Questions of Woman’s Film:
The Maid, Madame Freedom, and Women

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The development of the postcolonial South Korean film industry has been closely intertwined with the emergence of the “woman's film” and the modernities associated with multiple layers of colonialism. Films featuring female protagonists made for and consumed by women have been an important revenue source for the South Korean film industry since 1955. Examining these films, which explore feminine sexuality and gendered modernity, provides a way of examining the nation’s postcolonial period in which technologies of gender, sexuality, and cinema are inscribed by modernity.

The history of the colonization of South Korea—Japanese, American, and European—has created a hyphenated national identity that structures the nation’s cinema. The hybrid formation of modernity(ies) associated with the multiple layers of colonization over a short period of time contributed to a re-structuring of gender roles. It intensified the surveillance of gender roles and feminine sexuality that have been regulated under the aegis of nationalism and modernization during the postcolonial period. The inauguration of a military government in 1961 launched the project of state-initiated modernization, which involved exploiting cheap female labor by controlling female workers’ sexuality. In response to this social phenomenon, the South Korean film industry produced a series of films about Western Princesses (yanggangjin: military prostitutes), bar girls, and hostesses that narrativize the rural migrant female workers’ failed incorporation into the labor-intensive industry.

Postcolonial South Korean cinema came into full existence with the box-office success of Ch'ŏnhyangjŏn (The Story of Ch'ŏn-hyang, Yi Kyuhwan, 1955) and Madame Freedom (Ch'ŏnhyangjŏn, Han Hyŏng-mo, 1956). The success of these two films, which center on female sexuality, helped build a cottage-style film industry in South Korea. Ch'ŏnhyangjŏn
was adapted from the well-known medieval fiction that praises the virtue of feminine chastity, and Madame Freedom deals with a female identity constructed through American modernity and consumerism. These films played a crucial role in the early formation of South Korean cinema by reflecting the shifting identities of women during this period through the depictions of the feudal woman, Ch’un-hyang, and the modern woman, Madame Freedom. At the same time, movie-going allowed women to extend their sphere of mobility outside the private space of the home into the public space of the movie theater.

The new field of interest both in the representation and spectatorship of women after the war also anticipated the emergence of South Korea’s first woman filmmaker, Pak Nam-ok. Her film, The Widow (Mimangin, 1955) was shown at the opening night of the First Women’s Film Festival held in Seoul in 1997. The screening of The Widow was accompanied by landmark European and American feminist films such as Claudia Von Almen’s The Trip to Lyon (Die Reise Nach Lyon, 1980) and Lizzie Borden’s Born in Flames (1983). In such a viewing situation, where feminist readings were highly encouraged, the largely female audience not only responded enthusiastically to The Widow but also attempted to rearticulate its meanings in relation to current feminist concerns in South Korea such as sexuality and identity politics. South Korean social critics have argued that these feminist issues as well as (post)modernity have drawn attention away from other issues including class and nationalism in the 1980s. The First Women’s Film Festival emerged as a forum to address these concerns. In addition the Festival served as a vehicle for placing the first woman filmmaker’s work in South Korean film history and for relating The Widow to urgent questions within 1990s South Korean feminist film theory.

The most pressing issue included the critical appropriation of the woman director’s text, the practice of “reading against the grain” textual analysis, the (dis)articulation of feminism with Marxism, and the construction of the festival site as an alternative public sphere. To Western readers who are interested in the development of Asian feminist film movements over the last two decades, this scene must look rather familiar. Indeed, Debbie Zimmerman, executive director of Women Make Movies, excitedly commented upon the heated ambience of the event as she listened to the ongoing debates: “It’s just like our 70s.” The analogy sounds both incisive and puzzling if one considers the list of films screened at the festival, which ranged from the re-visioned South Korean films from the 1950s to Mary Harron’s I Shot Andy Warhol from the 1990s. This encounter has stayed with me for a while and alerted me to the complex meanings generated in the screening and reception of women’s and feminist films in a film festival influenced by decades of Western cine-feminism. Without a doubt, the legacy of cine-feminism has enabled South Korean film critics to view South Korean films from a feminist perspective. At the same time, the cultural specificity inscribed in South Korean cinema practices tends to be overlooked in the circulation of cine-feminism. For instance, the women’s film as an object of study in Anglophone feminist criticism would never find its equivalent in the South Korean context in spite of the fact there is a genre and a set of films that anticipate and solicit a female audience. On the one hand, it is a truism to say that the South Korean women’s cinema is different from the Hollywood women’s cinema in the 1940s. The development of feminist film criticism in South Korea, on the other hand, doesn’t seem particularly conscious of this difference.

