Article

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The Korean Pacific: *Triangulation in the First Two Books of Min Jin Lee's Korean Diasporic Trilogy*

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Abstract

This article theorizes characteristics of the Korean diaspora through comparative analyses of Min Jin Lee's Korean diasporic novels, Free Food for Millionaires *and* Pachinko. *While existing studies have examined Korean Americans and zainichi as distinct groups, they often lack a comparative perspective that integrates these communities, particularly in the context of a shared colonial and postcolonial history. Furthermore, no research has yet analyzed Min Jin Lee's* Free Food for Millionaires *and* Pachinko *to explore how these novels address interconnected dimensions of Korean American and zainichi experiences. Through our textual analysis of Korean American and zainichi characters in her work, we explain spiritual, private, and public dimensions of conflict among members of the Korean diaspora. We discuss this conflict in two ways: first, as a reflection of generational gaps among members of the Korean diaspora, and second, as a survival mechanism for the Korean diaspora in the racially discriminatory context of the United States and the ethnically discriminatory context of Japan. Based on these analyses, we derive the concept of the Korean Pacific. This concept refers to the unique characteristics of members of the Korean diaspora who migrated and settled down when Japan and the United States ruled Korea as a colony and a postcolonial state, respectively, in the name of modernization.*

Keywords: Korean diaspora, Korean Americans, zainichi, Min Jin Lee, *Free Food for Millionaires*, *Pachinko,* Korean Pacific

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Introduction

In 2022, Min Jin Lee became one of the most visible authors in the United States thanks to the adaptation of her novel into Apple TV's drama *Pachinko* (2022). In South Korea, she also won the 24th Manhae Grand Prize for Literature (2022).[1] No longer bound by her race, ethnicity, and nationality, Lee's works have been translated, adapted, read, and viewed by global audiences. As Lee Joo Young and Chong Ki-In (2022) have demonstrated, the context and paratext of *Free Food for Millionaires* alienated her characters as the racial and national Other, both in American and Korean societies. Similarly, *Pachinko* explores the theme of foreignness in both societies. From the American perspective, the novel was written by an immigrant, and the story is about zainichi. From the Korean perspective, it was written by an overseas Korean about zainichi. Ironically, the novel has become a symbol of national pride by winning global awards and producing a profitable media adaptation. This divergent reception highlights the liminal space *Pachinko* occupies between the United States and Korea. *Pachinko* specifically highlights this in-betweenness with its setting and characters positioned between three countries—the United States, Korea, and Japan.

Existing scholarship has explored each novel and its themes on Korean American identity (S. Kim 2014; I. Lee 2019), the zainichi experience (Yim 2019; Jang 2022; S. Kim 2022), immigrant narratives (M. Kim 2022; Na 2022; Oh 2021; Son 2020), gender politics (K. Lee 2021), comparative literature (M. Kim 2021), and Christian faith (Faulkenbury 2016; Kang 2009; McKee 2018; M. Yang 2022). However, the relationship between these two works from Lee's Korean diaspora trilogy[2] and their shared themes have not yet been examined in a nuanced way. Therefore, the objective of our article is two-fold. First, we aim to find similar characteristics of the Korean diaspora represented in *Free Food for Millionaires* and *Pachinko* within the contexts

1. The Manhae Grand Prize is one of the most prestigious awards in Korea, and is awarded annually to people who meet the Manhae's beliefs on freedom and equality.
2. Her trilogy includes *Free Food for Millionaires* (New York: Warner Books, 2007); *Pachinko* (New York: Grand Central, 2017), and *American Hagwon* (forthcoming). On her forthcoming novel, see Walsh (2019).

of colonialism and imperialism. Second, we theorize the Korean Pacific concept to explain similarities in the representation of the Korean diaspora in the United States and Japan in these novels. We define the Korean Pacific as the shared yet multifaceted characteristics of Koreans dispersed in the United States and Japan. The imperial power of Japan and then the United States over Korea from the early 20th century led to a massive migration of Koreans across the Pacific Ocean, creating new identities such as zainichi and Korean Americans.

Although Lee's novels are fictional stories, representations of Korean Americans and zainichi in these novels reveal collective memories that are only accessible through this genre. As a 1.5 generation Korean American, Lee has demonstrated the need for creating diverse content and characters to depict Korean Americans in literature and other forms of media (Martin 2007). In *Free Food for Millionaires*, the protagonist, Casey Han, is a Princeton graduate who challenges the traditional expectations placed on Korean American women. Instead of pursuing a career as a medical doctor, lawyer, or Wall Street businessman—professions often associated with the model minority myth—she becomes a hatmaker. Additionally, her romantic relationships with white men defy her parents' desire for her to marry a Korean man. Through Casey's choices and conflicts, the novel portrays the diversity and complexity of Korean American women who do not conform to stereotypical ideals. As a trained historian, Lee also conducted archival and oral history research in devising *Pachinko*. The stories of zainichi have not been preserved in either Japanese or Korean history books. Since there are few cultural products that depict the history of zainichi and diverse zainichi characters, *Pachinko* has become an invaluable means of capturing the experiences of three different generations of zainichi. Lee's experience as a 1.5 generation Korean American and the partner of a mixed-race Japanese American is as important as her novels. Many 1.5 generation immigrants and mixed-race persons face issues of belonging in at least one community (country or race and ethnicity). Her background is not the same as a zainichi's; however, her experiences provide a critical lens for confronting issues of racism and ethnocentrism that otherize different racial and ethnic groups. Therefore, on the one hand, our analysis of *Free Food for Millionaires*

and *Pachinko* unearths mechanisms of racism and ethnocentrism in the United States and Japan; on the other, we search for the mechanisms by which Korean Americans and zainichi survived in their respective contexts as well as their shared sensibilities as represented in the characters of Lee's novels. In writing about the Korean diaspora, Lee begins with the following first sentences in *Free Food for Millionaires* and *Pachinko*, respectively: "Competence can be a curse" (3) and "History failed us, but no matter" (3). These first sentences encompass the conflict and issues in these two novels. Thus, we ask the following questions: Why do Koreans, regardless of their abilities, live a cursed life in the United States? Why does history fail Koreans in Japan?

