

CLASSROOMS IN CONFLICT

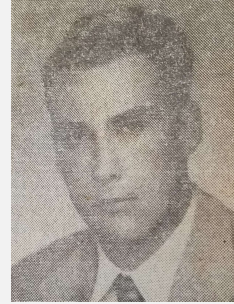
Oregon State College and The Korean War
By Carl Soder

Have any of you studied abroad? Many students have. But think about how dramatically different it would be to go abroad for education if your home country was at war. What if, you left your previous school because a different set of administrators took over your classroom, changed your curriculum, and forced you to speak a different language. What if, in order to see what higher education had to offer you, you needed to find a way out of your own country, away from repressive institutions? That's what happened to Esoon Choi, Choi, an Oregon State graduate student, in the prelude to the Korean War.

What happened to Esoon was actually a part of a larger phenomenon where warring nations brought their conflict to a new kind of battlefield: the classroom. Current headlines headlines may feature leaders trading insults or shaking hands over borders, but the Korean War changed how a generation of Koreans and Americans learned, worked, and interacted with their surroundings. Beyond the headlines, how does war affect the ambitions of students and faculty, the civilians involved in the 'academic combat' of politics politics and ideas?

Searching through the SCARC special collections, Daily Barometer microfilm, and OSC yearbooks to shed light on this issue, I discovered that, for all of the chaos that institutions endure, war can actually be a catalyst for academic growth, with international connections among universities being forged through acts of resistance and government aid.

3 STORIES; 3 PERSPECTIVES



To illustrate the bilateral partnerships in academia the Korean war created, I'm going to profile three Oregon State perspectives. Their individual stories illustrate how the war influenced the academic careers of students and faculty in both the United States and what would become South Korea.

First is Esoon Choi (left), who represents students in the prewar Korean higher education system, when the peninsula's universities were restricted under Japanese occupation.

Next is Bill Maxwell (center), an Oregon State College graduate who found new opportunities after enlisting with the U.S. Army during the United Nation's intervention.

And last is Bill Wilkins (right), a Korean war veteran who would later go on to become the dean of OSU's College of Liberal Arts. He represents how the war's legacy impacted American academics.

A PROBLEMATIC PENINSULA

“Northeast Asia, with the Korean Peninsula as its most sensitive flashpoint and strategic pivot, is the one and only region where the world’s four major powers—the United States, China, Russia, and Japan—uneasily meet, interact, and see their interests coalesce, compete, and clash in situation-specific ways.”

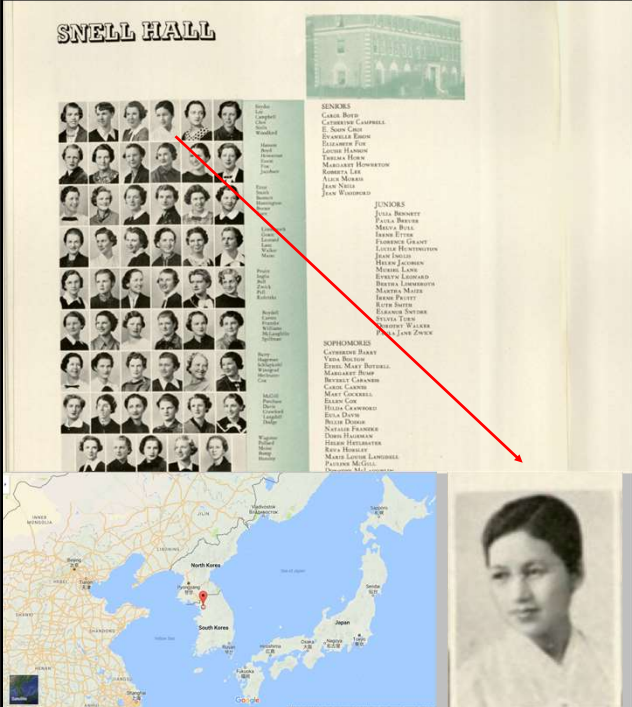
-Columbia University Political Scientist Samuel S. Kim

Before highlighting our story’s key players, it’s important to know why Korea was the setting for such heated conflict throughout the 20th century.

In the early 1900s, a unified Korea struggled to maintain its sovereignty amidst reforms and battles that severely destabilized its homeland, the Korean peninsula. Originally a dynastic kingdom before reforming into a short-lived empire, Korea found itself overwhelmed by a quick series of regional conflicts waged by China, Russia, and Japan that spilled over into their territory. Japan seized this opportunity to fold Korea into its own, quickly growing empire, fully annexing the peninsula in 1910.

What ensued was a complete remodeling of Korean society, placing Koreans as second-class citizens, as colonial subjects answering to new imperial interests. A complete restructuring of the country’s education system followed, which forced Korean academic institutions to undergo denationalization and deliberalization efforts by the Japanese bureaucracy. This limited the enrollment of Korean students from advanced technical courses, forcibly placed Shinto shrines into their classrooms, and required courses to be taught in Japanese. Education was now assimilation, and Koreans could no longer chart their own destiny.

