

**The Rangoon
Bombing Terrorist
Kang Min-chol**



Ra Jong-yil



The Rangoon Bombing Terrorist,
Kang Min-chol

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ISBN: 978-1-7356515-5-2
e-ISBN: 978-1-7356515-6-9
Library of Congress Control Number:
2022944338

Cover image credits:
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HRNK is the first and only NGO that solely focuses on North Korean human rights issues to receive consultative status at the United Nations (UN). It was also the first organization to propose that the human rights situation in North Korea be addressed by the UN Security Council. HRNK was directly and actively involved in all stages of the process supporting the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korean human rights. Its reports have been cited numerous times in the report of the COI, the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights, a report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, two reports of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and several U.S. Department of State Democratic People's Republic of Korea Human Rights Reports. HRNK has also regularly been invited to provide expert testimony before the U.S. Congress.

Acknowledgements

HRNK would like to acknowledge Nicholas Welch for his copy-editing work and Joseph (Han Sung) Lim for formatting and designing this book for publication.



The Rangoon Bombing Terrorist, Kang Min-chol

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Preface

The story that I am about to tell is that of the life and death of a young man who died in Burma, thousands of miles away from his home country, North Korea. He became known as Terrorist Kang Min-chol. His real name, however, was Kang Yong-chol. The North Korean regime gave him the name Kang Min-chol to conduct special missions. That is, his name was a kind of pseudonym, or nom de guerre, which is used by guerilla groups engaged in unconventional activities, or by people on some secret operations. High government officials in North Korea are mostly in charge of political and administrative jobs, and they are not injected into special operations or intelligence work; yet they, too, commonly have a false name besides their real ones.

Thus, Kang Yong-chol became known by his war name, Kang Min-chol, and he lived until his death bearing the latter. Actually, to be more exact, that name was erased from the face of the earth after Kang's death along with his body. The Burmese authorities called him Kang Min-chu, or sometimes even Kim Min-chu, in a pronunciation that was perhaps easier for them. In this book, it would make more sense to refer to him by his pseudonym Kang Min-chol—the name he lived by for twenty-five years, exactly half of his lifetime, and which name he became known to the outside world as the subject of interest and a protagonist of one extraordinary international case—than to call him by his birth name by which he lived his earlier private life.

Kang met his death in the faraway land Burma, which is now called Myanmar, where he would not have visited previously, nor imagined that he would one day end up living there for the rest of his life. The North Korean terrorist died there not as a free man, but as a long-time prisoner of a quarter of a century. After his death, hardly anyone paid interest in his parting that even the cause of his death became known by hearsay, and no one pressed to inquire about him. There is only word that his corpse was cremated and his ashes gotten rid of, and there is no record to be found as to whether any of his remains were kept. Maybe this is why there were rumors that Kang did not die of an illness but of some other reasons.

Officially, records state that Kang succumbed to liver cancer; however, among his former inmates who were imprisoned with him, some testify that Kang was in good health before he died, that he had occasionally complained of stomach cramps, but he did not show symptoms of any severe illness. Such claims lead to a rumor that in fact he was assassinated. There is a testimony that claims Kang Min-chol had suspected that Pyongyang would try to have him killed, and as a consequence he was always cautious and on the alert, especially with what he ate and drank. However, there is no way to confirm today the verifiability of these testimonies.

At any rate, Kang Min-chol failed to return to his fatherland where he yearned to go, and he perished as a long-term prisoner. Among the testimonies of his former inmates is one who says Kang wished he could get married. One of the former inmates said that he promised that when he'd be free, he would introduce Kang to a woman. According to records, however, toward his end the former indestructible agent groaned from extreme pain as he had not received proper medical treatment for his incurable illness, and finally he died on the road—in a vehicle that was rushing him to the hospital.

Throughout his imprisonment, Kang is said to have wished to return one day as a free man to the North, or the South—to the Korean peninsula. And if that were not permissible, to any place and to live among fellow Koreans, even if they were South Koreans, until his final day. Kang most likely did not let go of that hope until his last breath. Yet, neither of the two countries nor compatriots that he so yearned for, neither the North nor the South, acknowledged his existence. It is a wonder whether the truly responsible people even remember Kang's name: any one of those who drove Kang into meeting his miserable fate, those who are directly responsible for the horrendous crime that Kang committed, the people who are responsible for Kang's pitiful life and death.

And life went on and the world remained the same after Kang's death. Neither in the North nor in the South, was there anyone who mourned for him, or took interest in his matter. Like that, a man had simply died all alone, after suffering from physical and psychological pains in prison for twenty-five years and his whole identity, forgotten.

This book is the story of that very man and of the reality of the Korean peninsula that brought about a tragic fate as his.

Therefore, one can say this book is the story of a State's Hidden Crime. The tragic fate of Kang Min-chol may have been determined even before he was born. The so-called Rangoon Bombing (known as the Aung San Terror Case in Korea) cannot be regarded as a sudden, one-time brutal incident committed by the North Korean regime one morning in Southeast Asia. Instead, it is one of the numerous instances that occurred and is still occurring on the Korean peninsula since the division of the two Koreas. It is one of the countless incidents that occurred within the line of conflicting interactions between the two governments, which are in controversy since the division. The story of the Rangoon Bombing begins not in October 1983, but three years earlier, in May 1980, in the capital of Korea's southwest region, Gwangju (previously romanized as Kwangju).

The purpose of this book is not to target and criticize a particular country, government, or person, but rather to call to mind the historical and political situation Koreans are in today, as well as to reflect on our human condition by reading this story about a young man and his solitary death. That is, as an example of what has happened on the Korean peninsula for over half a century, and what could happen again in the future—and what's more, as something that could occur amid the interactions between the state authorities and an individual, the kind of general absurdity that can occur between the state's authoritative power and an individual citizen. Yes, citizens who the state by duty ought to be looking after.

Among the terms frequently used by literary critics of Ancient Greek tragedy, there is the concept "Tragic Flaw." In Greek, it is Hamartia, and refers to an inherent defect or shortcoming of the hero in a tragedy. For example, the excessive competitiveness of King Oedipus, the extreme greed for power of Agamemnon, or the monomania, or mysophobia (obsessive emotional self-protection), of Prince Hippolytus. It is common among ordinary people, however, that the hero of a tragic incident is said to be in a hypertrophic state of desire for power, or for honor or cleanliness. Such people cause tragic situations, and the damages affect not only themselves, but many people around them.

Meanwhile, there seems to be a weird principle in the reality of politics. We are often perplexed upon witnessing or learning of an extraordinary reality, yet either because we are so frequently exposed to such circumstances, or we are easily persuaded by logics that rationalize such situations that we end up accepting the absurdity of reality without particular perception. The perpetrator who directed the tragic situation walks free of any damages or responsibility and to the contrary enjoys all kinds of honor, fame, and social wealth and power, while the damages end up the share of the people, who are not responsible at all, and have no ability to deal with the aftermath.

This book is divided into two main parts. The first part describes the historical situation the main character is faced with. In this part, we will look into some of the actual circumstances the North Korean was in: how he was deprived of the opportunity to live an ordinary human life, and the cold reality that drove him to his despicable end. This part may seem wordy because it could sound redundant, a story that is already familiar to most readers. Notwithstanding, Kang Min-chol's life cannot be a simple one-time story without a diagnosis on the present reality of the Korean peninsula, which has been so for more than seventy years. German novelist Thomas Mann once said, "In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms." In that respect, as Koreans born in a divided Korea, unfortunately we are all ill-starred to live embracing a same destiny. And the story of Kang Min-chol is a most dramatic example of that unfortunate fate.

The second part is the story about the protagonist's personal life and about the case which appears as our mutual interest. The difficulty in preparing to write this book was the shortage of documents to reconstruct the facts. In particular, there were hardly any documents of North Korea, and they may remain impossible to obtain for some considerable time. I was, however, able to refer to a small set of materials, albeit minimum, and to the memoirs of people who were involved in the case directly or indirectly. Helpful references were the Burmese government's official publication, *The Judgement of the Burmese Martyr Mausoleum Bombing Case*, and *The Aung San Report* by Park Chang-seok (Ingan Sarang, 1993). Reporter Park miraculously avoided harm from the site of the terror and survived to leave a precious record of the incident. Other articles from various media were also conferred.

The account of Ambassador Song Young-shik, who was then counselor of the Korean embassy in Burma, in his memoir, *My Story* (Nbook, 2012), was a valuable source of information. Ambassador Shin Bong-kil, who also served as counselor in Burma after the incident, had a lot of interest in the incident and compiled his thoughts in Burma, *The Land Where Time Stopped* (Hannarae, 1991), which provided priceless help. Chang Se-dong's *Ilhae Foundation* (Hankuk Nondan, 1995) tackles the Rangoon Bombing incident as the background to the foundation's establishment, and it was useful because it quoted many official documents.

Recently, Burmese writer Kaung Htet published a work about the incident of the North Korean Special Forces, entitled *The Aung San Mausoleum Bombing Terror Incident*. There was no new information in particular; nevertheless, it helped in reconstructing the then situation.

In addition, I depended on the testimonies of people related to this incident, most of who were in Korea and a number of others in Burma. Many recalled their memories of the past and some share the records they had kept and provided valuable assistance in compiling materials for this work. Those who met or came to know Kang privately while they were on official duty, or while serving their time, shared their stories of their relationship, or the dialogues they had with Kang. Even so, such statements need to be dealt with extreme caution. I was provided with the testimonies of the Burmese government's public security personnel who were involved with Kang Min-chol, and I also met and heard the stories of the people who had been imprisoned with Kang. One of them was U Win Tin, a former deputy leader of the Burmese National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Others were two wealthy businessmen; one of them claimed that he preached the Gospel to Kang and even gave him a Christian name, Matthew. These testimonies mostly concurred, yet there were some parts that did not coincide in detail. For such points, the author made certain judgments and deductions and wrote the related pages.

To make one more point here: at the time of the Aung San Mausoleum bombing incident, the country's name was Burma, and later changed to Myanmar, as it is called today.

In this book, however, Burma is used because historically it was the country's name at the time of the incident. It would also be difficult to specify within each chapter and interview which country name was then used, not to mention the incident being still strongly and vividly remembered by many Koreans by the old name. There is a unique sentiment the country name Burma has for Koreans. Therefore, I ask for the kind understanding of the readers.

During his imprisonment, witnesses say, Kang learned how to speak Burmese and reached a fluent level. The time he is said to have learned that language, however, was before he was sent to Insein Prison; it was while he was in the Burmese military's special prison. He learned Burmese mainly from former soldiers arrested for desertion, who were serving on fatigue. Naturally, there would have been a limit in his Burmese. For instance, Kang may have found little language difficulty in daily life, but he would not have been able to read or understand written Burmese. People's memory can often fool even themselves. Furthermore, one cannot be too careful and take for granted a person's memory of a dialogue exchanged within a non-typical environment, such as a correction facility, many years ago and quote every word as a source material. For example, one testimony claimed that while he was in prison, Kang Min-chol said that his mother was originally a Christian and that she had a Bible and a cross hidden within their house. One has to consider, however, whether such a thing would be realistically possible in real life North Korea, especially at the home of a specially trained soldier who was on top-secret missions. Moreover, the inmate who supposedly heard these words was a Christian and a well-to-do entrepreneur. He was one of the few who Kang Min-chol befriended in prison, and supposedly provided a lot of help to him. Therefore, these types of testimonies had to be reflected upon several times and weighted against diverse aspects before accepting them per word.

Separately, I referred to testimonies of former North Koreans, who resettled in the South and had worked in organizations of the same field, or at related agencies as Kang Min-chol. Their detailed explanations as to what they personally experienced helped to reconstruct the circumstances.

It is regrettable, however, that the documents related to this incident (especially the documents of North Korea) are mostly not disclosed properly.

As a result, there could be errors in detailed facts. In fact, naturally there might be some. Nevertheless, I have gathered as many materials as is possible at present, and made an effort to organize them in various ways. Therefore, I believe the records in this book are mostly close to the facts.

Despite that all, I believe that what is most important at present is to remind ourselves of the subject of this book and to correctly perceive the questions that Kang and his life experience address us.

Finally, I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who went out of their way to help me complete this book. This project began as a modest thought to leave a small recollection of the life and death of a young man; however, it was more difficult than I had imagined to find a publisher who would show empathy to my idea, or at least comprehend my reason of writing it. Despite an unfavorable start, this book could see light thanks to everyone at the Editor's Department of Changbi Publishers, who willingly extended a helping hand. I also wish to convey special gratitude to Doctor Hwang In-soo for his help with the proofreads. I express my gratitude to Professor Yoo Jong-ho and end the Preface quoting a passage from his biography:

*I would have nothing more to wish for if this book could contribute to the fight of the persisting memory in her struggle against dispirited unawareness.*¹

In the office at Hanyang University,
September 2013

Ra Jong-yil

1 Yoo Jong-ho, *That Winter and Fall, My [Life in] 1951* (Hyundae Munhak, 2009).

Prologue
The Martyrs' Mausoleum, Rangoon
The Fateful Day



On the morning of October 9, 1983, a spell of light rain gave way to clear skies. The temperature hovered around 25 degrees Celsius, typical weather for Burma between the rainy and dry seasons. For the terrorists, it was Judgment Day. The entourage of the South Korean president was busily preparing for the day's ceremony, oblivious to the turn of events that would befall them in a matter of hours. The terrorists, far away from their home country of North Korea, were checking the final placements of the explosives. A small, unexpected problem occurred, however. A dispute arose regarding where they should activate the remote detonator. Kang Min-chol wanted the team to press the detonator from the top floor of the Shwedagon Pagoda, as one could command a view of the Martyrs' Mausoleum (the Aung San National Cemetery). Jin Mo (spelled Zin Mo in Burmese records) disagreed. He claimed that the pagoda would be full of tourists, who could blow their cover, so the bomb should be set off in the streets after the motorcade of the South's delegation passes by. Jin Mo insisted that everything be done according to his plans, since he was the leader. He was adamant. Eventually they situated themselves in front of a theater that was about a kilometer from the mausoleum.

The clock continued to tick, hurtling them toward their fate.

At 10:00 in the morning, members of the South Korean delegation and the press corps boarded from their lodging the Inya Hotel onto cars and buses provided by the Burmese government and headed toward the mausoleum. Several members of the delegation were already there and stood in two receiving lines, awaiting the president's arrival.

At 10:23, Foreign Minister Lee Beom-seok greeted a familiar face, a reporter, and they agreed to meet later in the evening. The reporter hardly imagined then that that dinner appointment would be the last conversation he would have with the diplomat.

The time scheduled for the ceremony was quickly approaching, and all preparations were complete, yet the South Korean president's delegation was still at the Presidential Guest House. The president was nowhere to be seen, and his secretaries and aides anxiously shifted their gazes between their watches and outside. The reason for the delay was that the Burmese Foreign Minister U Chit Hlaing had not arrived. The plan was for the Burmese minister to arrive at the Presidential Guest House at 10:15 and escort the South Korean president. President Chun Doo-hwan came down two minutes later, however, when he learned that the Burmese foreign minister had not arrived yet; frowning, Chun went back up to the second floor. Moments later, Minister U Chit Hlaing arrived at 10:19, four minutes late. The protocol officer had the Burmese minister wait for two minutes, and then led him to Chun. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Chun and his men left the Presidential Guest House at 10:24. No one at the time could have imaged the colossal fate of that four-minute delay.

At that moment, the terrorists were standing in front of a theater a kilometer away from the cemetery, blended in with a crowd of onlookers and waiting for Chun. There was no sign of him, although according to the schedule he should have already passed by. The North Koreans waited anxiously. At 10:24, a black Mercedes with a South Korean flag flying and followed by a motorcycle escort drove past them. That car arrived a minute later at the cemetery. The man who got out from the back seat was not Chun, but South Korean Ambassador to Burma Lee Kye-chul. The ambassador conveyed to the waiting delegation the message that the president would arrive momentarily.

To the terrorists, it would have seemed that it was Chun who had just passed by in the black vehicle when in fact he was then still at the Guest House. Whether by fate or coincidence, the motorcade made it seem as if the president was almost at the mausoleum. There was a further explanation for this mistake of identity.

Chun had in fact called Ambassador Lee to the Guest House that morning as a special favor. Chun wanted to leave a small gratuity to the Korean personnel in Burma, who had worked to organize the ceremony, as he felt a gift would facilitate the ambassador's posting in Rangoon a little.

For that reason, the ambassador had stopped by the Presidential Guest House and headed from there to the mausoleum instead of directly leaving from the ambassador's residence. Ambassador Lee's vehicle arrived at the Mausoleum at 10:25. Three minutes later the fatal blast went off.

The delegation on site was straightening things up after the ambassador informed them of the president's arrival when the sound of trumpets abruptly signaled the start of the ceremony. Two short calls sounded the fanfare. This would turn out to be a remarkable stroke of luck for Chun Doo-hwan. It was inconceivable that there would be a fanfare before a ceremony officially began. It still remains unexplained why the trumpets were called before the arrival of the Korean president. Did the trumpeters also take Ambassador Lee for Chun? Or was it someone's elaborate deception?

The fanfare was the signal that the terrorists had been waiting for. Jin Mo paused briefly after the sound of the trumpets had died down, and then pressed the remote detonator. Three minutes of silence had passed after the fanfare. A loud crack rang out, and a flash of intense light bathed the entire area followed by a powerful blast which shook the entire mausoleum. Everything became pitch dark, and a storm of shrapnel, flesh and bones pierced in all directions. Almost instantly, there were harrowing cries of the injured, and chaos ensued. The wooden building crumbled as the beams crashed down and the entire roof was blown away. Rubble rained down on the diplomat and Cabinet members, who had been waiting in line for Chun to arrive. Dozens cried out for help, crushed under the rubble, while survivors tried desperately to lift the wooden beams off the victims.

At that moment, the president's motorcade was speeding toward the mausoleum. The Presidential Guest House was only 4.5 kilometers away. The explosion occurred at 10:28 — two minutes before 10:30, the time the ceremony was scheduled to begin.

Chun had left the Guest House four minutes earlier, and his motorcade was a mere 1.5 kilometers away when the explosion tore through the cemetery. As soon as he heard of the bombing from his bodyguards, who were at the site, Chun ordered the motorcade to quickly turn around and go back to the Guest House.

The bombing claimed the lives of seventeen Koreans and four Burmese, and injured forty-nine others.

Chapter 1

Brother Against Brother



*“We are all humans and individuals. ...
We are like fragile eggs walled in by unyielding systems. ...
These walls are exceedingly high, strong and harsh.”*
Haruki Murakami (The 2009 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech)

“The South schemes, the North schemes, and the people suffer.”
Song Hae (The Seoul Daily, Aug. 15, 2011)

Every event that transpired following the liberation of Korea from Japan in 1945 can be elucidated only in the light of the antagonism, conflict, and resultant clash between a people who purport to share the same heritage, culture, and lineage.² The clash arose not because the two regimes that split the country were so different but rather because they were so similar. If there were a difference, it would be the disparate social background and history of the ruling class of the North and the South. The decisive difference, however, stemmed from their outlooks on international politics. Whereas the North’s Kim Il-sung emulated the Soviet Union in pursuing a one-party dictatorship and planned economy, the South’s pro-US Syngman Rhee espoused, at least in name, a multi-party liberal democracy and market economy.

Despite these differences, the two regimes did have much in common. Kim and Rhee were fundamentally nationalists, and while the methods may have been different, after taking power, they carried through their struggles against the Japanese colonial rule and took anti-Japanese positions. More than just a matter of politics or policy, the revulsion they both felt against the Japanese was visceral.

2 Ra Jong-yil, *Discovery of A World* (Kyunghee Univ. Press, 2009).

Both leaders also placed a political priority on establishing a centralized government rather than promoting civil society or market systems. Both regimes also faced the need to build a powerful military. Reunification was an important common issue, but the means to achieve it was through military power. Both Koreas had to construct independent economies that did not rely on foreigners, and rebuilding the national economy was more pressing than the people's welfare and livelihoods.³

Both in the North and the South, the state leaders preferred government control over a free-market system. The rift between the two regimes was made deeper because of these similarities. As the British novelist and journalist Arthur Koestler said, heterogeneity is so much more important than homogeneity that people are willing to kill for it.⁴ After the division of the peninsula, neither side ever entertained the idea of acknowledging the existence of the other, expanding contact and established coexistence. As legitimate as one side considered it to be, so traitorous the other side could only be. Thus the only possible path to reunification was by military force. Rene Girard, the French philosopher, said that people become aggressive and competitive once they realize what they have in common. "The danger is not difference, but the absence of it."⁵

When North Korean residents were suffering from catastrophic floods in 2012, South Korea offered aid supplies via the Red Cross. North Korea asked in what form the aid would be. The South replied that it would consist of flour, instant noodles, and medicine. North Korea refused the aid, and harangued the South for even offering. For both the North and the South, politics and strategy trumped their citizens' welfare. South Korea wanted to prevent their aid from being used for the North's strategic needs. Perhaps the South felt that staples such as packaged noodles could instill a new perspective of the South in the minds of ordinary North Koreans, and perhaps even make them envy the prosperity of the South. North Korea probably felt that while aid was welcome, it was more important to create the conditions whereby the North could receive what aid that the regime required. In other words, the message from the North was that without the aid they wanted delivered the way they wanted, there would be no dialogue that the South wanted—and without dialogue, the peace that the South wished for would be unachievable.

3 Ra, *Discovery of A World*.

4 Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in The Machine* (Hutchinson of London, 1967), 308.

5 Russell Jacoby, *Bloodlust* (Dongnyuk, 2012), 11.

In the game of high politics between the two Koreas, it was the people who inevitably ended up being the victims. This is but one small example that shows the divide between the needs of the people and the needs of those in power.

During the Korean War, it became common knowledge among North and South Korean troops that if it were inevitable that they would be captured, they would rather fall into the hands of foreign troops. That is, soldiers of the People's Army chose to become prisoners of the US, or other UN troops, and South Korean soldiers preferred to surrender to the Chinese rather than the North Koreans. The treatment of the foreign military was far better. Soldiers who surrendered could expect to be treated as defeated combatants, while to be captured by their Korean brethren subjected them to tedious and exhausting political sermonizing. Rather than being prisoners of war, they would be treated like criminals, who erred in both action and thought, betrayers of their own people and country. They would be branded as "traitors."

The two regimes vowed friendship to their Korean brethren while trying to do away with one another in a complex structure of conflict: a tragic aspect of inter-Korean relations that showed no sign of abating.

Conflicts of Inter-Korean Confrontations

Even after the Korean War that caused much pain and destruction to the people, the two Koreas continued to inject massive budget into building their military forces without a hint of regret or remorse, but rather as if they were preparing for another war. Both Koreas engaged in a series of special operations against each other. During this period, North Korea especially initiated a number of military actions with underlying political motives. This is stark proof of how ignorant a handful of people holding onto power can be of world affairs if they are without any external containment. These few rulers closed their ears not only to the outside world, but also to the dire conditions of their own people, hearing only what they wanted to hear and believing that their violent methods could produce great results. North Korean rulers believed that irregular warfare could spread uncertainty in South Korean society, undermine the South's government, and eventually fuel a people's revolt.

North Korea's provocations against the South after the Korean War include 600 incursions by spies and operatives and over 1,000 armed provocations. Infiltrations were made not only by land, but by sea and air as well, with approximately 500 of the former and forty of the latter.⁶ The South also initiated armed provocations against the North, although the character and intensity may have been different. In short, war and armed combat had never really ceased on the Korean peninsula.⁷

North Korea overestimated the discontent and dissatisfaction the South Korean people had toward their government, and overlooked the fact that North Korea was even more unpopular to the South Koreans than their authoritarian regimes. An examination of the small-scale military action carried out by the North during this period, one can discover the psyche the North Korean power elite and their "revolutionary strategy" that combines political and military activities. After the Korean War, the North's strategy shifted from making North Korea the "Revolutionary Outpost" to realizing a "Revolution in the South." The underlying logic was that while socialism was already entrenched in the North, the revolution against imperialism and feudalism was still ongoing in the South. North Korea's conviction that a "revolutionary capacity" was building up in the South became even stronger following the April 19 Revolution that drove out Syngman Rhee in 1960. A revolution would occur at an opportune moment if North Korea could help organize the revolutionary elements in the South. When the social atmosphere was ripe, South Korean revolutionaries, who would be prepared with the assistance of the North, would rise up and seize power. Assisted by small units of armed troops dispatched from the North, the South Korean military would inevitably have to intervene to bring order to the chaos in the final stages of the revolution, at which point North Korean regulars would march south for the conclusion.

North Korea's centralized power elites, however, only saw what they wanted to see. It was true that South Koreans were mired in poverty, even suffering from severe droughts and food shortages, and were repressed under an oppressive regime, but there was no possibility of a revolutionary force arising in South Korea. Far from giving rise to a revolutionary element, the Korean War perpetrated by the North had destroyed room for even progressive politicians in the South.

6 "The Unvarying Ministry of the Army," *The Hankookilbo*, Oct. 6, 2012.
7 Hong Seok-ryul, *The Hysteria of Division* (Changbi, 2012).

The North's continuous military aggression reinforced the legitimacy of the South's dictatorship and further entrenched the division of the peninsula. On the other hand, the ideological indoctrination that the North Korean military leaders had pressed upon their operatives infiltrating into the South was based on such a flawed analysis of South Korean society that it actually backfired on occasion. In other words, spies from the North were convinced that only a privileged handful of the wealthy bourgeois and the powerful enjoyed life in South Korea, with the majority of the proletariat and workers suffering from oppressive poverty and degradation. The proletariat sympathized with the North, the logic went.

The following is an account from 1968 during the so-called "January 21 Incident," when a North Korean Special Forces team attempted to assault the presidential residence and offices, the Blue House. A group of thirty-one North Korean soldiers selected from the elite Unit 124 had infiltrated into the South and made their way toward Seoul when they came upon a group of farmers who had been collecting firewood. A few of the North Koreans insisted that they should silence the South Korean civilians to avoid being exposed, but the others claimed that it would go against their mission to kill ordinary citizens, as their duty was part of a greater struggle to liberate the proletariats, farmers, and workers of the South. Eventually, the North Koreans released the farmers after threatening them with reprisals should they give away their position. Naturally, the farmers contacted the authorities as soon as they returned to their village, and this put a crimp on the North Koreans' plans.⁸ The political education they had received actually became a hindrance. This incident illustrates the discrepancy between the ideological mindset of the North's rulers and the reality. Notably, it was the troops with more experience operating in South Korea that had supported the idea to kill the witnesses at the time of this incident.

Targeting the president in the heart of the South Korean capital was shocking in its audacity and execution. The thirty-one operatives were all clad in South Korean military uniforms, and while they were spotted right before they reached the Presidential Residence and Offices and were stopped, their mission could have succeeded had they successfully infiltrated into their target. The speed at which they moved was especially remarkable.

8 Kim Shin-jo, *My History of Sorrow* (Donga Publishing, 1994), 42.

The bitter cold of winter did not slow them down as they passed through one South Korean defense line after another. Finally spotted almost in sight of the Blue House, all but three of the operatives were killed after a fierce firefight. Thirty-two South Koreans died, including seven civilians. Only one North Korean operative was captured, and two slipped past South Korean pickets and returned to North Korea. (Kim Shin-jo, the sole member of the assault team who was captured, later became a Christian pastor.)

Undoubtedly there were South Koreans who had their own unrealistic delusions about the people of North Korea. The Rangoon bombing, another incident in the foolish struggle for power, led to the loss of numerous innocent lives, including unarmed noncombatants. Once the smoke of armed conflict dissipated, what remained were wounds that cannot be healed: hatred, sorrow, a desire for revenge. North Korea's armed activities continued until the early 1990s when South Korea's modernization efforts brought the nation to the threshold of an advanced economy. While South Korea experienced outstanding development in all fields and rose above poverty and authoritarianism until they became faint memories, North Korea remained mired in the past.

That same year, from October 30 to November 2, 1968, North Korean Special Forces troops disguised as civilians infiltrated South Korea in three waves. The infiltrators consisted of eight teams with fifteen operatives each. Their mission was to organize revolutionary cells or "liberated zones" in remote regions throughout Korea. Entering rural villages, the North Koreans gathered together the residents and threatened and cajoled them into joining the party and swearing allegiance to revolutionary activities. Anyone who resisted was immediately executed. After a series of crossfire with South Korean police and military forces in Uljin and Samcheok in the eastern coast, 113 North Korean soldiers were killed and seven captured, with twenty South Koreans dead and more than thirty injured, including police officers, soldiers, and civilians.

Some argue that these incidents occurred amid a power struggle around the succession of power at the highest level of North Korean leadership. In late 1967, Kim Yong-ju, the younger brother of Kim Il-sung, was rising as the most likely successor, and the old revolutionaries in the military were trying to check his influence by accomplishing a notable success on the reunification front.

Their plan was “the South Korean revolution and reunification strategy.”⁹ For whatever cause, innocent lives continued to be taken as those at the top tried to grab onto and expand their hold of power. A series of failed operations did not deter North Korea’s reunification policy, even after power was passed down from father to son.

South Korea’s military and other agencies also carried out special operations against North Korea. The South also trained and dispatched operatives, but without much success. Security was much tighter in the North: South Korean operatives had less maneuvering room, and tactics and training were also inadequate compared to the North. The lack of results, however, did not mean that meaningless sacrifices were not made. While North Korean terror attacks had clear political goals based on an “objective” (albeit flawed) assessment of the situation, South Korean special operations did not have one. The South’s attacks had only tactical objectives, such as retaliation against North Korean attacks, diversions, or information-gathering. Although less well known, South Korean agents would have committed similar brutalities in the North.¹⁰

The South Korean side also sustained severe casualties. While there has yet to be an official investigation into the terrorist acts committed by South Korea, surviving operatives have testified as to their atrocities. There are also testimonies of personal corruption or violence committed during special missions that were conducted outside the normal boundaries of law.¹¹ Many servicemen made huge personal sacrifices, yet they were not compensated for because there were flaws in the system. From 1960 until 1972, the year the July 4 Joint Declaration between North and South Korea was announced, the number of operatives sent to the North who were left there to die or be captured is estimated to be as many as 2,150.¹² Officially, the armistice had brought an end to the war; in fact, although neither would ever admit it, both sides engaged in violent activities against their brothers on the other side. The most salient point is that while both sides claimed to be in pursuit of the reunification of the Korean people, their actions were in fact detrimental to the cause.

