Missing Partners: Single Motherhood in Korean Literature and Film of the Japanese Colonial Period

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This essay examines the single mother figures in Yom Sang-seop's novel *Three Generations* (Samdae, 1931, 2005) and Bak Gi-chae's film *The Straits of Joseon* (1943) against the backdrop of the late colonial period when the Japanese colonial government was beginning to exercise increasingly more repressive policies of assimilation (*doka*) and imperialization (*kominka/hwangminhwa*). By exploring the various levels of social antagonisms involving the single mother and her missing partner in these texts, I unveil the system of social hypocrisy which at once deprived and over-assigned the nation to these women who lacked the socio-economic and family structure in the first place.

Keywords: Korea under Japanese colonialism; colonial literature and film; social conditions; single mother

Introduction

A new social problem facing South Korean society in recent years has been the increasing number of *gireogi appa* (geese fathers), a term used to describe those fathers who are left behind in Korea to financially support their children whom they have sent abroad to study.[1] In these cases, the fathers are not only separated

1. Chun and Park 2008:329-332. The Korean term *jogiyuhak* (early age study abroad) refers to

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from their children but also their wives who usually accompany the young school age children abroad for either part of the year or permanently. It has been reported that many of these geese fathers develop depression, alcoholism, and other health ailments as a result of the stress associated with living alone and the financial responsibilities of supporting their family abroad. As such, a number of books, films, documentaries, television dramas, and studies have brought forth the topic as a sobering issue facing contemporary Korean society and culture. While the situation of geese fathers/husbands has been elevated to the level of a serious social problem, the condition of mothers/wives has received fairly little attention. And in the cases that mothers/wives are mentioned at all, it is in the twisted context of straying wives who are enjoying—a little too much—their freedom of living away from their husbands and in-laws back in Korea. There is no mention of lonely wives who must bear the responsibility of raising her children alone in a foreign environment or the duress of financial dependency she must endure.[2] Much of this unevenness still stems from patriarchal attitudes about women's sexuality and gender ideologies that stigmatize a woman's life outside the conventional domestic sphere, traditional family structure, and national boundary which expose women to "dangerous" ideas. This contemporary social problem where one of the spouses is away studying or working, however, is not exactly a novel one as it is being discussed. A similar kind of social

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those students who are below college age. These are not short term programs, but are intended for long term study, more than six months, with the hopes of completing at least part, if not all, of one's primary and secondary education and with the hopes of proceeding onto university. It wasn't until March of 2003 when the South Korean government permitted students younger than 15 years of age to legally study abroad. However, as the authors point out, the earlier law prohibiting elementary school students from going abroad could neither be monitored nor upheld; thus even before studying abroad became legalized, there were a number of school age children leaving South Korea to study abroad. The number of younger school age children, especially elementary school children, studying abroad has increased dramatically since 2003, and as of 2006 the percentage of elementary school students and high school students are about equal (Chun and Park 2008:332). The increase in the number of younger students demanded that at least one of the parents, usually the mother, accompany them abroad. See Jo, Choi, Lee, and Abelmann (2007) for more on the motivation and factors leading to early study abroad.

2. It would be helpful to have a study showing the household income of families who have sent their children on a long study abroad program to determine the proportion of income that is being used to support the family abroad. Jo et al. includes a chart noting the occupation of the interviewees. The majority of the interviewees are generally from the middle or upper-middle class and the parents hold professional positions, many of whom are university professors. Of the twenty students interviewed, six indicate that they moved and lived with their mothers (Jo, Choi, Lee, and Abelmann 2008:126-7).

problem and patriarchal attitudes seem to have pervaded Korean society during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945).