In retrospect, the image of “woman” in the “woman’s film” in South Korea did not reference women in as generalized a sense as is common in Western industry cinema. Rather, this general category came into common cultural parlance when feminist film critics subsequently framed these films, targeted for a female audience, as such. In the Golden Age “woman’s film,” female characters were categorized first as wife, widow, maid, and mother—that is, delimited by kinship and class positions that nuanced their signification of “woman” in an overall sense. The visual and narrative conventions South Korea absorbed from Western industry cinema that purveyed iconic representations of a generalized woman therefore existed in some tension with local linguistic and cultural significations of gender embedded in Golden Age film texts. In this context, it is necessary to point out the difficulty attached to the translation of “she” into Korean although “he” is easily translatable. Furthermore, there is no commensurate term for the plural of “she” (kǔnyǒdúl) while a plural form of “he” (kǔdúl) is available. 5

“Yǒsŏng” Film

The term yǒsŏng yǒnghwa or “woman’s film” is a recently invented category, which only dates back to the early 1990s. Yǒsŏng in yǒsŏng yǒnghwa refers to “woman.” In fact, the generic “women” in English can be translated both as yǒja and yǒsŏng in Korean. Often yǒja has derogatory connotations. 5 In the Korean dictionary yǒja designates a person who is born
as, who in turn is defined as a woman with an emphasis on sexual difference, as distinct from yǒnɡ which suggests a social gender distinction. The re-appropriation of yǒnɡ in 1990s feminist discourse among the many female-related identities—yǒnɡ, yǒnɡwŏn, feminist and yǒnɡwŏn undongga (feminist activist), for instance—might be related to the growing interests in the politics of sexual difference derived from the feminist and gay movements in South Korea.

Before the yǒnɡwŏn, of the 1990s, films for female audiences were simply labeled weepies (cb‘erumul) or other similarly derogatory terms. Following the example of Anglophone cine-feminists’ pioneering work, in the 1990s South Korean critics re-read the cb‘erumul through a feminist lens and recuperated them as examples of the yǒnɡwŏn. Well-known weepies such as Bitter but Once Again (Miwŏdo tari hanbŏn, Chŏng So-yŏng, 1968) were brought under feminist scrutiny. The discussion ensued with contemporary films that featured yǒnɡ explicitly in their titles, films that typically focused on women characters caught between their families and their careers. Thus films from both periods were viewed as examples of the “woman’s film.” At the time, the lack of a developed South Korean feminist cinema encouraged feminist film theorists to critique films intended for female audiences, in a mode similar to that of Mary Ann Doane’s reading of 1940s Classical Hollywood women’s cinema. She writes: “Because female identity in the cinema is constructed in relation to object- hood rather than subject- hood, an investigation of the contradictions resulting from an attempt to engage female subjectivity in a textual process such as the ‘woman’s film’ can be particularly productive.”

In 1993 South Korean feminist cultural workers made an attempt to introduce Euro-American feminist film practices to South Korean audiences. Information and reviews of films by feminist filmmakers Chantal Akerman, Helke Sander, Michelle Citron, and Sally Potter were disseminated in film magazines, public lectures, and books. In addition, the women’s video festival Riddles of the Sphinx screened Euro-American feminist avant-garde works. Within this context, yǒnɡ designated both films that targeted a female audience, whatever their politics, and explicitly feminist films. Feminist film theory encouraged an active reading of the former type of films as feminist. Thus, the linguistic use of yǒnɡ designates sexual difference but also oscillates between yǒnɡ and feminist (no equivalent term in Korean exists), indicating the negotiated space and moment onto which the emerging feminism in the cultural arena was grafted.

