of historical documents includes the “Report on US Crimes in Korea” published by the Commission of International Association of Democratic Lawyers in 1952, which gives the name of the US commander of the occupation forces as Harrison, whose orders were directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of at least twenty-eight hundred people in parts of Sinchon.

To complicate the matter even further, the Reverend Yu Tae-yeong, the model for the Reverend Ryu of Hwang Sok-yong’s creation, has gone on to harshly criticize Hwang for opportunistically misrepresenting his testimony. In a magazine interview he gave after the publication of *The Guest*, Yu describes how Yoseop’s life history mirrors his own: born into a family of third-generation Christians, Yu experienced Sinchon as a young man of nineteen, moved down South during the Korean War, and eventually settled in New York.

He met Hwang Sok-yong during the author’s exile and told the author of what had transpired in his native village, how he had witnessed his brother stab other villagers to death with a pitchfork, how he had helped North Korean musicians to hide, all in vain, and how he had reunited with his brother’s wife and son many years later during his visit to North Korea in 1990. Indignant at how Hwang had twisted his story out of context, Yu stated that he had never claimed the noninvolvement of US troops in Sinchon and
did not think that what happened in his small village should be taken as representative evidence for what had happened in Sinchon overall. And whether or not local episodes in small villages like his can put the smoking gun in the hands of the US soldiers, the United States cannot evade the question of its responsibility for massacres taking place in the areas under its military control during the periods of its military occupation. Yu further argues that what he had wanted to emphasize in his testimony to the fiction writer instead was the fact that contrary to his expectations, his relatives in North Korea had not suffered harm or been subjected to reprisals, unlike their counterparts in South Korea who were systematically discriminated against by both the community and the state.36 “It’s true that the North Korean state overly publicizes Sinchon, but considering the conditions of the time, I think this was the right move,” Yu comments.37 In other words, identifying the United States as the sole perpetrator helped “suture” the conflict and prevent further shedding of blood in a community where families of communists and families of Christians had to continue to live together.

The experience is actually captured in chapter 4 of The Guest when Ryu Yoseop has a private conversation about his family history with the North Korean guide. Afraid of the harm that may befall himself and his remaining family in North Korea, he had not disclosed to the North Korean authorities the identity of his brother, the infamous Ryu Yohan at the vanguard of the “Worthy and Heroic Student Uprising against Communism.” Yoseop is thus dismayed to discover that they had known it all along. Chiding Yoseop for not believing that the North Korean state’s objective in promoting these visits back home of diasporic North Koreans is to “help them reconcile and forge a new relationship with the homeland they left behind” (88), the guide tells him that the state’s core principle in conducting these visits is “never to ask about the past” (90). He then reassures Yoseop with the line about “healing wounds” analyzed at length earlier in this paper. This new contextualization of the guide’s words opens up the possibility of reading the ideology-laden North Korean presentation of the Sinchon Massacre as a pragmatic approach to reconciliation. Koreans killed other Koreans, the guide well knows, but in order to allow the perpetrators and victims to go on living together, manipulation of truth at a local level may be necessary as long as it does not ultimately violate the truth of US culpability in a larger sense.
If the above represents an example of reconciliation without truth (according to the revised history in *The Guest*), contemporary South Korean society has since provided examples galore of truth that admits no possibility of reconciliation. In 2002, a television documentary program called *Now It Can Be Told* (*Ijeneun malhal ssu itta*) devoted an episode to what happened in Sinchon in 1950 and interviewed several elderly Sinchon natives now residing in South Korea. While most interviewees were Yoseop-like figures who detailed what they had witnessed, two, like Yohan, acknowledged their active participation in the violence. Appearing with their faces pixelated, these elderly interviewees berated the producers for being naïve, rash, or both in assuming that “now it can be told”:

You shouldn’t be trying to set the story straight with a newspaper article or this documentary. People here still have families over there [North Korea]. . . . This phone here, the account isn’t in my real name. Why? Because the phone book will end up in North Korea. Phone books end up over there every year as far as I know. Newspapers end up in their hands too in just a few days.

