Base Encounters

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The US Armed Forces in South Korea

Elisabeth Schober

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1

Introduction

Violent Imaginaries and Base Encounters in Seoul

"A Certain Neighborhood …"

In mid January 2007, Private Geronimo Ramirez, a then 23-year-old United States (US) soldier deployed in South Korea, was arrested for the repeated rape of a Korean woman in the Seoul entertainment district of Hongdae. Together with another soldier friend of his, that weekend Ramirez had made the one-and-a-half hour ride from his US military base located in Tongduch'ŏn all the way to central Seoul. The team tried unsuccessfully to check into the Dragon Hill Lodge, a military hotel located within the premises of the Yongsan US Army garrison in Seoul that was booked out that evening, and then decided to go to a motel in Hongdae instead. After a night spent drinking and partying, Ramirez's buddy went back to the motel alone, while Ramirez continued to walk through the streets of the neighborhood, pouring down more beers bought from convenience stores nearby. In a deserted area, he encountered a 67-year-old Korean female in the early morning hours, who was on her way home from a cleaning job. Ramirez would beat and rape the woman repeatedly, on the street, in an alley and inside a building, until he was taken in by Korean police forces that had been alerted by the woman's screams. Ramirez, in his public letter of apology, stated that he had no memory of the sexual assault; and he asked the victim not to "think bad of americans [sic] for everyone makes mistakes and this was mine." He added that "I was suppose[d] to go home soon & get married[,] but now i can't[,] i will stay here & pay for my mistakes" (Slavin and Hwang 2007).

When I arrived in Seoul in the fall of the same year,[1] this brutal incident was still much discussed among locals and foreigners alike. Besides fulfilling certain expectations that many proponents of the nationalist left held about GIs,[2] namely that all US military personnel were potential

Figure 1.1 Map of the Korean peninsula

perpetrators, the event had also brought to light a recent development that posed a challenge to both US Forces Korea (USFK) and local authorities: many of the nearly 30,000 US soldiers[3] stationed in South Korea no longer seemed to stay in the remote red-light districts close to their base facilities that they had informally been assigned to. These so-called camptowns (*kijich'on* in Korean, also known as "villes" among the soldiers) are entertainment areas catering primarily to US military personnel. The GI bars and clubs in the area are typically run by Korean entrepreneurs who employ a number of female "entertainers" to look after the needs of the US servicemen. They are tightly regulated spaces; the US Military

Police send their own staff to patrol the area and go after US soldiers who are found to be in violation of US or South Korean law. However, now that plenty of servicemen increasingly seemed to party in entertainment districts in central Seoul as well—in downtown neighborhoods often far removed from their bases—the challenge of keeping these young men[4] in line increased disproportionately in difficulty. Many Korean citizens, I was to learn, including those locals left behind in the economically struggling and socially stigmatized areas nearby US bases, would like to contain GIs in the camptowns they emerged from.

I got to know Jay,[5] a 22-year-old US Army member also stationed in Tongduch'ŏn, in late 2007. He had been in Korea for a little under a year, and was about to be relocated to the Middle East over the coming few months. Walking into a popular bar in the downtown district of Chongno with Jay, his Korean girlfriend, and a Korean friend of hers, I became aware of the many stares that the young serviceman, tall, muscular and with short-cropped hair, attracted in this venue. While his friends quietly talked in Korean next to us—politely but decidedly ignoring Jay who would occasionally ask, "What the fuck is it that you are saying?", Jay was entertaining himself by returning some of the stares he received from the neighboring tables until the young Korean people seated there shifted their eyes away. After a while, he started to noisily grind the beer bottle that he had just emptied at the edge of the table we were sitting at, causing additional concerned looks in our direction. He only visibly relaxed when our food arrived; we had ordered grilled chicken, as Jay had ruled out any meal containing *kimchi*,[6] asking me earlier on, "You really eat that shit?"

After some initial remarks by Jay that he would most certainly not be a good conversational partner for me—"I'm not a good guy to talk to, in case you haven't noticed yet. I don't know how to deal with students. I only know how to deal with soldiers, got that?"—Jay began to talk about his life in Tongduch'ŏn where he was stationed. The US military, he argued, invested a lot every year in "good publicity projects," such as sending soldiers out to help with teaching English at Korean schools for a day. "The idea behind this is, of course," Jay added, "that there is already plenty of bad press about us out there." The "ville" of Tongduch'ŏn, he said, was the area that most of his co-workers spent their free time in, going to the bars, clubs, and restaurants catering to their needs.