9 Shin Pyong-gil, *Kim Jong-il and Campaigns against South Korea* (Institute of North Korea Studies, 1997), 128.

10 Please see Gu Gwang-ryeol, *Rock, Scissors* (Hwanam, 2011) for further accounts of South Korean operations conducted in North Korea in retaliation for the North’s armed provocations toward the South.

11 “Memoranda of Kim Hyeong-tae,” *The Hankyoreh*, May 4, 2012.

12 Ibid.

Evidently, there was more than war and terror between North and South Korea. Attempts were made for exchange and cooperation, along with offers of negotiations for reunification.

But these attempts were based on the strategic or tactical calculations of one side or the other and thus did not result in meaningful progress. The exception was the ten-year period when South Korea engaged in the Sunshine Policy (February 1998 to February 2008). Moreover, in the year following the terrorist attack in Rangoon, North Korea offered to send aid to South Korea when it was stricken by severe flooding. South Korea accepted the offer. Despite a number of important agreements, however, a sustainable series of positive achievements was difficult to build.

A notable feature of North-South relations is that both sides are quick to offer reconciliation and exchange when it benefits their own side. For at least two decades after the war, North Korea surpassed the South in reconstruction and economic development. North Korea made several offers to negotiate with the South during this period, but South Korea continued to refuse. North Korea's delegation to the Geneva Conference in 1954 made an offer of a "dialogue between the Korean people," but the South turned them down.¹³ There was contact between North and South Korea only when both sides, either rightly or erroneously, calculated that they would gain from exchange and cooperation.

Different Perspectives on Reunification

The North Korean regime carried out foolhardy operations due to a flawed understanding of what they thought were "objective circumstances" of South Korea, failing in both the establishment of "revolutionary conditions" in South Korea and the creation of favorable circumstances of harmony and reunification by relaxing tensions on the peninsula. The South Korean government, however, was no different in assessing the circumstances of the North in a unilateral

13 Paik Nam-jun, who was a member of the North Korean delegation, suggested on several occasions to Byeon Hyeong-tae, the head of the South Korean delegation, to hold a "person to person" meeting outside the conference hall between the leaders of both delegations. The offer was turned down by Byeon. Lee Sang-jo from the North Korean side suggested the same to Director Lee Su-yeong of the South's Foreign Ministry during the Panmunjom talks, but was again turned down. See Byeon Hyeong-tae, *Diplomatic Records* (Hankookilbo, 1959), 65-66.

manner. The underlying South Korea assessment by North Korea was that a group of “counterrevolutionary elements” maintained an oppressive hold on power with the assistance of foreign forces, and reunification would follow as soon as this small number of the ruling class was removed, either through outside intervention or by the efforts of the people of South Korea.

The South had a similar idea, but along a very different pattern. While North Korea may have been delusional, it waged violence as part of a political design which aimed at achieving the goals of reunification based on a set of theories. These “theories” may have been unrealistic and ideologically skewed, but they were nevertheless based on observations of the situation in South Korea or changes in the international political arena.¹⁴

South Korea also had similar “theories” on the nature of the North Korean regime or the prospects of reunification, but much more simplistic compared to those of the North. Initially, some observers in the South retained the hope that the North Korean regime would collapse without the absolute rule of Kim Il-sung, but they had no ability or means to realize this. When Kim Il-sung finally died in 1994, this hope of theirs was quickly proven to be groundless. Kim Jong-il had prepared long for his succession to power, and nothing hindered his continued hold of power in the North. Those who believed that North Korea would be thrown into chaos once the senior Kim was out would have been disappointed. Despite witnessing post-Kim Il-sung years, there remained watchers who claimed that once the ailing Kim Jong-il died, North Korea would collapse from within. This hope was dashed once again as the power passed smoothly down to the grandson Kim Jong-un. Hope still springs eternal in the hearts of some, who foresee an internal power struggle in the North that will lead the country to chaos or bring down the regime. In a sense, both North and South Korea held misconceptions about the possibility of regime collapse by bordering on fantasy. Despite repeated false alarms, this perception seems to withstand.

14 North Korean terrorist attacks, however, began to drop these political or strategic pretenses from the late 1980s. In other words, these attacks became increasingly one-off incidents to serve much narrower goals. This could be defined as “tactical terrorism,” to differentiate them with previous “strategic terrorism.” Examples of these single attacks could include attacks against Korean Air airliners, the assassination of Yi Han-yong, a relative of Kim Jong-il, the attempted assassination of Hwang Jang-yop, and the more recent sinking of the Cheonan.

As economic development bore fruit in the late 1970s, South Korea tried to seek more realistic “theories” and strategies regarding reunification, which took the form of a “functional approach”—that is, exchanges and cooperation with North Korea in functional areas while circumventing politics, easing tensions, and pursuing peaceful coexistence would eventually lead to reunification. This strategy is both the most realistic to date and founded on the belief that this form of reunification would also ultimately benefit the interests of South Korea. Progress, however, has so far been mediocre.

A recent survey threw some cold water on the expectation that a collapse of the North Korean regime will bring about the kind of reunification desired by the South. Intelligence authorities in South Korea and Japan carried out a number of surveys on North Korean residents along the Chinese border in 2009. Chinese residents of Korean ethnicity were enlisted to conduct interviews with North Koreans. Face-to-face meetings were held with approximately 1,000 North Koreans for each survey. The question they were asked was, “If North Korea suddenly collapsed, where would you go?” The most common reply was, “China.” The second-most common was, “I will try to remain self-sufficient the best I can,” and then followed by, “South Korea.” A few answered that they would “follow the mediation of the UN or the United States.” This pattern of replies can be observed in both surveys conducted by the South Korean intelligence and by the intelligence-gathering units of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. There may be disagreements on the objectivity or the accuracy of the results, but these answers at least show a reality in stark contrast to the hopes held by some in South Korea. Expecting the North Korean regime to implode in the near future, or looking forward to a natural reintegration of North Korea with South Korea should the regime eventually collapse, may be farfetched in light of these surveys. Indeed, when asked about the possible behavior of North Korea’s ruling class, the reply was almost unanimous in choosing allegiance to China if the regime were to collapse.¹⁵

Despite this all, there remains in both Koreas the hope that one day, miraculously, or by some amazing development, reunification will happen. The difference is that, whereas South Korea emphasizes a peaceful reunification through political and economic modernization, North Korea still adheres to a military aspect, perhaps as the most important element of an eventual reunification.

¹⁵ Kang Yeong-jin, “Will the North Korean People Want Unification Following Regime Collapse?” *The JoongAng Daily*, Sep. 29, 2012.

Chapter 2

The Gwangju Uprising and the Rangoon Bombing



Economic Growth and Korean Politics

Unforeseen assaults by North Korean Special Forces came to an end in the 1970s. In replacement, North Korea focused on deploying covert operatives via various infiltration routes to gather information and to “organize revolutionary capacity.” In these efforts, North Korea’s efforts were remarkably creative and diverse. One of the most common, as well as key, approaches was to use pro-North members among the ethnic-Korean community in Japan.

In 1974, there was a failed assassination attempt on then-President Park Chung-hee by a member of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon), who instead shot and killed Park’s wife, First Lady Yuk Young-soo. The South Korean Intelligence identified North Korean operatives and related organizations. The South, however, was in an era of authoritarian rule, and the incident also gave those in power ample fodder to repress political dissidents. Under the pretext of uncovering North Korean spies, the Park Chung-hee regime put trumped-up charges of association with North Korean operatives on any South Korean citizen who would criticize or protest the government.

Meanwhile, the South Korean economy started to outpace that of the North from the early 1970s, changing the dynamics of inter-Korean relations. The rapid pace of South Korea's economic growth surprised even those who were closely involved. American experts who were aiding South Korea's economic development and observers in the West were similarly surprised. A country that sorely lacked resources, capital, technology, trained manpower, and other social capital necessary for running an advanced economy had driven headfirst into the international economic competition and produced results beyond the expectations of every expert. A foreign reporter who had often written articles critical of Seoul left the following comment:

[South] Korea's economic growth was indeed shocking and awe-inspiring. Almost every prediction turned out to be incorrect. After the Korean War, American aid officials wrote Korea off as a "basket case," a limbless incompetent. They said that Korea will never be able to survive without massive foreign aid. But great men were already planting the seeds of future industrial success.¹⁶

Conversely, South Korea's authoritarian government that pushed through this remarkable economic growth began to find itself in an increasingly uncomfortable political situation. The economic growth made possible by the government was now hobbling them by presenting unwelcomed opposition. The government found itself no longer able to control the civil society that had expanded in both quantity and quality thanks to rapid economic growth. As civil society expanded and citizens began to demand more participation in politics, the government began to face resistance from the democratic movement and the labor-rights movement.

The government's attempts to repress or control them only fueled the resistance. The appearance of home-grown leftist revolutionary elements began to worry not only the Park regime but also social leaders. In addition, though few in number, social activists came to light who radically criticized the regime's policies, voicing social concerns for citizens who were left behind or sacrificed amid rapid economic growth. Pro-North Korean organizations aligning themselves with the government in the North and Kim Il-sung also made appearances. This political instability continued to persist as South Korea hurtled along the tracks of fast economic growth.

¹⁶ Donald Kirk, *Korean Crisis, Unraveling of the Miracle in the IMF Era* (St. Martin's Press, 1999) ref. the preface.

The government had to pursue sustained economic growth on the one hand while dealing with the North Korean security threat on the other. The government also had to control an increasingly vocal opposition. By the late 1970s, Park's "Yushin" regime was in a state of serious crisis, which led to political catastrophe, and finally to a tragic outcome. Pyongyang did not let the prime opportunity to exercise its characteristic strategy pass by. Violence had become an important tactical element in the game of politics.

The late 1970s marked a watershed period as one political era ended and another began. Political strife reached the highest ranks of the government as large-scale anti-government demonstrations broke out in 1979. At last, the president himself was assassinated by one of his closest confidants who had been responsible for the security of both the president and his regime. This incident signaled the downfall of the authoritarian regime, and the South once again faced unrest. As the military hinted to assert itself, taking advantage of the chaos, it stirred up a nation-wide resistance movement. Students, trade unions, religious leaders, and social activists stood up against the second military junta.

On May 15, 1980, large crowds gathered in Seoul demanding the repeal of martial law that had been declared in some areas. The government responded by placing the entire nation under martial law. A tragic scenario began to unfold. The government's heavy-handed measures, dictated by the military which controlled it, began to heighten resistance among citizens. Initially, small-scale demonstrations led by students were held in Gwangju. When they were brutally crushed by the military, larger numbers of citizens took to the streets in protest. As casualties mounted on both sides, the military deployed a large number of troops and crushed the protests just like a military operation. This tragic incident produced thousands of civilian casualties, with 256 people dead, 76 missing and 2,277 injured. (These numbers represent only that of known casualties, and it is plausible that there were additional untallied victims.)

Now called the Gwangju Democratic Movement, the May 1980 incident is among the most horrifying displays of the military regime's brutality on the peninsula since the Korean War, and it has left a dark mark in Korean history. The incident heavily influenced Koreans for years to come. Gwangju is remembered in Korea and around the world as a symbol of citizens' resistance against authoritarian rule, and as the prime example of violence levied by a military government toward its own people.

Having come to power in the wake of this incident, Chun Doo-hwan's regime was stigmatized by a serious scar on its legitimacy and legality, not to mention public support or popularity. A former Blue House correspondent during the Chun government once spoke of what it was like then. When Chun visited the provinces on regional inspections, he would criticize and counsel almost every local official he met, but would have only praise on visits to Gwangju. Perhaps it was out of guilt for what he had done. The presidential party and even reporters had to stay holed up in the official residence under heavy security until time for their departure. The correspondent reminisced that it felt like visiting an enemy ground. There were indeed some elements of danger, as occasional stones or Molotov cocktails would be thrown toward government buildings where Chun was known to be visiting.

Ambassador James R. Lilley, who was posted to South Korea in the mid-1980s, recalled the political situation of that period in his memoir.

“However [during this period] the incident that outraged young Koreans and sored the elders was then-president Chun’s merciless suppression of the anti-government demonstrations initiated in the southern city of Gwangju in May 1980. In the mid-80s, the cries “Let’s Remember [what happened in] Gwangju” became a touchstone for Koreans of all ages who longed for democracy.”¹⁷

The incident inevitably affected inter-Korean relations. The authorities in the North would not have been able to sit back and merely watch these developments in the South. The bloody terrorist attack North Korea waged three years later in Rangoon, Burma, must be examined together with the Gwangju Uprising. The conflict between North and South Korea eventually made its way to the faraway nation of Burma, culminating in another heinous act.

17 James Lilley, *China Hands* (Public Affairs, 2004), 268.

North and South Korea in World Politics

The Vietnam War in the 1970s was one of the manifestations of inter-Korean conflict that expanded beyond the Korean peninsula and created an indirect clash between the North and the South. After seizing power via a coup on May 16, 1961, Chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction Park Chung-hee offered US President John F. Kennedy a troop deployment to Vietnam in return for economic aid. The highest priority for the Park regime at the time was to rebuild the economy. To secure aid from the US, Park offered to assist the US in its war in Southeast Asia. Three years later, in 1964, US President Lyndon B. Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy, made the formal request for a South Korean troop deployment. The decision to enter the war in Vietnam would force Korea to bear considerable sacrifice and hardship, but underlying it was a complex series of calculations that included security concerns, from relations with the US and boosting the Korean military's capabilities to economic concerns and other national interests. Although it was clear that young Korean men's lives would be lost, the decision to send troops did not cause a big stir in Korea. The government's PR campaign played its part, but many Koreans also accepted the troop deployment positively as an opportunity. Fundamentally it was an unjustified war being fought in a foreign country by foreigners, but South Korea welcomed the unprecedented chance to engage in international activities and thereby took part in various ways. Another factor that played a significant role was the anti-communist sentiment that was pervasive in all levels of the Korean society. Of course, had there been any opposition to the decision to enter the Vietnam War, the authoritarian government would have suppressed it thoroughly. Today, Korea's participation in the Vietnam War is widely regarded as having hugely assisted Korea in the early stages of building the economy.

Interestingly, North Korea volunteered on its own, without any prodding, to dispatch an air force unit to Vietnam to assist the Vietminh. The Woodrow Wilson Center recently published a report that contained two Vietminh documents. According to them, North Korea made a request for the "authorization" of the Vietminh to dispatch troops to Vietnam, which led to an agreement over the specific details between the two parties. Eventually, following the "authorization" by General Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnam's military commander, North Korea sent in three waves fighter pilots and experts in various fields including psychological warfare.¹⁸

18 See "Verification of DPRK Air Force Participation of the Vietnam War" (*Yonhap News*, Dec. 5, 2011) for further information about the Wilson Center's N. Korean Int'l Documentation Project.

North Korea also made its own considerations for entering the Vietnam War. It is unknown, however, to what extent Pyongyang gained by sending troops to Vietnam, and it is questionable whether North Korea actually benefited in any practical way—that is, economically, or in the enhancement of its international stature, or in diplomatic power. Perhaps it might have helped the North Korean air force pilots to gain some combat experience. Nevertheless, an undeniable factor is inter-Korean relations. North Korea could not simply stand by and watch as South Korea was benefitting both domestically and internationally by participating in Vietnam.

A similar phenomenon can be seen in other examples. When the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games ended in great success, North Korea responded by hosting, at a considerable expense, the World Festival of Youth and Students in Pyongyang the following year in 1989. The Seoul Olympics raised Korea's international profile and also brought actual economic gains. The 1988 Olympics was also the first time in twelve years that almost all countries around the world of both the West and the Eastern bloc participated together in a summer Olympics; that participation is regarded as exerting considerable influence on the subsequent historic changes in the former socialist countries.¹⁹ Benefits garnered by the 1989 event in the North, however, are harder to ascertain. Indeed, North Korea's economic travails were exacerbated even further by holding such a major event without any visible return in the form of international reputation or positive reactions from other countries. This can only be regarded as one of the absurdities that an irreconcilable conflict between two parties tends to produce. Action from one side inevitably causes a reaction from the other. This is a major facet of inter-Korean relations.²⁰

In recent years, North Korea has been showing inexplicable actions such as neglecting its international status, reputation, or the welfare of the North Korean people while single-mindedly focusing on boosting its military power—including developing nuclear weapons, despite international criticism. Chinese President Hu Jintao and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who visited Korea in March 2012 for the Nuclear Security Summit, pointed out the unreasonableness of North Korea's nuclear policies, stating that “North

19 Ra, *Discovery of A World*.

20 Ibid. Referred to as the “dynamics of adversarial duo.”

Korea must first look after its own people” and, “Food for the people must come before missiles.” A reality that cannot be explained by reason, however, becomes clearer when it comes to the particularities of North-South relations. In dealing with a South Korea that has achieved rapid modernization not only economically but politically and socially, the sole and most “logical” choice the stagnant North Korea can make is its “Seon-gun,” or military-first policy. And this choice isn’t only limited to the realm of high politics, either.

The shadow of the North-South conflict and competition was even cast on events that seemed almost unrelated. Underlying the announcement made by the city of Seoul in 1969 of its plans to construct a second metropolitan center south of the Han, following the completion of the Hannam Bridge, were the people’s fears of North Korean threat. South Korea’s key ruling apparatus and human and material resources were heavily concentrated in Seoul, and the districts north of the river were especially vulnerable to a military threat from North Korea. The scale of the Hannam Bridge itself was symbolic of the competition between ideologies. According to a historian,

The proof is in the fact that just three months into construction, the design of the Hannam Bridge was altered to six lanes. The decision, which was pushed through despite strong disagreement, was not the result of some remarkable foresight but was simply a way to ensure that the new bridge would dwarf the Ongnyu Bridge across the Taedong in Pyongyang, which was four lanes wide.²¹

In a society that had seen significant social changes, the return of a military junta following a violent upheaval was even less popular than the authoritarian government that had preceded it, and popular resistance was intense. Chun Doo-hwan, a former military man, was probably the least popular of South Korea’s leaders. He was not just unpopular—Chun was a target of hate and derision. Although some artistic license has been taken, the 2012 movie “26 Years,” based on a comic series by famous cartoonist Kang Full (aka Kang Pool), depicts well the people’s sentiment at the time. The president and even the first lady were targets of vulgar jokes. Protests and demonstrations in some form broke out virtually every day. Universities especially were hotbeds of anti-government dissent and resistance.

21 Heo Dong-hyeon, “Modern Times: Behind the Maljukgeori Legend was the Hand of North Korea,” *The Chosunilbo*, Dec. 31, 2012.

When Kang Min-chol was wounded and arrested in Burma later, he falsely gave his identity as a student at Seoul National University according to a carefully crafted scenario prepared by North Korea, which was aware of South Korean campuses' anti-dictatorship atmosphere at the time.

Trust in the government inevitably fell, and even when North Korea engaged in provocation or spy rings were busted, many people dismissed them as government concoctions. Even the Rangoon Bombing, the main stage of the events discussed in this book, could not escape this skepticism: even though the Burmese government's strictly independent investigation concluded that the attack had been perpetrated by North Korea, and even though almost every country in the world accepted the conclusions of objective investigations based on solid facts, there were still people in Korea who refused to believe the official explanation. They instead believed that it was all a conspiracy and sham orchestrated by the authoritarian government. This phenomenon was not just limited to the terrorist attack in Rangoon. For every incident that occurred between North and South Korea from the Korean War onwards—including the KAL (Korean Airlines) Bombing in 1987—there were always those who refused to believe the explanations offered by the government. This continues today. Of course, there may be various other reasons. Such mistrust, however, seems to be yet another negative legacy left behind by an authoritarian regime.

Gwangju Uprising—South Korea's Crisis, North Korea's Opportunity

North Korea could not stand by as the conflagration of the Gwangju Uprising began to consume the South. Large-scale unrest had broken out within South Korea, and government troopers were massacring civilians. It was a situation that was almost tailor-made to suit the North Korean regime's overall strategy. These were the winds of revolutionary change the North had waited eagerly. The military was killing civilians, and a government without legitimacy or legality was oppressing its people. The ruling elite were deplored by the people, facing criticism and resistance from virtually the entire population. International scorn was mounting, and friends and even allies of South Korea were becoming more vociferous in their criticism. It was a perfect situation that the North Korean regime had only dreamed of. It was both proof that the North had always been right about its assessment and expectations of South Korean society, and an opportunity that could not be passed up. Direct military intervention was not out of the question, and North Korea could call it justified. "Protecting our brethren in the South from government tyranny" would have been the justification. Collaboration from within South Korea was a possibility.

In reality, however, and frustratingly for North Korea, direct action was not a possibility. The biggest factor was the United States. The world was a different place than in 1950. Exactly thirty years ago in June, the North Korean regime and its backer Stalin had gone to war, convinced that the United States would not intervene. But circumstances were radically different in May 1980. The United States had made its stance clear.

Spearheaded by an aircraft carrier, the US dispatched a task force to the Korean peninsula. The move was a strategic gesture that left no doubt about what the US military might do if the situation escalated. Such a show of force was a common method powerful countries employed to send a warning. Of course, the international diplomatic landscape had also changed significantly in the intervening three decades. If North Korea engaged in direct military action, no country would lend its support actively as had been the case before. Neither China nor the Soviet Union, who shared strategic interests with the North, would have been pleased or even critical of such a move. Even the very existence of the North Korean regime could have been threatened by rash action.

There was another factor that was preventing North Korea from asserting itself: the Korean War. Direct military action initiated by North Korea could actually end up helping the “counter-revolutionary government” of South Korea. While the government may have been authoritarian and reviled, the South Korean people nevertheless would support their leaders in a fight against “invaders” from the North. Any military action by North Korea could in one fell blow undo everything accomplished by the “revolutionary” situation that began in Gwangju. The South Korean government, in fact, had been shrilly accusing the North of masterminding the Gwangju Uprising.

The only alternative that remained for North Korea was a terror strike. The Gwangju Uprising presented a prime opportunity for achieving political goals through terror. Indeed, terror is a kind of political action per se. Killing the head of a new military junta with weak popular support from the people of South Korea would create a power vacuum, plunging the society into chaos and unrest. The new authorities would be thrown into confusion, shaking their already precarious support base. On the other hand, the democratic resistance and the then-leaders of the Gwangju Uprising would be greatly encouraged, expanding resistance against the ruling elite across the entire nation.²² A successful terror attack against the highest ranks of the government would shake the stability of the South Korean government and further erode the popular trust in the long term. The people would consider their government not only illegitimate but powerless to maintain national security. Removing an unpopular dictator would be welcomed by at least some South Koreans. North Korea could be even regarded as “the liberators” by some in the South. This would form a powerful revolutionary foundation in Korea. Should the chaos become entrenched, a direct or limited military intervention could ultimately be feasible. The possibility of a North Korea–led reunification would not be out of the picture. “The goal which North Korea tried to reach with a singular determination at this time was to assassinate Chun Doo-hwan in order to divide the South Korean public opinion and ultimately induce a civil uprising.”²³

22 Shin Pyong-gil (Ed.), *Kim Jong-il and Campaigns against South Korea* (Institute of North Korean Studies, 1996).

23 Lee Sang-gyu, “Process of Change of North Korean Tactics Against South Korea” (North Korean Studies), Vol. 4, combined volume, 11-12.

The assassination attempt was not just a one-time adventurous operation. The fact that the North Korean regime tried again and again despite repeated failures is a testament to the plan's priority. It was always the Gwangju Uprising that lent direct legitimacy to these attempts. In 1981, North Korean operatives trying to pass themselves off as families of the victims of the Gwangju Uprising plotted with members of the Mafia in Vienna and Macao to assassinate Chun. The plan was to ambush the president during his visit to the Philippines in early July of that year as he played golf with President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, then escape to rebel camps in Mindanao; it was never carried out. On two subsequent occasions North Korea tried to enlist ethnic Korean Taekwondo instructors in Canada to assassinate the president.

The fact that the United Front Department had been in charge of all of these attempts indicates that the plots were concocted as a piece of the larger puzzle of North-South relations. At least at this point in time, North Korea seemed to have been content to try to enlist foreign criminal organizations to try to assassinate President Chun, without utilizing its own assets. In fact, the United Front Department didn't have the personnel to launch overseas operations. The North Korean government seemed to have wanted these assassination attempts to be linked to foreign elements or to South Korea and keep themselves out of the picture, at least ostensibly. In other words, while North Korea may have overseen these plans, they wanted to hide their involvement and make them seem as though incidents were produced by internal political or revolutionary factors in South Korea.

Among the people North Korea used for the earliest attempt on Chun Doo-hwan's life was Choi Jung-hwa, the son of Choi Hong-hee. The senior Choi was a former general in the Korean military who had defected to North Korea due to dissatisfaction with President Park Chung-hee. He was also the founder of Taekwondo, having created and run the International Taekwondo Federation. When Choi Jung-hwa was arrested and interrogated following a failed assassination attempt against President Chun, he first claimed that the whole thing was a conspiracy drummed up by South Korea and that he was innocent. Later, he reneged and testified that the attempt was retribution for the massacre in Gwangju.²⁴

²⁴ "No Regrets for Assassination Attempt Against Chun Doo-hwan" *ObMyNews*, Sep. 3, 2007. However, he voiced his regret and a desire to seek forgiveness in other interviews (*The JoongAng Sunday*, Sep. 7, 2008; *The DongaIlbo*, Sep. 8, 2008).

But when these assassination attempts all ended in failure, North Korea is said to have passed on the responsibility for plotting these operations from the United Front Department to the operational commands of the military. As a result, the Rangoon Bombing was perpetrated not by the UFD, but instead by the operations command under the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces, which eventually sealed the fate of Kang Min-chol.²⁵

After Kang had made a full confession, he once spat at a representative of the Japanese embassy who had been observing the trial. Kang had shown open hostility to a man who had come to watch his trial. The Japanese diplomat was seated far enough not to have actually been hit by the expectoration. Later, Burmese officials asked Kang why he had spat at someone who had done nothing but sit and watch the trial, and Kang responded by asking whether the man had not been sent from the South Korean embassy.²⁶ Apparently, he still retained hostility toward the military regime that had perpetrated the Gwangju incident. Kang testified that he had been briefed about the political situation in South Korea before being dispatched to Burma. He witnessed on television what had happened in Gwangju, and he accepted his mission to remove Chun Doo-hwan as a "just duty": to eliminate a dictator who had inflicted irrevocable brutality upon innocent people in the South.

Kang was reportedly shocked, however, when he met a South Korean diplomat in the late-1990s and learned of the political changes in the South. Kim Young-sam, a former leader of South Korea's democratic movement, had become president, and he was succeeded by Kim Dae-jung, who had once been sentenced to death for his democratization efforts. Strongmen Chun Doo-hwan and his successor Roh Tae-woo were tried and jailed for corruption. Fifteen years prior to this eye-opening event for Kang, North Korea's plan to assassinate Chun Doo-hwan was not a mere terrorist attack, but a major political initiative. According to a testimony made by a former North Korean special operative who defected to South Korea, the North Korean regime did not abandon its plans to assassinate Chun even after the failed attempt in Rangoon. The North had even hatched a plan to infiltrate six separate teams disguised as roadwork

25 Refer to the *JoongAng Sunday*, Sep. 7, 2008 article, for the testimony of Choi Jung-hwa, son of Choi Hong-hui.

26 Shin Bong-kil, *Burma: The Land Where Time Stopped* (Hannarae, 1991), 187.

crews and install bombs on the roads frequently traveled by the president, which would be detonated to kill the president when his motorcade passed by. This plan was quickly halted due to reconciliation between President Chun's government and Kim Jong-il, leading to a period of warmer relations. No terror attacks were planned against Chun's successor, President Roh Tae-woo. While Roh was also a former military man and widely criticized by student activities in the South, perhaps it was because the government had taken power after a legitimate election participated by the opposition party, or perhaps because North Korea was pursuing a new strategy to newly develop relations with South Korea.

Had North Korea's terrorist plot succeeded and removed an unpopular dictator in the South, it is likely that at least some South Koreans would have welcomed his death, albeit not openly. Of course, the majority of the population would have spoken out against the act of terrorism. Obviously, Kang was not telling the truth when he identified himself to interrogators as a "Seoul National University student." The fictional feasibility of it being true considering the circumstances in South Korea, however, seems to have existed. Regardless, North Korea had planned to deny responsibility for the attack and claim that it was an internal problem of South Korea. The North felt that such a denial would help them avoid future retaliation or international criticism, and in fact they did deny their involvement despite there being clear evidence which proved the opposite and brought about an international outcry. Ultimately, the two Koreas assigned a young man to face his tragic fate due to political and ethical flaws, and then both Koreas feigned knowledge of him. As with Edmond Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, everyone conspired to lock away a man to see his miserable end for the supposed benefit and gain of themselves, and then forgot about his existence. Unlike the case with Dantes, though, the number of wrongdoers was far more than only a few people around him. We are all intertwined directly and indirectly with the man's fate. In a sense, we are all guilty.

Chapter 3

Operation Chrysanthemum and Chun's Visit to Burma



An Unplanned State Visit

As noted earlier, the North Korean regime had tried but failed to assassinate Chun Doo-hwan on multiple occasions following the Gwangju Uprising. Three years after the massacre, however, the opportunity presented itself to North Korea to eliminate the South Korean leader, who ultimately bore the responsibility for the brutal incident.

In 1983, the Chun government was planning a presidential visit to South Asia. The decision was met with some criticism. There were demonstrations and unrest almost daily, and some detractors accused the government of trying to find an escape by turning attention overseas and engaging in diplomatic activities.²⁷ The presidential delegation included top government officials, high-ranking military commanders, and heads of conglomerates. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was naturally in charge, and Minister Lee Beom-seok took charge of the planning from the initial stages. Minister Lee placed particular emphasis on Korea's relations with India, a nation that exercised considerable leadership in the world's neutral camp and with which Lee had built relationships from his days as Korea's ambassador to India, including Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Minister Lee's priority for the presidential visit was to improve relations with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). North Korea was also one of the countries that formed the NAM.

²⁷ Song Young-shik, *My Story* (Nbook, 2012), 232.

It is hard to imagine now, but North and South Korea at the time were locked in a battle for the upper hand in the global diplomatic environment, and North Korea had the advantage when it came to relations with the NAM. With the presidential visit, South Korea was aiming to dilute North Korea's advantageous position and create the foundations of diplomatic relations with NAM nations. The visit was planned for October and was code-named "Operation Chrysanthemum," after the flower that blooms in the fall season. The name had been devised by then-chief secretary for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon. Later on, some would comment that the choice of the code name proved to be ominously proper, as the white flower is commonly offered in memory of the deceased in Korea. Lee Sang-gu, who was a senior official with the Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP), once said that his heart still grows heavy whenever he sees white chrysanthemums.

