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(Re)Formulations of History: Testimonies of Colonization, War, and Division in 20th Century Korea

Last spring, at a dinner with Adam Johnson in the small kitchen of my dorm, he described his interest in Korean history as twofold: firstly, the history itself is turbulent and energized and fascinating, and secondly, it is vastly underrepresented in American media and education, despite the massive role that the United States played in the Korean War, the country’s division, and the formation of the South Korean governments that followed. And it is true—beyond a line in a high school history textbook about the Korean War, I had never learned anything about Korea in school. The only representations I ever saw in media were either pop culture or parody: K-pop groups visiting American talk shows, movies with million-dollar budgets mocking Kim Jong Un.

As a young teenager, to consider myself, and what it meant to be a Korean American, appeared to have no precedent, no source upon which I could confer besides occasional stories from my parents and grandparents, who immigrated to California in the aftermath of the war. If I did not know what to make of Korea, what could I possibly make of myself, removed by time and distance and language from my ancestral homeland?

As the years went by, the most amazing and altering discovery was realizing that I was wrong—about the unknowable history, the lack of precedent—for Korean American writers had been there all along, making up a body of literature which was infinitely-voiced. It was through the fiction in online literary magazines and on the shelves of bookstores that I first learned about Korean history through fictional narratives, and that I first began to understand that Korean American identity is shaped by this history. In high school, I sought out these works (and poetry, too), which became a kind of second education, one that I could not find in school; I was taught by the writings of Chang-rae Lee, Catherine Chung, Cathy Park Hong.

In the years that followed, Korean history became something I wanted and needed for understanding my own identity, the lives of my ancestors, and the heart of a people I was increasingly beginning to identify as my own. At Stanford, where I am an undergraduate, I took Korean history and language courses, I picked up books on Korean history and literature. I clung onto everything I learned, particularly about the history of the twentieth century. Every story of that century appeared to me teeming with implication, bringing me to understand the extent to which we are shaped by our histories. I learned stories of jailed independence leaders, of young children accompanying their parents to government stations when Koreans were required to change their names to Japanese ones. I learned the contours of war and division which radically reconfigured the country. I learned about massacres in whose involvement the US government has denied: the devastating 1948-49 Jeju Island massacre, the 1980 Gwangju student uprising.

I also began to learn about my own family history: my great-great-grandfathers were both leaders in the independence movement; one of them was a Methodist pastor who was exiled by
the Japanese government to Hawaii, and the other was a composer and the first school music
teacher in Korea, as well as the first Korean to study Western music. My great-great-aunt was
best friends with Korean national hero, Yu Gwan-sun, who was killed by Japanese prison
officers at seventeen. Last summer, I received a Chappell Lougee grant to research my family
history in Korea, where I collected Korean historical texts and listened to personal and firsthand
stories from the last century.

The works in my collection are an amalgamation of texts from my studies, pleasure
reading, and travels which document, reimagine, fictionalize, and testify to 20th century Korean
history. A history which, of course, is made up of histories, of accounts so complex and various
that I will never be able to know them all. My collection attempts to parallel the multifaceted
nature of Korean history, and the various ways in which Koreans envisioned their identities and
their futures. It is rooted in not only firsthand accounts and small- and large-scale historical texts,
but also the fiction and poetry that brought me to my passion for Korean history in the first place.
For I believe that these literary works define a crucial facet of the relationship of Koreans to their
history: they rewrite and re-envision history under a new light, just as colonial-era independence
leaders did when they were formulating a Korean national identity against the threat of
nationlessness, and they enlarge history to the level of the individual voice, imbuing it with the
range of feeling and love which in history books is not always easy to communicate. Catherine
Chung’s Forgotten Country, for example, invokes history through the narrative of a lineage of
women who lost their families to imprisonment, torture, and war, and Emily Yoon’s A Cruelty
Special to Our Species embodies the voices of Korean comfort women, giving testimony to the
details which were, in their everydayness, vastly significant: condoms for Japanese soldiers
called “Attack Number One,” girls who drank disinfectant and tried to kill themselves at the
stations, women who returned home with irreparable internal damage, infertility.

