

Broken Silence: The Taboo of Korean Prostitutes during American Occupation and Its Depiction in the Korean Films of the 1990s¹

in: *kultuRRevolution*. Zeitschrift für angewandte Diskurstheorie, no. 47 (2004): 68–71.

Hyunseon Lee

In the Korean movie *Spring in My Hometown* (*Arumdaun sijol*), directed by Lee Kwang-mo in 1998, the life of a family and village near a GI camp after the Korean War is remembered by a man in a flashback to when he was a young boy with his friend. His family survives the hard time after the Korean War because his sister becomes the girlfriend of an American soldier. His father becomes a worker in the American military camp. The family becomes the richest one in the village. The daughter intends to marry the American soldier. He promises her that.

The boys also see that the soldiers have sex with village women in a ruined house. The mother of his friend has to have sex with a GI because she lost his laundry. The son leaves home and never returns. Prostitution here is clearly interpreted not only as a profession but also as a kind of exchange. There are no professional prostitutes for the military. The film is tragic and highly political, even if the cold camera view is what the young boy sees, without emotional tension or dramatic effects. Mostly it is just silent picture. The camera often captures stage action as a picture rather than as a moving image. There only remains the picture of the beautiful young sister in pregnancy, a kind of ‘Western Princess’. She believed in her American lover. He is not once shown in the entire film. He will never come again to see her.

This cinematic narration shows, on the one hand, the characteristics of dealing with the subject: the Korean War and the Aftermath. The dominant method of film making in Korea,

¹ The work was supported by the Korea Research Foundation Grant (KRF-2000-AA0109).

namely Realism, is prevalent here also, and the boy's viewpoint contributes to this. But it allows, on the other hand, some remarkable changes. We finally see a normal daughter who has feelings for the American soldier, even if he has never visited her family. We are no longer confronted with such an emotional, masculine gaze as had dominated most of the films about the American soldiers and the Koreans, especially about Korean women.

The so-called Western Princess (in Korean 'Yanggongchu') originally means those Korean women who prostituted themselves for American soldiers during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 and after. The word is also used in broader context for women who went out with American or foreign men. For the Koreans, in their traditionally passive posture towards the foreign world, after the Korean War "American" meant "foreign," "western" and "international." In other words, in the post-colonial period since 1945 America has replaced the role that Japan played during the colonial period, and likewise the American military has replaced the status of the Japanese military. And military prostitution played a significant role in their perception of these foreigners. Western Princess is a degrading term in the Korean language. It is neither found in any Korean dictionary nor in scientific literature. It is a slang word or a swearword. In fact, the subject has not been thought worthy of discussion at all. It has become, however in my opinion, a collective symbol as defined by German discourse theorist Jürgen Link.² These colonized women have become a stereotypical figure in literature, films, and certainly in everyday life. Here I would like to explore her transformation in Korean literature and film.

Certainly she is a figment of the Korean imagination. The function of this symbol has become multidimensional, including even political aspects, beyond the image of a naive young 'woman of the evening.' First of all, Western Princess has negative connotations. The description is already ambiguous. Is there a connection between princess and prostitute? Why

did the Korean people baptize the prostitute for American soldiers with this noble title? Is there no distinction between princess and prostitute? Webster Dictionary defines the prostitute as “a woman who engages in promiscuous sexual activity for pay” and the princess as “a non-reigning female member of a royal family.”

Prostitutes servicing American soldiers have been regarded as the bottom of the hierarchy, even in prostitute society. The Western Princess has been used synonymously with ‘Western Prostitute’ and ‘Western Whore.’ This ironic name draws our attention to the woman who sees herself as a kind of princess, if she is to finally reach her dream of finding her prince among American soldiers, marry him and go to America. It might be connected to the slang term ‘princess illness.’ Nowadays, it is a common word in Korean culture, meaning the woman who behaves as though she were a princess, though her socio-economic reality is quite different.

Does this ironic title indicate a culturally specific frame that does not allow intimacy or sexual relationships between the Korean woman and the foreign man? Or does the ambivalence of this title imply a male viewpoint? Some see the condition of women or female existence in general as a kind of prostitution based only on her sexual availability. In this context, Claude Lévi-Strauss saw that marital alliance between groups in human culture took the classic form of a gift-exchange relationship and that the most important gifts exchanged were women.³ The function of kinship systems was to regulate and ensure the continuity of the exchange of women between groups.

The strange thing is that the so called ‘Comfort Women’ have enjoyed more sympathy and sorrow, since they had not prostituted themselves but were forced to sleep with foreign

² Link, Jürgen/Gerhard, Ute: Zum Anteil der Kollektivsymbolik an den Nationalstereotypen. In: Link, J./Wuelfing, Wulf (ed.): *Nationale Mythen und Symbole in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart 1991, 16-52.