At first, Burma was not included among the countries to visit. The most important destination was India, an important nation in the NAM. Other stops included Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, and Brunei. Burma was tacked onto the list in the final stages of planning, and the reason for this fateful addition was kept secret for a period of time. It was not a decision made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was in charge of the planning. Rather, the ministry received word from the Blue House to add Burma to the itinerary. The then-head of the South Asia department of the foreign ministry was Choi Nam-jun, with Choi Byung-hyo on working-level as secretary. In Choi Byung-hyo's recollection, the presidential tour originally included Australia, New Zealand, India, Sri Lanka, and Brunei, and Burma was on the list of destinations. There was some head scratching within the ministry, and some suspected ANSP's hand in the decision, but it was later revealed that the decision had come directly from the Blue House.

Several years after President Chun's term ended and a new administration was in place, a television special was aired that tried to shed light on what had happened. According to the program, the order to include Burma was based on the president's plans for his retirement. Having seized power via military power, the president was to step down in five years after his term of office ended. President Chun often stated while in office that he would step down after his

single seven-year term ended, as stipulated by South Korea's constitution. He did not show signs of planning to extend his term by overhauling the constitution or by other nefarious means. The adherence to the term limit was President Chun's most important, and perhaps only, claim to legitimacy. In other words, the president's claim would be to have taken power temporarily to restore order to a society beset by chaos following the assassination of President Park, and to step down once this task was complete. Whereas his predecessors had extended their rules through various irregular schemes, Chun seems to have believed that by retiring as a clean president after his term would be his lasting mark and contribution to the politics of Korea.

Such reasoning may be difficult to grasp today since the single-term presidency has solidly taken root. In the past, however, leaders would almost without exception extend their term limits through irregular means; Chun's decision, therefore, could be seen as a step in the right direction. While he may truly have been planning to step down after his single term, around every seat of power was filled by his loyal followers. It's not inconceivable that some of them would have different ideas than the president, or even express the inner thoughts of their leader better than he himself could. One of these close confidants apparently told Chun how he could maintain his power after retiring from office, or at least exert considerable influence in his field of expertise.²⁸ What Chun regarded as his expertise was national security, diplomacy, and the economy. He could have observed how General Ne Win of Burma had his party under his control even after retiring and thus continued to exert influence by appointing his followers as leaders of the government. Ne Win had his party (the Burma Socialist Programme Party) under his thumb, making him the *de facto* leader of Burma. President San Yu who had succeeded Ne Win was largely a figurehead, and Ne Win had a solid grasp on power even after his retirement. A visit to Burma would have allowed Chun and his people to study the Burmese model, as well as to start building a personal relationship between Ne Win and Chun.

28 People who have intimated this information—in other words, those who were aware of the internal workings of power at the time—single out an individual who was an advisor to the President. Some suggest that one of the president's close friends made an acquaintance first with Ne Win, arranging the eventual meeting between the two. These are, however, only rumors with no way to verify them.

Some, including Chun's former close advisors, claim that this theory is preposterous. They explain that the purpose of the Burma visit was to lobby for winning large-scale construction projects. A former protocol officer for the foreign ministry claims that Burma was included for a logistical reason. According to him, the president's delegation had originally intended to travel straight to India, which would have necessitated flying near the airspace of China and Vietnam, both enemy states of South Korea. A long detour required a stopover, and that was Burma.²⁹ The idea that a country was selected for a presidential visit simply to facilitate air travel, however, is unconvincing. If that were the case, the suggestion to add Burma would have come not from the Blue House but from the ministry, or another related agency. Many, including several former high-ranking officials who will remain nameless, believed the political-motivation angle.

Whatever the reason may have been for the inclusion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was displeased with the addition of Burma to the itinerary. The decision was met with reserve as well as with considerable resistance in some quarters. Minister Lee was especially unhappy. Burma was a socialist country and did not have close relations with South Korea. Neither did the country exert major influence over NAM countries. And Burma was not an attractive destination per se. There were security concerns. Not only was there a North Korean embassy in Burma, but seven or eight engineers dispatched from North Korea were working in Burma after the North had constructed a tin processing plant on the island of Syriam off the coast of Rangoon, and there was active exchange between the two countries. Burma was an important diplomatic and economic outpost for North Korea in South and Southeast Asia. If a terrorist plot were to be hatched, Burma would be the perfect place for it.

The ANSP was similarly concerned. Headquarters had its own issues, and officers on the ground were worried as well. The local ANSP station chief, Kang Jong-il, had been in country only since May of that year and was not intimately familiar with the conditions in Burma, but nevertheless collected his observations and dispatched a report to headquarters stating that a presidential visit to Burma may be fraught with danger. Specifically, the report advised against a visit to

²⁹ Refer to *Wolyo Newspaper*, Feb. 7, 1994, for further information about the meeting with Park Chang-seok.

the Martyrs' Mausoleum. The report stated that a terrorist attack similar to the one attempted at the National Cemetery in South Korea earlier was possible; should the president visit the Shwedagon Pagoda, as visiting dignitaries often do, a North Korean operative hiding among the crowds could suddenly bust out and attempt a suicide bombing; preventing such an attack would mean cordoning the site off before the president's visit to keep the public away, something which the Burmese government would not countenance.

Kang advised headquarters that if the president's visit was inevitable, he should only meet with Burmese government officials and skip any other appearances or events.³⁰ The itinerary initially prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did contain a visit to Shwedagon Pagoda. Another visit to a famous temple fifteen minutes away by helicopter from the pagoda was also planned. President Chun, however, expressed his displeasure after learning that he would be obligated to take off not just his shoes but his socks to enter the Shwedagon Pagoda. While local customs were important, he felt that a visiting head of state should not be forced to go barefooted. Thus, although not for security reasons, the visit to Shwedagon Pagoda was nixed, and the visit by helicopter to the temple was also struck from the plans. In addition to the possible North Korean threat, there were concerns that Rangoon Airport's runway would be too short to accommodate the president's airplane. The visit's planners, however, concluded that an inspection by South Korean technicians sent to the airport before the visit would resolve the issue.

Minister Lee did not hide his displeasure at the individual who suggested the addition of Burma to the presidential visit. Before setting off on the trip, Minister Lee told reporters at a private dinner in New York that he was going to Burma "thanks to that XXX," without revealing the name of the presidential advisor. Considering the tragedy that would later befall the minister because of the sudden decision to add Burma, these words were perhaps insufficient to convey his strong protest.

³⁰ Shwedagon Pagoda was eventually removed from the president's official itinerary of his Burma visit, leaving only the Martyrs' Mausoleum.

North Korea's Covert Preparations

While South Korea's foreign ministry was busy with preparations for the president's regional visits, the gears were grinding in the deepest echelons of the North Korean regime. In August 1983, Major General Kang Chang-su, Commander of the "Kang Chang-su Unit," the North Korean Special Forces Combat Unit named after him, summoned Kang Min-chol and ordered him to prepare for an important upcoming mission. A same instruction was given to the other two agents who would conduct the operation.

None of them realized that their special mission was of such an incredible nature as the assassination of South Korea's president. They were told only that the mission was of the utmost importance and that orders had come from the very top. Major General Kang was the son of Kang Kon, Chief of the General Staff of the North Korean People's Army, and who was killed in action during the early days of the Korean War; and the Kang Chang-su Unit was considered the most elite unit among the combat units of the General Bureau of Reconnaissance, the special operations command of the KPA. The Kang Unit was the umbrella of the Korean People's Army Department, now known as the Ministry of the Korean People's Armed Forces; however, it is said to be free from the ministry's direct operational control, and instead is an affiliate to the General Staff Department.

The three operatives were known to be the most proficient in hand-to-hand combat and other skills in their respective units. According to the testimonies of his cellmates while Kang Min-chol was being held in Insein Prison, each operative in the three-man squad was from a different unit, did not know each other until dispatched to Burma, and, as was the norm with North Korean operatives, trained individually in secluded houses to prepare for their mission. The Kang Unit was stationed in Kaesong, just above the Demilitarized Zone where the Gaeseong Industrial Complex is today.³¹ This area is home to a large number of bases and facilities for North Korean special forces units that infiltrate into the South.

31 Burmese government documents refer to Kaesong as "Kay Soon."

The team was composed of a major, later known as Jin Mo, and two captains, Shin Ki-chol and Kang Min-chol. All of these names were aliases. The Special Forces major known as Jin Mo was actually Kim Jin-su. He refused to answer any questions after he was injured and arrested, and apparently Burmese investigators who were not familiar with Korean names called him by whatever name they felt was convenient without bothering to parse through Kang Min-chol's testimony to properly check his name. Kang Min-chol's real name was also identified as Kang Yong-chol,³² which was revealed many years later by a diplomat from the Korean Embassy in Burma. The operative known as Shin Ki-chol at first remained unknown as he was killed during crossfire, but his real name was later identified as Kim Chi-oh. This book will refer to both North Koreans by their noms de guerre, which were widely known through media reports.

Thirteen years before the Rangoon attack, North Korea had attempted a terrorist attack at the National Cemetery in Korea during the ceremonies commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Korean War. Early in the morning on June 22, 1970, an explosion was reported at the National Cemetery in Seoul, and a body which appeared to be a North Korean operative was found on site. South Korean authorities determined that he had died by accident while trying to place explosives under the roof of the memorial building. Investigators announced that there had been two other North Korean operatives, but when the bomb exploded prematurely the surviving spies fled, leaving their dead comrade behind. The twentieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War was in three days, and the plot had been to assassinate President Park Chung-hee during the ceremony that was to be held there. But the explosion killed only the North Korean operative. The two other personnel who had fled were tracked by the police and the army to Gyeongangsan Mountain a few days later and were shot down. The reason the plot failed was not revealed. Explosive experts in the North Korean Special Forces command were also unable to determine exactly what had gone wrong. But the technical aspects of the bombing were subject to repeated tests which showed their methods were still reliable—thus the plan called for the use of the same kind of explosive device in Burma.³³

32 Burmese corrections officials, who had known Kang, referred to him as “Kang Min-chu” or “Kim Min-chu” during interviews with them.

33 While there are rumors of additional terrorist attacks that were planned for other stopovers

But the decision may have been erroneous. There is testimony attesting to the fact that the type of weapon they chose to deploy on that fateful day was the determining factor of its failure. Ironically, the Martyrs' Memorial had the perfect structural conditions for this kind of attack. Several years ago, following the terrorist attack, it was determined that the bomb used was composed of two anti-personnel mines, similar to the claymore mine used widely by the United States during the Vietnam War, and one incendiary device. The incendiary bomb was added so a fire would break out after the explosion, adding to the destruction and also ensuring the elimination of any evidence. According to Burmese investigators, the anti-personnel mines weighed 7.5 kilograms, and contained 700 to 800 five-millimeter lead bearings that gave the device a kill radius of fifteen meters. The incendiary bomb was a ten-centimeter-wide, thirty-centimeter-long cylindrical bomb. The three-man team began to train rigorously to prepare themselves for the imminent mission.

In South Korea, the foreign ministry, the Blue House and other government departments were frantically preparing for a presidential tour of unprecedented scale. For a top-level delegation including the president to visit six countries over eighteen days was an unusually large and complex undertaking. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had already been having an exciting year. In February of that year, Senior Lieutenant (equivalent to a captain in the South Korean army) Lee Ung-pyong fled to South Korea in a MiG-19, a new frontline fighter of the North Korean People's Air Force. Another major event occurred in May. On May 5, 1983, a Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) aircraft on its way from Shenyang to Shanghai was waylaid by six hijackers and made an emergency landing in the US airfield of Camp Page in Chuncheon. South Korea and China began to negotiate over the fate of the hijacked aircraft. The Chinese government initially tried to negotiate indirectly to secure the release of the aircraft and crew instead of dealing directly with South Korea, but eventually Director Shen Tu of the CAAC and a team of thirty-three administrators and aircrew arrived in South Korea to negotiate with then-Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Gong Ro-myung, ultimately signing an agreement composed of nine articles and bearing the official names of both countries. The incident marked an important step in the establishment of relations between

on the official visit such as Sri Lanka, no evidence of such plans can be found. It is likely that no other attacks were planned, aside from the bombing in Burma.

South Korea and China. On September 1, 1983, Korean Air 007 strayed into Soviet airspace near Sakhalin and was shot down by a Soviet Air Force fighter, resulting in the death of all 269 crew and passengers on board. The South Korean government strongly protested the Soviet Union's inhuman action, demanding an apology and restitution from the Soviet government, punishment of the parties responsible, and measures to prevent a reoccurrence of such an event; South Korea also called for an immediate emergency session of the United Nations Security Council.

On top of this, the ministry had to prepare and carry out a large-scale official overseas visit. The year 1983 was an eventful year already for the ministry. But these incidents pale in comparison to what was about to happen. There was even some organizational shuffling before the major event. Director of Asian Affairs Choi Dong-jin was transferred overseas to serve as ambassador to Bangladesh, and Kim Byung-yun replaced him. Choi Byung-hyo (later ambassador to Norway), who was one of the officials involved with the planning, joined the entourage as an unofficial staff member and ended up dealing with the aftermath of the incident together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Choi was relatively junior, but the task had fallen to him as many senior officials were left stunned by the attack and there was much work to be done, including attending to the casualties and contacting the home office. The South Korean embassy in Burma also met the news of the upcoming visit with reservation. Counselor Song Young-shik and Kang Jong-il from the ANSP had been in-country only since that spring, and were not yet familiar with local conditions. Song was one of the rising stars in the ministry, his previous position having been the important Director of North American Affairs. He would have been eligible to take the ambassadorship in Washington, DC, but instead he volunteered for a posting in Burma, hoping to take some rest and recover from heavy workload. What Song had planned to be his time off from real work ended up placing him in the middle of a major life-changing incident.

The DonggeonAeguk Arrives on the Rangoon River

As foreign ministry staff and other government officials were toiling to put the event together, North Korean terrorists were busy with their own preparations. Training ranged from acclimation to the tropical climate to handling explosives, special weapons, and communication gear. Political indoctrination was also a major component of the training process. The mission to eliminate the puppets of the hated American imperialists who repressed and even murdered fellow Koreans in the South—indeed to wipe out the top echelon—was a vital mission for the people and the revolution. There was no special training required for the mission. The operatives were already familiar with this type of mission and were highly regarded for their experience and abilities. The only difference was the mission's distant and unfamiliar location—and its gravity.

The team quietly departed Ongjin port by ship on September 9, 1983.³⁴ The ship carrying them was the “DonggeonAeguk,” a vessel purchased and donated to North Korea by Mun Dong-geon, an ethnic Korean businessman in Japan and the president of the “Democratic People's Republic of Korea,” a journal covering North Korean topics. The ship was registered to Daehun Shipping of Pyongyang.³⁵ The DonggeonAeguk was a 15.5-knot, 5,379-ton freighter. The ship looked like a cargo ship and indeed did carry cargo, but it also carried communication equipment that enabled direct communication with headquarters in North Korea from any harbor in the world, and without having to go through onshore radio relay stations. For this reason, the ship was often deployed for North Korean special operations.

Jin Mo, Kang Min-chol, and Shin Ki-chol met for the first time on board the ship. Only after they were on board and the ship was underway were they briefed on the specifics of their mission. The three operatives remained in their quarters throughout the journey. The confinement would have been arduous for most people, but for the trained operatives it was almost like a vacation. During the long trip, the three operatives prepared themselves mentally for the upcoming mission and rested from the rigorous training they had all gone through. Only

³⁴ Burmese government materials indicate the port from which they departed as “Aun Sin,” and one South Korean document mentioned the port of Wonsan. When all things are considered, however, Ongjin on the West Coast was probably their port of departure.

³⁵ For donating this ship, Mun Dong-geon received North Korea's highest decoration by Kim Il-sung, and a banquet was hosted by Kim at his official residence for Moon and his wife.

at night did they emerge for brief spells onto the deck to stretch and enjoy the ocean breeze. The operatives were occasionally spotted by few members of the crew, but they were used to the sight of special operations personnel being onboard, and left them alone or pretended they were invisible.

After six days, the DonggeonAeguk finally arrived at the mouth of the Rangoon River at 5 a.m. on September 15, 1983. The docking permit had already been applied for at the Port Authority of Burma, and the ship received a permit for transporting dry goods the next day, on September 16. Two days after docking, at 4 p.m. on September 17, the ship was authorized to dock at Sule jetty, quay number six in Rangoon Port, to offload its cargo. The work began on September 18, and was completed at twenty minutes past midnight on September 21. That morning, the DonggeonAeguk filed papers for departure. The capital, however, suddenly requested an extension of several days, claiming that emergency engine repairs had to be made to prepare for a long trip to the port of Alexandria, Egypt. Burmese authorities initially refused permission, but after the captain pleaded for a three-day extension, port authorities boarded the ship to verify the engine problem and issued the permit. The ship was told to move from the jetty on September 21 and to leave Burma three days later, on September 24.

The next day, on September 22, two individuals who appeared to be North Korean nationals boarded the DonggeonAeguk using a powered sampan, bringing on board vegetables and other food. When the sampan had first left the ship, it had been carrying three more North Koreans and two heavy leather bags with wheels. The DonggeonAeguk set sail as soon as the two crewmen returned, but the other three North Koreans never returned to the ship. These facts were later revealed by police testimony during the trial. The fact that there were three local police officers and two customs agents on board on the DonggeonAeguk and yet the incident went unreported was never raised as an issue during the investigation or trial process. Official government records offered no explanation.³⁶ Thus the three “crewmen” disappeared into Burma without any identity checks or immigration process. No official records or reports of this fact exist, however, and only through off-the-record statements from Burmese officials were the details of this incident learned, much later.

³⁶ This section refers to Rangoon Division of Judicial Body, “Criminal Proceeding No. 10 of 1983.”

South Korea naturally called that all into question. Suspicions were raised of collusion between Burmese authorities with North Korea, as well as the possibility of bribery. Those familiar with local conditions, however, said that such suspicions arose from ignorance. The DonggeonAeguk had been docked in a facility near Rangoon, but the pier lacked strict immigration protocols or official oversight, and it would have been easy for North Korean operatives to slip into Burma. Later, during the trial, the police officer who had been on site confirmed that on September 22 three North Korean individuals left the ship and did not return—but he stated that his job was to inspect the cargo, not keep tabs on the crew.³⁷

Kang Jong-il, the local ANSP officer, was aware that the DonggeonAeguk, a known spy ship, had docked in Burma and reported the fact to headquarters, but is said to have failed to realize that unidentified North Korean personnel had come ashore and were operating inside the country without following any entry procedures.

Terrorist Threat and Vague Concerns

It appears that not only South Korean intelligence officers in Burma but also Burmese intelligence and police authorities were unaware that North Koreans had slipped into the country illegally. Two days before the presidential entourage arrived in Burma, Lee Sang-gu, the ANSP's Director General of Overseas Operations arrived in country as per usual practice. The Directorate of Overseas Operations was a key department of the ANSP at the time. International operations, North Korean operations, science and information, and psychological warfare were all part of the directorate's bailiwick. It was customary for the director to visit a foreign country two to three days before an official visit, both to review preparations and to assess local conditions. Director General Lee had previously served as a minister at the South Korean embassy in West Germany, and Ambassador to Burma Lee Kye-chul had also been posted to the embassy at that time. The two were personal friends, and were happy

³⁷ For Harbor Police Officer U Tin Min's testimony, refer to: Park Chang-seok, *The Aung San Report* (Ingan Sarang, 1993), 116-17.

to see each other. Director General Lee checked the preparations and security status but did not discover signs of infiltration by North Korean operatives or any other irregularities. The general circumstances in the country, however, did cause him concern. The president's entourage would be highly exposed from external threats. Rangoon Airport did not have extensive facilities and was thus quite open, and an attack using heavy weapons from outside the airport could easily wreak havoc. To make matters worse, local security agencies seemed to be excessively laid back. A request to meet the chief of security for the host country was met with silence, and the representative who eventually showed up did not appear to be very competent nor committed to providing tight security for the presidential delegation visiting his country. Director Lee also received the impression that there was a communication gap between the South Korean embassy and the Burmese government.

Even so, by this time the presidential visit was going to go through no matter what local conditions were like, and it was too late to call attention to these various concerns. The ANSP's role was not to provide security for the president but to collect and deliver relevant information to the president's security detachment. Among the information Director General Lee furnished to the president's bodyguards included his opinion that there existed the threat of a terrorist attack during the presidential delegation's visit to the Martyrs' Mausoleum.

The report pointed out that a terrorist attack similar to the failed attempt to assassinate the president at the National Cemetery years earlier could be made again. That report, however, was later used as evidence arguing that the South Korean government fabricated the whole attack. Doubts were raised about how the report was able to predict the threat so accurately. Song Young-shik, the counselor of the South Korean embassy in Rangoon, also reported to Ambassador Lee about the appearance of the DonggeonAeguk in Rangoon, but he did not even imagine that the ship could have been carrying terrorists who would be responsible for the calamity to follow.

Successful Infiltration to Burma

The three-man special operations team dispatched to carry out the terror attack thus infiltrated Rangoon without leaving a trace. Immediately after they came on shore the team was whisked away to a house for North Korean embassy personnel. The address of this house was 154-A, Triacta 2 in the Ahlon district of Rangoon, in the old diplomatic district behind the Burmese foreign ministry. The house was located in a part of the city called the “diplomatic district,” right next door to the North Korean embassy. Counselor Chon Chang-hwi, one of the residents, was their contact and local case officer. The house could be accessed through its garage. The three terrorists stayed on the second floor of the house, which had a separate bathroom and allowed them to keep hidden without having to venture outside. The official title of Chon was counselor of the North Korean diplomatic delegation, and his job was administration—but he was known to be a senior official in the overseas operations department of the North Korean intelligence agency. Chun oversaw information gathering activities not only in Burma but in the entire Southeast Asian region.

Two days after the three North Koreans settled into their quarters, the explosives they would use arrived via a diplomatic pouch. The operatives remained holed up on the second floor of Chon Chang-hwi’s residence and kept in contact with headquarters back home, receiving information about local conditions and the upcoming mission, and waiting for the South Korean presidential delegation to arrive. The team received constant updates about the president’s tour schedule as well as his itinerary in Burma. This information was not classified. What is notable, however, is that the terrorists were already planning their attack before this information went public. While not completely reliable, a prison mate of Kang Min-chol claimed that he was told North Korea had already selected the team including himself as early as March of that year. While this information cannot be confirmed, the inference can be made that North Korea had been able to collect information on South Korean government internal discussions via wiretap or other information gathering methods.

On October 6, 1983, three days before D-Day, the three operatives departed from their hideout in Chon’s residence. Jin Mo, the team’s de facto leader, and Kang Min-chol wore local clothing. The two wore the longyi, a length of fabric

wrapped around the lower body like a skirt and tied in a knot at the waist. On top, they wore traditional garments that resembled Chinese shirts. Shin Kichol wore black pants and a white shirt. After leaving the counselor's house, the three visited Shwedagon Park where the Martyrs' Mausoleum was located, and Kandawgyi Lake. It remains unexplained to this day how, only three days before the visit of a presidential delegation, three individuals from a nation hostile to that of the visitors could go about freely without government surveillance.³⁸

It also defies explanation how they could have infiltrated the site of an upcoming VIP visit without interference from anyone and install an explosive device.³⁹ Some media outlets reported on the government corruption that may have enabled the lax measures. For example, Jiji Press of Japan reported on November 8 that North Korean personnel had visited the house of the Mausoleum's grounds manager at night, claiming to be South Korean security officials and asking for a tour of the site, in the process slipping 10,000 kyat in the local currency to the manager and even borrowing a ladder that was used to install the bomb.⁴⁰ The Burmese government's official report of the incident, however, mentions none of that. Either they did nothing to follow up on this information, or they did, but left it out of the report. On the other hand, Burmese authorities explained their inability to track the operatives by pointing out that the North Korean embassy had long served as a base for terrorist operations. The North Koreans did not hire locals, and since every staff member, including the drivers, was North Korean, confidentiality was assured. Diplomatic immunity, according to this view, was used to facilitate terrorist activities by hiding explosives in the embassy and using embassy vehicles with diplomatic plates to transport terrorists.

38 Park, *The Aung San Report*.

39 The actions of the Burmese Minister of Culture and Information on the day of the attack raised some suspicion as well. While the Korean delegation had already arrived and was waiting for the president, no Burmese officials had arrived yet to receive them. The minister finally arrived, but oddly he did not approach the Korean delegation on the platform but instead walked toward the entrance of the Mausoleum. While this may seem suspicious, almost every aspect of the Burmese government's preparation for and execution of the event was haphazard. Song, *My Story*, 178-79.

40 The official exchange rate is currently 5.5 kyat per dollar. In the black market, however, a dollar can command up to 1,000 kyat.

South Korean Officials in the Dark

Opinions are divided on to what extent South Korea's ANSP was aware of North Korea's machinations, or how much South Korean intelligence officials had prepared for possible scenarios and reported on their likelihoods. Some claim that they detected suspicious signs from North Korea related to the presidential visit. Burma had diplomatic relations with both North and South Korea, but North Korea had higher priority. Members of the diplomatic corps who served at the time recall that in the early 1980s Burma was one of the few countries to which the wives of North Korean diplomats could accompany their husbands.⁴¹ The most important evidence, though, was the departure of the DonggeonAeguk and its course. The ANSP advised against the president's trip before his departure, but the president replied that the visit had already been agreed upon by the two nations and cancellation would be difficult.⁴² That difficulty is considered to be common knowledge among intelligence officials from that period. Director Loh Shin-yong, the head of the ANSP at the time, however, denied that. While it was true that he was against the visit, his opposition was due to diplomatic considerations, and moreover, his concerns had been expressed to Minister of Foreign Affairs Lee Beom-seok, his successor, not directly to the president. In other words, before Loh came to the ANSP and while still serving as foreign minister, he had planned a top-level visit to South Asia including India, Australia, and Sri Lanka to boost the South Korea position among non-aligned countries. For whatever reason, however, his successor at the ministry, Lee Beom-seok, added Burma to the itinerary and asked for his opinion on the matter, and Loh replied that there was nothing to be gained diplomatically by stopping in Burma. Former Director Loh believed that a state visit should be limited to large, important countries, and to add a visit to Burma, and indeed begin the official tour there, was not proper.

Director Loh recalled that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and not the ANSP was in charge of presidential overseas visits, and that there was no information on a North Korean terrorist attack in Burma or anywhere else during the presidential visit.⁴³ That account does not align with the testimonies of other

41 Song, *My Story*, 156.

42 Ibid., 231.

43 The interview with former Prime Minister Loh Shin-yong (Noh Shin-young) took place at the offices of the Lotte Foundation on the twenty-sixth floor on August 30, 2012.

officials or ANSP personnel at the time. It is also difficult to accept that an agency in charge of gathering information about the security of the president would not be interested in these matters, even if the foreign ministry did have the final say. It defies belief that there was no assessment of a North Korean threat, which would have been the highest priority, especially considering the domestic and international circumstances surrounding South Korea at the time and that no one paid particular attention to securing enough information.

Director Loh also expressed his regret. After the terrorist attack, Loh paid a visit to the president and was leaving when the first lady pulled him aside and asked, “Why didn’t you insist harder against the trip?” One cannot help but suspect that, while officers on the line did determine that there was a possibility of a North Korean terrorist attack and duly reported it up the line, their calls went unheeded eventually prevented from reaching the president.

Conversely, North Korea seems to have had detailed information about the addition of Burma to President Chun’s state visit, as well as his itinerary in the country. Concerns were raised internally about this matter within the South Korean government, but no action was taken.

Ultimately, what is clear is that, as can be observed in other incidents perpetrated by the North Korean regime, the South Korean government lacked not only specific information about North Korean plans but even general, indirect information. The few pieces of circumstantial considerations or low-level intelligence that did exist were not properly sent up the channels, and there was no coordination between agencies. Then, as now, the government adopted a distinctly lackadaisical attitude when it came to North Korean threats or security issues. The government is thrown into high alert once an incident occurs, and then back to business as normal once the dust settles. In South Korea, once the decision had been made at the Blue House, every agency was content to follow orders, and a culture of reluctance to offer a different opinion seems to have become entrenched.

Diplomatically, the word on the ground was that the reason for the president’s visit was hard to determine. It was difficult to understand why the president had to visit Burma, a country with faint ties with South Korea, on a tour intended to boost ties with NAM countries. Despite these negative views, however,

Ambassador Lee Kye-chul and Counselor Song Young-shik did not let them show and decided to “respond actively to prepare for the president’s visit” and “dispatched a positive reply” back to Seoul:

It was impossible to offer the opinion that the president’s visit will face difficulties because of the close relations between Burma and North Korea. Once the order had been given to extend an offer of the visit to the Burmese government, it would have been unthinkable to say that a visit to Burma would be too difficult to even suggest.⁴⁴

While Ambassador Lee and Counselor Song responded positively to communication from Seoul, they were both hoping that the Burmese government would turn down the offer.⁴⁵ Burma’s foreign ministry, however, responded with unusual speed and alacrity to the offer of a presidential visit, and responded positively to the idea of hosting a state visit. For a resource-rich nation like Burma, expanding cooperation with South Korea, a country that had achieved rapid economic development, would have been an attractive prospect. The Burmese government’s vice minister for foreign affairs and its protocol director paid a visit to Pyongyang, and the embassy suspected that the visit was intended to ask for North Korea’s understanding regarding President Chun’s visit. After Burma accepted the request more quickly than was customary, Ambassador Lee’s reservations did not abate. The ambassador, however, did not reveal his feelings to officials back home.

Negative reports were not conveyed, including worries over a summit meeting that skipped over the usual process of initiating ministerial talks first; the host country’s poor infrastructure; and the possibility of extensive and deep pro-North Korean sentiment in Burmese officialdom.⁴⁶

No government department could dare issue a negative opinion on the president’s visit. The result, as is always the case, was a surprise attack by North Korea that caught everyone off guard.

There is yet another issue that is difficult to understand. Kang Jong-il, the ANSP station chief in Burma, had duly reported on the North Korean threat

⁴⁴ Song, *My Story*, 227.

⁴⁵ Interview with Song Young-shik (Seoul, Feb. 6, 2012).