In our search for answers, we theorize the concept of the Korean Pacific, drawing on Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993). Gilroy explains that the African diaspora was dispersed throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and the United Kingdom due to Western imperialism. Gilroy points out that the African diaspora is not characterized by cultural homogeneity based on *blackness*. Further, he contends that it is also inaccurate to discuss the African diaspora only as assimilated members of their newly settled country. Thus, Gilroy creates and defines the "Black Atlantic" as a framework for understanding the multifaceted culture of the African diaspora through his analysis of cultural products from its members. The Atlantic is a passageway through which Africans were sold into slavery in England, the United States, and the Caribbean. In addition, even after formal liberation from slavery, the remnants of imperialism remained throughout this passage. During this time, African people in the Caribbean migrated to England and the United States as well, influencing modern thought and cultures. As a result, while the Atlantic's past remains deeply rooted in the African diaspora, Gilroy's research demonstrates how the African diaspora's influence on global modern culture was purposely ignored.

The history of the African diaspora helps us understand the Korean diaspora (both zainichi and Korean Americans) formed in the name of modernization by two empires, those of the United States and Japan, in the 20th century. During the Japanese colonial era in Korea (1910–1945),

Koreans were forced to move to Japan and other Asian countries as laborers and sexually enslaved people. Since then, the Japanese have treated Koreans as second-class citizens. Moreover, after Korean liberation in 1945, US hegemony began with US troops in Korea. Moreover, attracted to the concept of the American Dream, Koreans began to migrate to the United States in the 1960s in search of new opportunities, escaping the poverty and devastation that resulted from Japanese colonialism and the Korean War. However, because of the subordinate nature of South Korea's relationship with the United States, Korean immigrants became ostracized and faced racism, ultimately becoming third-class foreigners and sojourners in the United States.

While the concept of the *Korean Pacific* draws on Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and provides an innovative lens through which to understand the Korean diaspora, it is important to critically consider the limitations of applying Gilroy's theory to the Korean context. The historical and cultural experiences of Koreans, shaped by Japanese colonialism and American imperialism, differ significantly from the Atlantic-centered narratives of African slavery and displacement. The very oceanic framework that Gilroy uses might obscure the specific geopolitical dynamics of East Asia, such as the division of the Korean Peninsula, Cold War tensions, and the forced repatriations of Koreans in Japan. Furthermore, while Gilroy's theory emphasizes the fluidity of cultural exchange within the Atlantic, the rigid national borders and ethnic hierarchies faced by the Korean diaspora complicate this type of narrative. Thus, while the concept of the "Black Atlantic" offers valuable insight as an analogy, we remain cautious in drawing attention to the distinctive histories and challenges that the Korean diaspora has confronted.

Thus far, scholarship on the Korean diaspora has focused on its historical background and members' identities after migration. In particular, In-Jin Yoon (2004) conducted a large-scale survey in the United States, Canada, the Commonwealth of Independent States, China, and Japan.[3] Yoon

3. In-Jin Yoon began his research on the Korean diaspora in his 1988 master's thesis, "Korean Immigrants' Small Businesses in Chicago's Black Neighborhoods." He later expanded his focus to the Korean diaspora in the Soviet Union, Japan, and China, ultimately

combines qualitative and quantitative data to reconstruct Koreans' lives abroad. Meanwhile, Kazuko Suzuki (2012) focused on the adaptation of the Korean diaspora to the distinctive contexts of the United States and Japan through a comparative analysis. This study reveals that Korean migrants have developed different patterns of adaptation in the United States and Japan, despite their common ethnic origin; therefore, Korean Americans and zainichi adapt to each country differently. Korean Americans are a visible minority because their phenotype and skin color differ from white Americans, while zainichi are an invisible minority because they share racial similarities with the Japanese. Therefore, to be accepted by hegemonic white American society, Korean Americans are expected to live up to the stereotype of the model minority, whereas zainichi acculturate to pass and survive in Japanese society. The works of Yoon and Suzuki are significant for classifying different dimensions of the Korean diaspora and capturing the uniqueness of each region.

In his explanation of Lee's novels, David Roh suggests that the concept of the "minor transpacific" connects Korea, the United States, and Japan. Roh notes that Asian-American literary studies have neglected the influence of Japanese imperialism on Korean American writers, though many Korean American novels deal with forced labor and sexual enslavement of comfort women within the context of Japanese colonialism. At the same time, Korean studies and Japanese studies have disregarded the legacies of US racial discourses that appear in zainichi literature. In this sense, both Asian-American studies and Asian studies need to attend to the relationships between minorities in each society and think about connections between empires and minority status holistically. From Roh's perspective, the "triangulation" of "minority text" in Korean American and zainichi literature fills the gap between ethnic and national literature and creates the "mediated minor transpacific" (Roh 2021, 12). This concept suggests that studies on overseas Koreans should look at the historical relationship between these three countries, not the bilateral relationships between the United States and Korea or Korea and Japan. The minor transpacific lens offers a new look at

consolidating this research into his 2004 monograph, *Korian diaseupora* (Korean Diaspora).

the Korean diaspora by discussing zainichi and Korean Americans together.