Quote from Samuel S. Kim’s article “The U.S.-DPRK Nuclear Standoff: The Case For Common-Security Engagement “ in the 2004 Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies Journal *The United States and South Korea: Reinvigorating the Strategic Partnership*.



ESOON CHOI

- Attended Oregon State in 1935 as a Graduate Student in Home Economics Department
- Arrived in the U.S. thanks to a scholarship from OSC's Home Economics Club
- One of OSC's first Korean students
- Completed Undergraduate Studies at Ehwa Women's College
- Emblematic of several Korean Academics during Korea's Japanese occupation

IMAGES

Primary Source: *The Beaver*. ASOSC vol. xiii. 1937, pp.

Secondary Source: Google Maps

Esoon Choi was directly affected by these changes.

Her home institution, Ehwa College, established by Christian Missionaries in the days of the Korean Empire, was subjected to new restrictions, and initially lost their status for teaching in the Korean language and promoting a western style curriculum. Facing barriers to furthering her education, she arrived in Corvallis in 1935 on a \$500 scholarship from Oregon State College's Home Economics club. Classmates gathered funds collectively to help international students from East Asia in need.

Studying abroad in her era Choi joined a cadre of Koreans who sought out western education as a medium to keep the Korean national identity alive. Oregon State College offered her an opportunity to educate herself beyond the prescriptions of Japanese imperial policy. The Japanese occupation of the Korean education system led to a new international relationship between a previously unknown East Asian university and Oregon State College to help maintain the sanctity and the sovereignty of displaced Korean academics.

AMERICAN-LED U.N. INTERVENTION



Left: Korean Woman on Seoul Street

Right: Children Playing in Seoul Ruins

Source: Bill Wilkins Papers



Allied powers liberated Korea after Japan's defeat in WWII in 1945. However, the task of dismantling Japan's colonial infrastructure in Korea was split along the 38th parallel by two countries that were placed in temporary trusteeship of the territory: Soviet Russia in the North and the United States in the South.





After helping form a new democratic government in the 1948, the U.S. government in conjunction with the United Nations ushered in a new era of federal aid to the South, remaining in the peninsula even after communist invasion in 1950 from the North. From 1945-1953, 15 billion dollars of aid poured into South Korea, with 95% coming from the United States. A corresponding draft occurred throughout the three-year conflict, with the military mobilizing recruits from different sections of American society.

While the Korean war would end in armistice with no clear victors, the lasting U.S. presence remaining on the peninsula would go on to reshape South Korea's education system.

The photos above were taken by Bill Wilkins in 1953 after a North Korean bombing raid on Seoul.

delta sigma rho

Have you ever heard Bill Maxwell speak? He is a classic member of Delta Sigma Rho, the honorary oratory fraternity for forensics students in college. The members, who are selected from third term juniors, encourage beginners in the art of oration by sponsoring an intersectional speech contest with \$5 prizes for the outstanding speaker of the competition.

Left: Maxwell in a OSC International Club Meeting.
Bottom-Left: Chonnam University
Bottom-Right: Maxwell's 1952 Yearbook Photo

BILL MAXWELL

- Member of several debate groups on campus
- ASOSC Vice President 1950
- Education Major, Graduated in 1952
- Joined the U.S. army in 1953
- Became first American instructor at South Korea's Chonnam University

IMAGES

Primary Source: *The Beaver*. ASOSC vol. xlvii 1952.

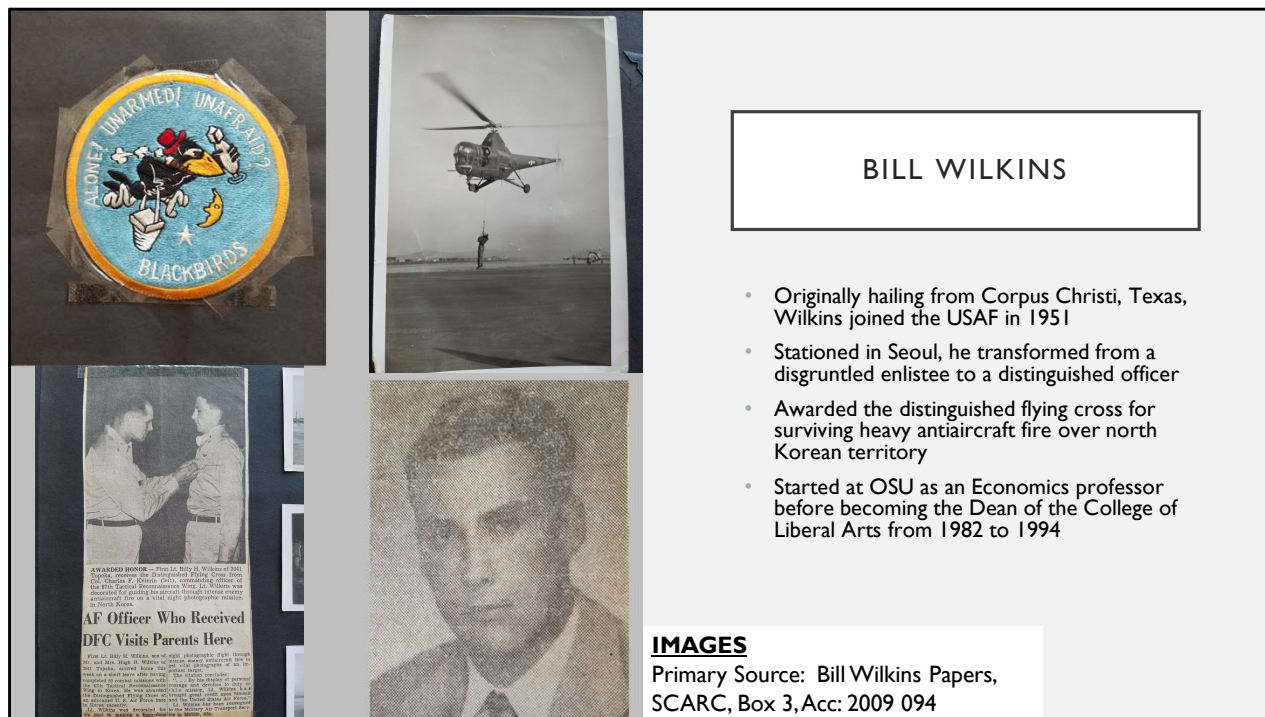
Secondary Source: Google Maps.