⁴⁶ Song, *My Story*, 162-63.

but had to take responsibility of the attack and step down. Meanwhile, no one in the upper echelons of the ANSP or the foreign and defense ministries took responsibility—in fact they continued climbing to the top. The person who would be held most responsible in such an incident would be the chief of the presidential security service. Yet Chang Se-dong, then-chief of the security service who had even accompanied President Chun to Burma, was not held responsible at all. Director of the ANSP Loh Shin-yong was hardly called on the carpet, but was later appointed as prime minister. Director Loh stated that the decision was made to not hold those who were involved with the planning responsible because considerable casualties had already been inflicted by the attack and further criticism would be self-destructive.⁴⁷

That assessment seems contrary to logic. Prime Minister Kim Sang-hyeop, who had no direct involvement in the incident, put in his resignation, which, incomprehensibly, was accepted. Director of Asian Affairs Kim Byeong-yeon, who was in charge of the visit on the ground, was hastily sent to Uruguay as ambassador by the new Minister of Foreign Affairs Lee Won-gyeong. The move was said to have been a preventive measure against punishment or criticism. Counselor Song Young-shik submitted his resignation after returning home, but it was not processed and instead, after an odd period of “punishment” where he was given no official posting, he was appointed as counselor to the UN delegation. Colonel Park Won-yong, who had performed with distinction at the site of the terrorist attack, was promoted to brigadier general. The people who were forced out were generally low-level agents of the ANSP. The director and deputy director of Asia-Pacific affairs left the agency. Director General Lee Sang-gu also stepped down due to “moral responsibility” and became the president of Naewoe News Agency (Nae-oe T’ongshin), an ANSP publication, before returning as deputy director. He later served as the ambassador to Malaysia. History is filled with incomprehensible idiosyncrasies, small and large.

47 Song, *My Story*, 235.

Arrival in Burma

On October 8, 1983, the president and his entourage finally departed Korea for the fateful journey to six countries. It was a major undertaking. The official delegation numbered over twenty, including Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Economic Planning Board Suh Seok-jun, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lee Beom-seok, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lee Ki-baik; additional support staff, reporters, and bodyguards raised the size of the entire delegation to 165, not including the president and the first lady.

The visit to Burma was scheduled for October 8 to 11, after which the delegation would visit India, Sri Lanka, Australia, New Zealand, and Brunei, and then return on October 25. The visit was unusually long for a presidential tour, covering 31,126 kilometers over eighteen days. In his pre-departure address, President Chun stated that the trip would mark the fourth achievement of his efforts for “open diplomacy” and that the trip would be a “stepping stone” to propel South Korea toward the center of world history.

Before the president’s visit, the government engaged in a campaign of public diplomacy by sending celebrities, Buddhist monks, religious leaders, and other civilian delegations to increase pro-Korean sentiment in the South. Requesting the understanding and cooperation of the Burmese government to prepare for these civilian events while at the same time getting ready for the presidential visit would have severely taxed the small staff of the South Korean embassy. The Burmese government tended to keep close tabs on foreigners holding events in Burma, and these events were not easy to arrange.⁴⁸ Considerable effort and expenses were expended, but the results were less than satisfactory.⁴⁹

The presidential party departed Gimpo International Airport at 10:35 a.m., and arrived in Rangoon eight hours and twenty-five minutes later. Local time was 4:30 p.m., October 8. Ambassador Lee Kye-chul and a protocol officer of the Burmese Foreign Ministry boarded the airplane, as per protocol, and greeted the president and the first lady. A twenty-one-gun salute met Chun and his wife Lee Soon-ja as they stepped off the airplane, and President San Yu

48 This practice continues to this day. The Burmese government also officially forbids foreigners from engaging in volunteer activities within Burma.

49 Meeting with Song Young-shik (June 6, 2012).

and the first lady of Burma met them at the foot of the steps. The welcoming ceremony at the airport was simple yet dignified. Chun and Lee left in separate vehicles, and attendants and reporters rode other cars to the hotel. The two first ladies rode in the same car and conversed about Buddhism, the deep faith of the Burmese people and considered to be almost the official religion of Burma. Crowds of citizens and students greeted the president, waving the flags of South Korea and Burma. The crowds lined the streets all the way to the Presidential Guest House where the president was to stay. Unlike the crisp fall weather they had left behind in Seoul, Rangoon was hot and humid and caused considerable discomfort for the visitors.

The delegation split into two groups and headed for their respective lodgings. The president, his personal staff, bodyguards, protocol officer, interpreters, and secretaries headed for the official guest house, while the ministers and members of the delegation went to the Inya Lake Hotel. The hotel was located on the shores of Inya Lake, offering an expansive view of the surroundings, built as a gift from the Soviet Union in 1962 and located about twenty minutes from downtown Rangoon and roughly halfway between the airport and downtown.

Reporters accompanying the official delegation were not pleased with the local conditions. Rangoon was hot and humid, and the sticky weather was unbearable; the hotel was less than ideal, too. The smell of detergent lingering in the old building was especially unpleasant. Rusty water would spray out of the showerheads. The reporters rented a microbus to tour the city center, but there was little to see, and nothing that might interest reporters. Sanitation was terrible, and drinking tap water was hazardous. The local beer, which they drank instead of water, was not to their taste. The food was laced with unfamiliar spices and herbs, and difficult to stomach for Koreans. A banquet was prepared at the hotel and set up as a buffet, but few touched the food. The fruit laid out on the service table was varied and colorful, but went untouched as well. Most could not wait for the visit to end so that they could leave the country.

Terrorists on the Operation

The three North Korean terrorists finally left their safe house on October 6, three days before D-Day. On the same day, their mother ship, the DonggeonAeguk, which would have been crucial for their escape after their mission, was refused reentry to Burma. This ill news, however, was not passed to them. Unaware that their escape route had been cut off, they were led by their local case officer Chon Chang-hwi and visited the area around the Martyrs' Mausoleum disguised as tourists. At dusk, the terrorists did not return to their quarters but battled mosquitoes as they slept outdoors near the site. They adhered to their training, with one person on watch while the other two slept. At 2 a.m. the next day, October 7, they infiltrated the Martyrs' Mausoleum. While his comrades waited below, Shin Ki-chol climbed up to the roof of the memorial hall and began hiding the explosives as Jin Mo passed them up to him.⁵⁰ One device was a remote-detonate bomb, another a high-explosive device designed to be set off by explosive pressure, and the last was an incendiary bomb for burning away any evidence.

Before placing the explosives, the team had received detailed information from headquarters that the delegation from South Korea would arrive the next day, October 8, and, as was the practice for official visitors from abroad, would pay their respects at the Martyrs' Mausoleum the following day.

⁵⁰ Official Burmese government records indicate that Shin hid two bombs, but it was later revealed by South Korean investigators that an additional incendiary bomb had been readied for destroying the evidence.

Chapter 4

The Aung San Mausoleum



Widely referred to as the “Aung San Cemetery” in Korean literature, the official name of the site is the Martyrs’ Mausoleum, and it houses the tomb of the independence fighter General Aung San. General Aung San was the head of the autonomous government of Burma during the country’s independence from the British following the Pacific War. The Aung San name is better known today as that of his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Burma’s democratic movement and international symbol of the struggle against authoritarianism; General Aung San, however, was a central figure in the process of Burma’s independence from British colonial rule by enlisting the aid of the Japanese imperial forces during the Second World War. Once he realized that the new Japanese occupiers were even more brutal than their former colonial overlord, Aung San allied with the British once again to drive out the Japanese. Keeping their promise, the British granted Burma’s independence. As preparations were underway to establish a new independent nation, the political enemies of Aung San, in the belief that his removal would place them in power, killed the general during a cabinet meeting. General Aung San and eight of his cabinet members who were murdered were interred in what later became the Martyrs’ Mausoleum. Next to the Mausoleum is a memorial

to “unknown soldiers.” The Mausoleum, in other words, is similar to Korea’s National Cemetery in Seoul. The site is located on a gentle hill, nearby which stands one of the best-known symbols of Burma: the Shwedagon Pagoda, which towers over the Mausoleum.

The Mausoleum was severely damaged during the terrorist attack and left derelict for some time, until the entire site was remodeled to replace the original structures. The tombs of General Aung San and his officials, which were sheltered by a wooden roof, were covered with concrete following the incident. Perhaps it was an effort to cover both the damage from the bomb blast as well as its shameful memory. While the Mausoleum still remains an obligatory stop for visiting foreign dignitaries, the site is closed to the public and photography is prohibited. Visitors are permitted to view the interior and take pictures from the outside.

Everything in Place

October 9 was Hangul Day, a national holiday back in Korea. A light drizzle in the morning quickly gave way to clear skies. The temperature stood around 25 to 26 degrees Celsius, a typical fall day in Rangoon.

The fateful day had come for the three terrorists. President Chun Doo-hwan and his entourage were busy preparing for the day’s events and the upcoming tour of the region, completely unaware of the events that would befall them in a matter of hours. By this time, the terrorists had successfully completed setting up the explosives.

A small problem, however, occurred late in the preparations. A disagreement arose on the time and place of the final stage—that is, where and when they would press the remote button to detonate the bomb.

Major Jin Mo, the de facto leader of the group, wanted to mix in with the crowds and detonate the explosive device, but Kang Min-chol disagreed. An operative standing in the crowds could see the motorcade, but not what was actually happening inside the cemetery. Kang Min-chol insisted that there was no way to verify that President Chun, the target of the attack, was within

the blast radius of the bomb. According to Kang, the mission would fail if the bomb was detonated while the president happened to be outside the kill zone of the bomb.

It was also possible that undercover Burmese security officers would mingle among the onlookers. If the terrorists acted suspiciously, they could be discovered and stopped. Escaping after setting off the bomb could also be a problem. Thus Kang suggested the top floor of the Shwedagon Pagoda Temple that overlooked the inside of the Mausoleum as the idea location. Jin Mo, however, was implacable. He said that the final stage would be carried out in an automobile repair shop near the temple. Jin Mo countered Kang Min-chol by saying that the Pagoda's temple would be filled with tourists that might hamper the operation, and more importantly their identities could be exposed and escape foiled due to the crowds. This had been a long-running dispute between Jin Mo and Kang.

Three days before D-Day, on October 6, the terrorists left Chon Chang-hwi's house. Jin Mo stuck with the plan to not return to the house in the evening. They avoided going to another hotel. They were being cautious of attracting suspicion and being questioned. The three terrorists slept outdoors. Kang Min-chol protested strongly. Not only was it uncomfortable, but they were constantly harried by mosquitoes. Kang felt that the mission would suffer if they were too tired from lack of sleep, and suggested going back to Chon's house or finding proper lodging. Jin Mo continued to ignore Kang, and criticized him. Kang Min-chol had also purchased a rosary with a crucifix from a store, for which he was criticized as well. Even after a long time had passed after Jin Mo was executed and Kang was alone in prison, his animosity remained. Perhaps it was more so because the rosary beads were meant for a woman who might have been waiting for him back home.

The rift between the two may have occurred due to the desire for glory. According to testimony from Kang Min-chol given to a South Korean diplomat while Kang was in prison, Jin Mo wanted to make sure that he made all the decisions to ensure he would get all the credit for the success of the mission.

If the bomb had been detonated from Shwedagon Pagoda, as Kang had pushed for, the results may have been different. Their mission could have been a complete, not partial, success. Kang later explained, “It was God’s wishes that President Chun survived. There’s no other way I could explain it. We did all we could, and there was no possibility of failure. But the mission failed. It seems that no matter how clever man is, there is another power that determines the outcome.”

The team eventually settled their argument in favor of Jin Mo’s opinion, and relocated to an automobile service factory named “Shew Lin Yone Motor Service” to wait for the South Korean delegation to pass by. An unexpected problem occurred as soon as they stepped into the factory. The owner of the shop, U Men Shwe, received a call that a suspicious Chinese-looking man in his thirties was seen walking into the house located on the grounds of the factory around 8:45 a.m. on October 9. The man was reportedly short, around 160 centimeters tall, and husky. This man was Major Jin Mo. The worker, who had spotted Jin Mo, told his boss that the man seemed odd and spoke no Burmese, and advised him to at least go talk to him. The owner of the repair shop stepped out and asked him what his business was there, who only repeated “Schina, Schina.” The man had an umbrella in one hand and a twenty-five-kyat bill in the other. Jin Mo apparently was trying to pay the owner to let him stay there. The two tried to communicate using gestures but were having a hard time. Jin Mo kept repeating, “Schina,” apparently trying to convince the local men that he was a Chinese tourist. But the Burmese employees of the factory could not understand him. Frustrated, the owner pulled out the fountain pen that was in Jin Mo’s shirt pocket to tell him to write down what he was trying to say, but Jin Mo in panic snatched the pen and quickly ran out of the factory. It was later revealed during the inquiry that the pen was in fact a booby trap.

Jin Mo rejoined the other two members of his team waiting outside, and began searching for an alternative location. Eventually they ended up among the onlookers. The team placed themselves on Wizaya Street, in front of Wizaya Cinema, about a kilometer away from the Mausoleum, and waited for the president’s entourage. The street was the main avenue leading up to the Martyr’s Mausoleum, and the president’s motorcade was to pass by. Along the street stood the statue of Wizaya, a nineteenth-century social activist and Buddhist monk, and the Mausoleum was near the statue.

In the Martyrs' Mausoleum itself, a slight disagreement arose between South Korean bodyguards and Burmese security personnel. The South Korean requested an inspection of the interior of the Mausoleum using metal detectors, but Burmese authorities refused, saying that guarding the interior of the site was their responsibility while perimeter security was the responsibility of the South Korean security detachment, and there was no need for the South Koreans to check inside. The people who were in charge of security on the Burmese side were later asked the reason for the refusal to allow South Koreans to search the interior of the Mausoleum, but an answer was not provided. Some theorize that they were reluctant to have South Koreans poking through a sacred site, while other say that the large number of metallic objects in the roof, such as nails, would have made an inspection meaningless.⁵¹ A Burmese individual who was part of the local security team at the time was asked why they failed to find the bomb hidden by the North Koreans, and he replied that they had not thought to check the roof. The explanation is difficult to accept, and the accusation is inevitable that security was lax.

After the attack, Burmese intelligence officials were reprimanded and transferred to regular military units, replaced by a new officer corps. This information about Kang Min-chol, however, was provided through informal interviews with Burmese security personnel, and no official announcement was ever made by the Burmese government. Kang Jong-il, the local ANSP officer, apparently raised this issue during a setup meeting with Burmese officials. Kang stressed the need to search the interior of the site since there was a possibility that the North Koreans would attempt a repeat of their failed attack on the National Cemetery in Korea, but Burmese officials were unreceptive. It has also been claimed that Kang received information from local agents that there were signs of suspicious activity from North Korea days before the event. Kang, however, was not on site on the day of the attack. He had been sent to Inya Hotel to prepare for the evening's events.

51 Song, *My Story*, 12.

The Sound of the Trumpets

South Korean officials and reporters staying at the Inya Hotel departed for the Mausoleum a little after 10:00 a.m. Korean government officials arrived first, and stood in two lines to await the president. A bus carrying the reporters arrived shortly after and drove past the awaiting entourage, and Minister Lee Beom-seok greeted a reporter he personally knew, saying, “Mr. Park, let’s get together in the evening. How many reporters are here?” He meant that he planned to pass on some spending money to the reporters. It was customary at the time to hand out 500 to 600 US dollars to reporters accompanying a delegation to a large event. The reporter could not have guessed that these were the last words he would ever exchange with the minister.

Tensions were mounting at the Presidential Guest House. Foreign Minister of Burma U Chit Hlaing, who was to escort the South Korean president to the memorial, failed to materialize. He was to arrive at the guest house at 10:15 to escort the president, but he was running late. Two minutes after the appointed time, the president came down to the first floor and asked whether they were ready to leave. Upon being told by his staff that the Burmese protocol officers had yet to arrive, the president returned to the second floor, looking displeased. This small hiccup in the day’s schedule would save his life.

A small misunderstanding had caused the hitch in the plans. On the previous day, the South Korean protocol officer suggested that the event planned for the first ladies at the Presidential Guest House should begin at 10:30, after the president had departed for the Martyrs’ Mausoleum. He felt that holding a separate event while the president was still in the guesthouse would be too much of a burden. Burmese officials, however, mistook this as a request to delay the departure of the president.⁵² The foreign minister eventually arrived at 10:19, four minutes later than originally planned. The South Korean protocol officer had the minister wait for two minutes and then showed him in. He had let the minister wait to give the president some time to calm down after being upset at the delay.

52 Song, *My Story*, 207. Song states that a close examination of the day’s events shows that the president would have escaped harm even if he had departed at 10:20 as originally scheduled. The convoy would have arrived at the Mausoleum at 10:25, and the bomb had exploded before then. If the terrorists had seen the president’s motorcade pass by, however, they may have delayed setting off the explosion despite the premature sounding of the trumpet and waited until the president was on site.

The president's delegation finally departed the guesthouse at 10:24. The departure was a mere four minutes behind schedule, but no one would have imagined at the time the magnitude of the difference this slight delay would eventually make.

Oblivious to this series of events, the terrorists were hiding among onlookers near the cinema and anxiously awaited the arrival of the president. At approximately 10:24, a motorcade passed by, led by police motorcycles. The crowds as well as the terrorists mistook it for the president's delegation. President Chun was still at the guesthouse at this time.

There was another reason this motorcade was mistaken for that of the president. The president had summoned Ambassador Lee Kye-chul to the guesthouse that morning. He had intended to give a small show of appreciation to the Burmese personnel, who had worked hard to prepare the event, and he wanted to give the gift via the ambassador. The president figured that having the ambassador present the gift would endear him more with the locals and make his jobs easier. That is why the ambassador's car had left not from his official residence but from the Presidential Guest House, along with the cars for the rest of the president's retinue. This motorcade had departed before the president's main group because the roundabout in front of the guest house was narrow and did not have enough room for all the cars to depart at once. Thus, several of the president's staff left first with the ambassador.⁵³

The motorcade arrived one minute later, at 10:25, at the memorial. One of the people who got out of the cars was Korea's ambassador to Burma, Lee Kye-chul. Ambassador Lee was tall and bald and could pass for the president from afar. The ambassador approached the waiting group, greeted them, and told them that the president would be arriving shortly. This exchange was three minutes before the explosion. As the group arranged themselves into two lines, the trumpet call announcing the start of the ceremony rang out. They were two short blasts. Among the serendipitous events that happened to President Chun, this was the most decisive. It was not only unprecedented but impossible that the trumpeter would sound the fanfare before the ceremony started. There is still no satisfactory explanation as to why the trumpets sounded early. Neither witness testimony nor official Burmese government investigative records explain this oddity. Perhaps the trumpeter mistook Ambassador Lee

53 Chang Se-dong, *Ilhae Foundation* (Korea Forum, 1995), 91-92.

for the president. According to one witness, chief of the security detachment Chun Byeong-deuk was apparently bored with the wait and signaled to the trumpeter to practice the fanfare. Being an eye-witness testimony, perhaps this explanation is the most likely.

The trumpet call was the signal the terrorists had been waiting for. Once it sounded, they could not delay setting off the bomb any longer. Jin Mo paused briefly after the sound faded away, and then pressed the detonator.

A flash of brilliant light bathed the Martyrs' Mausoleum, followed by a deafening explosion that ripped through the memorial like a tornado. Darkness suddenly descended on the grounds, and shrapnel from the bomb and pieces of flesh and bone flew in all directions. Chaos ensued. The wooden structure collapsed, the beams fell to the ground and the roof blew off. Underneath the rubble lay the shredded body parts of the people who had been waiting in line for Chun to arrive.⁵⁴

Some of the wounded cried out from underneath the collapsed beams and pillars. Counselor Song Young-shik recalled that he ran to the site of the explosion and tried to lift up the fallen roof beam but was unable to. Colonel Park Won-young and Major Kang Shin-wook, officers on active duty who had been part of the contingent on-site, leaped into action, dragging out the injured and taking charge of the scene. The claymore device contained pieces of metal that added to the carnage. One of the people who was trying to deal with the aftermath of the blast stated that Minister of Commerce and Industry Kim Dong-hui, who perished in the explosion, had been carrying a stack of currency in his shirt pocket that he had meant to hand out as gifts, which were found shredded by the blast.

Thus the president, who had been the target of the attack, was spared. The tie-up in the schedule, the mistimed trumped call, and other coincidences came together in what was a stroke of luck for the president. The political dividend North Korea had expected eluded them, and in fact backfired.

54 An examination of the site showed that the extent of damage had been mitigated by the fact that only one of the bombs had gone off—the other bomb and the incendiary device both failed to detonate.

The VIP Guest House was only 4.5 kilometers from the Martyrs' Mausoleum. The explosion occurred at 10:28, and the president's motorcade had departed the guesthouse four minutes earlier and was 1.5 kilometers from the site. The official event was set to begin two minutes later. If the terrorists had waited just a few more moments after they heard the trumpet before setting off the bomb, the outcome would have been drastically different.

This is the account of the Rangoon Bombing as we have known it. To reiterate, it is said that President Chun escaped harm because of a series of hitches in the day's schedule. That is undoubtedly the most convincing explanation.

A Failed Operation

According to Kang Min-chol's recollection, however, this explanation is not true. The reason President Chun survived was not due to a coincidental mix-up in his schedule. The following is based on what Kang told his cellmates during his imprisonment. An error in the choice of the weapon of attack led to the failure of the operation that day. The terrorists did not activate the remote detonator because they had mistaken Ambassador Lee's retinue as that of President Chun's. Neither did they mistake the trumpet blast as the start of the ceremony. The operatives knew that President Chun had not yet arrived. Another North Korean operative placed near the Presidential Guest House had been providing real-time updates on the president's movement. The terrorists knew the route the president's motorcade would take, knew that he was being delayed at the guest house, and knew exactly where the motorcade was. The reason for the premature explosion set off before the arrival of the president, the target, was the same reason as the failed attack at Seoul's National Cemetery thirteen years earlier.

They knew that the president would arrive shortly on site and waited anxiously. Then the trumpets began sounding the dirge. The operatives, however, did not pay much attention to the trumpets and kept their eyes trained on the street where the president was to arrive. It was then that the explosion occurred, without warning. The operatives were even more taken by surprise than the

onlookers. Their whole operation was collapsing right before they were to take out the primary target. The same failure of thirteen years past had reoccurred at the decisive moment.

They watched helplessly as the president's car backed up and roared away from the scene. This probably explains why Kang Min-chol exclaimed, "It was God who saved the president." The team's main concern was to leave the scene and make their escape. They did not know the reason for the failure. One possible explanation was that one of the numerous radio signals in the area had set off the device. Ministry of Foreign Affairs protocol officers, bodyguards, and Burmese personnel were all using two-way radio communication equipment. Foreign ministry official and deputy director Lee Soo-hyuck and Chief Protocol Officer Choi Sang-deok were both on site and using their walkie-talkies to communicate with personnel off-site. ANSP officers and Blue House security personnel were also probably using their radios.

Had North Korean spy officials overlooked this fact when planning the terrorist attack? If Kang's recollection is true, then the failure of the Rangoon Bombing was not the result of scheduling mix-ups or a string of spontaneous events. Rather, the North Korean authorities had made a serious mistake in a technical aspect of the operation. Another piece of evidence points to the technical failure of the North Korean planners. One of the bombs was a dud. The terrorists had planted two anti-personnel mines (claymores) and one incendiary device for a total of three bombs, but only one mine and the incendiary bomb exploded, and the second mine failed to explode and was later recovered by Burmese investigators.

Meanwhile, the president had been heading toward the Mausoleum but turned his car around as soon as his bodyguards reported the blast, returning to the guest house. Once he was back, the president summoned his three surviving aides—Senior Protocol Officer Kim Byeong-hun, Senior Assistant for Public Relations Hwang Seon-pil, and Chief of Presidential Security Chang Se-dong—and instructed them to cut the visit short and arrange for a return to Seoul immediately. The president gave orders to secure a special flight from Seoul to transport the casualties back home. He gave out additional instructions on domestic security issues, as well as several matters related to the incident.

As for the political triumph North Korea had expected, the attack was a complete failure. While a number of important South Korean officials had been killed, the president had survived and the political chaos, unrest, and resistance movement the North had hoped for did not transpire. In fact, the North was pressed into a corner and was forced to make excuses and evade accusations.

South Korea was thrown into a state of shock after the attack. Younger military commanders called for immediate retaliation. President Chun left orders for no action to be taken until he returned to South Korea. This order was delivered to Prime Minister Kim Sang-hyeop via Director of Asia-Pacific Affairs Kim Byeong-hyeon. The president's survival was not just a matter for his own concern. Although this is all conjecture, had the president been killed in the attack, the relations between North and South Korea could have gone into an entirely unpredictable direction. One wonders if a headless government could have controlled the strong will of the military.

The president had escaped death, but his safety was still uncertain. It was unclear who had planned the attack, and for what purpose. The president had to return home quickly to ensure that he remained safe. The guesthouse was located along the river, which offered great views but was a security nightmare since it was surrounded on three sides by water. While responsibility for the security of a visiting head of state fundamentally lay with the host country, the situation appeared to be too serious to wholly trust the Burmese. The attack had been sudden and unexpected, and neither the president nor his security team had any contingency plans and did not know from whom and how they had to protect the president. The bodyguards were in a state of utter confusion. The president asked for a glass of orange juice when he returned to the guesthouse, and some of his bodyguards even suggested that someone should taste the juice first for poison.

After the president arrived at the guesthouse, President San Yu of Burma came to the guesthouse accompanied by his foreign minister. The Burmese president offered his apologies and regret for the incident. President Chun asked for the Burmese president's help in dealing with the aftermath of the attack, including caring for the wounded, and told him that the pattern of attack appeared to indicate the handiwork of North Korean operatives. President San Yu repeated his apology but did not respond to the accusation. He merely conveyed the wishes of Chairman of the Revolutionary Council Ne Win, the man in power in Burma at the time: that an apology and condolences should be delivered to President Chun.

Shortly afterward, Ne Win himself visited the guesthouse and repeated his apology for the failure to provide adequate security. President Chun reemphasized that the incident was the work of North Korea. Ne Win also did not further comment on the identity of the attackers, but only promised that the perpetrators will be found and that the incident will be fully investigated. Although he was still in shock, Chun attended the next event on the day's schedule, a meeting with the local Korean community. While his advisors tried to dissuade him, Chun insisted that he should personally attend the event to reassure the members of the Korean community.

Following the return of the presidential delegation, the Korean government officially announced that North Korea was responsible for the terrorist attack in Rangoon. While flying back to South Korea, the leaders of South Korean conglomerates who had accompanied the delegation, following a suggestion from Chairman of Hyundai Corporation Chung Ju-yung, decided to establish a fund for the families of the victims. This fund later became the Ilhae Foundation and the Sejong Institute.

At the Crossroads of Life and Death

The president was not the only person to have had a close brush with death. Park Chang-seok, then a reporter for *Hankookilbo*, was on the stage but had come down to chat with a diplomat acquaintance, sparing him with only minor injuries. He later published valuable documentation titled, "The Aung San Report." Blue House spokesman Hwang Seong-pil finished his daily press briefing to the president and got up to leave, but the president asked him to stay for some tea. Exiting the guesthouse late, he was stunned to discover that someone had taken his car. He berated his secretary and jumped into a taxi for the Mausoleum. His delay allowed him to escape the blast. Anxious to arrive on site before the president, he was almost at the Mausoleum when he felt the explosion. He didn't hear the blast, but he later said he felt the shockwave in the air. Arriving on site, he realized with horror that but for his slight delay it could have been him under the rubble.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lee Ki-baik had not brought a formal suit so instead he wore his uniform festooned with medals and his thick service cap. His outfit protected him from the blast. Though seriously wounded, his life was spared. Before the explosion, Chief of Staff Ham Byeong-chun invited an acquaintance, Counselor Song Young-shik, to join him on stage. Song was uncomfortable with the suggestion and turned down the offer, which saved his life. Chief Protocol Officer Choi Sang-deok was on site but survived, albeit with serious injuries. He later received a special promotion. Then-Special Assistant for Foreign Affairs Hong Soon-young, who later became Foreign Minister during the Kim Dae-jung Government, had stayed behind in his room to put together some documents and escaped harm. Lee Soo-hyuck, a foreign ministry official, had accompanied the delegation as an unofficial aide for his role in preparing the president's visit to New Zealand and Australia. The program officer designated for the day's events in Rangoon was originally Officer Cho Chan-bok, but he had to oversee the First Lady's official event in the guesthouse, so he asked his colleague Lee Soo-hyuck to take over. When Lee arrived on site, the official aides were chatting outside the ceremony area in a small gazebo. According to the schedule, they should have already been lined up inside waiting for the president to arrive. Receiving the call that the president had just departed, Lee urged the group to line up quickly. However, seeing that it was crowded inside, he asked Chief Protocol Officer Choi Sang-deok to step outside. Then, against custom, Lee preceded his senior. After Lee walked down the steps and was about two meters from the mausoleum, Lee was blown off from the ground by a fierce gust of wind. He stood up unscathed, but his ears rang and he felt dazed. He radioed the guest house immediately, then realized there was no sight of Choi, who had been right behind him. The two had been only a few steps apart, yet Choi fell down with serious burns. Lee was rendered both temporarily deaf and dazed, he recalled later. He had been hit by flying shrapnel, but not hard enough for him to be injured. The survivors gathered below the hill in front of the gazebo where the official delegation had been just moments before, some of them bleeding. Lee asked a reporter whether he saw any injuries on him, and the reporter told Lee that he seemed all right.

Then there were those who were less fortunate. Ha Dong-seon, Planning Director of International Cooperation Committee, and Suh Sang-chul, Minister of Power Resources, had not been on the official list of attendants but had accompanied the president's delegation by their own wishes or by other circumstances, and perished in the attack. Lee Jae-gwan, the presidential press secretary, was not supposed to be at the Mausoleum either, but by happenstance found himself on site and died in the explosion.

Choi Byung-hyo, a foreign ministry employee, accompanied Director Kim Byung-yun as an unofficial member of his staff, and had originally planned to go to the ceremony with the director. However, he stayed behind to make changes to the joint declaration that would be delivered after the summit at a sudden request by his counterparts at the Burmese foreign ministry. The statement had already been agreed upon before the delegation left Seoul, and changing it at the last minute was against protocol, but Choi had no choice but to comply. The changes were presumably related to statements regarding North Korea.⁵⁵

There are many who survived from the explosion but who remain wounded physically and psychologically to this day. The wooden structure had imploded, and the roof had collapsed. Below the rubble lay the torn bodies of the members of the delegation that had been waiting for the president's arrival. The wounded lay moaning in pain, their bodies mangled.

