

Voices and narratives opening up a site of contestation

Jane Jin Kaisen's film *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger* (2010) creates a genealogy of the narratives of three generations of women, and in doing so highlights the historical and geopolitical relations on the Korean peninsula over the past hundred years. These narratives belong to the former "comfort women" mobilized as part of the Japan's imperialist war and colonization of Asia, the sex workers who have serviced the camptowns around US military bases from the post-war period onwards, and the international adoptees who have continued to be sent from South Korea to the West since the Korean War. Rather than dealing with their apparently disparate circumstances in isolation as separate issues, the film interconnects their circumstances in terms of a violence that has consistently systematically silenced the individual voices of these women who have been scarred by history. Here, I want to examine the representational strategies that highlight the film's multilayered connections.

Multiple Languages and Narratives

The film begins with un-narrated footage from the Women's International Tribunal on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery that was held in Tokyo in 2000. The scene is of the former "comfort woman" Wang Aihua collapsing while giving testimony about the sexual violence she suffered at the hands of the Japanese, and is shown in slow-motion while focusing on Wang as she falls. The images form a narrative of the body crumbling under the weight of another huge blow, this time from the pain of talking about being victimized by violence. We then become aware of the voices of those who have not yet been summoned to testify. These voices, washing over one another and impossible to separate individually, then fade out, and the title *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger* appears for the first time, giving the film a symbolic opening.

The voices and narratives of these women who have been scarred by history each closes in on us with an overwhelming physicality and materiality. At the same time, the fact that they speak different languages – English, Korean, Danish, Chinese – has the effect of placing what feels like an almost insurmountable distance between us. The subtitles only serve to further complicate the alienation effect.

Neither is English, the main language spoken in the film, presented as a monolithic language. One of the sex workers felt alienated when she married an American soldier and moved to the US without being able to speak a word of English, while an adoptee who was sent to the US when she was eight was forbidden to speak her mother tongue Korean and forced to become "American." The difference between the English that the sex workers servicing the American soldiers speak in order to survive each day in the camptowns, and the intellectual, analytical English spoken by the college-educated adoptees raised by middle-class American adoptive parents is plain to see. Ironically, amidst the current push of globalization, all that is wanted

from the returned adoptees is their English, and despite striving to regain their lost mother tongue, the broken Korean they speak is “worth nothing.” The film also contrasts the “English Villages” and the “hysteria to learn English” with the multiple languages and narratives needed to survive as a diaspora.

Reproductive Control – “Comfort Woman” / “Yang-gong-ju” / “Comfort Child”

The film, while articulating the continuity of US military domination as a carry-over from Japanese colonial rule, also draws attention to the continuity of the structures that give rise to international adoption by critiquing the distinction between “comfort woman” and “Yang-gong-ju” and the politics of boundaries. Underlying the international adoption system is a politics that confines the “Western Princess” to the camptowns and excludes from civil society anyone “biracial” who was born out of a relationship with an American serviceman.

While there were a large number of war orphans after the Korean War, many of whom were sent to the US from impoverished South Korea, the policy of exiling “biracial” children through adoption went beyond being a temporary postwar measure. As Tammy Chu points out, the boom years for international adoption were “actually during industrialization when Korea had achieved quite a bit of economic success in the 80s.” The policies aimed at rapid modernization under the military dictatorships from the 1960s through to the 1980s favored “security and economic growth,” and were associated with policies of forced population control. This was essentially reproductive control, and the international adoption system was a national policy to discard children born to poor families, through prostitution, or out of marriage. Jane Jeong Trenka, who was adopted to the US, expresses the close connection between “comfort woman,” “Yang-gong-ju,” and “comfort child” in the following terms.

“One step away from a Korean-American woman married to a white man, one more or the same step away from a Korean military wife with a soldier husband. Another step away from a war bride. Another step: war booty. Step: camptown prostitute. Step: comfort woman. Step again: comfort child.” (emphasis added)

Even the contrast between the black and white images of the past in the excerpts from the old news reels or documentaries and the color images of the present exhibits continuity. In the images of the present, the “red-lit boxes” in which “the prostitutes apply makeup even while waiting on display” are adjacent to “the gate at the military base” strung with barbed wire and guarded by “uniformed men with rifles.” The most compelling image is of the cross on the church steeple glowing red like a neon sign. The red-lit cross symbolizing the blood of countless thousands that flowed on the Korean peninsula during the Cold War following colonial rule and the historical scars that are etched deeply into the subconscious of the people gives off a unique light that stands out strikingly in the Seoul night. Accompanying these images are Trenka’s words: “sex red, meat red, motel red, Konglish red...”