Bill Maxwell, a recent Oregon State College graduate, was uniquely qualified to join this process.

Maxwell joined the U.S. army after a brief stint in graduate school at the University of California, Berkley. Although originally assigned to a medical unit, Maxwell soon played an integral role in the U.S. government's efforts to foster what Korean education scholar Sungho Lee described as a "democratic educational philosophy" that brought "a more equal distribution of educational opportunities by region, gender, and discipline" to postwar South Korea.

Later becoming an educator in the army, Maxwell found himself part of a \$19 million push to grow South Korea's educational institutions from 1954-1967. Accepting a position to teach English at Chonnam University in 1955, Maxwell was also able to advance his own academic career for 9 years in Korea outside of institutional barriers he found as a graduate student in the United States. In a 2015 interview with Ottawa University (where he was a faculty member), Maxwell recalled some difficulties in securing a student-teaching positions in discriminatory departments of the early 50s.

The new, inclusive learning community he found at Chonnam gave him significant experience educating abroad, and he later returned to the US to complete a doctorate in education from Harvard in 1967.



Last but not least, there is Bill Wilkins, whose service in the USAF would carry the legacy of Korean War to his own academic career at Oregon State.

Enlisting in the Air Force reserve in 1951, Wilkins was initially a disgruntled recruit. When his reserve status was extended indefinitely during the mobilization of U.S. forces for the Korean War, he initially had misgivings about how quickly a government could void a contract. Also, he marked down for having little growth potential in an officer effectiveness report. Nonetheless, when stationed in Korea in 1953, he was decorated for his role as a navigator with the 12th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron nicknamed the Blackbirds. Pinched in the clear nose of a painted black plane, he would spot targets for his crew on night missions over North Korean territory.

Looking through his papers, I saw the scale of his long career in the USAF, filled with flight charts and currency from around the globe. His time flying influenced his academic career, as Wilkins penned several articles that focused on deregulating airlines. But what caught my eye the most was the correspondence Wilkins had with the Lafayette Organization, expressing interest in contributing to the creation of an aviation leadership museum the USAF academy in Fort Collins, Colorado. The fact that Wilkins took an interest in maintaining the heritage of American airmen, in honoring his military service, shows how the patriotic rhetoric of war can influence the learning of generations. Even in his second act, the USAF continued to inform his worldview.

CONCLUSION

The Korean War produced patriotic rhetoric and bilateral partnerships in academia. Warring nations exerted influence over scholars to achieve the goals of military campaigns.

For Choi and Maxwell, conflict on the Korean peninsula rerouted their academic pursuits by using wartime tensions to create pragmatic educational partnerships through institutional resilience and military aid. Plus, Wilkins used his military background as a catalyst for scholarship, using his patriotic and aviation interests to develop an academic career that carried on many of the principles of his time flying in Korea.

Of course, I cannot claim that I can cover all of the educational shifts that happened as a consequence of the Korean war, and there is much more to be discovered. I'm definitely skewed toward using American primary sources, with myself lacking the Korean or Japanese language skills to explore beyond English translations. However, my research does provide a multinational range of perspectives that provide greater insight into the social cost of the war. More research should be made on how veterans of conflicts impact academia and how international partnerships are forged between universities, but my work here today could be a nice supplement to Myers and Peattie's *The Japanese Colonial Empire* or Wada Haruki's *The Korean War: An International History*.

Ultimately, war disrupts education to create new relationships, connections, and directions for learning. Through various restrictions and pragmatic programs, educators locate diverse avenues to adapt their research to postwar society. While lesson plans can be manipulated by government entities to achieve political goals, war brings cultural exchange that forges bilateral relations between previously distant academic communities. Whether it be through occupation, restoration, or legacy, the Korean War significantly impacted Oregon State academics, creating an environment for international partnerships in education for years to come. Thank you.

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