The collection’s historical texts can be broken up into two categories: large-scale,
academic histories and commentaries written by American historians and academics, and
histories written in Korean by the Koreans who lived through it and who tell the stories of their
ancestors. Large histories include works by Bruce Cumings and Carter Eckert, and they served as
initiatory texts into my study of Korean history. Less outwardly-prominent in terms of scope and
scale, but extremely significant in terms of authenticity and voice, are the smaller works that I
collected in Korea and that have been passed down in my family for generations, for they
provide the lived perspectives which no American historian could replicate. Cho Myeong-sok’s
Marching Through Love details her experience as the vice principal of a small school in Seoul
for North Korean refugees. A dissertation by Yoon Young Cho that my mother and I discovered
in the National Library of Korea focuses on my great-great-grandfather Kim In-shik’s role in the
development of Korean music during the colonial period.

The significance of my collection can be explained through a number of different lenses.
The first places this amalgamation of history against the backdrop of Korea’s colonial history:
during the colonial period, the Japanese government implemented widespread measures intended
to erase Korean culture. This erasure extended to the fundamental expression of the Korean
language, as its use was forbidden in workplaces and schools, and as speaking it could lead to violent consequences. Symbolically, these texts stand together as testament to the Korean voice amidst these historical forces of effacement and against the contemporary silencing of Korean perspectives in Western representations of Korea. Secondly, in its presentation of fiction, poetry, historical accounts, academic texts, and memoir, this collection pushes against the notion of history as singularly defined by outwardly objective sources, that it is instead comprised of manifold perspectives and imaginings. Finally, the diversity of the perspectives included in the collection, from the works of major Korean historians in America to books published by individual schools and churches which include documents specific to those institutions, creates a comprehensiveness of scale that large histories alone do not possess. Despite its limited number of texts, its fullness lies in this multiplicity of voices, many of which have gone largely unheard throughout conventional recollections of history, like Tae Yook Choi’s One Hundred Year History of Cheonan, which retells colonial history through Cheonan’s perspective, or Hyung-Ju Ahn’s Korean Youth Military School, which documents a Korean military school in Nebraska. As a collection, the works that comprise it make it novel, offering the vibrant tenor of voices which have not been heard outside of the small communities in which they were first recorded.
Photographs of students from the Korean youth military school in Nebraska

This collection is part of an ongoing project, one which I plan to continue for many years to come: I hope to extend the research I conducted for my Chappell Lougee project, to become fluent in Korean, and to ultimately write a collection of essays on my own family history, undoubtedly amassing more and more literary and historical works along the way. In terms of Korean American literary history, I also hope to pursue a PhD in Asian American poetry, with the question of how history shapes diasporic identity being one I will always explore. This question obsessed Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose radical text *Dictee* presented a voice so singularly striking that it remains unparalleled. The sound of Cha’s voice, however, was cut short by her murder one week after the work was published.

*Pages from Cha’s Dictee*

Throughout my attempts to write about Korean history, I did not, and still do not, know how to write about atrocity. What reading the works of this collection has taught me is the remarkable persistence of the human voice, the insistence on a national identity, amidst such atrocity. When I read such voices I am reminded of the smallness of my place among them. As I navigate how exactly to speak of the past, and how to formulate my own identity as a Korean American against that past, I am constantly humbled by the lineage to which I belong. Books were my first source of knowledge about not only where I came from, but also the utter vastness of that place and what I have to learn from it, and to them I am indebted, and to them I will return.
Bibliography

Fiction

Chung’s novel situates Korean history within the narrative of a family who immigrates to Michigan during the country’s military dictatorships and democratization movement. History here is explored as a force which shapes the manifestation of familial love amidst generational hardship and racism.


*Native Speaker* is one of the first books I read which was narrated from a Korean American perspective. Henry Park, a spy married to a white woman, navigates his shifting Korean American identity as the distance between he and his homeland increases. Years later, I had the opportunity to take a class with Lee at Stanford, from whom I learned much more about what it means to navigate being Asian American.


Lee’s novel, a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award, presents a fictional account of a rather underrepresented population of Koreans: those who live and work in Japan, either by forced labor under Japanese rule or by personal economic necessity, where they face widespread racism and secondary political status.


