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“The Case of the Mysterious Koreans”: The Meaning of *Life*, American Orientalism and the Korean War in the Age of the World Target

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I. Introduction

In the eponymous first chapter of her 2006 book, *The Age of the World Target*, cultural theorist Rey Chow asserts that “in the age of bombing, the world has [...] been transformed into—is essentially conceived and grasped—as a target. To conceive of the world as a target is to conceive of it as an object to be destroyed” (31). In making this claim, she draws on and supplements Heidegger’s contention that the world has become, in the age of modern technology, a “world picture.” Chow’s aim is to delve into an epistemic shift that occurred a half-century earlier with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The widely known fact that this devastating feat of military technology was enabled in some way by Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity was captured by the quotidian knowledge that the enduring image of the mushroom cloud had some relationship to the formula $E = mc^2$:

With the gigantic impact of the explosion thus elegantly encapsulated—as if without effort—in a neat little formula that anyone could recall and invoke, an epochal destruction became, for the ordinary person, an instantly perceivable and graspable thing, like a control button at his or her command. In this manner, the most rarefied knowledge of science became conceptually democratized—that is, readily accessible, reproducible and transmissible—as a weapon of attack. (29)

The great power of Chow’s argument is that it itself offers a rather “elegantly encapsulated” account of the militarized form of knowledge production that took shape during the Cold War years, one that, in her view, took its initial

form in the bombings of August 1945 and culminated in the stunning defeat of Saddam Hussein's forces during the first Gulf War, during which the technological prowess of U.S. military forces was epitomized by the "surgical" airstrikes they ostensibly unleashed—bombing raids that were themselves captured by digitally enhanced night-vision photography. Reflecting on the visual and virtual terms in which most Americans came to know this conflict, she asserts that the martial episteme that came into being at the dawn of the Cold War remained largely in place, decades after that epoch had ostensibly come to an end.

One lacuna in Chow's magisterial argument, however, concerns the fact that two of the labels commonly affixed to the period she is writing about—the Cold War and the Atomic Age—are, if not exactly misnomers, defined by a deep irony. For in countries like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and, of course, Korea, this period was marked by some rather devastating "hot" wars. And while the global struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union was certainly defined by each possessing a nuclear arsenal capable of destroying the world many times over, it was a conflict in which neither side could ever, for the same reason, bring its most powerful military assets to bear upon the enemy. It would not be entirely untrue to suggest, for these reasons, that the Cold War was not really all that cold and that the Atomic Age was not really all that atomic.

For the targeting of the world that Chow suggests is indicative of the Atomic Age does not only entail the demarcation of areas to be carpet-bombed or subjected to nuclear annihilation. Rather, the form of knowledge production that came to define this epoch also required a certain capacity for discernment: a more granular ability to distinguish between those subjects in a particular region deemed to pose a threat and those who do not. When we look at the American press coverage of the first military conflict that the United States entered into as a nuclear power—namely, the Korean War—we see the emergence of a mode of knowing that remains with us to the present day, one that is centrally concerned with differentiating between hostile and friendly elements of the civilian populations in which the fighting is taking place. To arrive at a more nuanced account of the form of militarized knowledge production that became ascendant in the post-Hiroshima age than Chow offers, it is necessary, then, to engage more concretely with how those in the West were invited to see those who lived in the regions of the world in which U.S. military actions actually took place, such as Korea. A crucial site for the

creation of such knowledge was, of course, journalism; my focus in this essay is the coverage of the Korean War offered by one of the most popular American magazines at mid-century, *Life*.

Oddly enough, Korea occupies a somewhat marginal position in the American press coverage of the Korean War overall, which tended to center more on the usual subjects of American Orientalist discourse: Japan and China. But in their liminality, Korean subjects play a crucial role in these representations. For Koreans tend to figure as an epistemological enigma: as ambiguously friendly/hostile, loyal/disloyal, and as worthy/unworthy of life. But in journalism's attempted management of that inscrutability we glimpse a crucial dimension of the shift in epistemes that Chow anatomizes. After 1945, it was the areas of the developing world that were seen as threatened by communism that “took on the significance of target fields—fields of information retrieval and dissemination that were necessary to the United States' political and ideological hegemony” (Chow 39). The popular dimensions of this epistemic shift as well as a different modality of the targeting Chow describes become apparent, I suggest, in the attempts of journalists to make sense of Koreans themselves: in their strained performances of their capacity to distinguish between those Asian subjects who are the legitimate targets of U.S. military violence and those who are not.

Life was the most popular journal in Henry R. Luce's powerful publishing empire. According to the cultural historian Erika Doss, by the late 1940s the magazine's circulation had reached 22.5 million, which represented roughly one-fifth of the adult population in the United States at the time, and it also “took in 19 percent of every magazine advertising dollar in the country” (2–3). In his 1936 prospectus for *Life*, Luce described what its mission was to be:

To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man's work—his paintings, towers, and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed. (qtd. in Doss 2)

Reflecting this emphasis on visual pleasure and education (“to see and be

instructed”) the magazine Luce introduced to the world later that year depended heavily on photographs and its dominant genre was the photo-essay. Largely through the popularity of *Life* and its sister magazine *Time*, Luce sought to wield a significant amount of influence not only on popular opinion but also on foreign policy. In the words of the historian Robert E. Hertzstein, “Two forces shaped Henry Luce’s character and worldview. One was Protestant Christianity; the other was a fervent faith in America’s God-ordained global mission in Asia” (1). While most American foreign policy at mid-century was focused on Europe, Luce was an influential “Asia-firster” who engaged in a virtual crusade “to involve the United States deeply in the battle against Communism in China and Korea and Vietnam” (2).