It would be foolish, absolutely foolish of me to try to look up my family and relatives up North or give my name to be considered for a possible reunion. Such talk is for people who don’t know the commies. But I know the commies. I’ve fought the commies. How could someone like me possibly engage in that kind of talk?39

Inserted between the men’s interviews, her facial expression all the more striking for coming between two blurred faces, is the footage of a testimony by an elderly Sinchon woman living in North Korea. Speaking of what she witnessed in Sinchon as a girl of eleven, the woman declared emphatically with gritted teeth, “As a victim and as a justice-seeker, I charge before the whole wide world that Americans are murderous monsters. Though they may walk on two feet, they are no more than a pack of wild dogs.”40

These are people clearly still at war, though not with each other. For the pixelated men quoted above who are still fighting the “commies” half a century after the cease-fire, the talk of reconciliation can only be the jabber of fools, liberals who indulge themselves in the easy romance of uni-
fication without knowing what lurks behind the color red. In the case of the North Korean woman, the big enemy is imperialist United States, and South Korea has always only ever been its puppet. No reconciliation as such is possible with a puppet since, as everyone knows, a puppet cannot author its own decisions, let alone honor them.

These examples of truth without reconciliation and reconciliation without truth testify to the realities of the Korean peninsula on the eve of the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War armistice. If the fate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea over the past three years is any indication, the goal of achieving truth and reconciliation about the Korean War, not one at the expense of the other, may still be a challenging task on the Korean peninsula. Rereading The Guest at such a time, while paying close attention to the dissonance between the novel and the novelist’s commentary, allows us to appreciate the possibilities of reconciliation opened up in Korea by the perceived end of the Cold War. But more important perhaps are the ways in which this reading makes visible those very Cold War structures that have become less visible since June of 2000 without ceasing to operate. In 2012, as this article is being written, Barack Obama has declared the twenty-first to be the United States’ Pacific Century, and territorial and historical disputes rock the already troubled East Asian neighborhood. The imperative of ending the Korean War is hardly academic, certainly for the people still at war and people who continue to be victimized or remain unreconciled, but at the state level as well. For Paik Nak-chung, the leading theorist of Korean division for the last four decades at least, the long postponed shift from a division system (bundan cheje) to a regime of peace (pyeonghwa cheje) must be pursued actively today, more urgently than ever. The division system is in crisis, and its coming end may be written in the walls, but the end of division, unless it is supplanted by active and comprehensive peace, will automatically bring about neither truth nor reconciliation.
Notes

I would like to express much gratitude to the guest editors of the series. Christine Hong has read multiple drafts of the manuscript and offered invaluable counsel on nearly every aspect of the paper. Henry Em suggested the evocative and apt section heading, “Ghostly Truths.”

1. “Kim Jong-il shokeu, eundunja eseo suposeute ro” (“The Kim Jong-il Shock: From a recluse to a Superstar”), Sindonga (New East Asia) 490 (July 1, 2000): 76–89.


4. Hwang Sok-yong, “Jakkaeui mal” (“Author’s Note”), in Sonnim (The Guest) (Paju: Changbi, 2001), 262. Hereafter, all in-text citations, unless otherwise noted, are my own translations from the Korean-language edition.


6. Red-baiting has returned with a vengeance under Park Geun-hye’s presidency. The term Jongbuk, or “follower of North Korea,” functions now as ppalgaengi, a derogatory term for communists, once did. In February of 2014, for example, Lee Seok-ki, a lawmaker and a member of the United Progressive Party, was sentenced to twelve years in prison for conspiring to start a “revolt” (naeran). The last time such a charge was used to prosecute a politician was in 1980, shortly after the massacre of civilians in Kwangju by the Chun Doo Hwan regime.

7. In an attempt to diagnose Korea’s political reality more accurately in the so-called post–Cold War era, Paik Nak-chung coined the term division system in the early 1990s as a way of analyzing inter-Korean division as a self-reproducing regime undergirded by the capitalist world system. See Paik Nak-chung, “Bundan cheje eui insik eul wihayeoo” (“Understanding the Division System”), in Bundan cheje byeonhyeok eui gongbugil (A Study Map of the Changing Division System) (Seoul: Changjak Gwa Bipyongs, 1994).
8. A required reading in most high school Korean curricula, *Jangma* traces the process of reconciliation between two elderly Korean women with sons on the opposite sides of the military conflict.


12. In addition to Jo Dong-hwan’s earlier-mentioned title, an account of what transpired in Sinchon in 1950 can be found in the first chapter of *Guwolsan*. Published in 1955 by the Ministry of Defense Press Service, the book was compiled largely from the records and journals left behind by Kim Jong-byok, the commander of the pro-South Guwol Mountain Guerrilla Army. Kim was decorated posthumously by South Korean president Lee Myung Bak in 2012.