The camera's gaze, capturing a cemetery, a military base, a camptown, an airport, and a street littered with all manner of advertising that come and go like "fugitive visions" as it moves around, reveals the volatile places where women and children live, with fragmentary crosscuts and composition.

The Politics of Speech and Representation

When talking about her relationship with American servicemen, the sex worker remains hidden from view. There is a risk inherent in coming out and talking openly about her experiences. The former "comfort women" were exposed to the same risk, but the struggle to regain their dignity won worldwide support, and they have now captured a public place in which to testify. Scenes from the protest rallies held in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul every Wednesday since 1992 are inserted into the film, and in these we can witness the former comfort women standing tall as they make their case with their many supporters. At the same time, the film problematizes the difficulty of talking about issues related to prostitution at US military bases from the post-war period onwards, compared to the ease with which the problem of comfort women under colonial rule is discussed.

Interestingly, by focusing on the conflicts and antagonisms inherent to the struggle to regain their rights, the adoptees have opened up a place in which to rethink concepts and restructure counter-knowledge. For example, Tammy Chu criticizes the bias of feminism in South Korea, which "has very much been middle class-based," and points out that the adoption issue is "related to working-class women [and] under-privileged women" and arises from the combined oppression of patriarchy and economic disparity.

"If you look at the women who give up their children they are mostly all because they come from an economically poor background and it is also very much because of this issue of patriarchy in Korean society. I mean it was only recently where they changed the family registry system so that women could be the head of the household. Before, if a woman had a child out of wedlock, that child was considered non-existent. So women couldn't be a single mother - society just did not allow it. That was why a lot of women gave up their children. And especially now, all the babies that are being sent abroad are mostly from unwed single mothers."

Maja Lee Langvad, who was brought up by her adoptive Danish parents, expands the debate on the rights of sexual minorities to the alternate context of the structural discrimination.

"People talked about equality and rights, about homosexual rights, and of course also the child's rights... In a Danish context there is a tendency to "forget" the biological parents... The fact that people who are more economically privileged have a right to adopt - even talking about international adoption as a right is problematic in the first place... The most important thing is to ensure that the biological parents have a real choice as to whether they want to relinquish their child or not."

While taking a clear stance against the discriminatory ban on same-sex adoption, Langvad, who is gay, presents a critical perspective on the one-sidedness of approaching human rights within the framework of Western-centric liberalism. The prosperity of the international adoption system lies in the circumstances of Asian women who lack both the rights and the economic means to raise a child born outside of marriage on their own.

The adoptees also critically reexamine the identity politics surrounding race and ethnicity in the process of exploring their own roots. As Jennifer Kwon Dobbs says, "It is not so much this nationalism, this Korean race that links us together...but more importantly the economics of this production of us as adoptees." Resisting monolithic identity politics and the neoliberal globalization that has swept the world, the women, rather than being apprehensive of the differences and antagonisms inherent to their struggle, instead talk about the internal conflicts and contradictions, while finding strength in their own radical otherness, and in doing so open up a site of contestation.

A Community of Activists/Artists

The film constructs creative and unique narratives to counter dominant narratives. Its overwhelming power is drawn from the voices and narratives, which are both individual and collective, of the community of international adoptees who strive to reclaim what was taken from them. Kaisen was herself adopted to Denmark from South Korea, and has been actively involved in the community's fight for the rights of international adoptees. The community of activists and artists serves as a foundation for producing the power to enrich and express thought. The adoptees' narratives contain words from poems and books that they themselves have written, and possess "an evocative power akin to reading a philosophical work," says Yayo Okano.

The images of the adoptees talking in voices and languages colored by their fundamental otherness also bear a strong evocative power. In particular, when Dobbs is talking in the following passage, the way in which the corporeality of her philosophical thought is beautifully expressed by the camera's intimate gaze closing in on the movement of her hands is no less fascinating than her voice or narrative.