While there are clear commonalities between Korean Americans and zainichi due to their shared experiences living in countries that once dominated Korea, it is essential to recognize the significant differences in the ways the United States and Japan exercised power over Korea and how these relationships shaped the statuses of the Korean diaspora in both nations. The United States' dominance over Korea in the post-liberation period occurred through neocolonial military and economic influence, whereas Japan's colonization of Korea was marked by direct and coercive assimilation policies and the systematic suppression of Korean culture. These differences have profoundly shaped the identities and experiences of Korean Americans and zainichi. For instance, Korean Americans often encountered the racialized dynamics of the United States as immigrants, facing discrimination but also having access to potential pathways to citizenship and integration. In contrast, zainichi were categorized as colonial subjects or foreigners, denied many legal rights, and frequently faced social exclusion despite living in Japan for generations. The experience of the Korean diaspora within the *Korean Pacific* cannot, therefore, be viewed as monolithic. These distinctions are clearly reflected in Min Jin Lee's novels.

Christianity and Confucianism play complex roles in shaping the Korean diaspora as well. Of course, these traditions are not exclusive to diasporic communities in the Pacific but rather part of broader transnational dynamics of migration, identity, and cultural adaptation. For example, Christianity has also been a major force in the African diaspora, serving as both a spiritual and social source of connection. In contrast, Confucianism remains deeply embedded in the lives of the Korean diaspora, with its emphasis on familial duty and societal hierarchy informing community structures. A nuanced understanding of these influences, especially as they intersect with other factors like geopolitics, class, and gender, enriches the concept of the Korean Pacific.

Through our analysis of Lee's novels, this essay demonstrates how commonalities among the diasporic communities of the Korean Pacific as well as differences between them are clearly revealed in her work. We not only illuminate their respective minority statuses in each country but also

highlight their *connectedness* as Koreans. Thus, we examine the cultural commonalities shared by zainichi and Korean Americans in the process of migration, as well as differences shaped by their respective countries' unique socio-political contexts, as delineated in Lee's two works. This exploration ultimately theorizes the Korean Pacific as a framework for understanding the shared sensibilities of the Korean diaspora in the United States and Japan.

Confucianism in Spiritual, Private, and Public Spheres

Lee's novels reconstruct Korean migrants' stories and reimagine individuals' inner thoughts and struggles. Therefore, we navigate the Korean diaspora's shared (both inner and outer) struggles and triumphs through many individual characters in *Free Food for Millionaires* and *Pachinko*, focusing on Lee's narratives of her characters' spiritual beliefs, romantic relationships, and career paths.

First, in Lee's novels, Christianity is both a survival mechanism and a source of oppression. The characters in the two works cross the Pacific Ocean and migrate to Japan and the United States due to their religious faith in Christianity. As they adapted to foreign countries with different languages and cultures, Koreans gathered at Korean churches, which helped them immensely as they navigated unfamiliar contexts.

Nevertheless, Lee's novels also show that the Christian faith has a destructive and violent side for these communities. This paradoxical depiction of Christianity in Lee's novels reflects the integration of Confucian traditions, which emphasize hierarchy, filial piety, and patriarchal values, into their Christian practices. These Confucian elements contribute to the distinctiveness of the Korean diaspora's Christian faith. The patriarchal pressures on female characters within Confucian and Christian frameworks limit their agency; therefore, Korean American women and zainichi navigate the survival within their community. This tension is a characteristic of the Korean Pacific.

Second, these personal issues are closely related to challenges in

romantic relationships. In the novels, second-generation Korean Americans and zainichi establish romantic relationships with white Americans or Japanese partners, respectively, while separating from their parents and assimilating to their birth countries. However, due to the respective power structures in the United States and Japan, covert racism is present even in romantic relationships. We recognize these unique power dynamics as a characteristic of the Korean Pacific.

Third, there is a public dimension related to the job market in both American and Japanese societies. In Lee's novels, Korean Americans and zainichi initially think they can escape discrimination and otherization through education and hard work. However, academic background and career success only guarantee minimum acceptance in discriminatory American and Japanese societies because of the *bamboo ceiling*. To survive in these contexts, second- or third-generation Korean Americans and zainichi in Lee's novels create their own career paths without regard to parental expectations. With their limited agency, Korean women characters also navigate their careers in light of their need for economic survival within gendered Confucian and Christian frameworks. These stories are overlapping experiences of the Korean diaspora.

These spiritual, private, and public spheres are uniquely connected in the stories of the characters in Lee's novels, and the relationship between them is rooted in the Confucian worldview, which is captured by the well-known phrase, "self-cultivation, family unity, state governance, and world peace" (修身齐家治国平天下) from the *Great Learning*, or *Daxue*, one of the Four Books in Confucianism. It means a true Confucian scholar should cultivate the self, maintain order in the family, and rule the country to bring peace to the world. In other words, in the chain of "I" → "family" → "politics," the private and public are closely connected. This value remains even today in Korean families and schools, well represented in the *Ga Hun,* or family mottos determined by patriarchs—fathers and grandfathers—and the *Gyo Hun,* or school mottos set by school principals. These *Hun* usually contain precepts on cultivating the self and moving on to public affairs (M. Kim 2018). In Confucian society, the *private* sphere was a step toward the *public* sphere, while the public sphere had to be verified by the private and

guaranteed by the spiritual sphere. The goal of human life is to become a *junzi* 君子, a statesman, or a good politician. Thus, an individual's private life had to be clean and ethical. In the following section, we delve into these spiritual, private, and public spheres shared by the Korean diaspora in the United States and Japan.