The choice of yǒnɡ among many female-related identities appeared less threatening not only to women of diverse positions but also to the mainstream media. For instance, women’s magazines and the newly installed culture and women sections in popular newspapers attempted to appeal to women readers, who emerged as powerful consumers, with a new identity such as Missy. The outcome of the acceptance of the yǒnɡ identity was that contemporary locally produced films by Kim Yu-jin, Pak Chŏl-su, and Yi Hyŏn-sŏng that focused on women were categorized as yǒnɡ films. In other words, critics were re-categorizing the yǒnɡ film as the yǒnɡ film. Kim Yu-jin’s Only Because You Are a Woman (yǒnɡ) (Tanji kūdae ka yǒnɡ ranhun iyu manŭro, 1990), which was praised as a breakthrough yǒnɡ film, is an example of this tendency. Similarly, Pak’s films that explicitly employ yǒnɡ in titles such as Today’s Yǒnɡ (Onsŭl yǒnɡ, 1989) and Yǒnɡ Who Walks on the Water (Murvi rŭl kŏmsun yǒnɡ, 1990) are particularly notable in terms of how they were re-categorized as yǒnɡ films.

During the historical moment in which feminist critics re-categorized the yǒnɡ film as the yǒnɡ film a number of issue-oriented films and videos produced by the newly formed independent media scene surfaced. Our Children (Urine aloidal, Paritó: Women Filmmakers Collective, 1990) took up the problem of daycare; Even Little Grass Has Its Name (Changin p‘ul ebo irum isinni, Paritó, 1990) focused on the labor union movement of women workers in late 1980s; and Living in Asia as Women (Asia es yǒnɡwŏn uro sandanun kôs, Pûrûn Yongwsang Collective, 1991) explored sex tourism. Even a brief look at the trajectory of the emergence of the yǒnɡ film in both the critical and filmmaking contexts of the early 1990s reveals the intersection of the legacy of Anglophone cine-feminism with the “woman’s film” produced in both commercial and alternative contexts of the South Korean cinema. In light of the reservations about applying the term “feminist film” to describe South Korean films, I use the term “woman’s film” to refer to films produced in both commercial and alternative production contexts. In the Ch‘unghwa or the commercial context, the “woman’s film” refers to films marketed to and consumed by female audiences. The “woman’s film” in the alternative cinema refers to documentary and noncommercial films that are consciously oriented toward women’s issues. As a consequence, the commercial film and the alternative film inhabit the same ground known as the “woman’s film.”

All the Women Ch‘unghwa Allows and Disallows: Madame Freedom, The Widow, and The Maid

As demonstrated by two films that take up the comfort women issue—The Murruring (Naţin mopkori, 1993) and Habitual Sadness (Naţin mopkori 2, Pyŏn Yong-ju, 1997)—the yǒnɡ film in postcolonial South
Korea inevitably deals with the colonial past, which provides a matrix of unresolved anxiety that spills over into the present. However, between the commercially produced feature *The Widow* (1955) and the independently produced documentary *Habitual Sadness* (1997) lies a wide spectrum of films designed to draw a female audience that does not exactly overlap with the ideal audience constructed by feminist film critics in the 1990s.

“Tearjerkers” (ch’oerumjok), or South Korean films produced between the mid-1950s and late 1960s that targeted female audiences, derivatively termed “rubber shoes” and “handkerchief army,” can be considered the equivalent of what Anglo cine-feminism has called “the women’s film.” Instead of the generic term “women,” the terms noted above used metonymies to indicate the desired but simultaneously degraded female audiences. The group of female spectators that the film industry favored was *ajumma,* wearing rubber shoes and armed with handkerchiefs. The melodramatic genre was considered an outlet for women to release their *han* (pent-up grief) over their experiences relating to repressive neo-Confucian patriarchy.

*Bitter but Once Again* provides a good example of this genre. It is not surprising that this maternal melodrama was subjected to heavy criticism in the mainstream press when it was released. It is unlikely that a film with an excessively sentimental tone and a narrative rife with coincidences that pivots on the fall of an innocent girl would qualify as an art or literary (munye) film. However, it is the film’s emotional excess that attracts the attention of feminist film critics. *Bitter but Once Again* deals with an illicit love relationship between a girl and a married man. As a result of the relationship, the girl ends up as a single parent to a boy who she sends to his father when he reaches schooling age. Her suffering increases as she watches her son being ill treated by his father. Unlike the Hollywood feminist favorite, *Stella Dallas,* however, the female protagonist in *Bitter but Once Again* takes her child back. Although the film’s sequel presented a *Stella Dallas* type of ending, the inflated valorization of the maternal in South Korean culture appears, at least in the first film, to dictate a different ending. Along with a detailed depiction of the female protagonist’s suffering, the film succeeds in capturing the pain of her lover’s wife who not only endures her husband’s affair but also faces having to raise his illegitimate child. The film’s pathos derives from inarticulate grievances and emotional blockages. As a maternal melodrama, it touches upon the social and emotional constitution of motherhood. One of the contradictions that haunts the female audience lies in the film-maker’s ambivalent treatment of the maternal. While the film severely condemns motherhood outside the family, it highly valorizes the emotional and ethical element of the maternal, in particular, the virtue of maternal sacrifice. The film demands female spectators (*ajumma*) to overidentify with the element of the maternal that is inscribed in both women characters. Simultaneously it elevates the spectators to a position where they can cast a condescending gaze on the leading woman characters.