The bodies of the dead were taken to Army Hospital No. 2 in Rangoon, and nineteen of the wounded, including General Lee Ki-baik, were transported to Army Hospital No. 1, which was closest to the site. One of the Burmese wounded died after arriving at the hospital. The initial list of casualties included eighteen dead and forty-eight wounded. The number of the dead rose to nineteen when Vice-Minister of Finance Lee Ki-uk died at around four in the afternoon.

⁵⁵ It was reported that Colonel Park Won-yong, the military attaché of the Korean consulate, and Major Kang Shin-wook of the Presidential Security Service, acted with courage and valor in the aftermath of the attack. The two of them leaped into the scene of the blast and began to clear away the debris, rescuing victims who had been buried and loading them onto ambulances. They also contacted the American military to have General Lee Ki-baik, who had been seriously wounded in the attack, to be sent to an American military hospital in the Philippines to receive a level of medical care that would have been impossible in Burma. Counselor Song Young-shik, who was also on site at the time of the attack, had been the target of some scuttlebutt among the reporters there for leaving the site immediately. Song later confided in his memoirs, however, that he had been whisked away from the scene almost by force by embassy staffers who had feared an additional attack.

Sixteen of the South Koreans wounded and additional Burmese casualties were moved to wards on the second floor of the hospital. The dead were interred in the morgue, and the wounded received emergency care. The hospital, however, was small and not equipped to handle the large number of seriously injuries, and both the hospital and the patients suffered. Korean diplomats recalled that Burmese hospitals looked like Korean facilities from the 1950s. Burmese authorities nonetheless tried their hardest to help the wounded. The Minister of Health himself, a doctor, arrived at the hospital to help. The entire staff of the hospital, from the director down to the medics, physicians and nurses all threw themselves into the effort to help the survivors. General Lee and Vice-Minister Lee received special attention and care, going into surgery first.

Autopsies and treatment for the wounded revealed that the most critical damage had been inflicted by the shrapnel from the bomb as well as by burns and secondary injuries from the collapsing structure.

Embassy staff and some members of the president's delegation worked hard to take care of the dead and injured, but the scale of the disaster was overwhelming, and there were not enough people. Everyone worked at a furious pace. Identifying the dead, moving them to the morgue, and tending the injured were monumental tasks. A few went to the Inya Hotel to take the sheets from the beds and wrapped the blackened corpses to carry them to the morgue. Some were so gravely wounded that identifying them by visual recognition was difficult.

It is said that President Chun Doo-hwan was shocked by the incident, and though his safety was in question, he went against the pleadings of his staff to visit the hospital en route to the airport, paying his condolences and inspecting the treatment being given to the injured at Army Hospital No. 1.

There are other stories, too, of people who were not originally part of the delegation to Burma. Secretary Kim Jae-beom of the first division of the foreign ministry's North American department was not directly involved with the trip, but he joined to serve as an interpreter, owing to his excellent English skills. He was selected as the interpreter for the First Lady, but he ended up at the hospital attending to the demands of the aftermath of the attack. Kim helped transport the deceased to the morgue, collected the belongings of the victims,

and spent the night at the hospital taking care of the injured. The next day, a chartered plane from South Korea arrived, putting an end to Kim's three-day stay in Burma. Kim left, however, with memories that would last him a lifetime.

Director General Lee Sang-gu also canceled the next items on his schedule and sped to the hospital. He was greeted with a horrid sight. The hospital lacked both staff and equipment. One of the injured was bandaged from head to toe and unrecognizable, and he turned out to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lee Ki-baik. Another victim was on life support, relying on a respirator which was being pumped by hand. According to Lee's recollection, the man was Vice-Minister of Finance Lee Ki-uk, who eventually passed away. Direct Lee immediately saw that measured had to be taken to control the situation. He contacted a local CIA officer to inquire about the closest US military hospital, and learned that Clark Air Base in the Philippines had a hospital. Lee took full responsibility and sent the injured to the hospital on the air base.⁵⁶

The Human Tragedy

The biggest victims of the incident were, of course, those who lost their lives and the families they left behind. Most of the dead had been carrying out important roles in their fields, and their futures had been bright. One of the people I had admired personally was Senior Economic Advisor to the President Kim Ja-ik. An exemplary student, he had been granted permission to apply for Seoul National University while still a junior in high school, a year earlier than others, and was accepted into the department of political science and diplomacy, the most competitive at the time. A man of virtue as well as genius, he was always kind and humble. After graduating, he began working for the Bank of Korea while attending graduate school for his master's. He also taught as an instructor at his alma mater. I had always looked up to him while in school, and I also received personal help from him while staying at Stanford University

⁵⁶ It has been widely understood that the military attaché was responsible for making the decision to transport the wounded to Clark Air Base. While this is a relatively minor part of the incident, there has been testimony to the contrary. According to Lee Sang-gu, this was the result of coordination between South Korean and American intelligence agencies, while it also cannot be denied that Lee played an important role in this process

after finishing my degree in England. I was so devastated by the news of his death that I could not even meet his family. I later dedicated a short essay in his memory that was published in a newspaper.

The remains of the victims were kept in the morgue until they were brought back to South Korea, and were interred in the National Cemetery. Lee Soohyuck went to the hospital immediately after the incident and saw the wife of Ambassador Lee Kye-chul in the lobby. She was still unaware of her husband's conditions and asked Lee about the ambassador. Lee knew that the ambassador had already passed away, but he could not bring himself to convey the news.

The shock and sense of loss felt by the surviving family members were indescribable. A special flight carrying the remains arrived on October 11 at Gimpo Airport. The delegation had left from the same airport just days earlier, and many of them returned in remains. A joint funeral service was held two days later at Yeouido Square in Seoul.

The widow of Director Ha Dong-seon never recovered from the loss of her husband, and three years later, in December 1986, she took her own life. Seven years after the incident, four widows representing the surviving families visited Rangoon in October of 1990, and left these words:

I have not seen you since you left home, nor have I visited the site of the incident, so I cannot believe that you have really gone. I still feel that you will reappear from somewhere at any moment.

Countless people had to suffer excruciating pain and loss. Most of those who were killed, and the families they left behind to live in grief and sorrow, were innocent people who had had no direct responsibility or involvement in the events surrounding the tragic incident.

Chapter 5

The Fate of the Terrorists



Failed Escape

As South Korea, the Burmese government, and indeed the entire world were reeling from the shock and dismay following the attack, trying to control the situation or watch the aftermath, the three terrorists had to hurry to escape the scene. The area surrounding the Mausoleum was thrown into chaos after the explosion. Police officers and security personnel rushed toward the memorial. Jin Mo decided that it would be better for the group to split up rather than move as a team. Jin Mo quickly left the scene after cautioning his compatriots not to return to their former quarters at the embassy. North Korea had prepared no plans for their escape or for dealing with unexpected situations. The operatives were eventually all captured or killed during their escape, revealing their plot for everyone to see. The fact that the attack was designed by the top-level planners without any consideration for the actual operatives resulted in the failure.

The original exfiltration plan called for a speedboat that would wait for them on the Rangoon River and carry them to Tagwoodpin village in an estuary of the river. There the team would meet operatives who would guide them to the mother ship, the DonggeonAeguk, downstream on the river and return to North Korea. The DonggeonAeguk was to wait for them until October 12. When they arrived hurriedly at the Rangoon River jetty, however, the speedboat that was supposed to take them away was nowhere to be seen.⁵⁷

While in prison, Kang Min-chol told a cellmate, Aung Thein, that they had discovered a boat, but it was inoperative. At any rate, there was no speedboat and no mother ship waiting for them at the river. The ship could not have come even if it had wanted to. This failure appears to be another result of serious miscalculation by North Korean planners of the operation. They seemed to have not been able to understand that the situation would fundamentally change once the attack took place.

On October 6, three days before the terror attack, the DonggeonAeguk made a request for reentry into Rangoon Harbor, but was denied permission by the Burmese authorities. With President Chun's visit so close, it was natural for the Burmese government to keep a North Korean ship from entering its harbor. The government notified the ship that it could dock only after October 15. The DonggeonAeguk was taking on fertilizer in India while the terrorists were desperately trying to escape. As can be witnessed in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, even if the DonggeonAeguk had received a docking permit and had been waiting for them downstream, there is no guarantee that they could have made it to their getaway. No one in North Korea told the operatives that the DonggeonAeguk had not been able to enter Burma and that there was no speedboat waiting to pick them up.

Nevertheless, the three North Koreans split up and began to make their way to the Rangoon River estuary, according to the original plan. Jin Mo made a futile

⁵⁷ Senior commanders of the North Korean special forces later levied scathing criticism against the trio, especially Jin Mo. They were accused of "incompetence and mistakes" and failing to carry out their mission. According to them, the operatives should not have attempted to escape after the attack and instead sought refuge in the jungle for a month or so before infiltrating their way back into the North Korean embassy. This would have caused the investigation to hit a dead end, leaving only speculation and dispute. However, almost the entirety of the operation's plans was focused on the terrorist attack itself, with little thought given to the aftermath and the operatives' escape.

search for the nonexistent speedboat, then waited until nightfall on the bank of the river before he jumped in and began to swim down-stream. October is at the tail end of the rainy season, when the river is swollen and the current strong. Jin Mo, however, trusted his swimming skills and thought that he would be able to escape on his own.

Although the three were terrorists who had committed a heinous crime, one can't help almost feeling pity for their desperate attempt to escape. Their exit plan had been shut down from the beginning, which they did not know, and thus they tried their hardest to escape from Rangoon. Kang Min-chol and Shin Ki-chol tried to walk, and Jin Mo tried to swim, to their rendezvous point. Perhaps Jin Mo had made the right choice to swim, since the other two operatives who had chosen to walk out were discovered and reported by locals and eventually killed or captured. Security was very tight in Burmese society at the time, and with tensions on high after such a large attack their eventual capture would have been inevitable.

At around 9:00 p.m., a group of locals at a boat tie-up along the river saw a man swimming by himself down-river, and naturally became suspicious. They reported him to the local authorities while shouting at him to come ashore. He continued to swim, oddly telling the onlookers, "Good night, good night." Locals carrying torches and security officials chased after him along the river, and police officers who had received the report began to follow him on a boat. Jin Mo swam to near the Nyaungdan jetty, a floating structure used for docking ships, and stoop up where the water only reached to his waist. Surrounded, he pulled a grenade from a bag around his waist and threatened them with it. An explosion immediately followed, and Jin Mo began floating down the river carried by the current until he was caught on a wooden post in the water. A policeman waded into the river to bind his hands while another held on to him to keep Jin Mo from floating away, then they dragged him out of the river. Though seriously wounded, he was still alive. Jin Mo was thus captured. The grenade he was carrying went off before he was caught, however, and three Burmese locals standing nearby as well as a sailor and fisherman were wounded in the blast.

After Jin Mo separated himself and escaped hastily from the scene, Kang and Shin also departed for Rangoon River. No matter how hard they looked, however, they could not find the speedboat that was supposed to be waiting for them. The setback did not unsettle the two North Koreans, since they had been hardened by special training. Dealing with unexpected setbacks had been an important part of their training program. They gave up looking for the boat and made their way downstream. They borrowed a boat from a vegetable market along the river and crossed it, then began to walk along the bank toward the estuary. The setback in their escape plan had made them anxious, but they did not see the situation as hopeless. When night fell, they were tired and could not find their bearings in the dark. Walking in the dark would have also raised the suspicion of any locals. While considering their options, they happened upon an empty shack along the riverbank and slept there. Of course, they had nothing to eat.

At dawn, they began walking again. Shin complained of being hungry and suggested that they find a village and try to secure some food. Kang was less eager, thinking of the risks. He asked Shin to hold on a little longer and reach the mother ship first, but Shin continued to harry him. Kang relented and turned onto a road leading to a nearby village, and at the entrance of the village they ran into two fishermen on their way out to the river to fish at dawn. The two North Koreans showed them the money they had been carrying and asked them using gestures to take them to Tagwoodpin village. The fishermen were suspicious but went along with the negotiation. They boarded a small fishing vessel and departed for the estuary. The fishermen had been suspicious of them from the very beginning, however, and were planning to turn them in the first chance they saw. They had been warned to report anyone suspicious following the serious terrorist attack. As they neared Tagwoodpin village, the planned rendezvous point, one of the fishermen complained of a stomachache and climbed out of the boat to buy medicine. He then went straight to the police and the village People's Committee to report the suspicious individuals.

Unaware of these developments, Kang and Shin arrived at the village, paid the fisherman and disembarked from the boat. They first found a store in the village and purchased three packs of cigarettes and Chinese snacks, paying with a fifty-kyat bill. Meanwhile, four police officers and the chairman of the local People's

Committee had been alerted by one of the fishermen, and rushed into the store. They first demanded to inspect the bags that the two men had been carrying, but the North Koreans only repeated saying, "Money, money." After arguing, Kang squatted and opened one of the bags, revealing it was filled with foreign currency. The police officers took them to the small neighborhood police station. When they arrived, the police tried to inspect the other bags, but the North Korean spies continued to refuse. Eventually, the police officers pointed their firearms at them and attempted to take their bags away. Shin struggled with them, trying to hold onto his bag, then pulled out his gun from the bag and began shooting. A firefight ensued. After a quick exchange of gunfire, Shin was mortally wounded and died on the spot, and two Burmese policemen were injured. In the chaos, Kang managed to escape.

What exactly happened inside that police box cannot be known for certain. Director General Lee Sang-gu was able to inspect the body of Shin Ki-chol, which had been laid out in the morgue of the same hospital that was treating the victims of the attack. Lee noted that the skin of the body, which was naked, was extremely pale and marred with numerous gunshot wounds. Apparently Shin had continued to fight after being shot. While it was a dead body and not a living person, Lee was able to determine immediately that this man was from North Korea. When Lee mentioned this fact to the Burmese authorities, they asked him how he could tell. Lee was unable to explain it, but Koreans have unique facial features which became even more noticeable between the residents of North and South Korea after the Korean War. There was also a "look" that was common to many operatives dispatched to the South from the North. Lee had considerable experience dealing with these North Korean agents, and was able to immediately identify Shin as a North Korean.

Following the shootout at the police station and the escape of one of the operatives, the village was immediately placed under lockdown, and the military replaced the police. An intense search began in not only the village but the surrounding area. In the morning of the following day, October 12, a village boy reported to the police that foreigners were hiding in the bulrush along the river. Over 400 police, soldiers, and local residents surrounded the area. Kang Min-chol was hiding on the bank of the Rangoon River between Tagwoodpin and Kwain Waing villages. He was apparently still holding on to the hope that he would be able to make his way to the nonexistent mother ship.

The soldiers were instructed to capture alive any suspicious individuals. At around 9:35 a.m., a crowd surrounded the rubbish pile where Kang was taking cover. Soldiers, police officers, and villagers all approached Kang and called out for his surrender, when Kang suddenly stood up with something in his hands. Three soldiers came toward him to apprehend him, and Kang raised his left hand. A grenade was clutched in that hand. As soon as Kang pulled the pin, Lieutenant MaungMaung, the senior officer present yelled, "Grenade!" and lied flat on the ground. The grenade immediately exploded, and Kang cried out in pain. He fell to the ground, severely wounded, and soldiers jumped on top of him. Two other Burmese soldiers, who had approached Kang, were also on the ground, injured by the explosion. When Lieutenant MaungMaung went closer, Kang moved slightly and looked around him. The Lieutenant told Kang, "Korean, Korean, please stand up!" Kang shook his head twice, and fell. MaungMaung told him to get up, and Kang lifted his left arm to show that his hand below his wrist had been blown off. Kang was handed over to the Burmese soldiers who were waiting. The wounded Burmese soldiers died while being lifted out by helicopter, but Kang survived despite his grave injuries.

Thus three young men had come to this distant land to kill their own countrymen; one died, and the other two were wounded and captured by the Burmese authorities.

The Trial of the Terrorists

Jin Mo and Kang Min-chol recovered quickly, even though their injuries were serious. Both were held at the Rangoon General Hospital, where four surgical teams operated on them simultaneously. Lieutenant Colonel Mya Thein Han, a military surgeon who oversaw their care, later testified during the trial about the extent of their injuries and the treatment. He said he followed orders to make a full effort toward their treatment. Kang had been slipping in and out of consciousness when he arrived at the hospital. He had suffered wounds on his face and in both of his legs, and a serious wound in his stomach necessitated a laparotomy. His left hand was damaged beyond repair, and amputated near his elbow. The surgeon added that his patients seemed to be thankful for the care and effort they were receiving from the Burmese medical staff. Kang's

injuries appear to have been less serious than Jin Mo's, who had to have one arm amputated and suffered serious injuries on his face and in both of his legs, thighs and internally.

One of the terrorists said that he would make a full confession once he was able to write, and the surgeon said that the patient told him on November 3 that he was ready to testify, and he reported this to the Military Committee. Lieutenant Colonel Ji Tu Win was another surgeon who had provided initial care to the South Korean victims of the attack, and later treated the terrorists as well. He recalls that both Jin Mo and Kang Min-chol were young men with extraordinary constitution. He had served long as a surgeon in the military and had seen and treated numerous soldiers who had been wounded in battle, but he said he had never seen anyone who were so strong. Their injuries were reportedly very serious. When Jin Mo arrived at the hospital, the grenade he had been holding had exploded, removing his left arm and four fingers on his right hand, his abdomen had been torn open exposing his intestines and bladder, and serious internal hemorrhaging had occurred in his left chest. The surgery lasted about two hours, amputations were performed, and Jin Mo lost sight in both of his eyes. But his hearing was normal, and he could converse using some English.

Jin Mo's recovery was so fast that he was able to eat normally the day after his surgery. When he was given food for the first time, he was asked whether he wanted bread or rice in English, to which he replied immediately, "Bread." He acknowledged the kindness being shown to him by the doctors and nurses by saying in English, "Thank you." When the medics asked him in English whether he was doing well, he would say, "Yes," and nod when he was asked, "Is the food to your liking?" He would thank the staff after treatment sessions. Lieutenant Colonel Ji Tu Win said that an ordinary person would have been killed immediately if a grenade had gone off at such close proximity. Most healthy people would still have been unable to endure the painful and complex treatment and rehabilitation process that normally followed such injuries. Jin Mo had been unconscious when he arrived at the hospital, and Kang Min-chol had been slipping in and out. Both had lost one arm.

The Burmese government had given special orders to the military doctors to make sure the two terrorists survived. Lieutenant Colonel Ji Tu Win and his entire staff including specialists in ophthalmology and internal medicine worked hard to save them. Jin Mo seemed to have given up and let himself be treated, but he said nothing that was not related to the treatment.

Kang Min-chol was treated at a different hospital than Jin Mo. He was brought to Mingaladon Military Hospital, some distance away from Army Hospital No. 2 where Jin Mo was being held. With the terrorist plot still not fully investigated, the two had been separated to make sure someone did not kill himself and the other to hinder the investigation.

Kang had suffered wounds all over his body and lost his left arm, but unlike Jin Mo, he did not lose his eyesight. Remarkably enough, both men lost an arm, and were injured not by the Burmese police or soldiers but from their own weapons—the grenades that they had been carrying. It is said that was a factor in Kang eventually coming around and making a full confession.

Once Jin Mo and Kang Min-chol fully recovered, the Burmese government began interrogating them in total seclusion. At first, neither would cooperate with their interrogators.

South Korea made several requests to take part in the investigation, but the Burmese government refused permission. They also denied offers of interpreters.⁵⁸ Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs dispatched Special Envoy Lee Won-gyeong and his assistant Park Tae-hee to take charge of the aftermath of the attack. In his first meeting with President San Yu and the Burmese foreign minister, Lee emphasized that the attack had been perpetrated by North Korea and requested a rapid investigation into those responsible for the attack, a quick announcement of the results, and strong punishment. He also asked for a joint investigation task force, per his instructions from home. The Burmese government adhered to their position, however: since the investigation was a matter of national sovereignty, they could not agree to a joint team. South Korea's diplomats had expected this posture from Burma. An agreement was

58 Song Young-shik stated that the decision by the Burmese government to conduct the investigation without any outside, and especially South Korean, participation was in fact more useful in showing the objectivity and impartiality of its official investigation.

finally reached where important issues would be settled through diplomatic channels, and technical issues regarding the investigation would be resolved through cooperation between the relevant agencies in both countries.

Special Envoy Lee's position from the beginning had been to have patience and observe the Burmese investigation instead of insisting on a joint investigation. It was a very prudent decision befitting a seasoned diplomat. A country like Burma that was sensitive to issues related to national sovereignty would not have relented to repeated demands for a joint investigation, and indeed may have backfired by further alienating them. In addition, by allowing the Burmese authorities to proceed with the investigation with no outside involvement, a more objective determination of the circumstances surrounding the incident could be produced. A joint investigation with an external party of interests, especially South Korea, may have sped up the process but would have thrown the transparency or objectivity of the investigation into question. Lee and his assistant Park observed the Burmese investigation and provided assistance only when asked by the local authorities.

For the Burmese government, South Korea's having suffered a terrorist attack did not mean that they were completely above suspicion for involvement in the plot. South Korea was also a part of Burma's investigation. Counselor Song Young-shik felt from the early stages of the investigation that the Burmese government also had suspicions about anti-government elements in South Korea or even its government agencies. Perhaps Burma may have even placed South Korea, then experiencing considerable domestic uncertainty, as a prime suspect rather than North Korea, with whom they were on more friendly terms.

Director General Lee Sang-gu, who had originally planned to fly out for his next destination on the day of the attack, remained behind until the most urgent issues had been dealt with, and then tried to leave. To his shock, he discovered that the Burmese government had barred him from leaving the country. South Korea was under considerable suspicion, which came as a surprise to them. Lee had to remain in Burma, even as envoys from South Korea began to shuttle back and forth to deal with the aftermath and cooperate with the investigation and communication channels were established with the Burmese government. It was only after North Korea was revealed to have been responsible for the bombing that Lee was finally permitted to return home.

There is an even more serious illustration of where exactly Burma's investigation was heading. The Burmese foreign ministry even took action that was unacceptable by international diplomatic standards. The ministry held hearings on the incident and, in an unusual move, requested the presence of Counselor Song of the South Korean Embassy as a witness. The request was unconventional, especially in light of the national as well as the personal shock and suffering South Korea and the South Koreans involved in the incident had experienced. It would not have been out of the ordinary to refuse such a request on the spot. An emotional response or protest would not have been out of line. However, South Korea responded calmly to the request, which was wise. As a diplomat, Counselor Song could have of course refused the summons, but after receiving permission from back home he complied with the request and appeared at the hearing to testify and answer questions. Song wrote in his memories that pointed questions were asked during the hearing that showed "a blatant suspicion of Korea" by the Burmese investigators.⁵⁹

In addition to Counselor Song, other private citizens then in Burma were questioned as well. The Burmese government prohibited employees of Hyundai Heavy Industries, who were involved in a dam construction project, from leaving Burma, and workers of Kukje Corporation constructing an ice factory were forbidden from moving between the construction site and Rangoon. Local employees of these South Korean companies were also placed under suspicion. They were brought face to face with the terrorists and asked if they were employees of their company. Overall, the Burmese authorities appeared to take an even-handed position from the initial stage of the investigation, avoiding being swayed by preconceptions and trying their hardest to carry out a neutral and objective investigation.

On the other hand, Japan seems to have determined early on that North Korea was responsible for the terrorist attack. On the day of the explosion, a counselor from the Japanese embassy in Rangoon requested a midnight meeting with Secretary Choi Byung-hyo. The Japanese counselor was known as the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Burma expert. He was certain that the terrorist attack had been perpetrated by North Korea. Japan may have had its own intelligence on the circumstances in North Korea.

59 Song, *My Story*, 189-92.

Even after the Burmese government completed its independent investigation and it became known that North Korea was entirely responsible, there was still talk, especially in South Korea more than any other country, that the attack was an inside job perpetrated by President Chun's administration.

Meeting the Terrorists

A meeting between South Korean officials and the terrorists was finally arranged on October 25. They were allowed to meet for only ten minutes under strictly controlled circumstances. Of course, diplomats from other countries were also invited to prevent any accusation of favoritism. Counselor Song Young-shik from the South Korean embassy and Special Envoy from Korea Shim Ki-chol, along with Director Song Yong-guk of the ANSP and Assistant Director Han Chol-heum, were able to visit the hospital and talk to the terrorists. In addition to the South Koreans, members of foreign diplomatic delegations in Rangoon also joined in the visit. They included the ambassador from the Philippines, the head of the diplomatic delegation, the Indonesian ambassador who was present to represent neighboring states, and the Sri Lankan ambassador took part in the visit as well, since his country had been planned as the next stop for the South Korean presidential delegation. And just as Director General Lee Sang-gu had before them, the South Korean officials were immediately able to tell that the two men were North Koreans.

The South Korean investigators asked them several questions. Jin Mo, who lost his eyesight from injuries suffered during his apprehension, remained silent, but Kang Min-chol claimed that he was from South Korea, twenty-eight years of age, graduated from Seongbuk Elementary School, and was currently attending Seoul National University. In a subsequent question, he said that he had only graduated from elementary school, and had not gone to middle or high school. He said he lived in Yeongdeung-po, Seoul, and his mother lived in Seoul. It was soon discovered that what he said was all false. Among the graduates of Seongbuk Elementary School, there was no Kang Min-chol, and while there was a Kang Min-chol attending Seoul National University, he was living in Seoul at the time. Asked about the route he had taken to enter Burma, Kang began answering that they had come on October 7 by land, but could

not answer more detailed questions. He then said they had arrived by sea, and then changed his answer saying it was a helicopter that brought them in. Kang was still defiant at this point despite his serious injuries, and when a Korean investigator asked him, “Shouldn’t you think foremost about keeping yourself alive?” Kang told him that he was not afraid of death.

It appears that North Korea had not been prepared for the eventuality of the terrorists being captured and interrogated. Their answers were amateurish and immediately revealed to be false. North Korea’s spymasters during the planning stage had focused only on the terrorist attack itself, paying little thought to the aftermath. This was also made clear by the choice of weaponry. The weapons the trio had been carrying were obviously from North Korea. Their grenades were the type only produced in North Korea, and even showed serial numbers identifying which factory in North Korea they had come from. Jin Mo and Kang Min-chol had used grenades with matching serial numbers, making it clear that they were a team.⁶⁰ Interpol was also able to determine solely from the serial number of the pistols the two had carried that they were .25 caliber Browning Automatics which North Korea imported from Belgium. All the evidence pointed to the origin of the terrorist act. North Korean officials, while denying that they were involved with the attack, nevertheless had left their fingerprints all over the incident.

North Korea’s Involvement Exposed

The South Korean government insisted from the beginning that North Korea was responsible for the terrorist attack. However, the only material evidence that could back up the claim were the weapons and explosives used in the attack, and the refusal of Burma to permit the involvement of other countries, including South Korea, in the investigation process, was a source of frustration.

The two Koreas were inevitably placed in a deadlock, while fate awaited two young men at the center of this turmoil. Chun Doo-hwan continued to

⁶⁰ For further information of the testimony of the investigator from the explosives brigade based in Mingaladon as well as that of Major Aung Thein of the Burmese Army, refer to: Park, *The Aung San Report*, 126.

emphasize after he returned to South Korea that North Korea was responsible for the attack. The investigation in Burma, however, was making little progress, and there were still people who suspected discontent factions or anti-government forces within South Korea for carrying out the attack. Rumors circulated in South Korea that the whole affair was a conspiracy orchestrated by Chun.

Chun Doo-hwan ordered the capture of two North Korean agents, who could then be made to confess to North Korea's role in the incident, and the South Korean intelligence agency captured two spies alive to comply. To carry this out, the agency had a double agent, who had defected to the South and was under the ANSP control, wire his controllers in the North. The double agent was to say that an overhaul of the national identity system was being planned, and he needed to return to the North to deal with the change and forge new identity documents. North Korean intelligence officials immediately took the bait. On the day of the planned rendezvous, a North Korean spy ship arrived off the coast of Dadaepo, Busan, and two North Korean operatives landed ashore and were immediately captured by South Korean personnel who had been lying in wait. Chon Chun-nam and Ri Sang-gyu, the two North Koreans who were captured, later said that the operation was like something from an action movie. A special unit that was separate from South Korea's Special Forces command was deployed to capture the North Koreans. They were trained to take captives without killing or injuring them, and none of them were given weapons. They waited on the beach in trenches dug in the sand. The North Koreans landed without a clue and soon sensed that something was awry and tried to escape, but it was already too late. The South Korean Special Forces personnel sprung out from their spider holes dug in the sand below the North Koreans' feet and jumped on the two spies, who were apprehended before they could pull out their weapons.

The two spies who were captured complied during the interrogation, and at a press conference revealed that the terrorist attack in Burma was carried out by North Korea. The two operatives, Chon and Ri, said that they had heard from a control officer in relay station located on Hwangto isle off the coast of Wonsan that two North Korean operatives had been captured after the explosion at the Mausoleum. According to the control officer, it was shameful and an act of

betrayal that the spies had been unable to carry out their mission properly and allow themselves to be captured. The operation was haphazard, the escape plan was faulty, and their cover stories were weak—but the harshest criticism was reserved for the fact that the two did not have the “revolutionary mettle” to blow themselves up. If their testimonies are indeed true, then it would seem that North Korea placed the blame for a failed operation on the operatives that carried it out. Chon and Ri are known to have subsequently settled down in South Korea.

The Burmese government’s investigation, however, was failing to produce clear results, and South Korea was concerned that the truth behind the incident may be buried in a mound of misinformation and presumptions if the two terrorists remained silent. There was also the fear that North Korea might try to infiltrate the hospital and eliminate the two surviving terrorists. There were rumors that North Korea had made that very attempt, and the rumor even found its way into the newspapers. Finally, Kang opened his mouth. On November 3, less than a month after the bloodbath at the Martyrs’ Mausoleum, Kang Min-chol told the Burmese investigators that he was ready to tell them the truth.

North Korea’s Irresponsible and Hopeless Attack

North Korea’s planning had been limited to the terrorist attack itself, and little attention was given to the safety of the operatives or their escape, contingency plans should they be captured, or any sort of rescue operation. These shortcomings apply to the vast majority of covert operations conducted by North Korea.