The exploration of these themes in Lee's novels highlights shared characteristics of Korean diasporic communities across geographic contexts, specifically the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, our theorization of the Korean Pacific is a way to understand the Korean diaspora, which has been caught between US and Japanese imperial power since the early 20th century. They created their cultural sensibilities and survival mechanisms at church, through romantic relationships, and in their careers. We call those Korean diasporic spaces and characteristics the Korean Pacific. For the Korean diaspora, the United States and Japan are spaces of both redemption and discrimination.

Faith and Religion: The Roots of Destiny

In Lee's novels, Confucianism and Christianity are essential parts of the narrative. In their analysis of *Free Food for Millionaires*, Miliann Kang (2009) and Kimberly McKee (2018) excoriate Confucianism and Christianity as causes of gender oppression. In *Pachinko*, Christianity and Confucianism are the reasons behind Isak's and Sunja's migration to Japan. Isak's Christian mission is to spread God's love and words, and Sunja follows her husband's choice based on the Confucian notion. Considering that Christianity is an important reason for the North Korean diaspora's migration, we assume Joseph's migration might be driven by religious motivations, although this interpretation does not explicitly appear in *Free Food for Millionaires.* As such, Koreans who migrated to the United States gathered at a Korean church. The Korean church functioned as a community enabling Korean culture and communication. However, as in the novels, churches and the Christian community also become sources of suppression. Therefore, we propose that Christianity in Lee's novels serves as a space for survival and

oppression simultaneously.

In *Free Food for Millionaires*, church serves as a twisted space for first-generation Korean immigrants, as described in Leah's case. For first-generation Korean immigrants who are not fluent in English, it is a great comfort to talk and communicate with other Koreans. Thus, Leah values "speaking Korean for only a few hours each Sunday" (129), which allows her to focus entirely on herself, rather than on her role as a mother, wife, or worker, and she feels happy when she is at church. However, Leah is sexually exploited by Charles, the newly appointed conductor of the choir. Rather than blaming Charles for his crime, Leah blames herself because she has been influenced by patriarchal ideology, coupled with Confucian and Christian frameworks that emphasize a woman's chastity. Existing research (Kang 2009; McKee 2018) has criticized a lack of active resolution through punishment of Charles in the novel.

However, it is necessary to consider why Leah's character actively decides to remain at the Korean church in Lee's story. This sacred space is essential for Koreans as they adapt to unfamiliar American society. Many first-generation immigrants are only truly comfortable when speaking in Korean at their Korean churches. Investing their energy and resources, as well as having opportunities to get jobs through the network church provides, also allows them to feel that they belong to a community. Given her limited agency in American society, Leah decides to remain at the Korean church to keep her community, rather than giving it up to avoid Charles.

As the narrative unfolds, Casey seeks revenge for the sake of her mother, Leah. The structure of this narrative results in solidarity between the estranged mother and daughter. Leah believes that she created the situation that led Charles to rape her, but Casey makes Leah realize that it was not her fault because Leah "said no" (608). Casey also goes to the rapist's house and denounces his actions.

As a result, Leah realizes that Charles is the culpable one, not herself. Of course, Charles is not punished by the US judicial system but by a family member. However, in these events, we see how Lee's Korean American women characters find ways to survive at church, in Korean American

communities, and in the United States through their solidarity. In this sense, church is a liminal space for Korean American women where oppression and survival coexist.

In *Pachinko,* Lee also captures the significance of Christianity for Koreans who moved to Japan. Many Japanese and independence activists who opposed discrimination against Koreans during the colonial period became Christians (H. Yang 2017). As stated in the Bible, the Christian faith and church community are spaces of reconciliation and freedom for the oppressed, such as Koreans in Japan. When the Japanese police capture Isak, zainichi Christians and their community become the target of oppression by the Japanese emperor. *Pachinko* thus reveals the critical role of Christianity in the zainichi community during the Japanese colonial era.[4] In *Free Food for Millionaires,* Joseph and Leah move away from their hometown in North Korea to the United States for economic freedom and opportunity. In *Pachinko*, Isak moves from North Korea to Japan with his Christian mission. Isak works there with those alienated from Japanese society, including the Chinese, but refuses to visit a Shinto shrine to worship and, as a result, dies in prison. As such, Christianity plays a vital role in the plot, and Sunja's descendants are all named after biblical figures, which serve as a guide for understanding their lives. Like the function of the church in *Free Food for Millionaires*, these names have dual meanings that capture the characteristics of the Korean diaspora.

Isak in *Pachinko* takes the position of Sunja's savior; however, he does not actually save anyone but actually suffers from a savior complex. Like the biblical figure Abraham, who proves his faith in God through his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, Isak decides to marry Sunja, who suffers as an unmarried pregnant woman in conservative Korean society. After her affair with Hansu, Sunja marries Isak, a devoted pastor who adopts her son Noa. By doing so, Isak appears to be a savior in *Pachinko*. Isak's faith and idealism become apparent in his last teachings for his son Noa: "Have compassion for

4. The Apple series *Pachinko* dramatizes this aspect of Christianity, which is at odds with Japanese imperialism, by depicting Isak as an active participant in the independence movement.

everyone. Even your enemies" (192).