³ Lévi-Strauss, Claude: *Structural Anthropology*. London 1968; New York 1994.

Japanese soldiers without pay during World War II. These women were drafted by the colonial power to service Japanese soldiers. Social cultural levels were not involved in this case. These women were clearly political victims.⁴

In comparison to the Comfort Woman, the Western Princess was regarded in Korean society as less sympathetic, more immoral, a social evil and most dangerous. Even now, the prevailing stereotype of Western Princess and women in so called 'international marriages' goes so far as to include physical features; their faces are reputed to have large cheekbones and wide mouths or otherwise fall outside of the mainstream Korean beauty ideal. This has negatively influenced how intermarriage or relationships between members of different cultures and races are viewed in Korean culture.

The Western Princess is defined by what she is probably not. She is measured by her own culture as one who accepts the attention of American soldiers (foreign men) and is seduced by the practical wish to make money quickly and by her dreams of a future life of financial security and happiness, which may include marriage with an American man of color – though she is looked down upon by her own homogeneous culture. Most people of her own culture see this girl as doing something out of the ordinary. Her fate is already defined. There is no happy ending, even if a successful Western Princess goes to America with her American bridegroom.

This everyday life discourse has been transformed in literature and film in various ways, but most of them are structurally similar. Due to lack of space, I cannot analyze many texts here. However, I would like to suggest and summarize a few characteristics of the literary and film discourses.

There is no first person perspective here, in these images. They have neither shining stars of a fantasy world in literature and film nor positive protagonists. The films *The Evil Night* and

⁴ Yang, Hyunah: Re-memembering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing. In: Kim, Elaine H./Choi, Chungmoo (ed.): *Dangerous Women. Gender and Korean Nationalism*. New York/London 1998, 123-140.

Sonja, directed by Shin Sang-ok in 1958, are two exceptions, because the Western Princess was played as a femme fatale protagonist who tried to seduce an innocent man for her own selfish desires.

The point here is that the life of a Western Princess in general has rarely been treated as a central theme. Even if it plays a key role or stands in the center of the story, it usually has been described indirectly or kept in the background. The short story *Obaltan (A Stray Bullet)* by Lee Beom-seon is a good example. The central theme of this short story published in 1959 is Song Chul-ho's family's life after the Korean War. His old sick mother is always crying "Let's get out, let's get out," probably due to a post-traumatic reaction, having been a refugee during the war. Poverty, hunger and hopelessness dominate their lives. The fact that his sister, Myoung-sook, became a Western Princess to rescue her family and that his brother became a bank robber only raises the tragic character of the story. The tragedy climaxes when his wife dies during childbirth despite the Western Princess having used her body in prostitution to help her.

The image of his sister remains almost without contour in the literary genre: staying in the background, keeping in silence, only because her appearance has been mentioned by her brother, in the third person perspective. She looks like an office worker with a lithe body, black dress and high heels. One day Chul-ho saw a Korean woman on the street with colorful sunglasses, being hugged by an American soldier. All the people see her and are wondering about this woman, his sister, saying, "As a business it's high classical one." and "Could that one too get married?"

The brother blushes and starts feeling dizzy. After that day they do not talk each other any more. Just as his wife is dying in the hospital, they exchanged a few necessary sentences, and the sister gives him money. At the moment where he saw a hole in her socks, he felt some sympathy for her.

His injured pride and shame as a brother has been replaced by the male viewpoint and by the nationalistic male gaze in the film *Obaltan*, directed by Yoo Hyun-mok in 1961, an important filmmaker during the golden age of Korean cinema in the 1960s. The film is based on the same story of the literary version but speaks a new and different language and grammar. It has even added many variations regarding the figure constellation and side stories.

So his sister's figure is more perceptible. Her mostly empty place in literature is occupied by the visual presence. Because of the power of the cinematic picture, one immediately sees a woman, once a brave, lovely girl, a typical Korean beauty, now on the street among the women of the evening, a princess in modern Western style, looking forward to being discovered by a prince, an American soldier. We will not experience any American soldiers. We will not find out what she really thinks and feels, even if she were to have sympathy for them.

We just see her true love, a good-looking Korean man, who lost his legs during the war. He is not able to give her his love any more. He abandons himself and his fiancé, and this has forced her to prostitute. Now he is just observing, like her brothers, how she catches the American man on the street. The view of victimization has been strengthened here. First of all, her brothers and boyfriend, the Korean men, are ashamed that Myung-sook became a Western Princess and feel responsible for this existence.