Hertzstein’s book-length study, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia*, offers a comprehensive historical account of the publisher’s efforts—through his magazines and also through his own personal and political networks—at fortifying American resolve to thwart the spread of communism in Asia. My focus in this essay, however, is much narrower and differs methodologically. It will not presume to offer an exhaustive analysis of *Life*’s coverage of the Korean War. Rather, it will offer close readings of several articles that bring into focus the *two* different modalities through which Koreans were depicted during this conflict, revealing a foundational instability in the version of Orientalism that emerged in American popular culture during the Cold War. The first involves identifying and targeting those Koreans who are the proper objects of American military violence. The second, however, concerns *feeling* as much as it does knowing; it concerns the development of a sentimental bond to those Koreans who are potentially friendly to the American cause, an affective structure born of the Cold War that has been powerfully evoked by the cultural historian Christina Klein.

II. “The Ugly Story of an Ugly War”

The first modality of knowledge production—which takes shape as a more discriminating version of the targeting that Chow postulates as central to the Atomic Age—is epitomized in a linked series of articles and photo-essays that appeared in *Life* on August 21st, 1950. This issue of the magazine came out a little less than a month after the official beginning of the war, as UN forces struggled to maintain the perimeter they had established around

Busan and roughly a month before Douglas MacArthur’s landing at Incheon would turn the tide of the war. It featured two photo-essays on the fighting. The first ten-page spread, “US Counters Mass with Mobility,” which is divided into four shorter pieces, relates a counterattack led by General Walton H. Walker that would enable UN troops, the reporters hope, to push back the much larger North Korean force that surrounds them. Embedded in this extended photo-essay are a number of the tropes that circulated in numerous American depictions of the war: the taking, losing, and retaking of hilltops; an enemy impossible to discern in the surrounding hills, one that is best taken out by devastating artillery barrages and air attacks; and the multitudes of white “pajama”-clad refugees which always include a significant number of “Communists in disguise.”

The first short article by John Osborne focuses on Colonel Mike Michaelis, whose 27th Infantry Regiment played a key role in the counterattack. It describes Michaelis directing an artillery barrage that had enabled a company in his unit to take a hilltop held by enemy troops without any casualties. In the next short piece, photojournalist David Douglas Duncan breathlessly recounts his experiences embedded with the 27th, huddling in his foxhole, hoping to survive the withering artillery and mortar attacks unleashed by the North Korean forces; he concludes with a description of a dive-bombing run by Marine Corsair fighters directed at the enemy artillery in the surrounding hills. The accompanying photographs show various U.S. soldiers during the action: under fire from a mortar attack, manning tanks, standing vigilant in their gun-pits, or getting some much needed rest.

A third article, written by James Bell, profiles General Walker and details the counterattack he devised. The accompanying photographs prominently feature African American soldiers, who were being hastily integrated into combat units during this conflict—in World War II they had served in segregated units. Indeed the article includes a full-page portrait of an African American infantryman, Corporal Ollie Lin, who stands in his “sweat-soaked uniform,” looking at the camera with a sense of grim purpose and quiet confidence, his eyes somewhat obscured by the shadow falling from his helmet, one hand on his hip, the other gripping a rifle which he seems to have momentarily rested on the jeep next to him. In contrast to the high visibility accorded to the black and white soldiers, this photo-essay offers only this prose description of the enemy—or, rather, of the seemingly empty landscape in which the enemy is hidden:

On the roads which parallel the U.S.-held bank of the river raced trucks, jeeps and an occasional tank. But on the enemy-held bank it was different—nothing but burning villages and spiraling towers of smoke. Now and then I saw a white-clothed peasant walking along a road.

The picture was deceptive of course. For on the west bank of the Naktong there were twice as many divisions as in the whole U.S. bridgehead. (Bell 21)

The fourth part of this ten-page spread of articles is titled, “Refugees Get in Way.” On one page, three photographs are arrayed around a short essay by Carl Mydans (see Fig. 1).

In one of them, the anguish and worry of the three female refugees is quite apparent as they look straight at the photographer they are walking past. The facing page is comprised entirely of a fourth photograph, taken from a vantage point behind the two U.S. soldiers who are in the foreground, looking into the distance, guns at the ready, at a large group of refugees who are making their way across the river. Visible behind the refugees are, the caption explains,

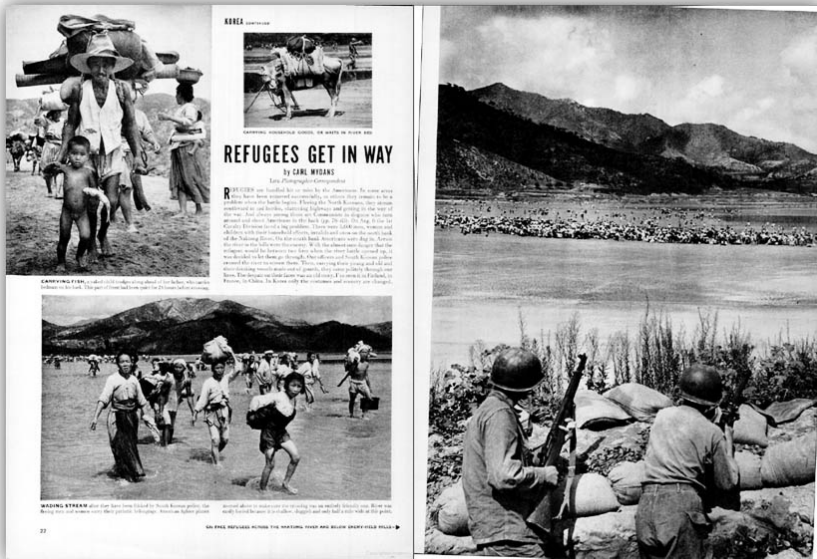


Fig. 1. Mydans, Carl. “Refugees Get in Way.” *Life* 29.8 (1950): 22–23.