Asked what his friends did when they had a bit of time to kill, he replied: "Go to whores. Sorry, but that's just how it is. Nothing else to do up there anyways." Filipina "entertainers"[7] (who have for the most part replaced the local women), Korean bar owners, and local taxi drivers are

the only civilians that they ever got to meet, and getting into fistfights with cab drivers, Jay bragged, had become almost a competition for some of his comrades, who tended to have run-ins with the typically older, male Korean drivers. The language of communication in Tongduch'ŏn was a mix of broken Korean and English, and Jay himself quickly learned how to say "Fuck off" and "I'll kill you" in Korean; "That's usually enough to drive guys away who wanna fuck with me," he added.

Finally, he brought up Ramirez, and gave me a description of the occurrence that reflected the extreme social and geographical distance that separates him and his soldier friends from the inner-city Korean student space of Hongdae:

> There was this guy who was charged with raping a 60-year old woman. I know the guy; he still claims he didn't do it. Well, I'm sure he came on to the woman, but … They were in one of *those* neighborhoods, you know. Where the only women you meet are prostitutes. But then, you know, the Korean media, they said that normal people are living in these areas, too. But of course, the soldiers, they don't see it that way. If you are in a certain neighborhood, you gotta be a hooker. That's the way they see it.

The crucial error underlying Jay's justification of Ramirez's actions—the woman may have been a prostitute after all—not only implies that violating a sex worker somehow constitutes a lesser crime than the attack on a "decent" female. In the particular context of Seoul, it also points to a gross misreading of a complex social urban space that Jay, with his limited knowledge of South Korea, is unable to fully grasp. Hongdae, in fact, is not one of "*those* neighborhoods" where sex is for sale; rather, it is an entertainment area popular with young Korean adults, in which, as a Korean friend of mine once put it, on your typical Saturday night out you have to "hunt for sex" rather than buy it. Jay's superficial knowledge of Hongdae—an area which he had visited only once—resulted in his conflation of the red-light districts near remote US military bases with this lively inner-city entertainment area mainly frequented by Korean students, artists, and unruly youth.

What is perhaps more interesting than his ignorance on the matter, though, is that Jay is embedded in a structure that *allowed* him not to care all that much whether the student district of Hongdae was, or was not, one of "*those* neighborhoods" where sex is for sale. His idea that any Korean woman he came across in "a certain neighborhood" necessarily needed to be sexually available to his comrades speaks of a certain kind of

Figure 1.2 Chongno entertainment district in downtown Seoul

dis-location of decades of GI experiences and behavioral patterns in Korea into the unknown territory of an experimental Korean student neighborhood in Seoul. It also hints at the gendered power relations in which this (mis-)understanding is embedded, structures of power which have—incidentally—come under heavy contestation over the last few decades.

An Anthropology of Militarism

The Korean peninsula today is one of the most heavily militarized regions on the planet, where the armed face-off between the northern and southern half has now entered its 66th year. At the end of the Korean War (1950–53), an armistice was signed—an old ceasefire that is broken

at regular intervals when smaller fights erupt at land or sea between the contestants. The lack of a real peace treaty between the opponents has resulted in a permanent lock-down along the dividing line ironically named the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Once described by Bill Clinton as "the scariest place on earth" (Havely 2003), militarization around this particular border has reached such intensity that it has turned the buffer zone into the most heavily fortified space on this planet.

The Korean People's Army today consists of over 1.19 million soldiers, with an additional 7.7 million people in the reserve, which makes it the fifth largest armed force in the world. About 70 percent of North Korea's troops are stationed in close proximity to the border with South Korea (Bermudez 2001: 1ff). The South Korean Armed Forces, situated on the other side of the DMZ, currently have around 655,000 people as standing troops and another 3 million in the reserve, with a majority stationed in this border region as well. For the year 2007, it has been estimated that more than 30 percent (about $8 billion)[8] of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's gross national income went into the defense sector, at a time when South Korea, with its $26.3 billion defense budget, actually spent a sum three times larger than its opponent (Moon and Lee 2010).

In the midst of such incredibly large local troop contingents, and the dispensing of such huge financial resources, which together have led to the ever increasing militarization of the peninsula, the number of US soldiers deployed in South Korea, which currently hovers around 30,000, may seem rather inconsequential. However, the continued presence of US troops in the South is of huge symbolic significance, pointing to the vast breadth and depth of US political, economic, and military engagement in Korea since the 1950s.[9] What is more, US bases in South Korea do not stand in isolation, but function as vital spatial nodes of geopolitics and US empire-making in the way they are connected to other US military installations worldwide.