Between the oscillation of these two spectatorial modes lies a gray area that aims to provoke tears, frustration, and anger from female spectators who are asked to derive meanings from the film according to their own experiences as women. This kind of film fully mobilizes the structure of female emotion to allow women viewers to recognize their own sense of entrapment. Unfortunately, however, the recognition does not always lead them to recognize and diagnose the underlying system of patriarchy. Instead, the film provides only a temporary release of “bitterness” and a momentary glimpse of the repressive system.

During the modernization of the 1960s, unmarried migrant female workers like the heroine of *Bitter but Once Again* moved from rural areas to Seoul—a social phenomenon that influenced the depictions of women in films of this period. As South Korea went through a rapid social transformation during the nascent industrialization in the 1960s, young rural girls became the most vulnerable and exploited group in the new urban society. Once they arrived in the city, they provided cheap labor in light industry as factory workers (*yögon*) or in upper-class homes as domestic helpers (*singmo*). Two films that dealt with the *singmo* social type were *Singmo* (*The Housemaid*, Pak Ku, 1964) and *Three Singmo Sisters* (*Singmo sambyöngje*, Kim Hwa-rang, 1969). In these films, unmarried female workers who are suspected of being working-class femme fatales pose dangerous threats to urban middle-class families. Their feminine sexuality combined with their working-class status place them in an abject position. This abjection allows the film to draw maximum emotional affect from the *ajumma* viewers. The success of the film *The Housemaid* (*Hanpyo*, Kim Ki-yong, 1960) can be contextualized in this vein. The reception of the film by female audiences at the time was registered in their reactions to the scene in which the maid seduces her married male employer. It has been reported that female audiences responded to this scene by yelling, “Kill the bitch!” The antagonism among women according to their class differences and marital status is quite strongly marked in this kind of spectatorship. *The Housemaid* (based on a real incident) displaces and disguises class conflicts within threatening feminine
sexuality and discloses the anxiety of the newly formed urban middle class toward an emerging lower-class other.

*The Housemaid* opens with the leading male character (Kim Chingyu) reading a newspaper, and it closes with him directly addressing the viewer. In the middle, the film contains a disturbing story seemingly triggered and constructed by his imagination in response to a report he read in the newspaper. The housemaid, who dreams of being upwardly mobile, is presented as a monster within the middle-class family. She is a hybrid monster born out of the repression of feminine sexuality and the lack of opportunities for class mobility. Her uncontrollable and dispersed identity is designed to disturb her employer's family and the audience as well. The incoherent development of the character in *The Housemaid*, an often-noted negative attribute of South Korean film, is productively mobilized to a greater extent in order to create a sense of fear and unpredictability.

Sin Sang-ok's *The Houseguest and My Mother* (*Sarangbang sunsin kwa omoni*, 1961) is another clear predecessor to *ajumma* films like *Bitter but Once Again*. The director, Sin Sang-ok, is known for his versatility in various kinds of genre films including action, horror, costume drama, and the musical, but he is best known for his melodramas. The overdose of sentiment that often related to *sinp'a* melodramas produced during the Japanese colonial period becomes less pronounced in Sin's melodramas. His subdued and sophisticated approach to melodramatic materials is well manifested in his 1958 film, *Hell Flower* (*Chikhwawa*), which stars Ch'oe Un-hui (legendary actress and wife of Sin Sang-ok) as a “Western Princess” or military prostitute for the U.S. soldiers. The female protagonist becomes involved in a love triangle with her smuggler lover and his brother. Elements of the action genre—a car chase scene, for example—are incorporated in this highly melodramatic narrative. The film reaches a climax when the smuggler kills his lover and himself when he discovers her betrayal, a recognizable element from the *sinp'a* mode. *Hell Flower* resonates with his *Evil Night* (*Agya*, 1952), which treats a similar subject set in the midst of the Korean War.

