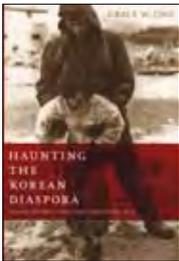


Korea



Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. xiii + 245 pages, b/w photos, notes, index. Paper, US\$22.50; ISBN 978-0-8166-5275-4.

HAUNTING the Korean Diaspora is an academic work presented in the experimental forms of “displaced autoethnography” (46) whose main theme is the “trans-generational haunting,” a condition of “the voices of one generation living in the unconscious of another” (180), which, Grace M. Cho claims, affects the Korean diaspora in the United States over traumatic memories generated by the Korean War (1950–1953) and the emergence of camptown prostitutes or the *yanggongju*. The term *yanggongju* (literally, “Western princess”) is a euphemism for *yanggalbo* (“Western whore”) and was used primarily during the 1950s in reference to Korean women engaged in sex work for wartime American servicemen stationed in Korea. Cho writes that *yanggongju* was an unmentionable word not only in her house but

also “an unspeakable and ‘phantomogenic’ word for the Korean diaspora” (3). Taking a psychoanalytic approach to “the process of nurturing a ghost through shame and secrecy” (3) about the *yanggongju*, Cho seeks “a radical resignification of the term away from either its stigmatic or its romantically tragic connotations” (203).

As offspring of the 1971 remarriage of a US serviceman to a Korean woman more than twenty years his junior, Cho writes that she has been haunted by recurring dreams about her mother and father’s personal histories of trauma-laden lives, whose origins and implications she seeks in the complicated US-Korea relationship, dating back to the Korean War, or the “Forgotten War” in US history. The book could indeed be regarded as the biracial activist-scholar’s monographic rendition of *sinsae t’aryöng* (192), the Korean tradition of telling one’s lamentable life story in rhythmic monologue-song form, which helps Cho obtain “an affective understanding of the *yanggongju*” (18) for both personal and political purposes.

Cho combines multiple methods and uses a variety of English-language sources of dream work, fantasy, fiction, semi-fictional vignettes (based on oral histories, interviews, and popular media accounts), film, and her own creative and performance-based work. The book is composed of five chapters, some of which are “experimental in terms of the voices used, while others are presented in a more ‘academic’ voice” (47). In chapter 1, where Cho presents dense theoretical discussions on the ghost and the production of haunting, she also notes that the byproducts of her multiple methods are “unexpected juxtapositions, repetitions, discarded thought fragments, and the same story told differently each time” (47). Cho’s methodological strategy of presenting repetitive “multiple drafts”—with overabundant quotations from psychoanalytic and literary works throughout the text—imparted to this reviewer a sense of haunting circularity to the linear process of reading the text, at the same time generating a deep sympathy and admiration for Cho’s courageous quest to confront a secretive gap in her family history, out of her wish to vindicate her mother.

In chapters 2 and 3, Cho critically reviews, respectively, the violence of the Korean War (with a focus on the atrocities committed to civilians and women during the early days of the war by drawing heavily on works by progressive historians and journalists) and the genealogy of the *yanggongju* (harking back to the “comfort women” for the Japanese Imperial Army and moving forward to the transformation of the “Western princess” into “war bride” and/or “GI bride”). The remaining two chapters focus on the *yanggongju* as the GI bride in the United States and the resultant transgenerational haunting, which Cho argues was created by the gap between the “GI bride” and the “Yankee whore” (131). Sociological narratives of Korean-American assimilation as honorary whites, critiques Cho, are fantasies dependent upon the erasures of the *yanggongju* in the “narrative of friendly US-Korea relations and the micropolitical fictions of family life” (130). In the postscript Cho further reflects on her affective bonding “through transgenerational haunting” (200) to both of her parents.

Overall, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* artfully interweaves psychoanalytic and critical discourses on a number of traumatic political and social events in modern Korean history and their psychic effects in the lives of the *yanggongju* and her

kinfolk with the author's personal need to search for her own family history. A minor weakness, which Cho acknowledges, is that her work relies on English-language materials only, some of which are outdated. A more substantive issue has to do with Cho's unmodified use of the term "Korean diaspora" throughout the book. Cho fails to mention that the majority in the Korean diaspora came to the United States in search of the American dream after the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 through no kinship to the *yanggongju*, and that the phenomenon of transgenerational haunting may be applicable primarily in the lives of the family and the immigrant relatives of the GI bride within the Korean diaspora in the United States.

Haunting the Korea Diaspora's contribution is to provide a critical analysis of the ambivalent Korea-U.S. relationship emanating largely from the latter's military atrocities suffered by many civilians during the Korean War, as well as from the structural violence experienced by countless young women selling sexual services to American soldiers in the South Korean camp towns, many of whom immigrated to the United States as GI brides. It hauntingly reminds the reader that unresolved traumas from "still present pasts" continue to torment the violated, including the *yanggongju*-turned GI brides from South Korea and their families in the Korean diaspora in the United States.

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