Although Isak saves Sunja and her son Noa, Isak does not love Sunja but rather sees her as a representation of his values and his willingness to sacrifice. Because of his commitment to denying idolatry, Isak refuses to visit a Shinto shrine. As a result, he dies from maltreatment and torture in prison before the emancipation of Korea, leaving his family in poverty and despair. Thus, Isak believed he could "save" Sunja and Noa with his faith; however, he did not know how to love Sunja as a woman with her own desires and agency due to his own patriarchal beliefs. Thus, Isak reflects the dual function of the Christian faith that saves Sunja in one form but does not ultimately save her in the end.

Meanwhile, Noa exhibits psychological and somatic symptoms after he fails to assimilate into Japanese society. Noa desires to look like his adoptive father, Isak, who is an "excellent Korean," unlike his biological father, Hansu (307). At the same time, to be accepted by Japanese society, Noa has to look "like a middle-class Japanese child from a wealthier part of town, bearing no resemblance to the unwashed ghetto children outside his door" (175). Thus, he "ke[eps] secrets" by using his "Japanese name Nobuo Boku" (176). At Waseda University, Noa is an excellent student who is beloved by professors. However, after Noa learns about his biological father Hansu, he fervently despises himself for being born of a "bad seed" (414). In response, he disappears, disguising himself as Japanese to start a new life.

Nonetheless, his disappearance, his change of name, and all his other efforts do not save him. Following Isak's instruction, Noa needs to protect his mother, Sunja, take care of his younger brother Mozasu, and study hard to save his family. Noa's story is similar to that of Noah in the Bible. Following God's providence and instruction, Noah built the Ark to save his family and their livelihood, and his family repopulated the earth. Like Noah in the Bible, Noa in the novel is wholly cut off from his current hometown and tries to move and start anew based on a new identity. Unlike Noah in the Bible, Noa in *Pachinko* cannot start a new life and fails to assimilate into Japanese society. Noa ultimately commits suicide.

There are two drastic differences between these two characters. Noah built the Ark, following God's providence while God purified the world.

Meanwhile, Noa tried to purify his "bad blood"[5] and built his world by his will. By placing Noa in the context of colonial and postcolonial Japan, Lee criticizes discriminatory Japanese society and demonstrates how it is impossible to build an Ark to save zainichi. However, as in the biblical narrative, the next generation continues the story in *Pachinko*.

The biblical Moses was born at a time when Israelites were enslaved minorities. Although Moses initially believes himself to be an Egyptian, he later learns that he is an Israelite and fully accepts his identity. After escaping an Egyptian plot to eradicate the Israelites, Moses endures agonies in the wilderness but ultimately saves his people.[6] In this way, Moses and Mozasu are alike. Noa's younger brother Mozasu (the Japanese pronunciation for Moses in the 1920s) desires to achieve monetary success rather than to fit into Japanese society or fulfill the role of a model minority. Mozasu accepts his zainichi identity and successfully builds his pachinko business, becoming a breadwinner for his family and providing job opportunities to other zainichi and Japanese. However, despite his effort, he cannot change stereotypes of zainichi as "dirty Korean[s]" (377). To help him overcome such prejudice, Mozasu supports his son Solomon with all his might in learning English and pursuing a degree in economics at Columbia University.

Despite his educational achievements, Solomon is also subject to discriminatory treatment. During his tenure at a British investment firm, a senior member of the company unjustly fires Solomon with no legal consequences since he is an easily disposable zainichi. In the Bible, Solomon

5. In the Korean translation of *Pachinko* the title of the 19th chapter is "Bad Blood" ('Nappeun pi'). Although Noa does not directly say that his blood is "bad blood," the Korean translator would have selected a Korean title based on the following: "All my life, I have had Japanese telling me that my blood is Korean—that Koreans are angry, violent, cunning, and deceitful criminals. All my life, I had to endure this. I tried to be as honest and humble as Baek Isak was; I never raised my voice. But this blood, my blood is Korean, and now I learn that my blood is *yakuz*a blood. I can never change this, no matter what I do. […] I am crushed" (311).

6. During a discussion about Daniel Deronda in an English literature class, Akiko connects Germany to Japan, implying that there are similarities between the Jewish diaspora and the Korean diaspora (279).

is famous for wisdom, as exemplified by the parable of two mothers fighting over a baby. When Solomon suggests cutting the baby in half, one mother accepts the offer, but the other refuses and offers to give up the child. Based on these different reactions, Solomon identifies the true mother as the woman who wants to keep the baby safe. Solomon's situation in *Pachinko* reminds us of this parable; however, the core issue is different. The two women in the parable desire to have the baby, but in the novel, two motherlands, Korea and Japan, deny Solomon. Solomon only exists between Korea and Japan, and his identity is not easily separable or divisible, much like the baby in the biblical parable. His "in-between" identity can be interpreted in light of the biblical parable because, as the novel notes, his name Solomon "[i]s from the Bible. He was a king. The son of King David. A man of great wisdom" (393).

Similar to the biblical story, Solomon returns to the promised land like a wise king. By achieving full acceptance of his triangulated Korean diasporic identity, not in the United States but in Japan, Solomon shows his will to fulfill the promise that Isak and Sunja made during the colonial era. In *Pachinko*, therefore, Lee depicts the double-edged sword of the Christian faith in Korean diasporic society in a similar way to *Free Food for Millionaires*. In both novels, Christian faith becomes a source of suffering, but also saves the next generation and protects it from many forms of oppression and discrimination.