“enemy-held hills” (Mydans 22). Mydans’s short accompanying essay focuses on the dilemma posed by the throngs of refugees that U.S. forces face every day.

Refugees are handled hit or miss by the Americans. In some areas they have been removed successfully, in others they remain to be a problem when the battle begins. Fleeing the North Koreans, they stream southward in sad hordes, cluttering highways and getting in the way of the war. And always among them are Communists in disguise who turn around and shoot Americans in the back. (22)

The problems posed by the conditions sketched in this first set of photo-essays—an enemy who hides in the landscape and infiltrates the masses of refugees displaced by the fighting—are the focus of the second extended article in this issue of the magazine, which is titled, “Report from the Orient: Guns are not Enough.” Written by John Osborne, this piece reverses the ratio between picture and text that is characteristic of *Life* and seems more like a piece that would have appeared in *Time*, for which he served as foreign news editor.¹ Though it is accompanied by several striking photographs, the lengthy essay offers an extended analysis of the severe problems posed by the refugee population: of how the enemy makes use of these civilians and how U.S. soldiers have been forced to respond. “Report from the Orient” issues a rather dire warning about the fighting in Korea, asserting that American soldiers are increasingly relying on tactics that involve the direct targeting of civilians, descending into a “savagery” that will result in losing the war of hearts and

1. Osborne assumed the position of foreign news editor of *Life*'s sister magazine, *Time*, in 1945, after the death of Whittaker Chambers, whose staunch anticommunism was increasingly reflected in that journal's coverage of the Soviet Union and China during the latter part of the Second World War. According to Herzstein, Osborne adopted the “anti-Soviet beliefs” of the man he replaced as editor at *Time* and its “foreign news coverage followed the same hard line” that Chambers had established (50). In his “insider's history” of *Life*, Loudon Wainwright, who served as a writer and editor at the magazine for decades, identifies Osborne as a member of the “Editor-in-chief's Committee,” which was headed by Luce and sought to ensure that everything that appeared on its pages conformed to the publisher's political vision (175). See: Wainwright, Loudon. *The Great American Magazine: An Inside History of Life*. New York: Knopf, 1986. For an account of how Luce used the advent of McCarthyism and the Korean War as opportunities to forward his anticommunist agenda, see chapter five of Herzstein's *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia*.

minds that is crucial to achieving victory in the Cold War.

After first testifying to the high level of preparedness and training apparent in the U.S. soldiers who have been sent there, Osborne asserts that what is happening in Korea is “an ugly war, perhaps the ugliest that Americans have ever had to fight” (77). Conditions there have “force[d] upon our men in the field acts and attitudes of the utmost savagery” (77). “This means,” Osborne continues,

not the usual, inevitable savagery of combat in the field, but savagery in detail—the blotting out of villages where the enemy may be hiding: the shooting and shelling of refugees who may include North Koreans in the anonymous white clothing of the Korean countryside, or who may be screening an enemy march upon our positions, or who may be carrying broken-down rifles or ammunition clips or walkie-talkie parts in their packs and under their trousers or skirts. (77)

The exceptional kind of “savagery” that U.S. forces find themselves drawn into stems from the fact that, as Osborne asserts, “this is a guerrilla war, waged amongst and to some extent by the population of the country” (78). To illustrate this point, he invites his reader to “come with me now to South Korea and see with me some of the scenes that I have witnessed or heard of at firsthand” (78).

The first scene he describes takes place on a street in “an important headquarters city in South Korea.” The jeep he is riding in is forced to stop when it meets “a long, long file of refugees from the fighting areas” (78). Of this group, he notices that the young men “seem to outnumber the others” and that “[m]ost of them carry packs, apparently of extra clothing” (80). “[W]atching them march by without escort of any kind,” he recounts, “I knew the constricting doubt and fear that every American in Korea comes to know as he watches those silent strangers, to whom he cannot speaking, filing down the roads” (80). He adds that several days later he would think about this particular column of refugees upon hearing “that North Korean guerrillas have unaccountably turned up far behind our lines and are fighting within a few miles of the city” (80).