Kim’s novel provides an important perspective on early Korean American immigrants, following one family’s narrative from the 1910s to the 1940s who were part of the stateless population who participated in the independence movement remotely while navigating their own hardships in California.

Nonfiction
Written by my great-uncle, a historian based in Seoul and California, this book covers the history of the church my great-great-grandfather founded as one of the first Korean immigrants to Hawaii. He was exiled from the country during Japanese colonial rule for his active role in the independence movement, and he joined the immigrant population who became stateless and originless during Korea’s colonization, a symbolic and political status discussed in *The Making of Asian America* (cited below).


Cha’s work, first published in 1982, which explores Korean history and identity from the physically and temporally distanced perspective of a Korean American immigrant, is renowned for its striking voice and its experimentation with various forms, including poetry, photography, and film. *Dictee*, an experimental book which grapples with Korean identity through the intertwining narratives of classical and revolutionary women, is considered a seminal text in Asian American literature, and was published only a week before Cha was murdered in New York City.


This book is a collection of primary source documents dating as early as the Choson dynasty. From protest letters written by the leaders of peasant rebellions under the Choson rule to speeches made by Kim Il Sung upon the formation of North Korea, this text provides an illuminating look into the diverse voices of both commoners and leaders.


Cumings, one of the most prominent historians on Korea in the United States, takes a unique view on Korean history, reformulating the Korean War as a civil war rooted in factions that developed during Korea’s colonization and emphasizing the crucial role US intervention played in starting the war, dividing the country, and protecting corrupt military dictatorships in South Korea. I first read this book, along with Demick’s and Ch’oe et al.’s, for my Korean history course at Stanford, which was formative to my understanding of what it means to have inherited the legacy of Korean history.

Demick, in chronicling the lives of North Koreans, provides an unprecedented look into life in North Korea, and, subsequently, its fraught and turbulent history. I admire it for its humanization of a people who face immense hardship and suffering and who are often one-dimensionalized (or not covered at all) by Western media.


One chapter of this Asian American studies text discusses Korean immigration beginning with the first wave of immigrants to Hawaii in 1905, the international nationalist movement, and Korean American relations with other ethnic groups in the US.


A collection of essays and literary criticism that I found in a used bookstore in Pasadena. One essay by Chung-Hei Yun discusses Kim Ronyoung’s Clay Walls. Yun describes Korean American literature as “generated from the loss of homeland through Japanese annexation, the mutilation of the land when it was divided into North and South Korea following the liberation from Japan after World War II, the Korean War, and the post-1965 exodus” (Yun 81).


Poetry

Although this collection of Cha’s works contains various forms such as prose, photography, and screenplays, much of it is poetry; however, when it comes to Cha, categorizing her work is an imprecise and limiting task.


The subjects of Kwock’s debut collection are directly rooted in Korea’s 20th century history, with division serving as a rich source of meditation as it manifests itself in colonization, the Korean War, death and personal tragedy.


Lim’s collection, while not a direct exploration of Korean American identity, naturally invokes its presence in poems describing an uncle in Busan who committed suicide and the lives of her mother and grandmother. It was selected by Louise Glück for the 2013 Barnard Women Poets Prize, and I picked it up after Louise recommended it to me when I took a workshop with her.


Hong’s collection recalls the Gwangju Democratization Movement, a 1980 uprising whose suppression led to the deaths of many civilians and students.


Yoon’s debut collection gives voice to Korean “comfort women,” the women who were forced into sex slavery in Japanese-occupied territories during World War II. Through poems written from the perspectives of these women, Yoon provides heart-wrenching and powerful testimony to their stories of the war and its permanent effect on their lives, its inducement of illnesses and infertility, stories which are growing increasingly rare now that only a few comfort women are still living. It is one of my favorite books, the language so astonishing and controlled. In its opening poem, “An Ordinary Misfortune,” Yoon writes, “Things a soldier can do: mount you before another soldier is done. Say, Drink this soup made of human blood. Say, The Korean race should be erased from this earth. Tops down. Bottoms up. Things erased: your name, your child, your history. Your new name: Fumiko, Hanako, Yoshiko. Name of the condom: Charge Number One. Name of the needle: Compound 606. Salvarsan means, an arsenic to save. Ratio 291:29 soldiers per girl. Actual count: lost. Lost: all.”