It cannot be verified whether there were in fact no backup escape plans or a rescue protocol in case the primary plan failed, or whether additional escape plans did exist but were not followed. However, this point is clearly evident: when it became known that the DonggeonAeguk would not be able to reenter into Rangoon, the North Korean commanders who had sent them to Burma did not prepare a new escape plan, nor did they inform the operatives of this latest development. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the entire operation was beyond the capabilities of North Korea and its operatives. Superbly trained as the spies were, their ability to carry out their task would inevitably be affected by local conditions.

Subsequent events show clearly that while the operatives may have been physically capable of carrying out the terrorist attack, their ignorance of local circumstances deprived them of the ability to respond flexibly to unexpected events. None of them, for example, could speak a word of the local language. For this reason, they were unable to defuse the situation that had arisen with the owner of the automobile repair shop where the team had initially selected as the site for the activation of the bomb. If the owner had been more suspicious and turned them in to the police, the operation would have failed before it even began. Neither did the team have the capacity to put together a getaway plan once it became apparent that the speed boat was not waiting for them on the Rangoon River, instead of trying to foolhardily escape toward the estuary by swimming or walking out. The team instead merely stuck to the original, futile escape plan. There was no control officer or operative they could contact if their plan ran into problems. These deficiencies can also be readily observed in other terrorist operations carried out by North Korea.

The behaviors of the commanders of North Korea's Special Forces seem to suggest that there was no soul-searching whatsoever after the incident. Former North Korean special operations personnel point out that the cause for these events lay in a fundamental flaw of North Korean operations. In North Korean special ops, there is no "in case of failure." If contingency plans are submitted for approval, the higher-ups will chastise them by saying, "Did you make these plans with failure in mind?" This meant that the only possible outcome of failure was suicide by the operatives. For that reason, there were never any mechanisms in place for operations that did not go according to plan, especially regarding the safety and survival of the operatives.

The overall command of the Rangoon Bombing was the responsibility of "Department No. 35," North Korea's overseas intelligence arm. The North Korean government absolved Department No. 35 of any blame for the failure to assassinate President Chun Doo-hwan, the primary target of the operation, as well as for the political backdraft that exploded in the wake of the failed attempt. The regime instead concluded that the responsibility for the failure lay with the military, and especially with the Reconnaissance General Bureau. There was discontent within the Bureau for this treatment, and conflict between Department No. 35 and the military as well.

In sum, unlike other intelligence agencies around the world, North Korea never had any backup plans for its operatives to deal with unexpected occurrences. No one gave any thought to the fact that operatives, once caught, would eventually have no choice but to confess and tell the truth except in perhaps a few special cases. The operatives were apparently ordered to make their way back on their own or tie up loose ends by committing suicide after the conclusion of an operation. The standing order for North Korean Special Forces is to commit suicide should an operation run into problems. Former North Korean Special Forces personnel now living in South Korea still remember the mantra that was drummed into their heads:

“Save the final round, the final grenade for yourself.”

“Being captured by the enemy and becoming a prisoner is akin to betraying your country.”

North Korean commanders seemed to have lacked the awareness that their men, no matter how well-trained in the art of special operations, were not just political tools but human beings as well. To the leaders, only the political or operational goals were important. Kang Min-chol later told his cellmates that were he ever to return to North Korea, the regime would find it more unforgivable that he failed in achieving the goal of his attack than in having made a full confession. Taking into consideration all the events that transpired as well as the later confession Kang, it seems that neither he nor Jin Mo even intended to kill themselves, but rather planned to overcome all barriers and make their way to the nonexistent mother ship. The sense of betrayal that his country abandoned him and the despair of having no one to turn to eventually made Kang speak. Kang had ample reason to change his mind and decide to cooperate with the investigation. Kang had a strong desire to survive. By confessing, he was removing the barriers suppressing his will to leave as part of his treatment and rehabilitation. Throughout the quarter-century of imprisonment that followed, Kang never gave up hope and tried his hardest to protect his hold on life.

Chapter 6
The Forsaken



“If I were to trace the origin of my sin, it would be the fact that I was born in North Korea.”

Kim Shin-jo (*My History of Sorrow*)

The Will to Live

A terrorist is a criminal who rightly must receive the indignation of all. Terrorists harbor a hatred of the world, think little of the value of human life, and will not hesitate to destroy or kill to achieve their ends. Some cannot hold on to a normal life, and engage in destruction to compensate for the failure of their personal lives. Still others are cowards who refuse to face the difficult truths in life. Some are weak in their constitution and easily controlled by those who seek devious ends. A few who might be marginally more “normal” may be crude romanticists caught up in cheap throwaway heroism and self-delusion. Whatever the cause, there can never be justification for terrorism that indiscriminately kills innocent people. It is only proper that a terrorist who perpetrates such a crime pay the price for his sins.

However, generalizations by definition cannot be applied to everyone. When it comes to human beings, there are always exceptions. There are no absolute principles, nor standards on which every man must be judge.

I have a soft place in my heart for at least one terrorist. It is not mere sympathy. In a sense we are all partaking in the historical current that determined his fate. While the exact form may be different, what befell this individual may happen to us all. Nor I can help but feel the gravity of his life and death, his human side. In the blink of an eye he fell from this earth into Hades. Even under such desperate circumstances, however, he never abandoned his hope for rediscovering his identity which had been lost through powers outside of his control, keeping the flame of his life alive through incredible courage and self-discipline. He did not collapse into nihilism or cynicism even when all he had taken to be true collapsed around him. In a hellish environment he adapted and considered his life to be precious and worth saving, displaying a sincere desire to forge a new course for his life.

Faced with this reality, it would be meaningful to look back upon the life and death of a certain young man. This man did not choose what would perhaps be considered the easy way out despite his frustration and pain. He overcame extreme hardship and pain and preserved his life until to the day when relentless sickness and death finally claimed him. For this at least, I believe that his pain, life, and eventual death were not in vain. Kang Min-chol felt the acrimony of the entire world as a heinous terrorist, was ignored by his own country and people, and led a miserable life in a foreign prison, but the unbending courage and perseverance he showed amid this hardship offers us a solemn reminder of humanity. That is not all. Kang was a witness to our people through his pain-filled life. Through the pain and endurance he displayed, he testified to the countless lives that were sacrificed in the foolish struggle for power and inhuman conflict between political forces that have plagued our people for over half a century.

With his entire world and everything he believed in collapsing all around him, this young man found religion and cultivated a new dimension for his life, to which he dedicated the rest of his short life. His self-denial, courage, and dedication to life provide a valuable lesson to those today that buckle under the smallest of failures and think lightly of the value of their own lives.

There is no doubt that he committed a terrible crime. However, I cannot help but rage and despair more toward those who made him commit those acts and fall into his deplorable fate than to the man who stands accused of them.

To take this one step further—his state may be the state that all of us living on the Korean peninsula find ourselves in today, both in the North and in the South. Along the same vein, one cannot help but feel rage and indeed sadness toward the people who knew of the agony this man was facing but felt no sense of responsibility, instead deeming it unworthy of their attention and refusing to lift a finger in assistance. They turned their faces away from the truth they found uncomfortable, and closed their ears to the whispered cries of despair from a young man in a prison in faraway Burma.

The Country that Forsook the Terrorist

I now begin my story about a terrorist. He lived out his life in a country that was distant from the homeland he longed for so much, a country to which he had given no thought until he came there, keeping his torn and mangled body alive for twenty-five years on two prison meals a day in a prison in Burma. His life had been ruined not by a handful of conspirators moving according to some personal wishes but by state powers espousing grandiose causes like “ideology,” “justice,” “nation,” and “self-determination.” Kang had no one to demand, nor did he have any cause to demand, recompense for his lost youth and ruined life. There was never any effort to restore his freedom in the first place.

Moreover, the final ten years this young man spent in his Burmese prison cell was a time of unprecedented reconciliation, friendship, and exchange between North and South Korea. Two summit meetings were held between the leaders of both nations, and unchanging friendship and partnership were being promised by both sides. A plethora of organizations seeking to promote North-South exchange sprang up. People armed with a humanitarian desire to help vulnerable people began to eagerly send food, fertilizer, drugs, and medical supplies to their fellow Koreans in the North. A large amount of cash was also sent northward for a variety of reasons and purposes. This last gift was particularly welcome to the North Koreans, who asked for money whenever they had a chance.

Buddhist or Christian religious organizations in South Korea, albeit under the strict control of the North Korean regime, began to contact their counterparts in the North. Factories producing food or pharmaceuticals were built in North Korea. Some went north to transfer agricultural or information technology. Tourists could visit Kungang Mountain and even the city of Gaeseong. Cultural and sports events were held, and everyone basked in the new warmth of friendship and exchange. Separated families living in North and South Korea were allowed to meet and visit each other, although in limited numbers and again under the strict supervision of the authorities. Food, wine, and money flowed freely in all these exchanges. There was cause for happiness not just for Koreans but for all the neighbors of the Korean peninsula.

To some, certainly, these developments were being carried out in the spirit of true reconciliation and friendship, but at least a few of the ruling classes in both Koreas had different ideas. While there may have been contact and exchange in the name of tolerance, reconciliation, or whatever else, the antagonism and conflict between the two systems of government continued in different forms and under different names. Rulers in both countries made sure that these exchanges would ultimately benefit them, and would lead to a reunification of their own designs.

While fraternal love and fellowship bloomed, no one paid any heed to a young man in a prison in Burma clinging to the hope that someday he would be free and be allowed to return to his homeland. There was more than the difficulty of prison life or homesickness that tormented this young man. He knew that he had committed a horrible crime, but he could not accept that only he should suffer for it. As a North Korean defector said, "Is it a crime to have been born in North Korea?" He was scourged by the thought that he and only he had to pay for a crime that had not been committed through his own will or decision. More than worry over his own fate, he was also pained by the thought of his family that he had left behind.

He had been unable to make decisions or act for himself from the initial stages of the incident in which he had been embroiled. His fate had almost totally been determined by factors outside of his control. Where he had been born and raised, the only information available was that which was provided by the state. Any deviation from the official guidelines was strictly prohibited, from conversation between friends to even one's own thoughts. All had to think, talk,

and act as mandated by the state. Even in a normal nation where information is plentiful enough that an individual can determine right from wrong by himself or herself, independent judgment and action is difficult once he or she becomes a part of a state mechanism. It would be unreasonable, then, to expect a person who had been born and raised in a state where all information critical for making independent decision-making was controlled by the state to be able to make moral decisions regarding the orders he was receiving. According to testimony from people who lived in North Korea, any deviation from the state's guidelines was reported immediately to related security apparatus in a tight web of surveillance. Punishment would then be incomprehensibly severe.⁶¹

It does not end there. Every resident is not only exposed to the constant danger of being accused of sedition in a well-organized and strict system of surveillance, but everyone is made to take part in an intricate system of propaganda, demagoguery, and collective consciousness. In a sense, every North Korean resident had to be an actor in a play written, produced, and directed by those in power. A great play ruled the lives of every resident, each obligated to fulfill the roles assigned to them.⁶² The biggest point that outsiders have to understand is that it is important for members of such a society to become accustomed to such a life, and that it is normal to follow the directions of the regime and truly believe and think along the party line. Placed in such circumstances, survival depends on adapting rapidly and participating willingly.

With all information required for independent thought and action cut off and placed in an environment where a person who had been born and raised into adulthood had to still think and act within the boundaries drawn by the state, a person cannot be asked to make decisions for which he or she can be held accountable.

61 Kang Chol-hwan, *Ab, Yodok* (Monthly Chosun, 2006); Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (Spiegel & Grau, 2009).

62 For the view of North Korea as a "Theatre State," see: Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea, Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012); Korean version published as *Theatre State* (Changbi, 2013).

The organization in which Kang Min-chol belonged was especially rigid in its hierarchical structure, and even more so was his unit that was tasked with carrying out special operations. Obviously, even a person engaged in a profession as particular as military service cannot be absolved from all moral and legal responsibilities, even if he or she was following orders. However, this norm only applies where individual decision is at least possible. It is a different matter entirely in a society like North Korea that is cut off from the outside world and where information is strictly controlled. Moreover, this was a system that had been in place since at least the middle of the last century, for over two generations. Thinking and acting in a prescribed, uniform way should now be considered as a cultural norm of North Korea. Needless to say, Kang Min-chol cannot avoid being held legally accountable for his crime. But can we rightfully demand that he bear the moral responsibility as well?

In a decade bursting with fraternal love and humanism, Kang's plight remarkably placed no burden on the collective conscience of a people. It is my belief that to eventually achieve not only reunification but true reconciliation, Koreans must realize that, morally, the life of one individual can be as important as an entire nation.

Both North and South Korea, however, remained blind to the bothersome presence of a man who could be a burden, and instead were consumed with a rare and new opportunity for both sides to become closer together.

Erased

“God still asks us, ‘Where is the young man, Park Jong-chul?’ We only point to the two policemen who tortured him, oblivious. This was Cain’s answer to God who asked him of the brother he had killed. The opposition parties, parents, teachers, religious leaders must all kneel before the vicious death of a young man, beat their breasts and repent, weeping for his pitiful soul.”

Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-hwan (during the memorial mass for Park Jong-chul)

“I picked up the grenade and hooked my finger through the safety pin. But from deep in my heart surged the desire to live. What more do I need to embellish my reason other than this desire to live? I am a human being.

That is reason enough.”

Former North Korean Commando Kim Shin-jo (*My History of Sorrow*)

With a unique climate, Burma is one of the countries where Koreans have an especially difficult time becoming accustomed to. The culture is as unique as the weather; as Rudyard Kipling, the nineteenth-century English writer, said, “The country that is different from any other country that you know—that is Burma.”

Even in the dry season between November and February when the weather is supposed to be relatively favorable, Burma is as hot and humid as Korea is in midsummer. Temperatures can shoot up in the months of March, April, and May to as high as 40 degrees Celsius. The highlands are supposed to be a little better, but regions such as Pagan (Bagan) and Mandalay can become even hotter. The rainy season begins between mid-May and mid-June, lasting until October, with the heaviest rainfall in July and September. Some areas will see up to 500 centimeters of rain per year.

Beyond the heat and the rain, perhaps what makes it most difficult for Koreans to adjust to life in Burma is the water. Drinking the local water could cause severe stomachaches and nausea. I stayed at the VIP Guest House during my first visit to the country at the invitation of the Burmese government, yet I still fell ill from the weather and the water. Here, Kang Min-chol lived imprisoned for twenty-five years before finally succumbing to death in pain.

The United States always reminds its citizens, “You are not forgotten,” adhering to this fundamental principle whenever the need or reason arises. This is not limited to the US. Every nation works to look after and win the freedom of her citizens who are held abroad against their will for having done their part in the affairs of state. Even Gaddafi’s Libya made great effort to win the release of the Lockerbie terrorists who had been imprisoned in the United Kingdom, eventually succeeding. The Libyan government reportedly worked through British Petroleum, a company with which the country had a deep shared interest, to lobby the British government and secure the release of the Libyan intelligence officer Abdelbaset al-Megrahi.⁶³

Setting aside the discussion about whether this is morally right or wrong, should it not be the duty of a country that bears responsibility for the lives of its citizens, and a nation that shares the same bloodline, to at the very least make an effort to save one of its own? The attitude our people displayed to Kang Min-chol stands in stark contrast to the normal practice of countries toward its own citizens.

I read a very moving article in a newspaper in 2010. An American entrepreneur was traveling in China in 1995 and saw a dog tag at a war museum in Dandong, China. Such tags have been in use since Ancient Greece for soldiers to wear around their necks in case their identities need to be verified. The American took an interest in the tag, and traced the origin of the artifact for over ten years to finally discover that it had belonged to a US Air Force Captain Troy Cope, who had been shot down and killed over a village in Dandong. After a long effort by many people, the remains of Captain Cope were finally found in the village and repatriated back home for a proper burial.⁶⁴

63 *The International Herald Tribune*, July 17-18, 2010.

64 *The Chosunilbo*, May 3, 2010, page A38.

In the mid-1980s, US military personnel searching for the remains of American servicemen along the Nakdong River discovered the remains of twenty-five soldiers of the North Korean People's Army. They were all verified to have belonged to the 4th Division. The Americans offered to send the remains to North Korea, but it refused. South Korea at the time was embroiled in a chaotic struggle for democratic reform and also would not accept them. Finally, the US military enlisted the help of Buddhist monks and conducted a funeral, then reburied the remains. The bones of young men who had been sacrificed in a war perpetrated by foolish leaders had seen the light of day for the first time in decades, but only the soldiers of a foreign country cared enough about them to pray for their souls and lay them to rest properly. Neither North Korea nor South Korea gave them a second thought.⁶⁵

I was extremely shocked when I read this article. I had by chance just written a piece at the request of a newspaper on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War proposing the construction of a memorial dedicated to the soldiers of the North Korean army who died during the Korean War. This article, however, never saw the light of day. I heard later that the editors of the newspaper decided to ax the piece.⁶⁶

After the Blue House Raid that occurred on January 21, 1968, South Korea planned to return the bodies of the North Korean "communist bandits" who had been killed in the attack in South Korea. The government prepared to take the bodies to Panmunjom and transfer them; the North Koreans, however, insisted that they knew nothing about the incident and had not sent these individuals, or anyone else, to South Korea, and refused to take custody of the remains. Twenty-nine bodies of young men did not receive any burial service or mourning, and were buried alongside a road near Munsan. Their families back home would have heard little, if anything, about the fate that had befallen them. Will the day ever come when the families and friends of these North Koreans, who had waited so long for their return, will be able to visit their humble gravesites and offer a drink in their memory? For how much longer must the Korean people repeat this cycle of tragedy?

65 Ra Jong-il, "The Lessons of the Korean War," *The Hankookilbo* Los Angeles Edition, June 24, 1987.

66 However, in 1996 and in accordance with the Geneva Convention and the principles of humanitarianism, the South Korean government established a so-called "enemy combatant cemetery" in Jeokseong-myeon, Paju, by interring the remains of 1,063 Chinese and North Korean soldiers killed during the Korean War. Buddhist rites are conducted at the cemetery for the deceased soldiers.

Thus disappeared from the thoughts of Koreans a young man held in a prison in Burma. He was forgotten by North Korea, his own nation that had sent him to his doom, and also by South Korea once the political storm which broke out after the incident died down. This reality is typical of Korea, where political significance trumps human concerns. No records have ever been found that expressed sympathy for the two North Korean operatives that had been captured, either by North Korea or South Korea.

In fact, it was a Japanese diplomat who had been observing their trials who expressed any human emotion for them. He had been shocked by the magnitude of what they had committed, but said that in some ways he felt sorry for the perpetrators who were of his own age, and felt empathy for their plight. He said that he felt especially sorry for Jin Mo, who lost an arm and his eyesight and eventually met his death on the gallows. The diplomat wrote that while he loathed the crime, he didn't loath the man who he felt was also a "victim" of the particular system of North Korea and of the conflict that kept the Korean peninsula divided.⁶⁷

There were occasional calls for Kang's repatriation to Korea. But these demands were not out of concern for an individual person and a countryman but to place him on the witness stand as part of a political process. Kang's value, in other words, was only that of a witness or source of information for a crime perpetrated by North Korea.⁶⁸ Politics, not the person, was again at the forefront. Opposition to his release and repatriation was also along the same political lines. These people opined that too many years have passed since the incident for Kang to have any informational value.

More important was the concern that Kang may become a stumbling block to the newly blooming relations between North and South Korea. In other words, at a time when North and South Korea were actively engaging in reconciliation and cooperation, the release and return of Kang to Korea could hinder this "great task" for the people of Korea. There was also the worry that the North Korean government would use it as an opportunity to rehash the claim that

⁶⁷ Shin, *Burma*, 187.

⁶⁸ "Secure the Person of the Rangoon Bombing Terrorist" (*The Independent*, Feb. 27, 2009); Cho Gap-jae, "Interview Records Acquired - Kang Min-chol, Rangoon Bombing Terrorist Desired to Come to Korea but was Denied" (*Monthly Chosun*, Sep. 2010). Along the same vein, an official of the South Korean NIS expressed a negative opinion of the return of Kang to Korea, saying that he was too old to have much intelligence value. "20th Anniversary of the Rangoon Bombing - Operative Kang Min-chol Says, 'I Want to Go to Korea'" (*Monthly Chosun*, March 2009).

the Rangoon Bombing had been a South Korean conspiracy. Even the South Korean press, which showed considerable humanitarian interest in human rights issues such as foreign refugees or immigrants, saw Kang only in a political light.

Sacrificed at the Call of the State

This work is not intended to glamorize or idolize this man Kang Min-chol, who is a terrorist who took the lives of many innocent people. Even before his involvement in the bombing at the Martyrs' Mausoleum, he was engaged in illicit activities including the kidnappings of women for North Korea's covert operational purposes. He confessed that he kidnapped thirteen women in Japan. He did the same in Taiwan and Hong Kong. He said that at the time he believed the task was necessary for the reunification of the Korean people and to achieve the socialist revolution. In prison, however, and especially after he converted to Christianity, he realized his wrongdoings and deeply regretted them.

All the above acts, however, were not of his free will, but missions conducted at the order of his country. He was used as a pawn in a foolish game of power under the pretext that reunification had to be achieved, at any cost. He is also one of the countless young people sacrificed in the long-lasting ideological conflict between North and South Korea and in the struggle for power.

He was a criminal who committed a terrorist act—however, he must be distinguished from other terrorists. He was born, educated, and trained as a soldier in a closed and totalitarian nation. Other than what was furnished to him by the government, he had no access to any information on which he could base his own opinions. He had no freedom to think or speak of anything that was outside the boundaries set by the state. As a member of a strictly hierarchical military organization, he was given an order to carry out a special operation as a soldier, and he carried it out. Is it reasonable that a man in his late twenties, who had lived cut off from the outside world, should be expected to question whether the orders he had received were right or wrong? He kept repeating during his imprisonment, "Put yourself in my shoes." He

knew he had committed a terrible crime, but could anyone else who had been born and raised in the same environment and had received orders as a soldier before coming to Burma to carry them out do any different? In addition, the Gwangju Uprising had provided an apt justification. While it cannot be said that he holds no responsibility for what he did, was it then right that he alone had to take all the responsibility, and receive punishment with no possibility of redemption or pardon?

Burma's Resolve and North Korea's Isolation

The Burmese government naturally took the incident extremely seriously. Three days after the incident, flags were ordered at half-staff from October 10 to 12 as part of a nationwide mourning period. The government formed an investigative committee composed of top officials and headed by the Minister of Home and Religious Affairs. The Vice Chairman of the Army Chief of Staff, Director of Planning of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Director of Political Affairs of the Ministry of Defense, and the Director of the Police Force took part in the committee. Five specialized subcommittees were also formed to examine each aspect of the incident. On November 4, the Burmese government released the results of the investigation and officially announced that the North Korean government had committed an illegal terrorist act. Before making the announcement, the Burmese government had conveyed the results of the investigation and the course of subsequent actions taken by Burma to the South Korean government. Secretary of the South Korean Embassy Park Tae-hui, who accompanied Counselor Song Young-shik to the Burmese foreign ministry to receive the news, recollected that the relief and the sense of release after weeks of non-stop work almost brought him to tears and unable to walk without staggering out of the ministry building.

Counselor Song had already been informed via an unofficial channel that the investigation had been completed and that strong actions were going to be taken. The day before the official announcement, black smoke was seen rising from the chimney of the North Korean embassy which Song guessed to be the North Koreans burning sensitive documents in case of an eviction. Park filed a report for the home office, and even added at the end, "Long Live Korea."

Burma derecognized North Korea and suspended all diplomatic relations. The Burmese government's measures were so forceful that even South Korean diplomats were surprised. Derecognition, a much more drastic action than just cutting off relations, was a rare act that was just one step below an actual declaration of war. There was disagreement within the Burmese foreign ministry about whether such an act was indeed legal under international law, but Ne Win himself, who held the real power in Burma, would not countenance dissent. Ne Win even went as far as to tell those who were making the objections, "What has international law to do with anything?" Ne Win had visited North Korea six years before the Rangoon Bombing, and had made a personal acquaintance with Kim Il-sung and developed a positive opinion of the country, which made him regard the attack as a personal affront and an act of betrayal. He was so angered that he once said, "North Korea has slapped my face in public."⁶⁹

The Burmese government then dispatched an official delegation of apology. Prime Minister Kim Sang-hyeop received this delegation and offered a banquet, which was to mark his last official act as prime minister. His resignation is yet another example of how those most responsible kept their jobs while people with little link to the incident had to take responsibility and resign.

Following the example of the Burmese government, other countries, including Costa Rica, Western Samoa, and the Comoros, cut off diplomatic ties with North Korea. Pakistan, which had been weighing diplomatic relations with North and South Korea for some time, established diplomatic ties exclusive with South Korea three days after the Burmese government's official measures. Sixty-eight nations denounced North Korea and applied sanctions to limit material and human exchange with the country. The United States Senate adopted a resolution condemning North Korea. The British government also issued a statement denouncing North Korea's terrorist act and voicing support for the Burmese government's measures against the North. France, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Singapore, and other countries followed with their own statements, and the foreign ministry of Norway, a country with diplomatic relations with North Korea, summoned its ambassador to condemn the Rangoon Bombing and inform him that Norway would stop providing loans. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported the decision of the Burmese government on the day of its announcement without commentary. The Chinese ambassador to the United Nations made a statement "opposing

69 Shin, *Burma*, 186.

all forms of terrorism,” at least indirectly joining the rest of the world in its outcry against the attack. Ambassador Han Si-hae of North Korea, however, stood alone in the UN, stubbornly claiming the innocence of his country.

It seems that North Korean leaders had not anticipated the severity of the international community’s backlash against their attack. That is how rigidly the thoughts of the North’s regime had been bounded by the frame of the Korean peninsula with little awareness of the outside world. Or, the North thought that they would be able to carry out the mission without leaving a trace of evidence. Perhaps they thought that even if all is found out, the ire of the international community would eventually pass, and more important than the North’s international reputation was the power struggle occurring on the Korean peninsula. Whatever the mindset, a significant gap can be identified between it and the normal conventions of the international community.

Even North Korean diplomats seem to have been unaware how serious the situation was. The North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pyongyang ordered its embassy in Rangoon to prevent the suspension of diplomatic relations at all costs. Local North Korean diplomats tried to comply with the home office’s wishes by whatever way they knew how, and even took a collection using personal funds to buy gifts and visit various Burmese contacts. To the Burmese government as well as the members of the international diplomatic community in Rangoon, these efforts appeared comical, if not despicable. Considering the struggle that was taking place for gaining the upper hand in the diplomatic sphere between North and South Korea at the time, the North’s terrorist attack seriously undermined their own cause. While this is only hearsay, the late Hwang Jang-yop testified that once the international uproar became more serious than originally anticipated, Kim Il-sung even suggested that they should admit to the attack having originated from North Korea but perpetrated by a handful of adventurists and without the knowledge of the state’s leaders. Kim Jong-il, however, opposed the idea and insisted for continuous denial, which remained the official position of the North.

Both South Korea and Burma began to see each other in a new light in the aftermath of the attack. Having regarded Burma before as just a poor and underdeveloped country, South Korean officials were impressed how prompt

and precise the Burmese were in investigating the incident and carrying out diplomatic measures. South Koreans also highly regarded Burma's deep pride in their national identity and dedication to preserving their dignity and sovereignty. The fact-finding process was thorough, and South Koreans were surprised at Burma's drastic measures against North Korea despite the warm relations they had been enjoying before the incident. The trial was also carefully conducted despite concerns from outsiders, the evidence and the application of law being carefully managed throughout a series of several trials and hearings. Lawyers for the defense were also committed to protecting the human rights of the accused, putting up a strong and well-crafted defense. Of course, it must be noted that a case with such a high international profile would inevitably receive such careful treatment, but everyone associated with the post-incident process agreed that Burma was exceedingly careful and impartial in handling the affair.

Burma expressed surprise at how cool-headed South Korea remained even after experiencing such a traumatic event, and especially their attention to detail in the investigation process. For example, South Korea presented discrediting evidence a day after Kang Min-chol's false testimony. South Korea also quickly established that the weapons seized from the terrorists were of North Korean origin. Burmese authorities expressed their gratitude to South Korea for helping bring the affair to a rapid close by understanding Burma's position and respecting their dignity. Later, it was revealed that in some quarters in South Korea there were calls for a retaliatory attack against North Korea, but such a measure never materialized, especially after the United States urged South Korea not to take drastic action, and cooler heads prevailed that prevented the incident from escalating even further.

Death at the Hands of the Executioner

On November 22, the first trial was held. The Burmese government usually held a trial in its customary three-appeal process. Having determined that the incident had important national ramifications, however, the initial trial and first appeal were omitted, and a trial was convened in the Rangoon District Court. In the special trial, an appeal could be filed within seven days of the trial to the Council of People's Justices, the highest court of Burma. The highest court would determine only whether the law had been properly applied. The trial was held from November 22 to December 9 in a temporary courtroom set up in the Officer's Club near the Rangoon Airport.

Two lawyers from the Rangoon Bar Association were appointed as public defenders for the accused. Relative to the gravity of the incident, the trial ended quickly. Presiding over the first trial was army Lieutenant Colonel MaungMaung Aye, and the two defenders were indicted on six different counts, including murder and the possession of illegal weapons, as per Articles 302 and 302 of the Burma Code of Criminal Justice, and Article 19 of the Law on Weapons. An overview of the case was presented by Director of Special Investigations, U Tin Hlaing of the Burmese national police, and a plea was entered. The next hearing featured cross-examination of witnesses and presentations of the facts and evidence of the case. The court was convened eight times to review detailed evidence and information.

When the court was convened for a ninth session, Kang was asked by the court, "You, Kang Min-chol, are you guilty?" after each charge was presented, to which he nodded each time. Jin Mo, however, remained silent when asked his plea, his name, or where he had come from. Finally, the judge asked, "Do you have anything to say?" but Jin Mo did not say a word.⁷⁰ Jin Mo's injuries were severe, and he had lost his eyesight. He did not seem to have any desire to live. When the court convened for its tenth and final session on December 9, both Kang Min-chol and Jin Mo were sentenced to death.