Although there were a number of exceptional Korean women who had spent a substantial amount of time abroad as students or professionals during the colonial period, by and large, men outnumbered women.[3] The majority of these men left their families at home in Korea while pursuing their studies afar in Japan, China, or the U.S.; and in other cases men left their villages to pursue education or employment in the capital city of Seoul (then called Gyeongseong or Keijo in Japanese). Furthermore, during the latter years of the colonial period, when Korean men were recruited to fight in the Pacific War, they once again became absent sons, husbands, and fathers. Despite the increased opportunities for men to gain new knowledge through modern education, colonialism removed Korean men from the center of power and authority vis-à-vis the Japanese colonizers. As such, many intellectuals who had studied abroad embarked on literary and film careers where their works drew attention to the plight of men like themselves. These male characters came to represent the emblematic dilemma of the colonial condition in which both colonialism and modernity alienated Korean men and stunted them from cultivating their subjectivity or interiority. In essence, the relegated or the impoverished status of Korean men in literary representations often served as a metonym for anti-colonialism as well as a critique of modernity.[4] But what about the wives and mothers who were left behind (both

3. Since the late 1990s there has been a growing body of scholarship on gender history and women writers in Korea. Among these studies, three women have garnered the most scholarly attention: Kim Won-ju (1896-1971) (pen name I-ryeop), who was perhaps one of the first *sinyeoseong* (New Woman) in Korea, Na Hye-sok (1896-1948) (pen name Jeong-wol), and Kim Myeong-sun (1896-1951) (pen name Dan-sil). All three women had studied in Japan and became pioneering artists and writers of their times. They had similar backgrounds, successes, and downfalls: they came from a well-to-do, privileged class; excelled academically while receiving an elite education; and succeeded, to a certain extent, as writers although they are also known for other artistic endeavors. In the same way, these three women also experienced setbacks in their personal lives and gained wide notoriety. Kim Won-ju gave birth out of wedlock, Na Hye-seok had an affair with a man she had met in Paris and was divorced from her husband, and Kim Myeong-sun was also entangled in numerous affairs and had a son out of wedlock. All three also, unfortunately, died in obscurity. Kim Won-ju became a Buddhist nun and lived a reclusive life in a monastery. Na Hye-seok and Kim Myeong-sun also persisted in their respective work as a painter and an actress for a while although they eventually vanished from public life. Na died alone and unidentified in a nursing home while Kim met her death as an anonymous woman in a psychiatric hospital in Japan. For studies from a literary historical perspective see Yi 2000, Choe 2000, Kim 2002 and from a social science perspective see Mun 2003, Kim 2004, and Yoo 2008.

4. Henry Em (1995) puts forth this argument in his reading of Yi Sang's short story "Wings."

temporally and spatially) and often left to live an impoverished life while their partners were away? How did literary works and films of the colonial period depict women who essentially became single (both married and unmarried) mothers and wives with missing partners? And how did these depictions participate in configuring gender discourses and structuring a family system under the Japanese colonial regime?

This essay will show that like the contemporary logic that subsumes geese fathers and mothers under the larger project of "globalization" and "nationalism,"[5] where these two concepts become two sides of the same coin, the colonial period literary and filmic depictions of separated families/missing partners, especially the representations of single mothers, was constructed around colonial modernity and nationalism. In making this parallelism, I am not claiming that colonial modernity and globalization are equivalent categories. I use globalization to mean the transnational flows and disjunctures of people, capital, culture, etc. through which new ideas and identities encounter not only the global (in and outside colonial Korea) and local (national) but also the anxieties of the present meeting of the past and thinking of the future's past (Appadurai 2000:5). Looked broadly in this way, globalization is surely not as new as it appears. In this respect, the moment and site of colonization and imperialism could also be the loci of globalization.[6] My interest in drawing this parallel, however, is not to engage in the tautological debate on globalization's and nationalism's harms and benefits but to take up the dialectical relationship between the theories and practices of globalization and nationalism in the colonial Korean context to show the extent to which they have participated in shaping the cultural and gender politics of the complex identity of Korean single

5. Gi-wook Shin (2003) shows that globalization and nationalism co-exist in South Korea, and these two projects work in tandem with one another. His study, in fact, shows that South Korean people's understanding of globalization and nationalism and the way these are set into practice in their everyday life, such as the extensive number of people studying English intensely while still firmly holding on to the belief that English should not become Korea's second official language, indicates that globalization and nationalism do not pose a conflict for them. Although Park and Abelmann (2004) use the term "cosmopolitanism" rather than globalism or globalization in their study of how mothers from three different class positions manage English language education for their children, they also contend that nationalism and cosmopolitanism are not contradictory.