He next ushers his readers to “a hilltop in southwest Korea” where an American command post housed in a schoolhouse had just been subjected to two attacks “by hundreds of North Koreans who emerged without warning

from the hills” (80). From that very same hilltop, Osborne writes,

soldiers of an American machine gun squad had seen the repulsed enemy retire beyond range and then, in plain sight of our men, calmly change from the green uniforms of the North Korean army to the white trousers and blouses of Korean peasants. And then they had walked back into the hills, looking like any of the lines of refugees who on this and every other day come down from the hills, across the paddies and along the roads past our lines and command posts. (80)

A third scene takes place at 6:00 AM in “a village at the foot of a valley” (80) as a small group of GIs confronts another throng of civilians moving toward them. They are nervous because they had earlier faced a similar situation only to find out that the refugees had been driven forward by North Korean soldiers “to confuse our men and tempt them to hold their fire as the enemy rises from the deep grass of the paddies” (82). Osborne pauses his narrative for a moment as he asks his readers to consider the possibility that these American soldiers might end up firing upon a group of roughly three hundred Korean civilians, many of them children and elderly: “For what seems to be a full minute, but must have been a matter of seconds, the thin file of soldiers and the still, dumb hundreds of refugees stand in the road face each other across the chasms of language and tradition that divides them” (82). What prevents carnage from ensuing is that one of the GIs gestures to the old man who seems to be the group’s leader to take a different road, which they do.

In describing a fourth encounter, however, Osborne suggests that crossing the threshold into the “savagery” of firing on civilian may be necessary. It is midnight in a command post. A radio report comes in that a column of refugees making its way toward a company of U.S. soldiers. A major tells the regimental commander, a colonel, that the civilians should not be allowed through. “And of course the major is right,” Osborne writes:

Time and again, at position after position, this silent approach of whitened figures has covered enemy attack and, before our men had become hardened to the necessities of the Korean war, had often and fatally delayed and confused our own fire. (84)

With seeming reluctance, the colonel formulates series of orders in consultation

with his staff:

“All right, don’t let them through. But try to talk to them, try to tell them to go back.”

“Yeah,” says one of the little staff group, “but what if they don’t go back?”

“Well, then,” the colonel says, as though dragging himself toward some pit, “then fire over their heads.”

“Okay,” an officer says, “we fire over their heads. Then what?”

The colonel seems to brace himself in the semidarkness of the blacked-out tent.

“Well, then, fire into them if you have to. If you have to, I said.”

An officer speaks into the telephone, and the order goes across the wire into the dark hills. (84)

Osborne does not actually specify what happens that night. But the next paragraph, which describes events of the following afternoon, makes clear that the colonel’s orders are now being implemented, and that U.S. soldiers have begun to fire into crowds of unarmed Korean civilians. Osborne relates that “a report has come that our rifleman have had to fire into another party of refugees who march at them, against shouted warnings and wavings” (77). The officer on duty says to one of his men on the telephone, “My God, John, it’s gone too far when we are shooting children” (84). However, he quickly adds, “Watch it, John, watch it! But don’t take any chances” (85). It is with startling frankness that Osborne recounts how routinely American troops in Korea now face the prospect of killing Korean civilians and how often they must do so to ensure their own safety. It is the ubiquity of this situation that threatens to instill in American soldiers an attitude of “savagery.”

Osborne goes on to reveal to his readers that U.S. troops are also finding themselves implicated in what he terms “savagery by proxy” (77). For the Korean allies they are fighting alongside seem to have no compunction about killing civilians. While he exempts the South Korean Army from his charges, he characterizes “the South Korean police and (in some sectors) South Korean marines upon whom we rely for contact with the population and for ferreting out hidden enemies” as “brutal”:

They murder to save themselves the trouble of escorting prisoners to the rear; they murder civilians simply to get them out of the way or to avoid

the trouble of searching and cross-examining them. And they extort information—by means so brutal that they cannot be described. Too often they murder prisoners of war and civilians before they have had a chance to give any information they may have. (77)

These South Korean military men and police officers exemplify a fully enacted version of the “savagery” that American soldiers risk embracing.²

Osborne’s ultimate aim in registering the exceptional violence of this war—a violence that targets the very civilian population that Americans are ostensibly there to protect and save—is to argue for a set of strategic and personnel changes that would lessen civilian casualties and thus make this war winnable. A key strategic change would involve the development of a more robust ideological campaign, to engage more fully in the war of hearts and minds that will be necessary for victory in Korea, an approach that would mark a departure from current planning:

We still think of war and “politics” as two separate things, the one to be waged by simple soldiers and the other to be handled, if it is handled at all, by civilian specialists who have nothing to do with war itself. We laugh at the “commissars” whom the Communists take good care to have with their military forces, and we refuse to see that with our enemies the “politics” comes first, the fighting second. We, in short, persist in thinking of political warfare as something to be practiced by rear-area pamphleteers and tolerated by the fellows doing the real fighting. All this being so, our military organizations in Korea and elsewhere do not have, as integrated parts or even as detached complements to the regular staffs, sufficient personnel equipped to deal with the people of the country, to explain to them and to our own men why we happen to be fighting there. (78)

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2. Osborne’s brief description here of how the South Korean National Police and some elements of the military negotiated the epistemological dilemma of discerning between hostile and friendly civilians with an often indiscriminate brutality accords with the account that Bruce Cumings offers of the counterinsurgency campaigns conducted by South Korean military forces and anticommunist paramilitary organizations: see the fifth chapter of his *The Korean War: A History*. The atrocities perpetrated by these entities as well as by their North Korean counterparts attest to the ways in which the 6/25 War was not only a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union but also a civil war.

The resources for developing the army of experts that would be required for this kind of “political warfare” already exists, Osborne points out, a product of the period in which South Korea was under the direct control of the U.S. military: “We occupied it for nearly three years and in this time we should have accumulated a considerable staff of military and civilian officials who came to know the country, the people, the language” (78). Moreover, he suggests that South Korea’s prior colonization by Japan is actually a boon in this context: “We have in Japan officials, civilian and military, who speak and understand Japanese. Because the Japs occupied Korea for so long, Japanese is the second language of the country” (78).