13. We can see this clearly in the shifting fate the truth and reconciliation commission suffered under the two most recent South Korean presidents. Launched in 2005 under the liberal Roh Moo-hyun government, the TRCK was effectively disbanded in 2010 under the conservative Lee Myung Bak presidency. Kim Dong-choon, the progressive sociologist appointed as the head of the commission by the Roh government, was not retained by the Lee government. Kim has accused the Lee administration of staffing the commission with conservative historians who hold views inimical to the spirit of the commission. For an interview with Kim, see Kim Dong-choon and Mark Selden, “South Korea’s Embattled Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Asia-Pacific Journal* 9–4–10 (March 1, 2010).


17. In 1989, Hwang took a history-making trip to North Korea, publicly violating South Korea’s national security law. After the trip, Hwang remained abroad in Germany and the United States for several years and, upon his return to South Korea in 1993, was sentenced
to seven years in prison (and pardoned after serving five). Many of Hwang’s experiences and impressions in Pyongyang and Sinchon, which appear fictionalized in *The Guest*, are also preserved in a nonfictional account of his trip to North Korea, *People Were Living There* (*Sarami salgo isseonne*, 1993). The essays in the collection were republished in 2000 with additional material under the title *Go Up North, Come Down South* (*Gaja bugeo, ora nameuro*).


19. Christine Hong, who has visited the Sinchon Museum of War Atrocities on two separate occasions, informs me that Kim Myong-ja may refer to Kim Myong-geum, one of the three child survivors of Sinchon who now resides in Pyongyang.

20. The scene offers a variation on the theme of spiritual possession. Yoseop, returning to his seat from the restroom, sees that his seat has been taken by the ghost of his brother. He ignores the ghost and takes his seat, in a visual joining of Yoseop’s body and Yohan’s spirit.

21. “Illang” is the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters that make up the Japanese name *Ichiro*. A name without meaning, *Ichiro/Illang* betrays the character’s mean social status and lack of family ties.


25. In this sense, coexistence is a maxim in the sense that Alain Badiou has discussed in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.


30. Yang, 157. [AU: Please provide publication details.]

31. Seonu Hwi refers to the 38th parallel as “a blade of disgrace” in his novella, *Flowers of Fire* (*Bul Kkot*) (Seoul: Mineumsa, 1957).
32. Hwang, afterword to *Sonnim*, 262.
34. In South Korea, the publication of *The Guest* generated interest, both popular and academic, on the Sinchon Massacre. For an overview of historical accounts of the Sinchon Massacre, see Lee Shin-Cheol, “6.25 Nambuk jeonjaeng sigi ibuk jiyeokesoeoeui mingingin haksal” (“Civilian Massacres Perpetrated in the Northern Areas of the Korean Peninsula during the Korean War”), *Yeoksa wa hyeonsil (History and Reality)* 54 (2004): 131–70. See also Kang Jeong-gu and Kim Jong-hoi, “Jonggyo munhwajeogin galdeung euro barabon Sinchon haksal sageon” (“The Sinchon Massacre as a Religious Cultural Conflict”), *Oeguk munhak yeongu (Foreign Literature Studies)* 42 (2001): 9–31.
36. For a case study of yeonjwaje, or “guilt by association” that families of those accused of communist connection during the Korean War suffered in postwar South Korea, see Kim Jong-gun, “Gusul eul tonghae bon bundan teurauma eui silche” (“The Substance of Division Trauma as Seen through Oral Testimonies”), *Tongil inmunhak nonchong (Journal of Humanities for Reunification)* 51 (2001): 37–65.
38. In 1999, a major South Korean television network launched a program called *Now It Can Be Told (Ijeneun malhal ssu itta)*. At the turn of the millennium, with South Korea’s democracy almost a decade old and the long-persecuted opposition leader Kim Dae-jung finally in the Blue House (and pursuing the Sunshine Policy to boot), public opinion became receptive to the idea that Korean history could finally shed ideology, that once dangerous truths about the past could finally be told. *Now It Can Be Told* devoted its episodes to probing historical events suppressed or distorted during the decades of authoritarian rule, ranging from the mystery surrounding the disappearance of the head of Korean Cultural Intelligence Agency to the “reeducation” of political prisoners and other “unsavory elements” of society in Chun Doo Hwan’s gulag.
39. *Now It Can Be Told*.
40. Ibid.