Sin Sang-ok's breakthrough film, *The Houseguest and My Mother* set in the 1920s, touches upon the delicate subject matter of widows in Korean society. In this film, a family of three generations of women—the widow (Ch'oe Un-hui), her young daughter, and her mother-in-law, together with their maid (To K'am-bong) host the deceased husband's friend in their guestroom (*sarangbang*). A mutual attraction develops between the widow and her houseguest, who is a painter. The daughter's point of view is privileged through the use of the devices of the daughter's voice-over narration and shots of her drawings. The narrative takes place in a small city that although provincial is not totally untouched by the constituents of modernity. The church, the widow's piano, and the Western style of painting favored by the houseguest are all signs of modernity. The possibility of the young widow's remarriage also presents a sign of modernity. The final decision made by the widow, however, indicates the immobility imposed on her by the residual Confucian order that still holds influence over the former yangban (aristocratic) class. The congenial mode of a collective spirit depicted in the beginning of the film signifies by the familiar sight of the neighbors clustered around the alleys quickly becomes claustrophobic when they gather by the riverside and gossip about the widow. The gossip and gazes of the neighbors are presented as a mode of surveillance that functions to safeguard Confucian norms. Although the film concludes with the widow withdrawing from the relationship, it remains critical of the constraints Confucianism places on women.

While *The Houseguest and My Mother* employs a subdued approach to the issue of a widow’s remarriage, *The Widow* connects remarriage to other factors including economic independence, motherhood, and the sexuality of middle-aged women. In *The Houseguest and My Mother*, the relationship between the mother and the guest is presented only to be disrupted by the Confucian ideology. *The Widow*, however, reveals the ways in which the leading character seeks the possibility of a second marriage explicitly out of economic, sexual, and maternal necessities. Three male characters who each meet one of the widow's requirements are presented in a schematic way: one offers money, the other offers romance, and another offers paternal care for her daughter. When the widow realizes that her relationships with all three men have problems, she begins to see the obstacles imposed upon a middle-aged widow, a *minmyogin* (literally, a person who could not follow her husband to death). Her new self-awareness persuades her to find a more independent way of living without depending on male support. The ending, although missing from the currently available print, is said to capture her determination to start a new life with her daughter. Despite its realistic representation of the status of a war widow, this low-budget independent film did not reach a large audience.

*Madame Freedom*, a huge box-office hit in 1956, was based on a serial novel in a major newspaper and caused a controversy with its scandalous representation of a professor's wife. From the perspective of the
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South Korean film industry, it also played a crucial role in constructing a platform for South Korean cinema. In this respect, we could say that the postcolonial and postwar cinema declared its birth with the discursive construction of a dangerous woman in the form of Madame Freedom. Since then films with the same title have been re-made—in 1969, 1981, and 1990—although none of the re-makes broke the box-office records of the original film. In the film, the leading female character, the wife of a well-respected professor, works downtown as the manager of a boutique called Paris. Exposed to the smuggled commodities on display, she gradually transforms into a consumer of Western goods and engages in an affair with her employer.

Madame Freedom’s focus on the female character’s promiscuity articulates the notion of freedom implicit in Americanization as sexual liberation. When the film was first shown, the kiss scene between the female protagonist and her illicit partner caused a great deal of controversy, which led to the censorship of the film. This expression of feminine sexuality, that of a married, middle-class woman in particular, was severely condemned at the time. In striking contrast with the widow character in The Houseguest and My Mother, the wife and mother character in Madame Freedom momentarily enjoys freedom outside the home. American modernity under the signifiers of consumerism and sexual freedom slips into the film to converge on the Madame Freedom figure. As discussed before, postcolonial South Korean cinema, in its attempt to confront modernity, has heavily focused on the representation of modern women. In this representation, the elaboration of feminine sexuality is figured as simultaneously dangerous and desirable. Madame Freedom becomes an object of desire, and subsequently of punishment, only when she masquerades in a Western-style costume.