As Catherine Lutz, in her seminal work on the topic, *The Bases of Empire*, points out: the "global omnipresence and unparalleled lethality of the US military, and the ambition with which it is being deployed around the world" are unprecedented in human history (2009a: 1). In this particular universe the United States has created, 190,000 US troops are joined by an additional 115,000 civilian employees, who populate 909 military bases worldwide. In 46 countries and territories, the US military has 26,000 buildings and structures valued at $146 billion to its name (Lutz 2009a: 1). "These official numbers," Lutz claims:

> are entirely misleading as to the scale of US overseas military basing, however, excluding as they do the massive building and troop presence in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last many years, as well as secret or unacknowledged facilities in Israel, Kuwait, the Philippines and many other places. (2009a: 1)

The network that the armed forces of the United States have spun around the globe is truly staggering, certainly providing an ample field for potential research. During the last decade, there has been a growing interest in militarism and the soldier as a subject for a critical anthropology, with the US Armed Forces, in particular, coming into sharp focus in a number of articles and books (see, for instance, Baca 2010; Forte 2011; Gutmann and Lutz 2010; Lutz 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009). The tremendous global presence of the US military and of its soldier representatives on the ground is not exactly a recent manifestation, however, so one may wonder why the US Armed Forces have only become an area of anthropological research as of late. To be sure, the current interest was partially sparked by the wars in the Middle East that the United States launched in 2001 and 2003. The large-scale mobilization of many sectors of US society in order to pursue the "War on Terror," as it were, did not come to a sudden halt at the doors of academia. In the wake of the US military engagement in Iraq, the Pentagon sought to actively recruit anthropologists into its war efforts via the Human Terrain System (Forte 2011; Gill 2007; González 2009; Schober 2010)—a recently deactivated (Jaschik 2015) program of the US Army that employed social scientists to provide cultural and social insights about the populations to be conquered. As a response to such massive cooptation attempts,[10] calls have been made by a number of anthropologists for researchers to turn their gaze onto the military instead (Gusterson 2007), a task which is to contribute to a larger investigation into the workings of a US empire sustained by its global network of military bases (Johnson 2004). The ensuing ethnographies, it was argued by Catherine Lutz (2006), would be complementary to more systemic writings on empire, as ethnographies have the potential to "question the singular thingness that the term *empire* suggests by identifying the many fissures, contradictions, historical particularities, and shifts in imperial processes" (2006: 593).

Very few anthropologists working on military issues seem to have sought to define the key term of "militarism" as a concept, a phenomenon in which the subject of the soldier is vitally embedded. Other social scientists

have been more precise in their usage of the term, however (for a review, see Stavrianakis and Selby 2012). Historian Alfred Vagts, for instance, in an early definition from 1937 in his book *A History of Militarism*, points to an important facet of militarism in the way it "ranks military institutions and ways above the prevailing attitudes of civilian life and carries the military mentality into the civilian sphere" (1937: 11). Sociologist Michael Mann, in his *Incoherent Empire* (2003), speaks of militarism as "a set of attitudes and social practices which regard war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity" (2003: 16f). Feminist writer Cynthia Enloe, on the other hand, argues in *Does Khaki Become You?* that:

> militarization can be defined as a process with both a material and an ideological dimension. In the material sense it encompasses the gradual encroachment of the military institution into the civilian arena. [...] The ideological dimension [...] is the degree to which such developments are acceptable to the populace, and become seen as a "common-sense" solution to civil problems. (1983: 9f)

Perhaps the most expansive definition to date comes from sociologist Martin Shaw, however, who argues that:

> the core meaning of "militarism" should be specified not in terms of how military practices are regarded, but how they influence social relations in general. [...] Militarism denotes the penetration of social relations in general by military relations; in militarisation, militarism is extended, in demilitarisation, it contracts. (2012: 20)

While all the definitions above point to militarism as a process that involves an encroachment and expansion of the military into civilian terrain, Shaw, in particular, puts the emphasis less on discourse or ideology, but instead focuses squarely on social practices. Indeed, such an emphasis on *practices* lends itself to anthropological inquiries, and is crucial for my own understanding of the phenomenon as it may allow us to also make sense of the rather distinct situation in South Korea.[11]

GI Crimes and the Public Imagination

Images of US soldiers continue to haunt modern Korea. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), depictions of long-nosed, villainous

American troops (often pictured in the act of torturing and murdering Korean women and children) serve as one of the stock characters in the state's manifold propaganda repertoire (Myers 2010: 131ff). While it may not come as a surprise that a sworn enemy of the United States would make use of such depictions, in the allied nation of South Korea, too, images of US troops as offenders and criminals can easily be found. In the Republic of Korea (ROK), however, it is not the state that functions as the main disseminator of such images, but civilian actors hailing from a leftist-nationalist spectrum. A brief glance at popular South Korean movies released during the last decade, for instance, will reveal a number of films made by progressive film directors that have at times been labeled "anti-American" (Ryan 2012) for their depiction of the US military presence in the country.