This kind of narrative structure is typical for the story told about the Western Princess, even in a so-called 'globalizing' Korean media culture in the 1990s. A hiding of the subjects from direct confrontation or presenting them as side figures in side plots may not always be intended by the authors. But I would like to consider this as a discursive strategy. It has two functions that might at first sight appear as contrary or incompatible.

On the one hand, the image of the victimized prostitute dominates the literary and film discourse about these women, especially in the literary texts written soon after the Korean War - e.g. the short story *Shorty Kim* (1957) by Song Byung-soo, *Obaltan* - and in the 1980's

novels *Nosering (Gobbi)* by Yoon Chung-mo and *Silver Stallion (Unma nun oji annunda)* by Ahn Chung-hyo. Here we mostly find the warm view of the authors. They are trying to look at the social conditions under which an innocent good girl or woman slips bit by bit towards the bottom. Here, the Western Princess can be seen as an allegory of a Korean nation who has to be confronted with so much violence by foreign forces.⁵

This already ruined woman, having arrived at the bottom of her professional prostitute's life, now functions, however, as an evil image. She is not a victim any more nor a passively obeying woman. On the contrary, she could be dangerous, hurting not only herself but others as well, or society as a whole. Lee Moon-yul's novel *What crashes, has wings* (1988) shows such a woman as the protagonist. She is the sister of a Western Princess about whom the reader only knows through typical storytelling techniques; she has fulfilled her American dream of marrying an American soldier and moving to America. The former Western Princess also invited her sister, an English literature student at an elite university, to America. She is in a deep relationship with a Korean law student, but their love story ends in fatal tragedy. The sister, who has now become experienced with American men, a kind of Western Princess, as Koreans say, cannot be happy with a Korean man any more. The Korean man kills her.

The evil image of the protagonist is described much more strongly in the cinematic version of the story in 1991 by Kang Che-kyu. She herself has not really prostituted, but her dreams of America and her sexual relationships with American men are accused here, in the name of true love, an obsession of the Korean lover.

Here I would like to stress that the narrative strategy of avoiding direct confrontation with the theme, the discursive silence in terms of Michel Foucault, makes, on the contrary, their presence more effectively clear; and that this narrative structure, even in a globalizing media culture, yet continues, in spite of certain radical transformations.

⁵ Kim, Hyun Sook: Yanggongju as an Allegory of the Nation: Images of Working-Class Women in Popular and Radical Texts, in: Kim, Elaine H./Choi, Chungmoo (ed.): *Dangerous Women*, 175-202.

The desire for globalized culture is dominant in the Korean imagination starting about 1990. So it is no wonder that the discourse of everyday life and the media on the subject have increasingly changed. A newspaper notes that the contribution of the Western Princess to the modern history of Korean clothes should be revisited. Another newspaper comments that the contemporary look of the fashionable Korean woman is like that of the former Western Princess, with sunglasses, colorful hair, and a provocative sexy air. There are also other media forms that have attempted to approach the real life of these women. Relationships with different cultures and races are not regarded as negatively nor are so absolutely rejected as in the past. According to a 1999 survey of 1,288 young Korean university students, more than 50 percent of them view marriage outside their own culture in a more compatible way. This represents a huge generation shift.

On the other hand, the collective memory about the Western Princess for American soldiers is so visually alive, and the explicit pictures of assault on the innocence of young women by greedy soldiers are so radically cruel. The Western Princess is a terrible product of war, a traumatic insult of nation by the (post-) colonial power, which the Koreans would have liked to have forgotten and repressed, if possible.

I would like to point out here the role of art as a place for collective memory. While economic political and social discourse tends to close, if not heal, the historical wounds, realistic literature and visual art – especially film – in Korean media insist in some ways on remembering, saving and discussing it.

The emptiness and the silence which characterize the existence of the Western Princess have been challenged by various figures in the 1990s. The author Bok Geo-il, a representative friend of globalization, published a novel *Camp Seneca GI-Town* in 1994. The young boy's perspective, like in the movie *Spring in My Hometown*, is also found here. His childhood, which was mostly influenced by GIs, is remembered. The perspective of an innocent boy allows Bok to deal with the Western Princess here, not directly with a problematic centrality

but symbolically as minor characters. The boy observes, without any judgement, how Mrs. Hong comes to the village, smokes American cigarettes, and has sex with American soldiers. He also sees a Western Princess named Dolly, who became a prostitute of her own free will because she likes it. She will have an 'international marriage' and go to America soon. The boy also sees Polly and Tina, with her red hair and short skirt; both have been killed by their American lover which brings the village people in to the street shouting: "Yankee go home!" The Korean War is here reduced to a series of voyeuristic images, as in the movies *Spring in My Hometown* and *Silver Stallion*.