While Christianity plays a crucial role in both the zainichi and Korean American communities, there are notable differences in how it functions within each group. For zainichi Koreans, as shown in *Pachinko*, Christianity often acts as a form of resistance against colonial oppression, with the faith community becoming a target of Japanese imperial control. After liberation, Christianity further distinguishes zainichi from the Japanese, which is symbolized in *Pachinko* by zainichi protagonists being born in Japan but given biblical names that reflect their unique identities in a society with a very low percentage of Christians. In contrast, for Korean Americans in *Free Food for Millionaires*, Christianity functions as a means of survival, helping them navigate racial and economic barriers and assimilate to the hegemonic power of religion in the United States. It serves as both a support network

and, at times, a source of oppression.

Thus, simply criticizing Christian faith in the Korean diasporic societies in Japan and the United States is a myopic view. A close reading of Lee's novels in conjunction with the Bible illuminates how the church and Christian faith function in bifurcated ways in the Korean diaspora throughout the Pacific Ocean.

Romance: Beyond Family Expectations and Misunderstanding of Others

In the two novels, romance is a literary device that reveals the conflict between first-generation immigrants and their children. For later generations, having a romantic relationship with a member of another racial or ethnic group is a survival mechanism that allows them to assimilate into American and Japanese societies. However, romance with white American and Japanese partners does not eradicate discrimination. Instead, these romantic relationships make Lee's characters feel like eternal strangers.

Free Food for Millionaires repeatedly highlights the familial expectation that Korean American characters must marry a Korean. From the second generations' perspective, this may seem like racist prejudice. However, it is instinctual for members of the first generation to desire to communicate with other Koreans who share the same language and historical backgrounds. For example, the scene where Joseph and Jay (Casey's white American boyfriend) meet for the first time brings their communication challenges to the foreground:

> "Excuse me."
> "No. Excuse me," Jay said, refusing to move aside. He didn't smile anymore. "I'm your daughter's fiancé." His voice was full of rebuke, reminding Joseph of his duty […]
> "Get out of my way," Joseph said. "Sir-" Joseph cocked his head, and a quizzical expression crossed his face. What he felt was disbelief. He thought, this boy wants to die by my hands. (173–174)

In this dialogue, Jay and Joseph do not understand each other due to cultural differences and hold grudges against one another for their actions. To American Jay, Joseph must welcome Jay as his daughter's fiancé. From Joseph's point of view, it is rude to block an elder according to Korean custom. After this incident, Casey realizes that she cannot marry Jay. For first-generation Korean immigrants, family is an extension of the self. It is ideal in this model for children to adhere to their parents' expectations and to expect the same of their own children. However, the American boyfriend, who does not understand this Confucian culture, prioritizes individual choice over family values. Therefore, Joseph thinks that Jay's infiltration of his Korean family might ultimately destroy the family tree. Eventually, Jay's cheating makes Casey realize that she cannot be with this white American boy who represents mainstream American society.

When Casey enters the business school at New York University and works as a summer intern at Kearn Davis, she also participates in a physical relationship with her boss Hugh, a white man who ultimately otherizes her. One day, after intercourse with Hugh, Casey watches a pornographic film featuring an Asian woman at his home. Seeing an Asian woman treated as an object rather than a person on screen, she wonders if Hugh regards her in the same way: "Was this the way he saw her? How could she ever know what he really thought of her? Was that his fantasy? […] The girl looked nothing like her, but Casey used to own a red suit, and Hugh had complimented her on it" (639). Casey realizes the film reflects the ways that Asian women are frequently objectified and fetishized to satisfy the fantasies of white men. Casey had previously wanted to enter affluent middle- or upper-class American society. However, this incident becomes a turning point for her to protect herself by voluntarily leaving Wall Street, where the gaze of white men dominates.

Pachinko also sheds light on the characteristics of romantic relationships across generations. Sunja is in a relationship with Hansu and Isak, both of whom try to save her. One day, Japanese men molest her, and Hansu miraculously appears to rescue her from her attackers. However, Hansu then infantilizes her, directly referring to her as an "infant" and an obedient "dear girl" (44). He also believes she is a potential childbearer who can deliver

a son to continue his family line. As a *yakuza* (a member of an organized crime ring in Japan), Hansu falsely believes that he is the only one capable of saving Sunja and his biological son, Noa. However, Noa despises his family genealogy and commits suicide.

After her affair with Hansu, Sunja marries Isak, a devoted pastor who adopts her son Noa. By doing so, Isak also functions as a savior in *Pachinko*. It is apparent that Sunja, who has a child without a father, would be ostracized due to the scarlet letter. Nevertheless, it is Sunja who ultimately saves her partners. When Isak is tortured by the Japanese, Sunja is at his side and comforts him as he dies. When Hansu has terminal cancer, he visits Sunja and wants to be with her. In this way, these men are physically and psychologically reliant on Sunja, rather than her saviors.

Sunja's intimate relationships with Hansu and Isak are related to the context of the colonial era. Nayoung Kwon (2015) has analyzed novels by Lee Gangsu, Kim Saryang, Jang Hukju, roundtables about Korean literature,[7] slogans like *naeseon ilche* 內鮮一體,[8] and the Joseon boom.[9] Kwon demonstrates how the relationship between Japan and Joseon at the time was an "intimate" relationship and how masculine Japan represented itself as a benevolent savior that modernized and industrialized Joseon. Japan also represented Joseon as a woman in various media of the time. However, Japan economically and politically exploited Joseon by taking its resources, devastated the country, and negatively influenced the next generations.