Unlike contemporaneous films such as The Stray Bullet (Ohalt’an, Yu Hyön-mok, 1961), Barefoot Tooth (Maenbal ri beh’ongch’un, Kim Ki-dok, 1964) and The Coachman (Mabu, Kang Tae-jin) that investigate the anxiety of the marginalized urban male, Madame Freedom focuses on a middle-class female character. Once she obtains a disposable income, Madame Freedom adopts a sexual and consumerist identity. The narrative marks her as both a salesperson and a consumer who is well versed in the names of Western goods. Her changed perspective regarding her husband and her home reveals the shift brought by American modernization in both private and public spheres. Her presence in the public sphere is left ambiguous. On the one hand, her new identity is related to the notion of illegality (a salesperson dealing with smuggled goods) and sexual promiscuity. On the other hand, the display of her tailored suit and free-floating lifestyle also provokes a longing for a consumerist lifestyle on the part of female spectators. The protagonist pays dearly for her “freedom” at the film’s conclusion. Her business partner catches Madame Freedom in an erotic embrace with her husband and slaps her. Deeply shamed, Madame Freedom runs home, only to find herself rejected at the threshold of her home by her husband. Despite the imploring cries of her son on her behalf, her husband abandons her at the threshold. The mise-en-scène of the ending indicates the precarious position of women during the period. In comparison with her husband’s conventional clothes that suit the traditional-style house, her Western dress clearly signifies her nonbelonging. After tasting a bit of consumer culture, the protagonist faces her final condemnation and punishment. In a society where consumer culture is pervasive, the female as consumer is an identity often glamorized and idealized. However, Madame Freedom, set in impoverished, war-stricken South Korea, associates the female consumer with decadence in spite of inevitable fetishism thereof. The film thus exhibits an imagined realm of commodity desire that exists in stark contrast to any possibilities for its realization or fulfillment.

As noted above, the tension exhibited in Golden Age films between representations of a generic woman and culturally specific significations that emphasized differences among women were manifested in class-marked narrative frictions and divisions among them. However, these tensions were most dramatically realized within another relationship. The recurrent subject positions of leading female characters—fallen housewife, widow, and maid—created a striking contrast with the married women (ajumma) of the target audience.

Woman Filmmaker and Comfort Women

The colonial past under the Japanese occupation is the most under-represented subject in postcolonial South Korean cinema. Evading the layers of modernity the Japanese colonial force introduced, South Korean cinema has focused on the precolonial past and the postcolonial present. Rather than confront the legacy of Japanese colonialism, South Korean cinema instead offers scenes of underdeveloped or inadequate American modernity such as It’aewon, the U.S. military base and surroundings, or representations of the forlorn countryside that escaped the attention of state-governed modernization. Decolonization is displaced by nationalist narratives, which feature “Korean hyper-masculinity and vigilance about female chastity.” The absence of representations of the legacies of
Japanese colonization can be attributed to the perception within the South Korean cinema industry that this subject is not marketable. Furthermore, the South Korean military government's complicity with Japan contributed to the silencing of the comfort women issue, one of the most painful legacies of Japanese colonization. Therefore, it is not surprising that the comfort women issue had not been represented on screen from a woman's perspective until 1991 when three former comfort women came forward to speak of their experiences in public. In spite of the political silence, the subjects of feminine sexuality and women's bodies in post-colonial South Korea have been associated with the repressed shame attached to comfort women, which in turn demanded a reconstruction of the nationalistic narrative. As You-Me Park poignantly states:

I do not remember the exact plot. It was one of the numerous stories in Korea in the 1970s that used the metaphor of women's bodies being violated and raped to narrate the story of Japanese occupation and the U.S. presence after the Korean War. Korea as a nation was compared to a virginal body that was trampled upon and violated by aggressive outsiders. Again and again, these (almost exclusively male-authored) texts deployed the lost virginity and the shame inflicted upon their mother country by foreign forces.  

In addition to this kind of literary imagination, the history of comfort women was appropriated either as a backdrop of gang-rape fantasies in sex-exploitation films or as leverage to promote a nationalistic rescue fantasy in television documentary. Indeed, these two kinds of representational practices fluctuate between over-sexualization and de-sexualization of comfort women. Pyŏn Yŏng-ju, a feminist independent filmmaker, made an alternative approach to comfort women possible. Pyŏn launched her filmmaking career in the late 1980s when the independent film movement finally joined the populist minjung movement. The trajectory of her filmmaking is quite revealing. Pyŏn's first documentary Living as Women in Asia traced sex tourism from the Cheju Island in South Korea to Thailand. During production, a sex worker for Japanese tourists in Cheju Island confessed that her mother was a comfort woman. This resulted in the production of the films *The Murmuring* and its sequel *Habitual Sadness*.