Korean Texts
English trans: *1902, Person of Choson Boards an Immigration Ship Bound for Hawaii: American Diaspora Seen through the Life Story of Ahn Jae-chang and His Family*

This book charts the history of Korean immigration, beginning in 1902, with the first wave of Korean immigrants to Hawaii who were sent to work on plantations. Ahn follows the narrative of his great-uncle, Ahn Jae-chang, through his immigration to Hawaii, tracking the first developments of the Korean American population and the political difficulties Korean immigrants faced due to their statelessness while Korea was under Japanese colonial rule as well as their confrontations with racism. Ahn donated all of the sources he used for the book to UCLA’s special collections, where they are now kept in the Hyung-Ju Ahn Collection.


English trans: *Cheonan March 1st Independence Movement and Korean American Support for the Movement.*

This book discusses the connections of the 1919 Cheonan independence movement within the terms of the larger national movement and its significance as an international movement which had an impact both abroad and domestically. It sheds light on the vital role that Korean Christian pastors played as leaders of the movement and highlights my great-great-grandfather, Ahn Chang-ho, who threw himself into the national independence movement as a leading figure upon the deaths of his wife and two daughters, a role which would later lead to his exile. I was given this book during my grant travels in Cheonan, and as I toured the city with the officials of the Methodist church Ahn Chang-ho founded in 1916 on the former land of a snake charmer, I learned a story about how he boarded Yu Gwan-sun in his house while she hid from the police before her initial arrest.


English trans: *Korean Youth Military School*

A recipient of the Inside and Outside Korean Culture Chronicle Award (English trans.), this book covers the history of a Korean youth military school in Nebraska, which operated from 1909 to 1914. The school was intended to educate and train young scholars to fight for the Korean national cause. As a nation which was continually oppressed by other nations throughout the century, this school marks a niche, yet rather common, development of militaristic organizations intended to rebel against Japanese colonial rule and to establish a united Korean nation-state.

Cho writes about her experience rescuing North Korean refugees and serving as the vice principal at Yeomyeong School, an alternative high school catering to students who escaped North Korea and are not able to adapt to the South Korean curriculum, for the past twenty years. My mother and I have visited the school every summer for the past few years, and I was given Cho’s book during my research grant travels last July.


A biography of Charles H. Kim, who played a vital role in establishing the Korean American community in Los Angeles, founding its Korean Center in 1962. As a Korean who supported the independence movement from abroad, collecting funds to send to Korea and participating as a member of the Korean American delegation in LA, his story is illustrative of the political involvement of Koreans who lived overseas during colonial rule. There is an elementary school named after him in Koreatown.


Cho’s dissertation discusses the development of music in Korea during the colonial period, with a particular focus on the contributions of my great-great-grandfather, Kim In Shik. Kim was the first Korean to study Western music and became a violin professor for the Chosen Classical Music Heritage Organization and a music teacher for the YMCA, putting together the organization’s earliest concerts. While the concerts were used as monitoring sites for the Japanese colonial government, for Koreans, singing and playing music together was a vital mode of expressing patriotism.


Given to me by an official at Ahn Chang-ho’s church in Cheonan, this book traces the city’s history from its centrality to the conflicts of the Three Kingdoms Period to its unwilled position as a base for Japanese economic and political invasion, a position which influenced the development of its strong spirit of resistance. The book also discusses the role that Ahn Chang-ho and his wife played in the region’s development.

This volume includes a directory, published in 1938, of the teachers, professors, and students of Soongsil Middle School and Soongsil University. Soongsil University, founded by the American Presbyterian missionary William Baird, was Korea’s first modern university, which dissolved itself during the colonial period in order to avoid submitting to Japanese rule, reopening in 1954. I received a copy at the Soongsil University’s museum, and it contains a photo of Kim In-shik, who taught music there.

My great-great-grandfather Kim In-shik’s photograph (bottom left) and name in the Soongsil directory.