Osborne points out here an aspect of the U.S. role in Korea that is scarcely known by Americans, “that the United States occupied Korea just after the war with Japan ended, and set up a full military government that lasted for three years and deeply shaped postwar Korean history” (qtd. in Cumings, *The Korean War* 104). In so doing, he is suggesting not only that the United States is reprising the role of colonial power that had been played by Japan through the first half of the twentieth century but also that it should embrace that role.

Osborne does not exactly spell out how this shift in strategy and reallocation of personnel from Japan would ameliorate the situation faced by troops on the ground, the encounters with large groups of civilians in which enemy soldiers might be hidden. Presumably the ability to at least speak Japanese would better enable soldiers to disperse such crowds of refugees. At any rate, his assertion that a more accurate and comprehensive knowledge about Korea is of vital strategic interest points toward the need for a more up-to-date form of Orientalism, even if that knowledge is mediated by the Japanese colonial legacy. The vision that Osborne outlines of a disciplinary apparatus that would create knowledge about places like Korea that are imperiled by communism would come to be embraced by Cold War strategists in the United States. For along with Chow, Bruce Cumings, Harry Harootunian, and, of course, Edward Said have noted that this era saw the emergence of Area Studies as an academic discipline in America, a development that was spurred by the military exigencies of the global struggle against communism and the war of hearts and minds that was being waged in the developing world.³ As Cumings has observed,

3. See: Cumings, Bruce. “Boundary Displacement: The State, the Foundations, and Area Studies during and after the Cold War”; Harootunian, Harry D. “Postcoloniality’s Unconscious/ Area Studies’ Desire.” *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*. Ed.

It is now far to say, based on the declassified evidence, that the American state and especially the intelligence elements in it shaped the entire field of postwar area studies, with the clearest and most direct impact on those regions of the world where communism was strongest: Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, and East Asia. (“Boundary Displacement” 261)

And as Chow has asserted,

despite the claims about the apolitical and disinterested nature of the pursuits of higher learning, activities taken under the rubric of area studies, such as language training, historiography, anthropology, economics and political science, and so forth, are fully inscribed in the politics and ideology of war. (40–41)

Osborne’s article underscores the military significance of the information that a Korea expert could retrieve and disseminate. But while the cadre of Korea experts he conjures does not currently exist, the epistemological authority with which he invests the virtual tour of the fighting in Korea provided by his article suggests that the *journalist* might serve, in the meantime, as a kind of intellectual temporary worker.

Indeed the full-page photograph and accompanying caption that come at the very beginning of this article exemplify the kind of weaponized knowledge that Osborne suggests that he as a journalist is capable of producing (see Fig. 2). This picture seems to have been taken from the top of a U.S. tank, — the barrel of its primary gun is visible in the lower right foreground. In the upper left quadrant of the photograph are three identically-clad Korean men with walking sticks, striding toward the left of the camera, heading into the territory that the American tank is either guarding or has just vacated. That this photograph is intended to make the reader experience the sense of worried unknowing that the U.S. soldiers described in the article routinely experience is clear from the text in the accompanying sidebar:

THE CASE OF THE THREE MYSTERIOUS KOREANS

This seemingly quaint photograph illustrates how difficult it is for

Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2002. 150–74; and Said, Edward. *Orientalism*.

www.kci.go.kr

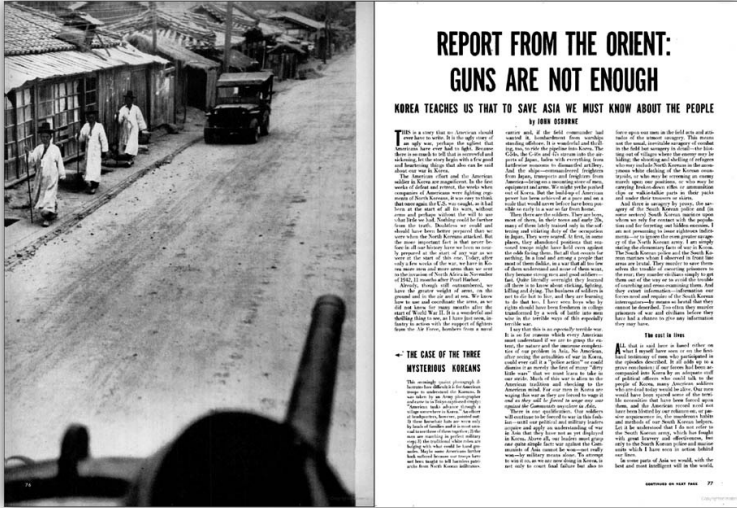


Fig. 2. Osborne, John. "Report from the Orient: Guns Are Not Enough." *Life* 29.8 (1950): 76-77.

American troops to understand the Koreans. It was taken by an Army photographer and came in to Tokyo captioned simply: "American tanks advance through a village somewhere in Korea." An officer at headquarters, however, pointed out: 1) these horsehair hats are worn only by heads of families and it is unusual to see three of them together; 2) the men are marching in perfect military step; 3) the traditional white robes are bulging with what could be hand grenades. Maybe some Americans farther back suffered because our troops have not been taught to tell harmless patriarchs from North Korean infiltrators. (77)

Unlike the U.S. troops whose imminent doom this photograph might possibly foretell, readers are here given the knowledge that will enable them to tell the difference between "harmless patriarchs" and "North Korean infiltrators." It is precisely this kind of knowledge that U.S. troops on the ground currently lack.