Unlike the *Ch'ungmuro* "woman's film" that tends to bypass the shared history of women, *The Murmuring* and *Habitual Sadness* recognize that the postcolonial genealogy of womanhood stemmed from a colonial history that has not been reconciled or incorporated historically. The two films disclose how the present notion of feminine sexuality is deeply entangled with the comfort women as if it were a tacit historical transference. As such, the comfort women provide a way in which an identity known as woman can be historicized during the postcolonial period. When the comfort women speak in *The Murmuring*, shattering fifty years of silence, the female spectator is invited to partake in their grief and also to understand her own involvement in this history. The filmmaker explicitly declared that her films were made to address female spectators who in turn responded to the films with enthusiasm. Many of them left their words of support on the board after the screening. Some of them related their own experiences of sexual violence to that of the comfort women.

The re-vision of women's bodies is most clearly present in the final scene of *The Murmuring* when the camera dwells on a naked body of one of the comfort women who was forced to remain in China after having been released from the "Blood-Sucking House (the comfort women station)." The camera gently reveals her sapped and wrinkled body that seems to ridicule the inadequacy of Japanese monetary reparation. In general, *The Murmuring* is quite removed from the emasculated narrative of nationalism, which has subjugated the comfort women to the fossilized realm of nationalist tropes. In fact, this new *yŏng mag* film is a collaborative product of the women's movement (in particular with the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan) and the independent film movement.

Whereas *The Murmuring* depends on a confessional mode of utterance to process overdue mourning through the film, *Habitual Sadness* mobilizes songs and jokes as vehicles to articulate the comfort women's long-repressed desires and needs. *Habitual Sadness* focuses on a group of comfort women who live together in a shelter (Nanum ûi chip, The Sharing House) at the outskirts of Seoul. Growing vegetables on a small farm and sharing everyday life, these women slowly move in the direction of self-healing by exchanging their painful memories. The fact that the making of *Habitual Sadness* was actually requested by one of the former comfort women also indicates the move toward healing. After having been diagnosed with terminal cancer, Kang Tŏk-kyŏng asked Pyŏn to film her while she was alive. The other members of the Sharing House also agreed to participate. Instead of remaining passive informants, they actively involved themselves in the filming process. Kim Sun-dŏk wants to be
remembered as a hard-working person and requests that the director film her working in the pumpkin patch. Sim Mi-ja and Yun Tu-ri take this occasion to reveal their wishes. Pak Tu-ri, who was reluctant to be filmed in The Murmuring, directs jokes and songs to the film crew. Since it was initially Kang Tök-kyŏng who asked Pyŏn to film her and her friends, the members of the Sharing House articulate their own experience voluntarily instead of remaining passive victims caught between exploitive nationalist tropes and inadequate Japanese economic reparation.

Although the two films failed to reach a large audience, the discursive effect they created was far from negligible. The films toured college campuses across the nation and the story of the films and the filmmaker were covered by the mass media, including the major newspapers, television, and women’s magazines. For women, the two films served to inscribe the issues of sexual violence in the popular consciousness. In addition, the filmmaker put her efforts toward linking the case of the comfort women to the ever-increasing sexual violence in the present. In the very last scene in Habitual Sade, Pyŏn compares the statistics of contemporary rape cases with those of the comfort women. Although it is uncertain if the filmmaker’s last-minute attempt to make a connection is effective and persuasive, it clearly points out the historical burden imposed on today’s women. In many ways, The Murmuring and Habitual Sade distinguish themselves from the preceding Ch’ungmu “woman’s film” not only in terms of their mode of production, distribution, and exhibition but also in their approaches to women as historical subjects.

Ch’ungmu yŏngŏ films have provided a limited scope on women’s roles as wives, widows, or maids—that is, of women positioned only in relation to their male counterparts or masters. In contrast, The Murmuring and Habitual Sade focus on women’s collective life and their discontentment with a history that remains to be reconciled. The exceptional and simultaneously marginal status of these two films in both Ch’ungmu and the independent film contexts demonstrates that the yŏngŏ film has yet to tell narratives about women’s experiences outside of the problematic representations of the maid, widow, or Madame Freedom.

Notes

1. In The Gender of Modernity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), Rita Felski re-traces the trajectory of modern “through the lens of feminist theory.” On one hand, she criticizes the male-centeredness implicated in the notion of modernity in Marshall Benjamin’s influential book, All That Is Solid Melts into Air. On the other hand, she mobilizes works that have already problematized the phallocentric theorization of modernity by Elizabeth Wilson, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Rachel Bowlby, Nancy Armstrong, Andreas Huyssen, and Patrice Petro, for example. I use the expression of gendered modernity in order to give particular attention to the gender politics operating both in the theory of modernity and the formation thereof.