In the wildly popular film *The Host* (*Koemul*, 2006), for instance, an actual event, when an employee of the US Armed Forces dumped a large amount of formaldehyde down the drain,[12] is taken as the movie's starting point. In this fictional world, the chemicals have now caused the rise of a monster living in Seoul's Han river. In *Welcome to Dongmagkol*, a movie released in 2005, US troops are seen attempting to bomb a secluded, peaceful village miraculously left untouched by the Korean War, where a renegade team of North and South Korean soldiers join forces to prevent this mass murder at the hands of Americans. And *The Case of It'aewŏn Homicide* (*It'aewŏn Sarinsakŏn*), which attracted a sizable audience in 2009, is a movie based on an infamous murder of a Korean college student in Seoul's It'aewŏn neighborhood, with two Americans as the prime suspects of the crime. Faced with such images depicting murder, misconduct, and lawlessness surrounding the US military, one impression inevitably takes shape: in South Korea's popular imagination, too, the contentious figure of the violent US soldier will not go away.

To be sure, images such as these—representations of some of the negative aspects resulting from the complex encounter between US troops and the South Korean population—are only one part of a larger story I wish to tell here. I set out for Seoul in September 2007 on what would become a 21-month-long journey with the idea in mind of finding out more about both popular imaginaries about GIs *and* the actual encounters between US military personnel and locals. My main motivation in going to the capital of the Republic of Korea was one curious puzzle that I wanted to look more deeply into: South Korea was for a long time known as possibly the most US-friendly nation in the world, with the Republic of Korea being, as Bruce Cumings once put it, "one of the few countries that

never said 'Yankee go home'" (2005:102). But over the last few decades, South Koreans seem to have had a drastic change of heart.

On December 14, 2002, for instance, an estimated 300,000 people attended candlelight vigils across the country to protest the death of two 13-year-old schoolgirls who had been run over by a US military vehicle (Cho 2013; Min 2002). In 2006, violent clashes erupted between farmers and activists, who faced thousands of Korean riot police when their rice fields in the village of Taechuri (near P'yŏngt'aek) were seized for the expansion of a nearby US base (Yeo 2006). Two years later, in 2008, during another round of candlelight rallies that erupted in Seoul, hundreds of thousands of protesters attended a series of protests after a ban on US beef imports was lifted, with anti-American sentiments running high once more (Lee J. 2012; Lee S. et al. 2010). And finally, over the last few years, the completion of a Korean naval base on Cheju Island has been delayed due to a number of protests. The opponents of this project argue that the US military will also have access to this ROK Navy-run facility, which may turn it into a key outpost for American attempts to keep maritime hegemony in the region intact (Kirk 2013; see also Pae 2014). These are just a few instances of recent public anger in South Korea over issues pertaining to the United States and its entanglement with the fate of the Korean peninsula.

Within this heated context, "GI crimes" (*migun pŏmjoe*) were repeatedly taken up by actors of the nationalist left as examples of the quasi-colonial nature of the long-term alliance between the United States and Korea. The National Campaign for Eradication of Crimes by U.S. Troops in Korea, for instance, a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in the early 1990s that is opposed to US bases estimates that tens of thousands of crimes were committed by US soldiers against Korean citizens,[13] as approximately 1,100 to 2,300 crime cases involving US servicemen were reported annually between 1976 and 1991 (Moon 2010a: 354). Clearly the issue of violent soldier behavior, with those living and working in or near US entertainment areas predominantly affected, has often been a weighty matter of concern, made worse by the fact that addressing it publicly could very well land a person in jail until the years of the military dictatorship (1961–88) came to an end.

There was one particularly heinous offence, I was to learn, that over the years would become viewed as the quintessential "GI crime": the gruesome murder of a young Korean prostitute by the name of Yun Kŭm-i who was killed by Private Kenneth Markle on October 28, 1992—an event that, to this day, seems to represent people's imaginations in South Korea of what US soldiers are potentially capable of. In the months and years