The final scene recounted by Osborne in this article also allegorizes the point made by this initial photograph. Once again a group of U.S. soldiers faces down a group of Korean civilians. This time, however, "there's a difference,"

and he “witness[es] something of an advance in American communication”:

A Marine is passing a mine detector over the clothing and packs of the refugees. Any metal—a rifle barrel, a pistol, a clip of ammunition, maybe the parts of a radio—will presumably be spotted by the detector. Anyhow it is better than guns and policemen whom I have seen at work. (85)

The wonder of the mine detector lies in its ability to make something previously illegible about Koreans legible: namely, their intentions. In enabling the Marines to determine whether any particular Korean body is hiding “a rifle barrel, a pistol, a clip of ammunition, maybe the parts of a radio,” it produces a piece of objective knowledge that makes visible a formerly invisible subjective intent. The metal detector is, then, a metaphor for the technology of information retrieval and knowledge production that the article overall asserts is necessary for the winning of the war.

The mine detector is thus also an allegory for the kind of journalism concerning Asians and Asian Americans that *Life* typically offered. As Christina Klein notes, during the Second World War, Luce, the publisher of *Life* and its sister magazine *Time* used these organs “to disseminate positive stories about America’s Chinese allies” (*Cold War Orientalism* 4).⁴ However, several other articles also appeared in *Life* during that conflict that identified for readers those Asians and Asian Americans who were hostile to the American cause. Its March 20th, 1944 issue, for example, featured a photo-essay that included a picture of the “Tule Lake Pressure Boys,” the Japanese American “troublemakers” who had been sent to the stockade at the Tule Lake Segregation Center for being “fantastically loyal to Japan” (“Tule Lake” 25). The kind of knowledge about Asia that *Life* promised to provide its readers was best exemplified by an article that appeared in the December 22nd, 1941 issue. Titled “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese,” it provided several annotated photographs that promised to identify for readers the facial features that reveal the subtle differences between the members of those ethnic groups (see Fig. 3).

4. For a detailed analysis of how the Chinese were depicted on the pages of *Life* during the Second World War in ways that humanized them while insisting as well on their alterity to the West see Kelly Long’s essay, “Friend or Foe: *Life*’s Wartime Images of the Chinese.” *Looking at Life Magazine*. Ed. Erika Doss. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001. 55–75.



Fig. 3. “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese.” *Life* 11.25 (1941): 81.

The formal headshots of General Hideki Tojo, a mustachioed and bespectacled “Japanese warrior,” Ong Wen-hao, a clean-shaven “Chinese public servant,” as well as a candid shot of Joe Chiang, a “Chinese journalist,” are used to itemize the facial features that discerning Americans should focus on if they want to tell the difference between friendly and hostile Asians.

To return to Osborne’s 1950 article, we see him celebrating another piece of American military technology in addition to the mine detector that also seems to allegorize *Life’s* function. Shortly after witnessing the Marines making use of the mine detector, he watches a group of helicopters flies over the head of a group of Korean children:

[O]ne, a boy of perhaps 7 or 8, stares upward at the monstrous things with a gaze of fixed and bright fascination. *His eyes shine, his lips are parted, and I think of an American boy gazing at his first bicycle on a Christmas morning.*

The mine detector, the helicopters, the boy on the roadside—here, after a fashion, was communication between the American West and the people of South Korea. And, so thinking, I reflected as the jeep bumped

into Pusan that the machine age and the machine man of the West can be pretty wonderful. But machines still can't talk to people, not as we must learn—and learn very soon—to talk to the people of Asia. (85; emphasis mine)

What gives this reporter a sense of hope are two pieces of American military technology and a young Korean. In light of the article's overall thesis, each component of this triad takes on a real symbolic significance. The meaning of the mine detector we have already explored, but the value of the helicopters in this instance is also tied to the potential effect they can have on Korean bodies, not militarily, however, but ideologically. For the helicopters—which through a kind of soft dissolve in Osborne's imaginative vision transform themselves into the gift of a bicycle—are notable for what they do to the young boy who looks up at them with “a gaze of fixed and bright fascination” that makes him seem resemble an American boy on Christmas morning. His expression—“His eyes shine, his lips are parted”—and the desire it clearly conveys suggest that certain technological objects can function as technologies of Americanization, integrating Asian subjects into an identification with that most American of sentiments, the desire for consumer goods.

The mine detector and the helicopters and the relationship to Asian subjects they enable articulate a fantasy about a kind of technology that is capable of winning the war: a technology of detection, knowledge-production, and desire that is not only being described on the pages of this magazine but also embodied by them. For the conclusion of “Guns Are Not Enough” offers a kind of metacommentary on what the magazine is itself doing—on how media like *Life* can function as vital components in the apparatus of war. For if Osborne's piece points out how technologies of military destruction (guns) must be supported by a technology of detection that will enable its users to tell the difference between hostiles and friendlies (the metal detector); and if, finally, it is also pointing out the military necessity of a technology of representation that educates its viewers and readers in the ways of American consumer desire (the helicopters); if all of this conveys what is going on in this article, then what's actually being described in it (along with everything else) is *Life* itself.