6. If one believes that globalization is linked to the onset of capitalist modernity, then for Korea and East Asia, the late nineteenth century was that moment even though they might have been violently brought into the network of global capitalism.

mothers. In short, by introducing the contemporary social problem of geese fathers as a prelude, this essay is interested in showing the two historical moments—early twentieth century and early twenty-first century—as still sharing a set of similar social problems: a problem of "totalitarian social hypocrisy" that demands women be bonded to the family (and the nation) while men practice libertinism (Gramci 1971:297, 300).

The two works to be examined in this essay are Yom Sang-seop's novel *Three Generations* (Samdae, 1931, 2005) and Bak Gi-chae's film *The Straits of Joseon* (1943). Both works are from the latter part of the Japanese colonial period, which is commonly referred to as *amheukgi* or the dark period for the ways in which the increasingly repressive policies of the Japanese colonial government affected Koreans. While the entire thirty-five years (1910-1945) of Japanese colonialism has often been described as Korea's dark period in history, beginning in 1931 Japan launched a series of aggressive military moves expanding into Manchuria and then invading China proper in 1937, which also impinged on Korea's resources. Japan's invasion of Indochina, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and subsequent military expansion into Southeast Asia in the early 1940s placed Japan in the thick of the Pacific War and intensified their move toward creating the East Asian co-prosperity sphere. By 1942, however, Japan began to experience a series of defeats in the Pacific which led Japan to organize more assertive methods for coercing its colonies and colonial subjects to its war efforts. It is against this backdrop that *Three Generations* and *The Straits of Joseon* were produced. Both of these works are also family sagas or dramas that present various levels of social antagonism within the family of their respective stories. Interestingly enough both illustrate the crisis in social relations within the family as well as in society through the figure of the single mother.

A Colonial Period Social Problem: Romance, Marriage, and Missing Partners in *Three Generations*

Yom Sang-seop's *Three Generations* is a novel about three generations of the Jo family, each at a different juncture in their lives, during the time of colonization and modernization.[7] Yom represents three periods of Korean colonial history

7. *Three Generations* was serialized in *Chosun ilbo* from January 1-September 17, 1931, and then published as a bound volume in 1948.

through three men: the aging grandfather and Jo family patriarch who represents the feudal era of the dying Joseon dynasty; Jo Sang-hun, a Christian convert, who represents the generation belonging to the conflicted Enlightenment era; and Jo Deok-gi, the grandson studying in Japan, who stands for the modern youth and future of the country. It is, however, also through these men's relationships with their wives and other female characters that we can understand gender history in colonial Korea. Romance and marriage between the characters serve as the converging sites revealing the social (family) and economic structures of the colonial period. The Jo patriarch remarries after his wife's death, but his new wife is a much younger woman (younger than his daughter-in-law) who eagerly awaits his death so that she and her daughter can inherit his estate. Jo Sang-hun's mistress, Hong Gyeong-ae, is an innocent female student and the daughter of a succumbed anti-colonial nationalist leader who becomes a Modern Girl/ café waitress after she is seduced by Sang-hun. Jo's wife suffers from having to serve a younger mother-in-law and is plagued by jealousies due to a philandering husband. Deok-gi's wife is a typical *ku yeoseong* (traditional woman) who compliantly serves her in-laws, but Deok-gi himself becomes attracted to a poor, leftist girl, Kim Pil-sun, and is determined to help her.

