Limón shares his Love for Korea

Judith van Praag

For nearly 30 years, detective novel writer Martin Limón (1947) has had an ongoing love affair with Korea. At age 17, east L.A. born and raised Limón enlisted in the US army. At first stationed in Fort Lewis, WA, he was sent to Korea in 1968, for a so called "hardship tour". Korea, suffering the aftermath of the war was considered a third world country. Only the higher ranked officers were able to take their family; troops lived in isolation, far away from home. On and around the army base, a world all of its own was formed.

Already as a 19-year-old, Limón observed the culture clash between teenage soldiers and a 4000-year-old Confucian culture. He thought superiors had to be watching and recording the interaction.

"That," he told me over coffee at Elliott Bay Books, "didn't turn out to be the case."

After three years Limón returned to California, and enrolled at Cal State Long Beach. During his junior year he visited Taiwan and studied Chinese. He graduated from CSLB with a major in Political Science and a minor in Asian Studies.

Bored with civilian life, he reenlisted and left for Korea again in 1973. He stayed off and on until 1986, when the army sent him to Oakland CA as a recruiter.

Uninspired, working excruciating hours, "We'd see the kids at 4 a.m. and often we wouldn't finish until 8 p.m.," Limón became a ferocious reader. One time, he picked up a book on writing, titled, "Maybe You Should Write a Novel". He realized that he, as a soldier, had a story to tell. But that was not the only reason why he started writing.

Over the years, people in the US, especially his relatives, would ask him why he kept going back to Asia. They weren't satisfied with his answers. At last he stopped trying to answer their questions, instead he decided to write about the country and the people he had learned to love.

Limón enrolled in a Writers' Digest correspondence course and zeroed in on "Men's Adventures". But stories in that genre were about —Rambo style— heroes. Not his cup of tea.

His latter years in Korea, Martin Limón had managed the club on the army base.

"A wonderful job," he said. "I had 44 Korean employees, all war veterans." In this capacity, he had an almost omniscient view of what was happening on and around the compound.

"There was always plenty of everything, and therefore lots of business going on. Troops would buy stuff; take it to pretty girls outside the compound. The girls would turn around and sell the goods to Koreans. In the local language they were called "persons who do business". In G.I. slang "business girl" became a euphemism for prostitute."

The question remained how Limón, as a writer, could tell what he had seen. Thus GI cops George Sueño and Ernie Bascom were born.

Altogether Limón wrote about 30 stories, of which half took place in ancient China and Taiwan. But it wasn't until he gave his cops a job —a crime to solve— that his work started to sell.

Asked how he knew so much about police procedure, Limón said with a big smile, "I didn't". He went on to explain: "Sueño and Bascom are mavericks, they don't follow procedure. At the time

that the stories take place, blood from the crime scene had to be send to a lab in Tokyo. The turnaround was two to three weeks. They (Sueño and Bascom) didn't have time to wait for the results, they moved on."

Many stories about war and the aftermath of war give you the big story, Martin Limón focuses in on a small segment. Much of his own reflective person can be found in George Sueño, as he weaves his love for Asian history, and a moody description of weather and scenery throughout his main character's narration.

Older Koreans may not wish to be reminded of that period in history, but their children are interested in Limón's books. Some say: "You tell us what our parents won't talk about."

In Limón's latest, "The Door to Bitterness", published by Soho Press Inc., ("A terrific addition to Limón's series about Army cops serving in Korea in he 1970s." —Seattle Times) George Sueño's wakes up with a pounding headache, robbed of his I.D. and weapon. When the thieves use his weapon to kill people, he feels guilty by proxy. The notion, that on a larger scale, the (any) army is debit to the fate and predicament of the offspring of local women and soldiers, is hard to escape. That in it self makes Martin Limón's writing —started to explain his love for Asia— more universal than his initial intention may have been.

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