"We have this text of the body and we are trying to extract from it some thing, some face, that can close down that distance and create a space of intimacy, not necessarily a love connection, I don't even think, but rather a space of intimacy where that distance has been minimized for a kind of confrontation with the radical otherness that comes quite frankly from our bodies. So for instance I think when we are looking for our birth family, we are not even looking for a mirror. What we are looking for instead is for that distance to shrink. This presence that is part of the raw materials of our very physicality. And that radical otherness, seeing it face to face isn't necessarily to find out who I am, but rather, to give substance to that image that is kind of flitting, kind of ghostly, moving, ephemera, in that distance."

I want to touch now on the puppet shows and masques that the adoptees put on as part of their community activities. These are provocative displays designed to disrupt and break down the established order, and are directed at the people who gather at The War Memorial of Korea, where tanks and other weaponry are on display and which seeks to “enhance [the] warrior spirit defending this country”. There are shocking improvised performances where, for instance, a woman carrying a fetus has her stomach cut open and the fetus beaten out of her, after which straw stuffed into her womb is set on fire. This use of allegorical puppet shows makes it possible to represent the grotesque and brutal reality of issues related to the adoption system and sexual violence of a degree that you could not easily subject a real person to.

A woman, an orphan and a tiger appear in the puppet shows. At the end of the film, as the camera focuses in slow motion on a young girl and her father who have come to see the puppet shows, the women’s voices and narratives from the beginning of the film fade back in to form a chorus of voices, washing over one another and impossible to separate individually. These voices and narratives that we have not yet caught seem to beckon us back into the forest of words. This is a call that repeatedly opens up a genealogy of diverse and antagonistic narratives that are neither linear nor monolithic.

1 The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger was co-produced by Jane Jin Kaisen and Guston Sondin-Kung (Production: Itinrantsendsforitinerant).

2 Record of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal: Breaking the History of Silence, Video Juku Productions (2001).

3 The original version only has English subtitles, and Japanese subtitles (translators: Akwi Seo, Yasuko Ikeuchi, Chie Yokozeki) were added to a DVD put together by the Japan Film Screening Committee for screenings in Japan. Quotations are all from the original film script, with slight modification of some words.

4 Yang-gong-ju, literally “Western Princess,” is a derogatory term originating in the 1950s during the Korean War in reference to Korean women who associated with foreign men, particularly American servicemen. The term was still prevalent in the 1970s and 80s but is dated now.

5 Mihee-Natalie Lemoine (appears in the film in voice only), a pioneer who returned to South Korea from Belgium in the early 90s and created a network for restoring the rights of international adoptees, has talked about the adoptees being “industrial waste” dumped overseas. Mihee-Natalie Lemoine, “Nation, Race, Culture – A Korean Diaspora Artist on Her Fight to Overcome Three Barriers” (Japanese) in *Zenya*, first issue, Fall 2004: 81-96.

6 Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee’s Return to Korea*, Saint Paul, Minnesota: Craywolf Press (2009: 68-9). In the film, many passages and words filled with penetrating reflections are quoted and recited from this autobiographical work. The title was inspired by Sergei Prokofiev’s piano concerto “Visions Fugitives” (1917). Pieces from this piano concerto have also been included in the film along with other popular American music, and help create the charm of the film’s disparate narrative of mixed voices.

7 Zianichi Korean artist Soni Kum (appears in the film in voice only) created a work drawing inspiration from this red-lit cross, of which there are many to be seen dotted around Seoul at night. The work *bloodsea* (2010) is a video installation and performance piece that was produced in conjunction with her doctoral dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of Fine Arts, Tokyo University of the Arts.

8 Same-sex couples in registered partnerships now have the right to adopt thanks to legislation approved by the Danish parliament in May 2010

9 Yayo Okano, “On Watching The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger” – Comfort Women, US bases, International Adoption,” feedback from a film screening held by the Gender Studies Research Group,

Institute of International Language and Culture Studies, Ritsumeikan University on April 28, 2011 (<http://wan.or.jp/group/?p=982>). A film screening and talk were also held at the Institute for Gender Studies, Ochanomizu University on April 30.

10 Quoted from the Greetings page of The War Memorial of Korea website (<http://www.warmemo.or.kr/eng/intro/mess>)