The complex relationships between the female characters and the three Jo men are "morbid symptoms" [8] of the most pressing social problem of the times: the problem of the missing male partner from the lives of women, which has left women in vulnerable positions within the patriarchal family and social-economic structures. This social problem could possibly be attributed to the traditional practice of arranged marriages and early marriages where couples were obligated to marry a person they did not love or share common interests with. The "morbid symptoms" of this problem then appear in the form of neglected wives who must fight for their authority within the family while the tarnished New Woman mistresses must struggle to stand up on their own. What appears obvious is that both types of women must concern themselves with being left physically unattended and financially unsupported by the men who are stuck in the interregnum. This, in fact, leaves both women in precarious positions within the embedded patriarchal practices of Korean society. Jo Sang-hun's relationship with his wife and his mistress epitomizes this.

Sang-hun, a product of the Enlightenment era, leads a bifurcated life. As described by the narrator in *Three Generations:*

8. Phrase is borrowed from Gramci.

> Like so many young men of his generation struggling to cast off the burdens of a feudal society, Deok-gi's father had stepped forward as a young patriot. Many of those men had flocked to the altar, kneeling before it as political possibilities dwindled. That was how Deok-gi's father had taken his first step toward religious life. If, instead, he had chosen to "come to terms with his past," to use today's parlance, and had learned to distance himself from it, he might have succeeded in making the ideological transition into a new era. And he might have developed a lifestyle more suitable to his character, instead of leading a double life. (Yom 2005:32)

He wears his Christianity like his western frock coat in which only the glossy surface of modernity is displayed for others to see. Under the frock coat, however, he hides his gambling addictions and adulterous affairs. While Sang-hun too could be seen as a victim of his times, his ambivalence has far greater damaging consequences on his family, especially on Hong Gyeong-ae, who he seduces, impregnates, and then abandons leaving her to raise their daughter alone. Although the narrative does not reveal all the details leading to Gyeong-ae's eventual pregnancy, the relationship between Sang-hun and Gyeong-ae begins on an extremely unequal ground—between a wealthy, older man and a poor, young woman. Initially, the young Gyeong-ae is merely grateful that Sang-hun comes to the aid of her family and that he provides financial and spiritual support at the time of her father's death. His kindness and generosity are welcomed, and both Gyeong-ae and her mother become increasingly more dependent on Sang-hun, which he unabashedly takes advantage of. Their relationship does develop into a romance, unlike the kind of relationship he has had with his wife. For Gyeong-ae, at least, she is "delighted to receive [Sang-hun's] letter" and "[h]er heart had been racing when she opened the envelope" (Yom 2005:83). But rather than this romance developing into love and leading to a marriage, it ultimately turns into a scandal. Although people are suspicious of Sang-hun and whisper behind his back, he largely escapes accusations of impropriety. Furthermore, as a church leader, he takes unusual care to maintain his standing—albeit chiefly superficial—in the Christian community. The blame, the burden, and the shame thus all fall on Gyeong-ae, who gives birth out of wedlock and becomes a single mother, more specifically an unwed mother (*mihonmo*). In fact, Gyeong-ae is sent to Tokyo to hide "away in the outskirts of Omori for three months, feeling like a prisoner the whole time" until she is ready to give birth and then "returned to Seoul like a fugitive" (Yom 2005:84). The cul-

tural image of the unwed mother thus becomes associated with the "other woman/New Woman/Modern Girl" who threatens the sanctity of marriage and family while the male character largely escapes responsibility.