7. At the end of the Japanese colonial period, roundtables seemed to be intimate meetings for sharing interests. But, in reality, they were a kind of a play carefully directed to promote imperial ideology. Numerous roundtables were held to perform an intimate relationship between Joseon and Japan.
8. *Naeseon ilche* 內鮮一體 (the Japanese mainland and Korea are one body) was a slogan used to justify Japanese colonization of Korea. Japan claimed that Japan's inner land and Korea were inseparable. However, despite this propaganda, Korea was discriminated against as a colony under the jurisdiction of the Japanese Governor-General.
9. The Joseon boom was a colonial material worship phenomenon that translated exotic Joseon culture into the Japanese language and into forms that the Japanese could easily understand. At that time, the Japanese had both desire and hatred for colonial others (Joseon), and Joseon culture was translated and consumed in a way that stimulated both emotions.

Kwon's analysis of Korean-Japanese relations describes a dynamic similar to the relationship between Sunja and the two men.

This dynamic of inequality in relationships continues in the next generation. Sunja's son, Noa, goes out with his first love, Japanese Akiko, at Waseda University. However, their affair reveals an imbalance between them. She states, "I love that you are Korean. Koreans are smart and hardworking, and the men are so handsome" (307). Here, Akiko shows her ethnocentric ideology, not accepting Noa as a unique human being but stereotyping him as an intelligent, hardworking, and handsome Korean. Tired of this choking relationship, Noa passes himself as Japanese and marries a Japanese woman. Nevertheless, no romantic relationship can save him from the oppression of Japanese society. His effort to assimilate into Japanese society fails, and he commits suicide.

The romances in these novels show that the most intimate relationships still alienate ethnic minorities. These failed intimacies reflect the unequal relationships between Korea and Japan and Korea and the United States—the result of colonial and imperial hegemony throughout the Pacific in the 20th and 21st centuries. The United States and Japan justified their respective invasions with promises to save Korea through modernization. Like Jay, Hugh, Hansu, Isak, and Akiko, these countries took the position of a pseudo-savior. Nevertheless, just as foreign nations exploited Korea and its resources, Casey, Sunja, and Noa's American and Japanese partners proved to be incompetent in sustaining these relationships. Thus, these overlapping individual stories share characteristics with the Korean diaspora.

Knocking on the Bamboo Ceiling as a Model Minority: Breaking the Internalized Other and Recognizing Themselves as the Korean Diaspora

In both novels, first-generation immigrants who fail to master a new language choose manual labor to make a living. To help their children avoid this fate, they want them to learn the language perfectly, get the best education, and have high-income professional jobs. However, these

expectations often cause conflict between generations.

In *Free Food for Millionaires*, Joseph thinks his children should become lawyers or surgeons. This compulsive expectation reflects the Korean experience in American society. Despite her father's dream, Casey chooses Wall Street over a legal career, before ultimately pursuing her own dream of being a hatmaker.

Casey makes this choice because she confronts the complete lie of the model minority myth in a racist American society. After being raised in a poor immigrant family marked by domestic violence, she dreams of climbing the socio-economic ladder by attending Princeton and entering the financial industry in New York City. Nevertheless, she is neither at the top of her class nor socially popular at Princeton. Even after graduation, she only obtains a low-level job on Wall Street without a white-collar, upper-class network. At the same time, in a white male-centered business context, a Korean American woman such as Casey is objectified as a sexual object by her boss Hugh. The frustration Casey experiences through this process wears her down. She says, "Maybe being female might help. Being Asian: no" (192). At the same time, she develops an inferiority complex and suffers from imposter syndrome, described by Lee in this way: "Casey had somehow put limits on her future. Law school was out of the picture—her dated acceptance letter was meaningless. The top two business schools were near impossible but it was hardly a tragedy" (192). Casey not only has a conflict with her father, who wants her to pursue a law degree, but is also in conflict with an American society that limits every step of her life. Casey's struggle is challenging because she needs to overcome internal and external barriers. In this sense, her choice of being a hatmaker is not just her dream but provides a means of survival when her career is otherwise limited.

Because of ethnocentrism and sexism, Sunja also has no opportunity to pursue an education in Korea or Japan; therefore, making and selling kimchi is the only career option for her. Like Sunja, her descendants, Noa, Mozasu, and Solomon, all confront similar hardships. Noa thinks that he can do whatever he wants if he becomes an excellent student. Mozasu believes he can do anything if he earns a lot of money. Solomon thinks that if he studies English in the United States and speaks English like Americans, he will

be able to return to Japan and do what he wants. However, each of these characters faces discrimination in Japan due to their lineage as *Koreans*. Ultimately, they all end up working at a type of gambling house known as a pachinko, which the Japanese avoid.

This situation is not an exceptional fate for the characters in the novel, but rather a reflection of the general problem faced by Koreans in Japan. When Japan annexed the Korean Empire in 1910, Koreans legally became Japanese. For 36 years, zainichi suffered from discrimination and violence. The Japanese treated them as second-class citizens; meanwhile, Koreans viewed them as Japanese. After its defeat in the war in 1945, the Japanese government denied the Koreans who remained in Japan rights as Japanese citizens. Although the Japanese government initially attempted to evict zainichi from Japan, GHQ's opposition made this impossible. As a result, they were excluded from social security systems, such as national health insurance, national pension, and child allowance, while still paying taxes (Yoon 2004, 161–162). The more significant problem was that they faced explicit and implicit employment discrimination; thus, the fields in which they could participate were limited. Even during the colonial period, most Koreans in Japan engaged in manual labor, and they had to be satisfied with wages that were approximately 50 percent less than what Japanese workers made. Further, after the war, even these jobs were unavailable to zainichi because they had become foreigners, and they had no choice but to make a living through illegal sales or scrap collection rather than through the regular labor market (Yoon 2004, 176). In particular, zainichi engage in the pachinko industry, on which the novel focuses, with zainichi representing more than one-third of the workers in this sector. They exercised dominance in the pachinko market because it was despised and looked down upon by the Japanese (Yoon 2004, 180–181). As of 2000, unemployment levels among zainichi remained quite severe; while the average unemployment rate in Japan was 4.7%, the unemployment rate for zainichi reached 8.2% (Yoon 2004, 182).