To see how this is the case, we might simply consider the physical layout of the pages in which the article appears. The photo-essay I have been describing weaves its way through often colorful advertisements that describe the luxurious rest that Pullman sleeper cars can provide; that offer place-setting

tips from Oneida silverware; that promise dog-owners a way of cleaning their dogs without bathing them; and that extol the virtues of New Williams Shaving Cream and Best Foods Prepared Mustard. This layout is typical of *Life* and other magazines of its type. As Doss observes, such periodicals are “often organized as jumbled assemblages of images, text, features and advertisements whose miscellaneous graphics, words, and intended effects are intermingled and often intentionally inseparable” (8). Bearing in mind the multiple aims of *Life* as they were laid out in Luce’s prospectus—“to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed”—we can see how the magazine’s message was carried not only by the content of its photo-essays but also by the abundant advertisements that appeared on its pages, the juxtaposition of which were key to its aesthetic: “This juxtaposition of ‘instructive’ articles and photo-essays in monochrome hues and ‘pleasurable’ advertisements in color gave the magazine a certain rhythm and flow, and guided readers between what to think about... and what to buy” (8). In the end, what *Life* is selling in the August 21st, 1959 issue of the magazine which we have been examining here, in the advertisements as well as in the photo-essays, is the American way of life. Osborne’s article simply adds the proviso that the promotion of this way of life comprises a crucial component of the arsenal that will enable Americans to win the war of hearts and minds that is underway in places like Korea.

III. “Things Look Better in Korea”

A full-page photograph that appeared a mere two months later on the pages of *Life*, in the October 23rd issue, uncannily recalls Osborne’s evocation of the youth who looked up at the American helicopters in the sky with the expression of a boy contemplating gifts under a Christmas tree. Bearing the title “Things Look Better in Korea,” it pictures a Korean boy happily sucking on a popsicle, seated in a jeep next to a smiling American GI (see Fig. 4). The accompanying caption reads: “The faces of these companions, taken by Mydans, reflects mutual satisfaction with the war’s progress in Korea and the promise of better things to come—for the lieutenant, more victories as U.N. forces move north; for the South Korean boy, more Popsicles as victors grow more free with largesse” (37).

In light of Osborne’s dire and urgent reflections the nature of the fighting



Fig. 4. Mydans, Carl. “Things Look Better in Korea.” *Life* 29.17 (1950): 37.

that had appeared just two months earlier, this photograph reflects how much better the prospects for victory seemed by late October. The American soldier’s smile suggests that things look better militarily, as UN forces had recently crossed the 38th parallel, commencing the war of rollback that would eventually push the frontline nearly to the southern bank of the Amnokgang, a period of optimism that would be shattered in less than two months by the entry of Chinese forces into the fighting. The young boy’s expression suggests that things are looking better ideologically as well—that the war for the hearts and minds of Koreans is also being more successfully waged. Like the young boy described by Osborne, the one pictured here also has his lips parted with desire; but in this case, he is more directly partaking of American largesse in the form of a popsicle, and the pleasure and gratitude imparted by this gift seems to have made him unambiguously loyal to the American cause.

In this picture we see the other dominant modality through which Koreans

came to be constructed as objects of knowledge in American depictions of the Korean War: as the grateful recipients of American generosity and protection. The duo pictured in this photograph has numerous counterparts in the American media representations of the Korean War. To cite two filmic examples, the first Hollywood movie about the Korean War, *The Steel Helmet* (Samuel Fuller, 1951), has at its emotional center the attachment that a hardened American GI, Sergeant Zack, comes to harbor for a South Korean orphan, Short Round and the melodramatic biopic *Battle Hymn* (Douglas Sirk, 1957) offered a fictionalized depiction of the real-life exploits of the Dean Hess, a U.S. pilot, who orchestrated the airlift of hundreds of Korean orphans from Seoul to Jeju.

As a number of cultural critics and historians have noted, the Korean War served as a watershed event in the emergence of the discourse and practice of transnational adoption.⁵ The adopting of children who had been orphaned by war became central to how Americans justified their military endeavors in Korea and elsewhere in Asia. In the fourth chapter of her book-length study, *Cold War Orientalism*, Klein recounts how a number of prominent American liberals, including James Michener, promoted the idea that winning the Cold War required developing a much greater emotional investment in the fate of Asia and how they “cast the problem of political obligation to Asia as a problem of family: Americans did not feel bound to Asians because they had rarely belonged to the same families and thus shared few of the ties of culture, religion, and language that families knit across oceans and generations” (145). One particularly effective way of addressing this problem, Michener and others asserted, was for Americans to adopt orphans from Asia:

During the postwar period the hybrid, multiracial, multinational family created through adoption became a familiar feature of middlebrow culture. These families offered a way to imagine U.S.-Asian integration in terms of voluntary affiliation: they presented international bonds formed by choice (at least on the part of the American parents), rather than by biology.

5. See: Kim, Eleana J. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham: Duke UP Books, 2010; Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism*; Oh, Arissa. “A New Kind of Missionary Work: Christians, Christian Americanists, and The Adoption of Korean GI Babies, 1955–1961.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 33.3/4 (2005): 161–88.