To be sure, Gyeong-ae deserves much sympathy for the way she is treated by Sang-hun, but Yom Sang-seop is also careful to present a sympathetic view of Jo Sang-hun's wife. Although the novel does not give much background information regarding the wife, it is most likely that she is a traditional woman who had married Sang-hun through a traditionally arranged marriage in which romance and love were probably not part of their courtship. Throughout the entire novel, there is very little interaction between Jo Sang-hun and his wife. He hardly acknowledges his wife's presence. They do not seem to communicate directly with each other, but their whereabouts, doings, and words are reported to one another by a third party, usually conveyed through Deok-gi or his wife. The couple lives in a traditional style Korean house where their living quarters are separated; therefore, although they live in the same house, they might as well be leading separate lives. Thus, although Sang-hun and his wife are legally bound as husband and wife, they appear more like strangers because of the supposed emotional, intellectual, and physical distances that exist between the *ku yeoseong* wife and her more modern husband (the New Man). For all intents and purposes, Sang-hun's wife, like Gyeong-ae, has probably been and is a single mother who lives with the absence of her marriage partner. Though they share a similar fate, these two are social antagonists.

In discussing the romance between the New Woman and her partner as a social problem, Kelly Jeong points out that in a "romantic triangle formed between the New Man, his traditional wife, and the New Woman" while all of these characters are victims of traditional marriage practices and patrilineal culture, it is the case that "one woman or the other—often both—got sacrificed" (Jeong 2007:47). Jeong expands on Choe Hye-sil's idea that neither the New Woman nor the traditional wife had the right to choose to either be "legally married or love for love's sake without being legally married" (Choe 2000:301). The right and the power to choose what to do with the relationship once it has begun resided solely with the man where he will largely remain unhurt while the women will receive the brunt of the judgment. For example, Sang-hun could divorce his wife, leaving her to live with the stigma of being a "divorcee" without the possibility of remarrying. Just as well, Gyeong-ae would always be branded as the selfish, other woman (Jeong 2007; Choe 2000) whether she becomes the new wife or remains the mistress. In the novel, the author makes

the point that Sang-hun's philandering and ambivalence bring about the sacrifice of both women who are essentially turned into single mothers. Furthermore, although the story of Jo Sang-hun and Hong Gyeong-ae could remain as only a family saga, Yom strongly hints at it being a wider social problem and the potential for it being reproduced in subsequent generations when Deok-gi determines that he will help Pil-sun and her mother just as Sang-hun had helped Gyeong-ae and her mother.

Begun in January 1931 and completed in September 1931, only days before the Japanese invasion of Manchuria on September 18, 1931, Yom's *Three Generations* astutely foresees the more intense clash between the Leftists and the Japanese colonial government as well as between the Korean Leftists and Rightists. Yom shows the multi-aspects of the tension between the Left and the Right through the female characters whose circumstances and choices are complicatedly intertwined with the conditions of generational differences, colonialism, modernity, and capitalism. Single mothers, in addition to Sang-hun's wife and Hong Gyeong-ae, abound in the novel and for the older generation, the single mothers regularly base their decisions on their economic interests and welfare rather than national interests. Suwon woman, the grandfather's second wife and Deok-gi's step-grandmother, eventually becomes a single mother after her husband dies. Although she had hoped to produce a son, thus securing her position in the Jo family, she was left with a young daughter whom she had to support. The insecurities of being omitted from Jo's will, in fact, leads her to take desperate and drastic steps, such as scheming with other family members to bring about a quicker death of the Jo patriarch. In Gyeong-ae's mother's case, when she finds herself widowed without financial means to support herself and her daughter, she resigns herself to accepting Gyeong-ae's relationship with Sang-hun and even harbors a secret hope that the relationship will, at least, provide some financial guarantee. When Gyeong-ae becomes pregnant by Sang-hun and gives birth to a daughter, Gyeong-ae's mother further relinquishes herself to the realities of her situation. The narrative speculates on Gyeong-ae's mother's decision in the most incisive way:

> This was a woman who had been an evangelist, carrying her Bible around with her in a black tote bag. But she was not a naïve woman who had forgotten what to do to ensure her own survival.... This is ... to suggest that she was open-minded and resourceful, and that individual circumstances affect the choices people make. If her husband had left

> behind paddies yielding forty or fifty bags of rice a year, she would never have been indebted to Jo Sang-hun.... (Yom 2005:85)

While both Suwon woman and Gyeong-ae's mother could be characterized as calculating and manipulative, their instincts for survival, and the only way they know how to survive, lead them to rely on men as their source of financial support—that is they work squarely within the parameters of the existing social and economic structures of the patriarchal society. Moreover, their choices reveal that where they lack the kind of education, family, and financial means to support themselves and their children, the more immediate concerns of shelter, food, and money precede moral and ideological concerns.