In both films, the prostitution of a mother with an American soldier instigates the violent revenge of a son through whom the story is told. This intricate webbing of sex and violence is a prominent phenomenon in the Korean Films of the 1990s about the Korean War.⁶

The film *Silver Stallion*, directed by Chang Kil-su in 1991, the cinematic version of the same novel, presents a good example for the allegory of a gendered nation. It shows how the beautiful protagonist, a brave widow and mother of two kids, has been raped by American soldiers, isolated by the village people and become a professional Western Princess. She symbolizes the raped nation of Korea.

In the film *Address Unknown*, made in 2001 by Kim Ki-deok, the lover of another Western Princess never came back to her in Korea. Here the most cruel and radical moving pictures dominate. The film marks a symptomatic break with the Realism tradition, which mostly deals with the subject and very often links to the naturalistic tendencies or emotionally attached nationalistic feelings.

⁶ Kim, Kyung Hyun: Is This How the War is Remembered? Deceptive Sex and the Re-masculinized Nation in the Taebaek Mountains. In: James, David E./Kim, Kyung Hyun (ed.): *Im Kwon-Taek. The Making of a Korean National Cinema*. Detroit 2002, 197-222.

The image of the Western Princess is not measured in this film by a sentimental view and is quite different from the others, especially from the viewpoints of the 1950s. We see a one-eyed, pretty girl who has accepted her sexual desire for a Korean boy but sleeps with an American soldier because he helps her get an eye operation by an American doctor (to give her a false eye). Finally, in desperation, she poked the false one out. She cannot allow her situation to make her into a Western Whore. She returns to her Korean boyfriend with only one eye.

We see also a beautiful, passionate, tragic Western Princess who has been totally isolated by the village people but who still waits for a reply from her American lover. She writes letters to him in America, and they always return with the stamp “address unknown.” She lives in an old red car outside of the village and is regarded as crazy; she is beaten up even by her son, Chang-uk. This is a boy of Black American and Korean parentage, the least beloved, most forgotten figure in Korean culture. His mother has a Korean lover whose job is to kill dogs. Her son is the central figure here to whom attention has to be paid. The so called ‘mixed blood child’ has been a taboo subject in Korean culture, which stands accused here of discrimination against the mixed blood child, the Western Princess and mixed relationships.

The radical political viewpoint of the film’s director leaves the viewer uneasy, pulls in opposite directions between emotional attachment and physical sorrow. The boy is symbolically identified with the dog. Both he and the lover of his mother – the brutal dog killer – cannot replace the absence and empty space of her American love. Both die like dogs. The mother eats the dead body of her son piece by piece. It does not leave a lasting positive image with which we might live.

Are Korean stereotypical concepts such as the Western Princess really created by subjects themselves or are they total victims of what others seem determined to classify them as being? Why do these fixations remain undisturbed, although in different ways, as the media, culture

and society evolve towards globalization? To whom should the fault be ascribed? Those who are the objects of media description?

The scenes, either of sad literary memory or of terrible, sensual, shocking film pictures, accuse a political culture moving toward globalization of a past not yet overcome and of prejudice unchanged, in spite of rapidly changing realities.

Literature

Appadurai, Arjun (ed.): *Globalization*. Durham & London 2001.

Bok, Geo Il: *Camp Seneca GI-Town*. Seoul 1994.

Fiske, John: *Reading the Popular*. New York 1987.

Foucault, Michel: *Der Wille zum Wissen. Sexualitaet und Wahrheit* vol.1. (5th ed.). Frankfurt am Main 1991.

Hall, Stuart: *Ideologie, Kultur, Medien, Neue Rechte, Rassismus. Ausgewaehlte Schriften*. Hamburg 1989.

James, David E./Kim, Kyung Hyun (ed.): *Im Kwon-Taek. The Making of a Korean National Cinema*. Detroit 2002.

Kim, Elaine H./Choi, Chungmoo (ed.): *Dangerous Women. Gender and Korean Nationalism*. New York/London 1998.

Kim, Myung Hwan/Kim, Yung Kyung et al. (ed.): *Korean Representative Short Story*. Seoul 1997.

Lee, Hyangjin: *Contemporary Korean Cinema. Identity, Culture and Politics*. Manchester/New York 2000.

Lee, Moon Yul: *What crashes, has wings*. Seoul 1996.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude: *Structural Anthropology*. London 1968; New York 1994.

Link, Jürgen/Gerhard, Ute: Zum Anteil der Kollektivsymbolik an den Nationalstereotypen. In: Link, J./Wuelfing, Wulf (Hg.): *Nationale Mythen und Symbole in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart 1991, 16-52.