70 Park, *The Aung San Report*, 111.

Kang Min-chol's lawyer claimed that his client's confession had allowed the Burmese government to understand how the incident had unfolded and revealed to the world the parties responsible for the attack, and stated that under Burmese law he was entitled to privileges as an informant. Under this claim, Kang could have even received a pardon. Even so, the court struck down this claim. The lawyers immediately made an appeal to the Council of People's Justices, but the appeal was also struck down during two hearings that were held on January 11 of the following year and February 9. Burma's highest court rejected the appeal and let the death sentences stay. On February 24, the two public defenders filed an appeal with the Council of People's Prosecutors, which was rejected two months later. On May 2, as the final legal resort, an appeal was filed with the Burma People's Assembly, which was chaired by the president. Jin Mo's appeal was overruled in March the following year, while Kang received a suspended sentence.

The people who should have been on trial, however, were of course absent. One must again consider who was directly and indirectly responsible for sending these two men to a foreign land to eventually stand on trial, severely injured and disabled.

Jin Mo's execution was carried out. In a Buddhist country such as Burma, executions were an extremely rare affair. While Burma retained capital punishment, it was almost never carried out. Only a few exceptions exist. The murderers of General Aung San were executed in 1974. In the same year, the ringleader of an attempted coup against General Ne Win was also executed. Jin Mo's execution was the third since the establishment of the Burmese State.⁷¹ That was how seriously the Burmese government viewed North Korea's terrorist attack as a challenge to its national sovereignty as well as a betrayal of its trust.

Kang's life was spared with his suspended sentence, which he earned by cooperating during the investigation. After being held in a military prison for a year, he was transferred to the infamous Insein Prison near Yangon.

71 Shin, *Burma*, 187.

Meanwhile, Jin Mo died without saying a word in a faraway land, deprived of everything, even his real name. While desperately searching for the ship that was to take him back home, the vessel which never existed in the first place, he was critically wounded by his own grenade. Suffering serious injuries including the loss of his eyesight, he endured the difficult treatment process and remained speechless throughout the investigation and interrogation, finally accepting his death. There is nothing known about any last words he may have uttered, any messages or letters to his family, or how his body was disposed after the execution.

Chapter 7
Terrorist Kang Min-chol



Kang Min-chol, or Kang Yong-chol

Official records show that Kang Min-chol was born on April 18, 1955. However, he told a Korean diplomat that his birthday was July 29, 1957. There was probably a need to disguise his personal identity, but it is unknown why he chose that particular date. Perhaps it was the birthday of the Seoul National University student whose identity he had used as a cover. He was born in Tongchon, in the northern side of Gangwon province. Tongchon is near the coast, and is known both as a transportation hub as well as for its breathtaking natural scenery. Roads and railway are well-developed in Tongchon, connecting it to other regions in North Korea. Chongsokjong, one of the “Eight Natural Beauties of Gwandong” (or Gangwon province), is also located in Tongchon. Numerous other sights dot the landscape. The Tongchon Plain extends out to the East Sea, providing the region with an abundance of seafood and crops. The region was home to many notable figures, including former chairman of Hyundai Group Chung Ju-yung. Plentiful fishing grounds allowed the locals to live in relative abundance.

Kang's real name was Kang Yong-chol. Cover names are common in North Korea, not only among special agents, but also among leading public figures. The pseudonym Kang Min-chol could have been that of a Seoul National University student living in Seoul whose identity Kang had taken for himself. The Burmese called him "Kang Minchu" or "Kim Minchu," which were easier for them to pronounce. They also called the leader of the terrorists, Kim Jin-su, "Jin Mo," out of convenience. Thus, Kim Jin-su remains Jin Mo in official records. However, Kim Jin-su never revealed his real name, not even during his interrogations in Burma.

Kang was seriously wounded while carrying out a mission following his orders from the commanders of a Special Forces unit of North Korea's General Bureau of Reconnaissance. He was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He was incarcerated in the Insein Prison located outside the city of Rangoon, the old capital city of Burma, where the majority of inmates are known to die within twenty years.

But the Burmese authorities did not send Kang right away to Insein, which was a civilian prison. He was first held in a special prison operated by the military for a year. There were security concerns in a civilian prison, and worries that some ill might befall Kang. At that military prison, Kang learned the Burmese language from soldiers on work detail who were imprisoned for desertion. By the time a South Korean diplomat met Kang for the first time, some fifteen years after the incident, Kang was quite fluent in Burmese, and could even speak some English.

Kang served a total of twenty-five years in Burmese prison, and died of liver cancer in May 2008. But fellow inmates who knew Kang at Insein Prison expressed disbelief that he died of cancer, saying that Kang was in decent health when he died. This remains a mystery to this day. Kang was seriously wounded when he was arrested by the Burmese authorities. His left arm was amputated below the elbow, and he had suffered wounds all over his body including his face, right shoulder, stomach, groin, and both legs and thighs. Once, he took off his shirt in front of a South Korean diplomat who went to visit him, revealing his body that was covered with unsightly wounds and surgical scars. The diplomat recalls that Kang's body resembled a road map, with scars that ran across his body. Kang added that he still had shrapnel that had not been removed, which shifted and moved around in his body.

Kang's family back home was small but tight-knit. He was the only son, the pillar of his household, handsome, athletic, and an officer in the Special Forces, all of which made his family members expect much from him. His father was Kang Sok-jun, his mother Kim Ok-sun, and he had an unmarried younger sister. When Kang left for Burma, his father had already passed away.

Kang had little time to spend with his family after joining the military due to the nature of his missions. He was permitted to take a brief leave before departing for Burma, and managed to spend a few days with his family for the first time in a while. That was the last time he saw his family. He was not able to see his friends or relatives. He did not tell his family where he was going or what he was doing. His mother was proud at how different Kang looked, telling him that he had "really grown up." He tried hard to make his family believe that the work he was doing was important, but also easy and interesting. His mother, however, seems to have sensed instinctively that he was doing something dangerous and difficult. She sometimes looked at him with concern. When it became time for them to part, his mother said to him, "Wherever you go and whatever you do, remember that I am praying for you."

He had a girlfriend who he had been seriously considering marrying. He sometimes said that she was a woman he knew from his neighborhood for a long time, and on other occasions he said that she was the daughter of a woman who had been looking after him while he was training. Perhaps the women he spoke of were not real people, but only existed in his imagination. That was how desperately he longed for a female presence.

Sentenced to Life in Insein Prison

A photograph of Kang taken around the time he arrived in Burma with orders to kill the president of South Korea shows a young man with strong features, including tight lips and bright, strong eyes. He was tall for a North Korean, at 171 centimeters. He was still very fit when he met the diplomat from South Korea after fifteen years in prison.

Only two meals were given at the prison each day—not enough food. Most people in Burma at the time, however, ate two meals per day, and even today few people are said to eat three meals a day—thus his prison diet would not have been significantly worse. In addition, the special section in Insein Prison where Kang was held served relatively good food, although to someone like Kang who had always received special treatment in North Korea, the food would have been insufficient. He was young and in his prime, and things must have been difficult. He was always very meticulous about what he ate. While he may have looked gaunt with his thin frame and shaved head, his cautious eating habits kept him mentally and physically quite fit. The South Korean diplomat who met him on several occasions said Kang remained handsome and presentable despite the many years he had spent imprisoned.

While in prison, Kang meditated after dinner each evening and prayed for his family who he had left behind. Kang first turned to Buddhism, but, according to his inmates, he converted to Christianity at the urging of another inmate. Among the people who were in prison with him were U Yaw Sett⁷² and his brother-in-law U Aung Thein, both successful businessmen who had been given long sentences for smuggling teak lumber out of Burma into China—but according to them such crimes were commonplace in Burma and rarely led to prosecution. In other words, their real crime was their Christian proselytizing, an act especially offensive to a regime that placed great importance on its relationship with Buddhists.

Some say that their crimes were merely an excuse produced by the Burmese government, which had actually imprisoned the two for being Christians and active in their missionary work, which caught the attention of the regime. In other words, they had been imprisoned for raising the ire of the rulers.

⁷² U Yaw Sett's real name was the Christian name Joseph, which was pronounced "Yaw Sett" in the Burmese fashion.

The two men, and especially U Aung Thein, evangelized earnestly to Kang, and it was through their efforts that he turned to Christianity. Kang learned about Christian beliefs from U Aung Thein, and received a Bible from him. Kang told them the remarkable story that his mother had actually been a Christian, and had kept a cross, a Bible, and other religious objects hidden inside their home. Sometimes his mother had taken these out to pray. He also told them that his mother was part Russian, having hailed from the northern part of the Korean peninsula of Hamgyong-do. It's uncertain how much of this account is true.

The two Burmese prisoners were wealthy, having been involved with hotels, real estate, gem mining, and lumber, and they received plenty of food and luxuries. They were even allowed conjugal visits, and U Yaw Sett had a son while he was in prison. Kang seemed to have received considerable assistance from them.

Aung Thein had caught the eye of the government after he had created a religious community by establishing a number of Christian villages. While it is impossible to be sure, the sentences the two men received were unreasonably harsh compared to the crime of fudging the amount of lumber they were exporting. Aung Thein received a fifteen-year sentence, and U Yaw Sett was sentenced to eighteen years. U Yaw Sett took special pity upon Kang, and not only shared his own food with him but made special requests for Korean food to be served to Kang. Whether it was Buddhism or Christianity, Kang appears to have become devoutly religious during his imprisonment. According to the two Burmese men, Kang became a Christian and died a Christian. Aung Thein was especially adamant that Kang had originally been a Buddhist when they first met, and had converted to Christianity.

Kang was held in Special Cell No. 1 in Insein Prison, and Aung Thein was in cell No. 7. The prisoners were free to move around in their cells. One day, Kang saw Aung Thein dressed in a pair of shorts and a sleeveless vest in his room, and told him that he looked "like a civilian." Aung Thein sensed that Kang fancied the clothes he was wearing, and later acquired another set for Kang and told him to try them on. Kang wore them and happily noticed that they fit him well. When Aung Thein told Kang that he could keep the clothes, Kang said, "Why do you give me such good clothes?" Aung Thein replied, "We are brothers. If there are good clothes, it's only natural that we share them." Kang still asked Aung Thein why he was being so generous, and that is how their relationship began.

Aung Thein told Kang, “All humans are the children of God, and He is always prepared to forgive sinners who repent,” telling Kang about the basic Christian dogma that anyone who repents and is redeemed from sin by God is saved and receives eternal life. Kang asked him, “Buddhism has its Five Tenets; does Christianity have something similar?” Aung Thein told him that Christianity had the Ten Commandments. Kang asked, “Buddhists do not believe in Jesus or God, so does that mean they cannot be saved?” Aung Thein told him that anyone who doesn’t believe will not be saved, and Kang told him then that he will convert to Christianity. While Aung Thein was not a minister, he said that due to the nature of the circumstances inside a prison he baptized Kang without using water and gave him a Christian name, “Matthew.” Kang became a devout Christian, praying in Korean three times a day and even telling a visiting Burmese official that he “should believe in Jesus.”

One of Kang’s favorite teachings of the Bible was, “Love thy enemy,” as taught by Jesus in the New Testament, as well as verses such as, “whoever shall strike you on your right cheek, turn to him the other side also.” Aung Thein stated that he gave Kang an English Bible, since he could not read the Burmese language. One day, Kang said that he saw a vision of his mother standing beside Jesus in his dream. Jesus had a long beard and wore white clothing, and next to him was his mother who he had left behind in North Korea. And before he died, Kang told Aung Thein that he would become a minister or a teacher to spread the Gospel of Jesus should he ever be released from prison.

Dreaming of Life in South Korea

Kang sometimes heard news about the democratization movement in Burma from political prisoners who were being held in a prison adjacent to his own. One of the political prisoners Kang had been close to was Win Tin, vice-chairman and spokesman of the National League for Democracy, the political party headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. Win Tin was placed in solitary confinement when he was first imprisoned, but after the 2004 downfall of Khin Nyunt, the second-most powerful man in the Burmese government, he was allowed outside of his cell and made contact with other prisoners.

After his release, Win Tin was interviewed by *Radio Free Asia*, and he stated that Kang Min-chol, a North Korean covert operative, had wanted to go to

South Korea while he was still alive but was denied the opportunity. Win Tin appeared in a daytime program for the American radio station and said that he had conversed several times with Kang during his imprisonment, reporting that Kang's desperate desire to go to South Korea had been denied by both the North and the South, and that he eventually died alone in prison. According to Win Tin, Kang never abandoned his dream to go to Korea. When relations were restored between Burma and North Korea in 2007, Kang thought that he would be able to return to Korea, and reportedly said, "I want to go to South Korea, but not back to North Korea." He also said there was a possibility that he would be released since his presence was a source of consternation for both Burma and North Korea. Win Tin said that "North Korea denied that Kang was one of its citizens, and South Korea also refused to accept him on account of him having attempted to murder President Chun Doo-hwan."

Kang's prison cell in Insein Prison was reserved for political prisoners, foreigners, and other special inmates. Built as an annex, parts of this prison resembled apartment blocks, and there was even a garden where prisoners could spend time outside. Conditions were much more favorable compared to other prisoners, and food was relatively more plentiful. Contact with other prisoners such as Win Tin would have allowed Kang to learn about things happening outside Burma.

Kang seemed to have placed more hope in South Korea than the North in winning his freedom. He could not abandon the notion that, while he was a traitor to North Korea, the South may someday forgive and accept him. Kang learned about Burma's political situation from political prisoners such as Win Tin, began to contemplate the circumstances in Korea. While Burma was far removed from the Korean peninsula, learning about the country allowed him to examine the political situations in North and South Korea in a new light.

Foremost on his thoughts, however, were neither politics nor his homeland but his family. He was the eldest son, and his failure to do his filial duty always tormented him. Kang frequently spoke about his guilt at not having looked after his unmarried sister. He was most troubled by the thought that his family would have been punished for his failure to adhere to his indoctrination: take his own life, or at the very least take his secrets to the gallows. The fate that he might have sealed for his family was his most dire nightmare. For that reason, he always awaited and welcomed news from North Korea, but was frequently disappointed when the news he heard inevitably had little that concerned him.

Kang reportedly became extremely excited when he heard of the bombing of Korean Air Flight 858 in 1987 and the arrest of one of the terrorists, Kim Hyon-hui. Kang said that he once served in the same unit as Kim while he was training for overseas special operations. When Kang heard that Kim had published her memoir, he expressed a strong desire to get hold of a copy. After a South Korean diplomat obliged to his request, he read the book again and again. He talked about some of the people mentioned in the book, saying that he knew many of them. He also told his fellow inmates that Kim's actions as a covert operative were very rudimentary and not much worth talking about.

Kang also said that the North Korean government, and especially its special operations command, often ordered its operatives to engage in foolhardy operations and did not care sufficiently about their welfare. He also said that the North Korean leadership was either ignorant of the outside world or was too caught up in their own thoughts to care. With his newfound perspective from the outside, he said that the actions of the North Korean leadership were as foolish as they were evil. While in North Korea, Kang had felt that his work was justified and deserved his utmost loyalty to speed up the reunification process of his country and his people; in prison he confessed that those beliefs were futilely false.

He felt that not only had the North Korean government completely turned his back on him, but further, it probably considered him traitorous. For that reason, he did not abandon the hope that the South Korean government might take him in, even if it meant another punishment. He once told a Korean diplomat that while he had committed a grave crime, he would rather go to South Korea even if it meant that he would be punished again. He also once recounted something he heard, that when an Israeli person was lost at sea the entire nation mobilized to rescue him. He had committed a crime, but wasn't he a fellow countryman? Couldn't he go back to Korea before he died, and at least stand upon his home soil before his life drew to a close?

A Young Man Bred as a Terrorist

Like every male in North Korea, Kang was drafted into the military after completing ten years of education, consisting of four years in elementary school and six years in high school. He had been an avid sportsman from his youth, and was an exemplary student in academics as well as other areas. He was handsome and presentable, masculine, and popular. He dreamed of success as a military man, a position of considerable social stature in North Korean society.

Kang received high marks in the military and was made an officer, receiving an assignment to a school for special operations soldiers. Included in the curriculum at the school was acclimation to a South Korean lifestyle to prepare them for covert operations. The soldiers learned from former South Koreans how to speak with South Korean accents, buy things, order food, and other daily functions. The candidates at the school also had the special privilege of watching South Korean movies and television programs selected by the instructors. As officers, they were highly proficient in combat, martial arts, and marksmanship. The training facility even included a “charm school” that was a facsimile of a typical South Korean street, where they learned about life in the South.

They had been drawn from across the country, and went through a strict screening process that examined not only their physical or mental capacities but their family background as well. They all adopted false identities and were not allowed to learn each other’s true names. They covered their faces with masks when in the presence of each other. Kang said he was later able to recognize another operative he had trained with not by his face but by noticing a spot he had on his hand.

Kang finished the training school with excellent marks, and received the rank of captain after graduating. His service number 9970. For the members of the special operations unit, infiltrating South Korea and conducting covert missions was quite ordinary. They entered South Korea so often that some of them even talked about their favorite restaurants in South Korea. Kang must have carried out missions in the South as well. He sometimes spoke to other inmates while in Insein Prison about the operations he had carried out in the South. According to him, most of his covert operations had succeeded in only causing disturbances, without actually achieving their mission goals.

Like the other members of his Special Forces unit, Kang received considerable privileges. His pay was much higher than that of ordinary officers of his rank. The salary of a captain in a special operations unit was double that of a school principal or a director-level party official, almost as much as a vice minister. He carried an ID card that listed his rank as colonel. In addition to his official pay, he was supplied with special luxurious items hardly available to ordinary North Koreans. The special operations unit received as much as a train car full of such goods per week.

On the flip side of this special treatment, however, was an extreme training regimen to enable them to carry out normally impossible missions. Their training, which steeled not only their bodies but their minds, was proven time and again in the operations they carried out. North Korea probably produced the strongest special operations troops in the world. For example, members of Unit 124 that attacked the Blue House in 1968 marched clear through South Korean cordons via scaling the mountains in the middle of winter. South Korean military officials estimated the marching speed of heavily armed troops in wintertime mountainous areas as four kilometers per hour, and set their defensive lines accordingly. It was later revealed, however, that heavily armed North Korean members of Unit 124 had marched through knee-deep snow at an average speed of ten kilometers per hour.

The unit trained to march at double-time, half-step, quick march, and easy march, and according to their training manual for overland movement the unit was capable of double-timing at a pace of twelve kilometers per hour on any type of ground other than snow. When a submarine ran aground on the coast of the East Sea, the captain executed thirty of his crew and committed suicide. But three Special Forces operatives who belonged to the Reconnaissance General Bureau were spared this fate since it was determined that they were capable of breaking through South Korean cordons and returning to North Korea. At least one of them succeeded in evading pursuing South Korean police and military forces, breaking through the heavily guarded border along the Demilitarized Zone and returned to North Korea. Their military prowess is almost unimaginably strong.

It was standard procedure for North Korean operatives to commit suicide or be killed at the hand of their commanders when placed in an inescapable situation. Of course there were exceptions. Some have surrendered or turned themselves in, while signs of struggle have been found on the bodies of operatives who apparently tried to resist mass execution by their commanders.

Murderous Special Forces Unit Training

Some new recruits who entered the Special Forces school dropped out of the month-long basic training course and were forced to leave. Basic training included wilderness survival, 250-kilometer marches, and nighttime operations in mountainous terrain. Recruits first begin marching ten kilometers at a rapid pace carrying a thirty-five-kilogram sandbag, increasing the distance to twenty, forty, and fifty kilometers. Sometimes individual trainees depart the camp alone at night, march a certain distance at double-time over the mountains, and return to base within twelve hours. After completing their march, they are questioned about the things they saw to test their powers of observation and memory as well as to ensure that they followed the pre-determined route. Their training is reportedly four to five times the amount that ordinary North Korean soldiers receive.

The operatives also received land navigation training, familiarizing themselves with the area's geographical and topographical features. They were trained to look at a map and memorize it, then reach a waypoint without using a map. They were trained to scale and descend cliffs without using climbing equipment. The training was endless. Unarmed combat as well as marksmanship and bayonet training were standard. The variety of training was endless, too, including guerilla warfare, assault and demolition, ten-men or two-men squad operations, facility infiltration, making secret rendezvous, communication, using radios, reconnaissance, surveillance, and more.

More difficult than the training, however, were the real-life simulations. For example, the operatives would actually carry out an ambush. At other times, the operatives would be instructed to tap into a phone line and eavesdrop on a conversation, then ambush and destroy a vehicle at a certain time and place. Sometimes they would be ordered to assault an important government office

and kill the people inside. Before carrying out such training, the area would be placed on high alert on the pretext of some emergency. Both the attack and defense were carried out using live rounds, and casualties would occur. However, they learned that such was the price that had to be paid to prepare for their role as frontline troops leading the revolution in South Korea. This sort of practice would have caused an outrage in any ordinary country, but the mindset of North Korea's Special Forces command was so twisted as to justify any sacrifice or ancillary costs in the name of fostering a revolution in the South and ultimately achieving reunification.

Going through the arduous training program was a monumental task. But once training was completed, the special operatives became almost superhuman soldiers. Almost every nation in the world operates special operations units. Navy SEALs in the United States or the Special Air Service in the United Kingdom are famous around the world—but few know about North Korea's Special Forces unit. Should the world ever learn about them, however, there is no doubt that they would be ranked as high as if not higher than any other special operations units around the world.

They were soldiers trained to carry out missions on land, water, or in the air. Each operative could operate a 100-ton boat by himself, swim twenty kilometers, and traverse up a river for almost thirty kilometers while carrying out a mission. A member of Kang's unit once swam from Mangyongdae in Pyongyang to the locks of the West Sea. Diving to a depth of fifteen meters was an ordinary training day, and many could dive much deeper. The operatives were trained to move across land, rivers, or the sea without leaving a trace. In the Blue House raid of January 21, 1968, North Korean operatives in the South erased their footprints while traveling over snow-covered mountains. Infiltrating the South or clinging onto special submersibles was child's play. Japan was especially exposed to their infiltration activities. According to former North Korean special operations officers now residing in South Korea, Japan was almost totally open for some time, and they could enter and exit the country at will. They recall effortlessly entering coastal areas such as Yamaguchi, Okinawa, and Fukuoka.

While in prison, Kang told his fellow inmates that he had been specially trained as a professional killer, and could kill a man even if he lost all his limbs. Sometimes he spoke of specially designed firearms designed for assassinations, which were small enough to hide in the palm of the hand but deadly enough to kill anyone within three seconds no matter where the round landed on the body.

Kang Min-chol's Change of Mind and His Will to Live

There comes a moment for everyone when a decision must be made that determines the course of the rest of his or her life. Small and seemingly innocuous coincidences can come together to dramatically change a person's life. Kang's selection for the Burma mission was also almost a coincidence. During the planning of the operation by senior commanders, the opinion was raised that a communications specialist might be needed, and Kang's name was pulled to replace an existing member and join the team.

Later, Kang explained to a South Korean diplomat why he had a change of heart and decided to make a full confession. He was most affected by the empathy shown to him by the Burmese hospital staff, who had cared for him. He recounted that a nurse was particularly kind to him. He had not expected any such kindness or humane treatment, especially in light of what he had done in Burma. Kang said he could not have expected the same kind of treatment in North Korea. The nurse supposedly urged Kang to confess everything on several occasions. She also told him that he could stay and live in Burma, instead of returning to North Korea. The effect such words may have had on a young man struggling for survival can easily be guessed.

It was later recounted in Burma that the nurse who had been so devoted to Kang's care while he was hospitalized in Mingaladon Military Hospital had actually been planted there by the Burmese government. Investigators selected an attractive female nurse on purpose to shower him with attention and convince him to cooperate with the authorities. The intent was to rekindle Kang's will to survive and thereby ease the investigation process along. This is a common investigation technique.

Even so, it would not be right, and indeed cruel and inhumane, to dismiss Kang's confession as merely having fallen for a honey trap. It is impossible to know whether or not Kang had seen through the Burmese government's scheme. As an operative trained to carry out special missions, however, it is likely that Kang would have recognized one of the oldest tricks in the book, and thus it is inappropriate to credit Kang's decision to confess after reaffirming his will to live to such an amateurish attempt at seduction.

Spies or special forces operatives sometimes turn after being captured. Often, the primary reason for this turning is the deprivation of freedom. A careful examination of such cases shows that these kinds of conversions are not merely one-time events born out of desperation and a desire to survive. We can witness similar cases not just in the world of espionage but in politics and religion. It may take years, but once sown, a seed of doubt may take root and grow whether or not the person is aware of it. Spies that turn often state that they changed when they received information about the outside world and saw the way people lived. Even the most draconian or closed society cannot completely rule the hearts of the men and women living in it. Even people who enjoy the privileges reserved to but a few surely have, in a corner of their hearts, the awareness that things are not all right, that their beliefs and privileges are flawed. I believe that when a person's world changes, this awareness that had been consigned to a corner of his or her consciousness due to need or convenience rises again to the surface. In other words, a person does not suddenly transform by being thrust into the outside world.

A person whose mind has been steeled through years of training can interpret and absorb newly encountered information in line with existing beliefs. This process is called biased assimilation. New and objective reality is selectively received and reinterpreted according to the recipient's own beliefs. For example, Islamic fundamentalists or adherents of similar radical beliefs insisted on holding to their beliefs despite being exposed to plenty of information contrary to their beliefs, or even because of it. Like everything else in life, the process that takes place before a person defies the rules of one's organization and turns to the other side require more than a single explanation.

Above all, the key, I believe, is the will to live. Kang appears to have recovered his desire to continue living while recovering in the hospital. Until he finally succumbed to illness, he spent many years holding onto this will and refusing to abandon hope even in the direst of circumstances.

Some spies and operatives choose to take their own lives when capture is inevitable. There are many reasons, including a strong internal conviction or a sense of duty, the belief that suicide will serve the greater good. Some take their lives in fear of the fate that might befall them after being captured. Still others choose suicide as a reflex, the result of years of being exposed to political propaganda and brainwashing. Some spies took their lives because of the love they had for the families they had left behind and concern for what might happen to them. Certainly there are other reasons. However, what moved me most was that basic desire we all harbor, the will to live. “If you think about your family back in North Korea, if you think about Kim Il-sung to whom you swore allegiance, if you doubt whether you will be allowed to live if you surrender, then you will not be able to surrender. To surrender is to give in to the most primeval of human instinct, to cherish life and refuse to abandon it.”⁷³

Political or social power often demands that we cast away our lives in the service of the powers that be—for the country, for the greater good, for the family, for the children, for our reputation. Kim Shin-jo, the only North Korean operative to be captured in the Blue House Raid, later wrote a moving memoir. In it, he repeatedly speaks of his will to live clashing with the training he received and the sense of duty he felt toward his comrades with whom he had trained and then shared life-or-death experiences. Regarding the moment he decided to stop resisting and surrender, he said the following: “I would not have surrendered if there had been just one more person with me. I chose to surrender because I was alone.”⁷⁴ Kim’s confession is a candid revelation of his desire to live and the circumstances that clashed with it.

This all is not just limited to North Korea or any other country. States around the world try to convince people using various methods and words to sacrifice their lives to fulfill some higher value. During World War I, British recruiting leaflets would say, “Give you own life, and receive eternal life from your country!” Poets such as Friedrich Schiller would wax romantic about death on the battlefield that could transcend the pain of life. Famous philosophers and men of letters in Imperial Japan also strove to convince young men and even women and children that they should choose death without a second thought

73 Kim, *My History of Sorrow*, 254.

74 Ibid.

to serve their country and the emperor. The Japanese emperor himself said in a degree to his soldiers that “they should not survive and suffer humiliation.” This kind of practice has almost completely disappeared today, and few states require such blind sacrifice from their people. The most fundamental aim of justice in a society should be to protect the lives its members and not require that they sacrifice their lives.

There is something heartwarming about Kang’s struggle to recover his instinctual desire to survive despite having been brainwashed to consider his life disposable. The desire to survive is a basic instinct, transcending the intellectual or psychological plane—but we are moved, not intellectually or emotionally, but viscerally, and to the core. After he was wounded and captured, Kang showed throughout this arduous treatment and recovery a burning desire to carry on living.

Survivor's Anguish

It has been reported that Kang and Jin Mo set off a grenade to commit suicide. But Kang denied doing so. Both tried to escape to the mother ship that never materialized, battling the Burmese soldiers and police. Kang stated that he was wounded and arrested “while in combat.” He never once mentioned that he tried to blow himself up. If he had, he would have held the grenade close to his body to ensure his death.

There is a method North Korean operatives use to take their own lives if things become inevitable. If they are unarmed, or restrained, they must bite through their tongues. However, it is exceedingly difficult to kill yourself by biting your tongue. In that case, they are told to bite down and deliver a powerful punch to their lower jaw, to bleed to death. Suicide is much simpler with a weapon, such as a knife or a firearm. In particular, a grenade can be held closely below the jaw and detonated for a sure kill. Yet Kang Min-chol and Jin Mo did not hold their grenades right below their chins, but they held them above their heads high in the air. The more recent writings by Kaung Htet also state that the North Korean agents tried to throw grenades, but they exploded in their hands. That may be why they were able to survive. Kang never once mentioned after being captured that he had failed to make a suicide attempt, nor that he regretted not having taken his life.

Kang and Jin Mo had both possessed poison to commit suicide. While Jin Mo may have been wounded abruptly and then captured, Kang would have had enough time to take his suicide pill. But he tried to stay alive until the end. During his imprisonment in Burma, Kang explained to Aung Thein that the grenade he had been carrying had a five-second fuse. He had expected the grenade to explode five seconds after releasing the safety tab, but it exploded in his hand the moment he released the safety tab, and subsequently he lost his arm along with the prayer beads with a crucifix that he had purchased near Shwedagon Pagoda.

Just once, Kang stated that he had tried to take his life but failed. He told Win Tin on one occasion that although North Korea considered him a traitor for having been captured and made a confession, he had actually tried to commit suicide but had failed. This statement seems out of place considering Kang's

typical words and actions. It is, however, understandable when examined in the light of the circumstances around the statement. Kang had always been tormented by the fact that his family could have suffered for his having survived and confessed. Win Tin, Kang knew, was essentially an anti-government activist and had visited North Korea. Kang may have told Win Tin that he had tried to commit suicide in the hope that Win Tin would someday visit North Korea again and relay what he had told him, thereby perhaps putting his family in a more favorable position. If Kang had indeed tried to commit suicide and had failed, he would not have cooperated as he did during the investigation.

There are other reasons for his confession. He had begun to doubt, for the first time, whether their actions were justified. Kang was able to receive some limited information about the outside world during his recovery, and he learned that the entire world had condemned the terrorist attack they had perpetrated. North Korea continued to deny their involvement or knowledge in the matter. North Korean leaders were blaming South Korea. It was the same explanation Kang had been told to give during his training, and he tried to follow his instructions; it would have been difficult for Kang, however, to countenance his government's lies with no qualms.