Thus, characters in *Pachinko* gradually recognize themselves as the other in Japanese society through their struggle in the job market. Solomon, an alumnus of Columbia University and former employee of a multinational

company, eventually took over his family's pachinko business. Solomon acknowledges the violent gaze of the Japanese who see him differently. Unlike his father Mozasu, who is ashamed of the pachinko business, Solomon says he will take it over himself and embraces his multifaceted identity regardless of how others see him. He also does not resent Japanese society even when his company abandons him. Solomon's girlfriend, Phoebe, a Korean American, needs help understanding Solomon. While Phoebe quickly demonizes Japanese society and expects him to do the same, Solomon does not choose this easy path.

> Then the whole Japan-is-evil stuff. Sure, there were assholes in Japan, but there were assholes everywhere, nee? [...] Kazu was a shit, but so what? He was one bad guy, and he was Japanese. Perhaps that was what going to school in America had taught him. Even if there were a hundred bad Japanese, if there was one good one, he refused to make a blanket statement. Etsuko was like a mother to him; his first love was Hana; and Totoyama was like an uncle, too. They were Japanese, and they were very good. She hadn't known them the way he had; how could he expect her to understand? [...] In a way, Solomon was Japanese, too, even if the Japanese didn't think so. (471)

The desire to see oneself as an individual rather than a racist reduction of one's national character is what his uncle Noa longed for, and Solomon fulfills it through this dialogue. Even if the Japanese discriminate against him, he does not stereotype but instead sees a multiplicity of Japanese individuals. Further, as a zainichi, Solomon knows he is part Korean and part Japanese. This sentiment reflects the complex identity of Koreans in Japan in recent years. Zainichi Koreans are generally divided into the first generation, who migrated during the colonial period, and the subsequent second, third, and fourth generations. Scholarly research on zainichi Koreans highlights the differences between the first and second generations and the third and fourth generations. Scholars demonstrate that the first and second generations strongly or somewhat maintain their ethnic identity. However, the third and fourth generations possess a more

fluid identity, transcending the boundaries of ethnicity and nationality (Joung 2024). *Pachinko* illustrates this characteristic of zainichi Koreans through the protagonist, Solomon, who embodies this "border-crossing" identity, navigating his Korean and Japanese heritage with a perspective that challenges rigid ethnic categorizations.

A notable difference between the career prospects of zainichi and Korean Americans is the institutional barriers they face. Zainichi, who are not granted Japanese citizenship, are subject to official discrimination and left with limited career options. But Korean Americans face covert forms of discrimination, such as the *bamboo ceiling* that limits their advancement in corporate environments as seen in Casey's case. Yet, they still possess freedom to pursue any career, including high-status professions. This distinction underscores the structural and social challenges that shape their respective paths in Japan and the United States.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us return to the first sentence of the novels. *Free Food for Millionaire* begins with the statement that "competence can be a curse," a description of how Casey's brilliance, passion, and awareness haunt her. She understands but cannot accept her father's Confucian patriarchal worldview and cannot ignore her sexual objectification by her white partner. Although she could acquire the life of a model minority as her family and society wanted, she cannot ultimately give up her passion. Through Casey, a talented Korean American woman who sets out to find herself, Lee captures spiritual, private, and public dynamics of the Korean diaspora.

Through the three generations of zainichi who brilliantly affirm themselves despite a long history of societal persecution, Lee depicts the dynamics of the Korean diaspora's social adaptation along a long-time axis. The first sentence of *Pachinko* is "History has failed us, but no matter," a statement that captures the story of Sunja's family and their struggle against institutional discrimination as zainichi in Japanese society. While Noa tries to be a good student and Mozasu works hard as an entrepreneur to achieve

inclusion in Japan, neither can overcome ethnocentric Japanese prejudice. However, Solomon, in the end, affirms a zainichi identity that encompasses both Japan and Korea.

The ultimate question that runs through these two novels is why their characters' outstanding abilities become a curse and why history fails them. It is because the Korean diaspora migrated to the US and Japanese empires. If Koreans were white or Japanese in these respective societies, their ability would not be a curse; the stigma of history would not have haunted them for so long.

It is significant that the final generation of Min Jin Lee's novels are represented by Casey and Solomon. Both reject the comfortable choices suggested by their parents and instead make decisions that reflect their own personal desires. The lives of Casey and Solomon embody a new generation of the Korean Pacific, one that transcends traditional notions of nationality and ethnicity, and one that seeks to break free from the ghosts of the past to make their own choices. Lee concludes her novels at the point where both characters begin to make those new, autonomous choices, as if suggesting that the next steps will be determined by the new generation. In this sense, Min Jin Lee's novels present the emergence of a new dimension of the Korean Pacific, individuals who finally bear the possibility of being *pacific* in the fullest sense[10]—at peace with themselves and their hybrid identities, no longer bound by the limitations of their inherited national and ethnic legacies.

10. The idea that the third and fourth generations of zainichi, who are no longer bound by nationality and ethnicity, might represent the true conditions for peace on the Korean Peninsula and the islands of Japan is inspired by Ogata (2006).

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