2. Supervisors routinely raped young female workers in order to intimidate them so they would not leave for other factories and sex industries. As the sex industry prospered in the 1970s, it was not uncommon for female workers to prefer it to factory work, because they could make more money and avoid intense labor. Female factory workers and sex workers were largely rural immigrants who sent most of their earnings back to the countryside to support their family. Under these circumstances the chastity ideology was reinforced in order to stop the female workers from shifting to the sex industry. This ideology was particularly apparent in the hostess genre film, which centered on a room salon hostess (or bar girl). The hostess film narrates and visualizes the tribulations of a female factory worker-turned-hostess who committed suicide toward the end of the film. While the real cause of the female protagonist’s shift to the sex industry lies in financial need, the hostess film displaces it with her sexual desire.

3. In 1973, Claudia von Alemen organized the first Women’s Film Festival in Berlin.

4. Claudia von Alemen expressed a similar view, replacing American film feminism with the West German variant.

5. I thank Chris Berry for suggesting Tani Barlow’s article, “Theorizing Woman,” in Body, Subject, and Power in China, ed. Angela Zito and Tani Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), when I pointed out the problem of translating the word “she” into Korean. I was also greatly indebted to his keen insight and suggestions on South Korean cinema in relation to gender and sexuality while we jointly taught a class on the issues at South Korean National University of Arts during the fall semester of 1997.

6. For instance, yŏngŏ is often used to refer to situations in which a woman is suspected of violating the patriarchal codes of conduct.


8. One department store coined the term Misuy to lure housewives in their twenties and thirties, who surfaced as new consumers in the 1990s, into the store.

9. Ch’ungmu is the name of the South Korean Film Industry. Analogous to the term Hollywood, it comes from the name of a district in downtown Seoul where film companies are located.

10. Rubber shoes, a form of inexpensive footwear, is a signifier of working-class or common women.

11. In Anglophone cine-feminism, the term “woman’s film” refers to films produced from the 1930s to the 1950s starring a female heroine, often adapted
Soyoun Kim

from women’s literature and made for and consumed by a female audience. Typically the “woman’s film” focused on women’s issues, such as domesticity and motherhood.


13. The modern term *siamong* replaced *hanbok*, the feudal term for female servant.


16. In South Korea of this period, goods were hard to find even in department store display windows. In this context, the film screen might have served as a window to Western commodities.


Lethal Work: Domestic Space and Gender Troubles in *Happy End* and The Housemaid

KYUNG HYUN KIM

Toward the end of *Happy End* (*Haep’i endu*, Ch’ong Chi-u, 1999), Min-gi, the male protagonist, is seen riding on a train. Wearing a black suit and a tie, he is traveling to Taegu, a city about 150 miles away from Seoul, where the funeral of one of his former schoolteachers is being held. He nervously smokes in the moving train, his hands trembling. It is not the death of his teacher that is making him shake, but the death of Po-ra, his wife, whom he has just killed. Before departing Seoul, he had executed the meticulously planned murder, a bloody scene where he stabbed Po-ra repeatedly with a long jagged knife. He has an alibi because he was taken to the train station by his friend, and made sure he was seen on a train that departed earlier that day. He has also left no evidence, having carefully removed his fingerprints, the murder weapon and his bloodstained clothes from the scene. Leaving traces of Po-ra’s blood in another apartment, he has instead framed Il-bom, Po-ra’s secret lover. Min-gi, after having his cigarette, takes his seat and begins to toy with an elastic band. Across from him sits a young boy who curiously watches Min-gi’s game, the band constantly twisting and evolving into different shapes. The boy’s puzzled and naive expression offers Min-gi a moment of relief, and he smiles for the first time in the sequence.

It is here that any spectator who is knowledgeable of South Korean film history feels an eerie sense of familiarity and intimacy. The train, the funeral, the guilty man, the adulterous affair, the violent murder and, topping it all, the twisting and twirling elastic band evoke the memory of a legendary South Korean film, *The Housemaid* (*Haneul*, Kim Ki-yong, 1960), that features a man, Tong-sik, whose affair with his maid ends up killing them both. The pumping engine and the blowing whistle of a train are vivid sights and sounds in *The Housemaid* when Tong-sik, the guilt-stricken protagonist, departs to attend a funeral to mourn the death of a