Kang could not help feeling resentment for the North Korean government and his direct superiors. He and his comrades had been trained to destroy and kill, and had received special privileges in return. Once they fell into a perilous situation in the course of their mission, however, there was no rescue available for them. They were just pawns for those in power, and Kang began to feel that the privileges that had been provided to them had been bait to ensure their commitment to being tools for the regime. Both their leaders and the North Korean regime wanted them to cleanly kill themselves if they were placed in dire circumstances.

A nagging doubt remains. Kang had been seriously injured not by gunfire from the Burmese soldiers and policemen but by his own grenade. Some say that he tried to commit suicide, but Kang himself suspects that the North Korean government had given them grenades designed to force them to kill themselves regardless of the operative's intention. This issue was raised during the trial as well. While the lawyers for the defense claimed that Jin Mo's and Kang's

intent was to commit suicide with their grenades, the prosecution countered by stating, “The explosion of the grenades near the operatives was not accidental but intentional. The weapons seized from Kang were deadly, and were intended for use against the soldiers who were trying to apprehend them.”⁷⁵

Indeed, we have witnessed in our own experience North Korean soldiers placed in desperate situations who manage to break through and return to North Korea. When surrounded by Burmese soldiers, Kang’s instinct as a specially trained soldier was to fight and try to escape the situation. Then he would try to make his way to his ship. He had pulled out his grenade and removed the safety pin, but was holding onto the lever. The grenade should have gone off after he threw it. However, it exploded as soon as he pulled the pin. Kang himself had shouted in surprise. The Burmese soldiers who were present heard his shout as “it exploded.” Kang suspected that the premature explosion of his grenade was not an accident but had been designed by his handlers to assist him in taking his life, whether he wanted it or not. Kang would often remember the inhumanity of those in power hidden behind such amorphous slogans as “revolution” and “reunification,” and shudder.

Nevertheless, he held onto one wisp of hope. He thought that his comrades or his commanders of whom he had considerable respect would conduct behind-the-scenes negotiations to have him freed. His hope was soon dashed. North Korea continued to say that they had nothing to do with the affair. This denial continued even after Kang’s death. Neither North nor South Korea expressed any interest in settling his affairs after he died. According to Burmese authorities, I had been the first, and to date the last, person to have ever inquired about what had happened to Kang’s remains or whether any funeral service had been performed.

⁷⁵ The defense’s claim regarding the explosion of the grenade and the rebuttal by the prosecution. Refer to Park, *The Aung San Report*, 131.

Life in Prison

Kang Min-chol had a forceful personality. From his actions it is clear that he did not confess out of weakness or cowardice. He had a very strong will and obsession to live. He never once said that he regretted not having committed suicide as he was being arrested. Kang was always open and honest about what he had done. While he never said that he was sorry for his actions, he seemed to consider his candor to be his expression of regret.

His strict self-discipline allowed him to survive on two meals a day for twenty-five years in Insein Prison. Conditions would have been very difficult for him. But what pained him the most, along with his longing for his family, was the sense of deprivation and loneliness for having fallen from a young officer with a promising career ahead of him to a disabled prisoner in a foreign land. Until a staff member of the South Korean embassy came to see him in 1998, Kang lived for fifteen years without seeing another Korean face.

Breakfast was served at 11:00 a.m., and the second meal was handed out 4:00 p.m. Beans and rice were the staple, most of the time with boiled vegetables and curry. Kang would often prepare his own meal. He was very selective about what he ate, not eating any meat that was given to him and giving it away to other inmates. He ate relatively well when he was receiving food from the South Korean embassy, and he would hand out chocolate and other snacks to other prisoners. He would often depend on inmates such as U Yaw Sett who were relatively better off. On the other hand, he did not often eat food given to him by Win Tin. Kang would often be wary, even if there was no particular reason. He feared that the North Korean government might harm him. He became especially on guard when North Korea restored its diplomatic relations with Burma. Kang would often climb the trees in the prison garden and pick fruits such as mangos, mix them with rice, and make porridge. The other inmates would be impressed by how well he climbed with just one arm. He would also beg the prison for extra meat or eggs, and then give them to the other prisoners.

Kang Min-chol did not smoke. Sometimes he would come by cigarettes and would hand them out to others. He drank a large amount of water, often up to four large bottles per day. He exercised diligently and spent a lot of time in meditation and prayer. He would awake at four in the morning, exercise for

an hour, and then pray or meditate. After breakfast, he would exercise again or do light labor until the afternoon, such as chopping trees. He taught other prisoners Taekwondo. And he prayed a lot in the evening, usually for the welfare of his family.

Kang would be ecstatic whenever a South Korean embassy staff member brought him food such as instant noodles, chocolates, or other snacks. Like every Korean, he enjoyed kimchi. For some reason, he did not have much of a liking for kimbap (rice balls). With food being poor in prison, he welcomed anything that would supplement his diet, and particularly enjoyed instant noodles and kimchi. Before he died, Kang sent a cup noodle to his friend U Yaw Sett, who says he still has it in memory of Kang. The South Korean diplomat who visited him gave him a little bit of money as well. Kang kept it in the prison deposit and used it when needed. However, this contact from the embassy did not last long. As relations between North and South Korea began to warm in the 2000s, the South Korean government began viewing Kang's presence as awkward.

Kang said that he was a virgin who had never had any sexual experience. He had had a girlfriend to whom he had apparently promised marriage, but there had been no physical interaction. He said wryly that he had never even held a woman's hand.⁷⁶ His memory of his girlfriend differed slightly depending on who he was talking to. To some, he said that there had been a woman who he had been close enough to discuss marriage back in his hometown of Tongchon. To others, he said that there was a daughter of a woman who had been taking care of his during his isolated training before being sent to a mission, as was common practice with North Korean operatives. He had been planning to marry her if he returned from his mission. He sometimes wondered if he should write to her, but despaired that she may already have married. He often professed disgust at the sexually depraved acts that took place among some of the inmates. He said, "Some of these people are worse than beasts. It is sickening to think about what they do, much less watch." However, to U Yaw Sett, his friend, he said that his biggest wish was to get married. U Yaw Sett felt pity for his friend and promised that he would introduce a girl to him when he was released. Kang died before he could fulfill his promise.

⁷⁶ I have heard similar stories from other former members of North Korea's Special Forces. This is not unbelievable, considering the severe restrictions placed on relationships between the sexes in the North. As was the case with every other aspect of its society, there is no sense of "freedom," even in dating.

Kang felt torn regarding his emotions towards Korea. On the one hand, he had a deep hatred for his country and the people who had ruined his life. He lashed out at the South Korean diplomat when he first met him, saying disrespectful things about the entire Korean people, and both North and South Korea. It was natural for him to harbor a hatred for North Korea, which had sent him to his fatal mission and then disowned him. He would often criticize and curse the North Korean regime and its leaders, but sometimes he could not hide his nostalgia for his homeland, and would sometimes say that there were good things about North Korea, too.

U Yaw Sett had a television in his room, with which they could watch news about South Korea. Kang was able to see how South Korea's economy was booming, but he said that North Korea had many positive qualities and that its military was strong. He said that North Korea would beat South Korea in launching a rocket and sending a satellite into space.

What bothered Kang the most during his imprisonment was his identity. Who was he, and why was he consigned to this life in limbo in a strange land? He would say that if he returned home or went to any place where Korean was spoken, he would rediscover himself. Kang wanted to go back to North Korea, if only for a single day, even if punishment for betraying his country and the Dear Leader awaited him. He knew that it was impossible. A more realistic hope was South Korea. He knew that he would be punished as a terrorist if he set foot in South Korea. This reality did not discourage him from wanting to go there. If that proved to be impossible as well, he said he wanted to go to a foreign nation with a Korean community, and live like a real person among people who spoke his own language, even if just for a day.

Kang's tenuous link with the South Korean embassy eventually began to fade, and then it was cut off. As the exchange and partnership between North and South Korea began to take off in earnest, the local embassy was ordered to avoid all contact with Kang.

Chapter 8
Death in Prison



Longing for His Homeland

The April 27, 2007, issue of the Irrawaddy, a newspaper published by Burmese defectors in Thailand, reported that Kang was refusing to return to either North or South Korea. The article stated that Kang would be punished wherever he went. Kang reportedly said that his command of the local language had become quite good and wanted to live out his life in Burma. Everyone I interviewed, however, denied the validity of this article. Some said that this article had been planted by the Burmese government that was at the time trying to reestablish diplomatic relations with North Korea.

The testimony of Win Tin, who had spent twenty years in prison with Kang, also casts doubt on that article. Win Tin was imprisoned from 1989 to 2008, the year Kang passed away. Kang was reportedly very curious about the fact that many in Burma wanted the nation to democratize, as had happened in South Korea. Kang was also fascinated that there were South Korean nationals working to support Aung San Suu Kyi in the quest for a democratic Burma. Kang told Win Tin that he hoped the Burmese government would send him to South Korea once relations were reestablished with North Korea, and that his presence would become awkward for both North Korea and Burma. Kang also felt that the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries would rekindle interest in his issue, eventually leading to a pardon. Kang was severely disappointed when these wishes came to naught. It is clear, however, that Kang never abandoned his hope for returning to his homeland until the moment of his death. The more his memories of home faded and his body grew weaker and decrepit, the stronger his longing for his country and his lost identity became. His strong desire to go back to Korea, where he knew that no one awaited him or would welcome him, was more than just a longing for his homeland. It was part of his desperate attempt to rediscover himself. What pained him the most was that he was a forgotten existence, a wraith, in both North and South Korea.

Even after spending years in a foreign prison, Kang would wake up in the middle of the night and wonder where he was, whether it was reality or he was in a bad dream. Many times he would find himself back home in his dreams. He would be a privileged member of the special forces again, a young officer with a promising future, loved by his family and his girlfriend, and respected by his entire neighborhood. In his dreams he would eat his fill of the delicacies of his hometown, steamed dried pollack on rice or flounder kimchi. He would inevitably wake up from these sweet dreams back in his nightmare world. When he awoke, he would have to wander between his dream and the strange reality he found himself in. Was I dreaming or was it real? Was I trapped in a recurring nightmare? Who am I? Where am I? Why have I been sent here? In this swirling confusion he would finally return to reality, slowly. He would realize that he was trapped no matter how hard he struggled. He would take deep breaths, run his one remaining hand over his chest to try to soothe himself—but reality still pressed down on his like a boulder. The emptiness he felt was completely secular and human, unable to be filled by any religion, faith or prayer, a pain that could not be eased.

Efforts to Repatriate Kang

I visited Burma in 1998 for a meeting with local intelligence agencies. As my plane prepared to land, I thought not of what I had come to Burma to discuss but of a young man who had been forgotten by all. By then, only a few even remembered Kang. For some unfathomable reason, however, he was on my mind constantly.

In a packet of materials that had been prepared for the visit, a small section contained information on Kang Min-chol. It had been compiled locally several years ago, and stated that Kang had developed autism and almost became an invalid. Kang had been in prison for fifteen years by that point. Kim Hyon-hui and Kang Min-chol both committed heinous crimes, but it cannot be denied that they were, at least in part, victims of the conflict between North and South Korea that had persisted for decades. I felt that, as had been given to Kim, Kang should also be afforded an opportunity to live his life as an individual being, making his own decisions about himself and his world around him. He should be given the opportunity to live, even for a short time, as a free man. At last, I met with General KhinNyunt, then the Chief of Intelligence and the number-two man in the Burmese government, and after discussing the major items on the agenda I brought up the issue of Kang. I asked for permission to meet him. General KhinNyunt at first was reluctant. Once I explained my reasons, however, the General agreed, albeit after some contemplation. The meeting with Kang was not an official arrangement by the Burmese government but rather a personal decision by the General. That is, the head of the Burmese intelligence agency personally ordered the intelligence liaison officer in Insein Prison to arrange a meeting between Kang and a South Korean diplomatic official.

The visitation room in Insein Prison was located near the entrance to the facility. The meeting with Kang took place in a separate room further inside the prison past the regular visitation room. In the middle of the room was a table, and on other side of it a South Korean diplomat and Kang met and talked for the first time in 1998. It was the first time in fifteen years that Kang was meeting a fellow Korean who spoke the same language as him. He was wary and expressed a complex set of emotions, including resentment and bitterness. He did not hide his dissatisfaction and distaste toward the North Korean

regime that had ruined his life, as well as South Korea. Once the South Korean diplomat listened to Kang's tirades and responded warmly, Kang began to relax and speak his mind. Kang told the diplomat that he was actually two years younger than the age he was known by, and insisted on calling the diplomat "elder brother."

These meetings, however, did not last long. A power struggle broke out among the Burmese top leadership in 2004. Than Shew and Maung Aye, two men in the highest echelon of power, purged Khin Nyunt and confined him to house arrest. The removal of Khin Nyunt also resulted in the fall of General Kyaw Win, one of his close confidants and a person with whom I had a personal relationship. With Khin Nyunt gone, there was no one left to arrange the unofficial meetings with Kang, South Korea's National Intelligence Service also began to lose interest in him. I was at this time working through various channels to have Kang released. The South Korean government tried to negotiate with the Burmese government to either allow them to bring Kang to Korea or help him settle in a third country with a large Korean community. These suggestions, however, were never accepted. Later it came to light that while the idea had received support from the North Korean affairs department of the NIS, it had ultimately been nixed due to opposition from other departments and agencies.

Even those who were in favor of releasing Kang considered his value to be as "a witness to an important historical event" or as a source of information, and I did not find anyone who expressed sympathy toward his pain and suffering as a human being. As the NIS began to devote more of its resources to dealing with a new wave of North Korean defectors, interest in Kang within the agency began to wane. With the government unwilling to carry Kang's case forward, I turned to civil society to search for another route. I visited Pastor Kim Jang-hwan—who was active overseas, including in Burma, and who had considerable influence in international humanitarian circles—and asked him if he could arrange Kang's release. I continued to believe that allowing Kang to live the rest of his life in a third country instead of returning to South Korea would be best for him. Pastor Kim visited Burma twice to find a way to win Kang's release. I know that Pastor Kim worked with local missionaries and expended considerable effort in negotiating with the Burmese government. Should he have succeeded in winning Kang's release, Pastor Kim had planned to bring Kang to South Korea and arrange a meeting with former President Chun for an opportunity to apologize.

In the end, there was only disappointment. A Burmese official stated that his government would be willing to discuss Kang's release if the South Korean government initiated the effort, but they could not release a prisoner to a private individual. There was, in reality, no reason for Burma to keep in prison a person they had kept incarcerated for twenty years. They were ready to release Kang if only the South Korean government made the request. Kang's own countrymen had no interest in or concern for him. Political concern was paramount.

Terrorists Lost in Inter-Korean Politics

While this book was being prepared, an excerpt from it was published in the weekend issue of a South Korean daily newspaper over three weeks. Two other newspapers ran editorials about the excerpts. The editorials conveyed critical opinions on the so-called Sunshine Policy of the time, while ignoring the person Kang Min-chol whose story I had intended to tell. There was no interest in a person who had been torn apart in the struggle for power among the people of the same nation.

The irrationality of the relations between North and South Korea has disturbed me for a long time. Just one year after the horror of the Rangoon Bombing, North and South Korea again began to discuss “humanitarian aid” and “brotherly love.”

President Chun’s administration felt that an opportunity had surfaced for a significant turning point in North-South relations. There was active dialogue and contact between North and South Korea, and in the following year Director of NIS Chang Se-dong, widely considered to be President Chun’s right-hand man, secretly visited Pyongyang to meet Kim Il-sung and there delivered a personal letter from Chun suggesting a summit meeting. During his meeting with the North Korean leader, Jang also lauded Kim as a great leader who had fought valiantly against Japanese colonial rule and led North Korea to great success for four decades, and relayed President Chun’s high regard for Kim Il-sung’s patriotism and love for the Korean people. The two discussed making a joint effort between North and South Korea to achieve peace on the Korean peninsula and reunification. In his letter, President Chun thanked Kim for responding positively to South Korea’s suggestion, and proposed that Chun would visit Pyongyang first to begin the summit meeting, which would be followed by a visit by Kim to Seoul. Kim agreed to the proposal, and stated that the summit will create an opportunity to relieve the tension on the Korean peninsula, begin the process of resolving the conflict between North and South Korea, and ultimately create a unified nation with neutrality. Kim asked about “His Excellency President Chun’s” welfare, and thanked Jang for “delivering good words [the letter] brimming with kindness and patriotism” from the president.

Despite these flowery words, the proposed summit never materialized. This incident is a clear illustration of the pattern that keeps repeating in North-South relations. Just two years after one leader had tried to murder the other, Kim Il-sung and Chun Doo-hwan were heaping praises on each other and discussing the reconciliation and reunification of the Korean people. The vitriol against North Korea following the terrorist bombing had transformed into praise for Kim's "patriotism and love for the Korean people." Kim also spoke of Chun's "patriotic intellect"—ostensibly oblivious to the fact that Kim had tried to have him blown up in Rangoon just a short two years prior.

Indeed, these two leaders were indirectly responsible for the unfortunate fate that had befallen the young man who was disabled and living in a cell in Burma. As explained earlier, while the direct responsibility for the terrorist attack lay with Kim Il-sung, the political chaos that had been brewing in South Korea before and after the Gwangju Democratic Uprising provided the indirect cause and background that led to the attack. Throwing about words like "reconciliation" and "reunification," they paid no heed or felt any remorse about the young men they had consigned to a tragic fate.⁷⁷ Neither did the people who worked to arrange the summit—including Chang Se-dong, Park Chul-un, Han Si-hye and Huh Dam, nor the two leaders Kim Il-sung and Chun Doo-hwan—consider the life and death of a young man to have any relevance whatsoever in the larger picture of a "grand political achievement." Something that was insignificant as a single life could not be allowed to interfere with the course of such an important task. In fact, the thought probably never even occurred to them.

This pattern persisted into subsequent administrations. From the Kim Young-sam administration of the 1990s to the period of considerable warming and exchange between North and South Korea during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung, talks of reconciliation and reunification continued while the struggle for the upper hand continued quietly.

I continued to ask diplomats in other countries about the possibility of taking custody of Kang and helping him settle in their countries. The responses, naturally, were uniformly negative. Who could be asked to care about a man that had been abandoned and forgotten by his own country, his own people?

⁷⁷ Choi Bo-sik, "Records of the Conversation between Chang Se-dong and Kim Il-sung" (*Monthly Chosun*, Vol. 9, Issue 9, 1998), 180-224; "Reunification History Records Center," *Tongil News*, (Sep. 16, 2010).

Death

There are two contrasting accounts of the death of Kang Min-chol. One is that his health had been failing for quite some time until his death. He was supposedly ailing for over ten years but was not aware of it. His decline first began with indigestion, and then Kang began to complain of stomach pain. In January of the final year of Kang's life, he was first treated in Rangoon hospital. He was prescribed medicine, but it did not help. He became increasingly ill and visited the hospital again in April, where he was diagnosed with liver cancer. A once strapping young man had become sick and old. Neither the hospital nor the prison told Kang about his diagnosis, instead telling him that he would get better soon. He took some drugs, which were of course ineffective against the cancer. He tried several homeopathic therapies in prison, to no effect. He began to lose weight each day, and his complexion turned dark and bruised.

Kang's fellow inmates, however, said that Kang did not suffer from any health-related issues until he died. Some say that Kang had been poisoned to ensure that he did not interfere with Burma's reestablishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea.

According to U Yaw Sett's recollection—seemingly healthy, Kang once complained of stomach pains and went to the hospital, but still appeared healthy when he returned. A few days later he was writhing in pain and taken to the hospital again, and never returned to the prison.

Some day the truth about Kang's death may be revealed to the world. Or perhaps his death will be forgotten just as his life has been. Aung Thein, his closest friend in prison, however, denies the poisoning theory. Kang apparently had health issues for years and had been suffering from breathing difficulties. Kang seemed very weak and afraid of dying the second time he was hospitalized. Aung Thein remembers telling Kang, "Do not be afraid. I will pray for you." Kang, however, did not return. Aung Thein stated that Kang's belongings had been packed in a metal box and entrusted with the hospital clinic, and could possibly be claimed by negotiating with the prison. When hospital authorities were contacted later regarding this matter, however, all his belongings had disappeared.

Kang is said to have lost some of his resolve in the last days of his life, often lamenting that he had no country and nowhere to go if ever released from prison. Even then, however, he would add that he would like to go to South

Korea if they would have him. Prison guards often told Kang, “We can let you go at any time if there is a country willing to accept you. But you have nowhere to go. That is why you are here.”

It cannot be denied that for exactly half of his life Kang lived a wretched existence, treated poorly up to the very moment of his death. Whether it was liver cancer, some other disease, or natural causes that eventually claimed him, what is clear is that he did not receive medical attention at the end of his life. Medical care in Burma was poor even for its own citizens, and it is unlikely that a prisoner like Kang would have received anything better. The final hours of his life were punctuated by his agonized cries. The ambulance summoned by the hospital came much too late, and he died in transit to the hospital at Minigong Crossroads, a mere ten minutes from the South Korean embassy. He did not leave any last words. Nothing of the once strong and proud young man could be seen on the face of the decrepit old man dying in an ambulance. Kang died with his eyes open. It was as if he was still searching, searching for himself, until the moment of his tormented life. It was May 18, 2008, 4:30 in the afternoon. There were no last rites and no proper funeral. Following a perfunctory verification of the death certificate and body by an official from the police agency and a prison guard, Kang’s remains were cremated and his ashes scattered into the wind.

Epilogue

In Memoriam of a Forgotten Terrorist

Several important people passed away in Korea in 2009. Among them were two former presidents and cardinal of the Catholic Church. The cardinal had been respected almost universally, and a throng of mourners paid their respects to him and followed his funeral procession. Following his death, the cardinal's words and actions in life began to receive renewed attention beyond the religious sphere in civil society and politics, finding new meaning that transcended political or religious differences.

The two former presidents had a large following, and their deaths plunged the entire nation into mourning. The unexpected death of one former president was especially traumatic for the nation. Not only his supporters, but also a multitude of ordinary citizens empathized with a man who had been driven to such desperation that he took his own life, and people were moved and inspired by the story of his life and death. His political life and his achievements as president were newly evoked and evaluated.

The other former president had fought for decades to democratize Korea. He had been persecuted harshly during the course of his lonely political battle, and had once been sentenced to death and imprisoned for many years to await his execution. He later received the Nobel Peace Prize for his policy of reconciliation and engagement with North Korea.

The government held a national funeral and paid its full respects. Both former presidents received considerable attention, respect, and love. Numerous special events sprang up even after the funerals ended, along with commemorative foundations and the posthumous publication of memoirs.

The death of a Korean man a year earlier, who met a lonely end after suffering for twenty-five years in a foreign prison with no one to care for him, however, received no mourning, no interest at all. When he took his last dying breath, there was not a single person beside him who he could speak to in his fading

mother tongue. No one shed a single tear. His death was not deemed newsworthy anywhere on the Korean peninsula, nor in any of the Korean communities overseas, which together are said to number over seven million. Kang's body was cremated and his ashes cast into the air. As his body faded into dust, every trace of his life was erased from the world.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida once said the following about our memories of the dead: mourning for a dead person continues endlessly without completion or conclusion, and mourning must fail, and "fail well" to be considered successful. One need not go as far as to quote Derrida to understand that we try to find meaning in the death of people we know, remember, and mourn for as much as we try to seek meaning in our lives and pursue it. In this sense, an obituary of someone may contain much more significance than what we usually assign it. Are we not writing and reading a person's obituary to erase his or her memory from our minds rather than to remember the life and legacy of that person?

The most prominent memorials with respect to the dead in our times will be those that commemorate deaths for the state. Numerous structures erected to remember deaths related to the affairs of the state demand that we remember them throughout history. Every country, for example, creates national cemeteries to remember and mourn for those who died in state-led activities or made significant contributions to the causes of the state. Memorials dedicated to the establishment, continuation, development, or prosperity of a state are designed to suit the goals and purposes of that state, to assist in the pursuit of particular goals or ideals, and to convince its people of the truth and importance of these mighty deeds and principles. In addition to these national memorials, there are countless smaller and private memorials and cemeteries that let us remember those who are no longer with us, who we loved in life, and who had special meaning for us.⁷⁸

Was the death of Kang Min-chol entirely devoid of meaning for everyone in North and South Korea? Must the meager records contained in this small volume be the sole memorial to the life and death of this man? Not one among his people for whom he longed so dearly remembers him, and not a single plot

⁷⁸ Hyeonik Kwon, translated by Yoo Kang-eun, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Archive, 2012).

of land in the country of his birth to which he so desired to return is dedicated in his memory. There is no space where Kang can be laid in rest in either the National Cemetery in South Korea or the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery in North Korea.

Is it possible to remember and mourn the death of a person who we barely knew and had little affinity for, and may even had enmity for? Confucius is said to have come upon the funeral of a person he did not know and suddenly could not help but weep. In the book *The Mourner* by the Japanese author Arata Tendo, the protagonist spends his time attending the funerals of strangers and mourning for them in remembrance of their good deeds in life.⁷⁹

I remember something from long ago. While I was studying abroad, there was a homeless person who was always drunk on a street corner in my university town, and I would see him every morning on my way to class. One day, I noticed that he was no longer there. He had died, people said. The following week, I recall being greatly impressed to see an obituary about his life and death and meaning in the university newspaper.

I have never met the former terrorist written about in this book. I know very little about him. What I know officially about him are now faded memories of events that transpired a long time ago. I only remember a great crime that he committed some thirty years ago in a nation that was then called Burma. Although the target of the attack, a president, escaped harm, numerous people with bright futures lost their lives. The consequences of the terrorist attack went beyond the personal tragedies of the victims and their families, and created uproar in South Korea, North Korea, Burma, and the entire world. Then is there a reason why the life and death of this one man must be remembered and mourned for? Most would agree that there is not. Many would try to find some political motive or explanation for this book.

Some may ignore this work considering it futile, while others may angrily accuse it of reopening old wounds. Indeed, when a part of this book was serialized in a daily newspaper, a prominent member of our society denounced it by stating, "This is something North Korea should be interested in, not us." Some were wary that this book was an attack on a previous presidential administration, and a noted politician protested directly to me.

79 Wang Eun-cheol, *In Praise of Mourning* (Hyundae Munhak, 2012), from 274.

To these accusations, I would like to make but a single request. I urge you to read this book, slowly and from the beginning to the end. Then, make a decision about the main figure in this book and about his life and death, whether it is right for Koreans to ignore him and forget about him, or to mourn for him while asking ourselves whether there is any repentance that ought to be considered on our part.

If Koreans sincerely long for reunification and for the divided people to come together again, they must take a moment and reflect about the agonizing life and lonely death that was borne by this young man—and not just reflect, but repent, beating their chests. Beyond regretting what one did or did not do, one must be able to acknowledge that the suffering and life of a single individual can be morally as valuable and weighty as the destiny of an entire nation and state. Before thinking about the pursuit of glory of a people, the stature of a state, and the establishment of a powerful and prosperous nation, one must also have the means to care for the life of a man who was once young, strong, and could have enjoyed a bright future but in one day was thrown into deep despair, his body torn and disabled, his freedom taken away and sentenced to life imprisonment in a foreign country, living each day in misery and hardship.

There should have followed proper mourning and ritual after the death of a young man—who endured life away from his home for twenty-five years only to finally succumb to his loneliness and pains in a faraway land—as proper as that offered to men of influence who had been respected by all and accomplished great things in life.

There is a group of people known as “the Erased.” They were the 18,000 residents of the former Yugoslavia who, being of a different (Slovenian) ethnic descent, lost their citizenship when Slovenia split from the country in 1991. Their basic rights as citizens were deprived of along with their citizenship, and they cannot even travel abroad because they do not have passports. An author who wrote about these unfortunate people said, “The power to enable the countless ‘Erased’ in this world to survive and live properly again lies not in providing them material support but in listening to their stories.”⁸⁰

80 Lee Yoon-young, “The Tale of The Erased,” *The Hankyoreh* (Feb. 15, 2011).

How many people were “erased” in the conflict that put a nation against itself for so many years? Should only those linked to power and state be remembered? Do only the stories of the powerful deserve to be heard? Have we ever tried to heed the quiet tales of the people around us who were “erased”?

The man called Kang Min-chol was a criminal who committed a grave and heinous crime. But let us make a further reflection. Is it proper that we simply consider him a vicious criminal, assign all responsibility to him, and close our ears to the fate that befell him and the story that must have weighed down his heart? Should his family and friends who were left behind suffer because of the memory and longing of a lost son, brother, and friend?

The state that had sent him to his doom turned a blind eye to him once he was put into a foreign prison. There is a concept called “homo sacer” in Roman law, which could be ironically translated as “the cursed one” or “the sacred one.” People called this were those who did not keep their promise with the gods, and were cast out both from secular law and sacred order. They were *persona non grata* in both the society of man and the sphere of the spiritual. As they were ousted from society, anyone could kill them without having to worry about the consequences. Could the same thing happen in modern society, where the state has been separated from religion? Could anyone be assigned to this unfortunate station in life in a modern state where every citizen has the right to be protected by the state as long as he or she remains within the boundaries of law?

Kang Min-chol never stopped longing for his country and his homeland during his years of life in confinement in a foreign prison, living a life of physical and mental torment. This young man is no longer in this world. Could at least the lingering memories of his anguish and loneliness, pain and yearning, hate and longing be allowed to return to the homeland he so missed, told in a story and written on the pages of a book about his life?



The purpose of this book is to recount the crumpled and broken life of a young man who was born on the Korean peninsula and who tried to make a life for himself, living as a free man with desires, wishes, and goals.

This book is also an accusation of the absurd reality that has ruled the peninsula for the past two generations and crushed and torn apart the lives of thousands of Koreans. Furthermore, this is a story about the eternal and perhaps unavoidable chasm that divides political power and the logic of that power, and the pitiful stories of the common people who ought to by all means be protected by that power. This may be the fundamental problem that has followed the existence of the entirety of human race from its origins, varying in degree as it may be in different epochs and peoples. Our greatest pain may be the fact that we are well aware of this unfair and absurd state of existence yet are unable to do anything about it. Nevertheless, our powerlessness to change this fact does not absolve us of our duty to understand and acknowledge our reality. I hope that this story about the life and death of an unfortunate young man contributes to this understanding.



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