In doing so they foregrounded the idea of alliance among independent parties—the model of postwar integration—rather than the idea of an empire unified by blood and force. These mixed-race families also offered a way to imagine Americans overcoming the ingrained racism that so threatened U.S. foreign policy goals in Asia. (146)

The work of Christina Klein thus offers a supplement to Chow’s assertion that Cold War era knowledge production took shape as a targeting of those regions of the world in which “the United States competed with the Soviet Union to rule and/or destroy the world”—areas “that required continued, specialized super-vision” (39). For a crucial element in this martial episteme was the capacity to distinguish between (as *Life* claimed to its readers that it could) those Asian subjects who could be integrated into the American sphere of influence and should thus be saved and those who could not and should thus be justifiably killed.

In order to see how this former group of Asians came to be constructed by *Life* and in other middlebrow cultural sites, it is instructive to turn to Klein’s study, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961*. In this book, Klein traces the emergence of a distinctly American form of Orientalism in this period, one that worked to depict Asians both at home and abroad as “model minority” subjects, fully assimilable to the American way of life. Klein details how “Oriental” subjects became increasingly visible in middlebrow American culture, something apparent not only in the positive depiction of Asians in magazines like *Life* but also in the string of Asian-themed, Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals produced in the 1950s: *South Pacific*, *Flower Drum Song*, *The King and I*. She argues that explicitly middlebrow works like these “played a crucial role in legitimating the geopolitically valuable idea of America as a racially inclusive and integrated society” (“Sentimental Culture” 157).⁶

Klein supplements the metaphor of *containment*, which is the primary paradigm through which the international and domestic politics of the Cold War have been understood in the United States, with that of *integration*. The policy and cultural logic of containment, as she describes it,

6. I quote here both from Klein’s book-length study, *Cold War Orientalism*, and an article that conveys the argument of her book in condensed form, “The Sentimental Culture of Global Integration.”

posited a zero-sum conflict between Moscow, which it figured as aggressive and expansionist, and Washington, which it figured as defensive and peaceful. Containment held that, since cooperation with the Soviets was impossible and all communist governments were subservient to Moscow, the expansion of communism anywhere in the world posed a direct threat to the U.S. share of world power. (*Cold War Orientalism* 24)

In contrast, Klein characterizes her work as building upon the arguments put forward by a group of “revisionist” historians that includes Melvyn P. Leffler, Thomas J. McCormick, and William Williams⁷ who foreground the paradigm of integration. From this point of view, the primary aim of U.S. foreign policy was to “create an internationally integrated free market economic order, in which each nation would have unrestricted access to the markets and raw materials of all others, while capital goods, and people would move freely across national borders” (25). While it is a term we associate more readily with the domestic Civil Rights struggle, Klein asserts that “the domestic project of integrating Asian and African Americans within the United States was intimately bound up with the international project of integrating the decolonizing nations into the capitalist ‘free world’ order” (226).

To understand, then, the two intimately intertwined modalities through which knowledge about Korean subjects came to be produced during the Korean War, it is necessary to marry the historiographical paradigms offered by Klein and Chow respectively. Chow’s study helps us confront the aspect of the American imperial project during the Cold War that Klein does not always fully consider, which is that it did not simply involve the sentimental integration of Asians but the killing of them as well. Klein’s work likewise calls attention to a more granular aspect of the world-targeting form of knowledge production that Chow anatomizes, the terms through which it distinguished between those who should be annihilated and those who should be brought into the fold.

7. Cf. Williams, William Appleman. *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1972.

IV. Coda

In the years since Klein’s and Chow’s books appeared, 2003 and 2006 respectively, we have seen the persistence of the modes of knowing that both cultural critics identify as emerging in the early Cold War period and that are on display in *Life* magazine’s coverage of the Korean War. The nature of the fighting in the early days of that conflict has sadly been reproduced many times in the various regions of the world in which U.S. military forces have been engaged since that time. Targeting the enemy has continued to require a technology of knowledge production that promises to be capable of distinguishing between hostile and friendly elements of the local population.

With the passing away of *Life* magazine in 1972 and the declining significance of print journalism overall, the task of providing Americans with a clear understanding of the difference between the hostile and friendly elements in the local populations with which U.S. military forces have engaged has fallen to a press corps that makes use of the newer media, first televisual and now increasingly digital. Whatever forms it now takes, however, mainstream journalism in the United States remains firmly within the Age of the World Target. The knowledge journalism produces about regions in the Near and Far East continues, as Chow suggests, to constitute them as “target fields—fields of information retrieval and dissemination,” but ones that are subjected to ever more granular scrutiny, and it promises to draw finer distinctions between those subjects who can justifiably be targeted by drone attacks and SEAL strikes and those who, presumably, should not be.

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Abstract

This article examines the coverage of the Korean War in the popular American magazine *Life*, focusing on its depiction of Koreans. In these depictions, Koreans figure as an epistemological enigma: as ambiguously friendly/hostile, loyal/disloyal, and as worthy/unworthy of life. But in journalism’s attempted management of that inscrutability we glimpse a crucial element of the shift in epistemes that defined the emergence of what cultural theorist Rey Chow has described as the Age of the World Target: an epoch in which the “countries of East Asia, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East took on the significance of ‘target fields’—as fields of information retrieval and dissemination that were necessary to the United States’ continual political and ideological hegemony.” To understand this emergent episteme, however, it is also necessary to engage with the work of cultural critic Christina Klein, who has described the post-1945 period as one in which middlebrow cultural works like *Life* reveal a U.S. Cold War ideology oriented as much by a desire to integrate subjects of the decolonizing world into the American sphere of influence as by an impulse to contain the Soviet menace.

Keywords: journalism, Cold War, Korean War, Orientalism, American Studies, Area Studies

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