On the other hand, the next generation of women, who have had access to some modern education, takes risks by challenging the status quo. For example, Gyeong-ae is a single mother who does not appear to be consumed by motherhood though she certainly cares for her daughter. Gyeong-ae possesses an ideologically driven consciousness that aims to be different from her parents' generation, yet only to a certain level. She masterminds the meeting between Pi-hyeok and Kim Byeong-hwa, the Marxist boy in the novel who represents the underground, anti-colonial element. It is revealed that Gyeong-ae has been a leftist sympathizer and goes on to help Byeong-hwa with his secret political activities. In fact, by the second half of the novel, Gyeong-ae's daughter disappears entirely from the text while Gyeong-ae becomes more frantically involved in helping Byeong-hwa. As the novel draws near to the end, Gyeong-ae and Byeong-hwa's storefront scheme is found out, whereupon they are arrested. Gyeong-ae's proletariatization is unfortunately cut short, suggesting not only the incomplete politicization of women but also that women's work in the political or public sphere is still contingent upon her work in the domestic sphere. That is, she had to be both a "good wife, wise mother" and a good nationalist (leftist) but being both posed great difficulties.

Loyal and Faithful Wife: Chunhyang as a Role Model in *The Straits of Joseon*

In the beloved eighteenth century Korean classical story *The Tale of Chunhyang* (Chunhyangjeon), Chunhyang endures the cruel demands of the corrupt new

governor in order to remain faithful to her husband [9] Yi Mongryeong who has been away preparing to take the civil service examination in order to become a government scholar-official like many other *yangban* men of his status. Chunhyang's unwavering loyalty to her beloved, even though she did not know when he might return, has been upheld as the greatest female virtue and a quality that every good wife should aspire to achieve. The ultimate moral of the tale then becomes one in which all ends well because of Chunhyang's faithfulness to her missing partner, for it is seeing her ardent loyalty that Yi Mongryeong, who returns as a royal secret inspector to Namdo, unveils Byeon Hakdo's malicious deeds and rescues Chunhyang.[10] Chunhyang's loyalty and faithfulness to her absent husband, thus, has been espoused as a quality that all Korean women should emulate.[11] While there are many lessons to be told from the tale, the most important lesson, of course, is directed toward women readers and audiences. I would, therefore, suggest that overlooking Yi Mongryeong's heroism while underscoring Chunhyang as a loyal wife was a discursive strategy employed to cement women's roles under the idiom of "wise mother, good wife," which continued to be the nationalist mantra during the first half of the twentieth century.

Hence, the important question for this essay is whether this pattern continues throughout the late colonial period or if it shifts with the changing historical situation. If reconstruction and enlightenment (*gyemyeong gaehwa*) became an ever

9. I use the word husband but it is, in fact, unclear whether or not Chunhyang and Yi Mongryeong actually marry and become husband and wife. There are multiple versions of *The Tale of Chunhyang* (from a classical poetry version to prose, pansori, and film) and just as many variations of Chunhyang's social status and the couple's marital status. What is common throughout, however, is that Chunhyang and Yi Mongryeong marry unofficially with a promise that they will marry officially upon his return. Thus, it might be more accurate to describe Chunhyang as Yi Mongryeong's fiancé, at least during the time he is away. Furthermore, in some texts it remains unclear whether Chunhyang becomes Yi's legal wife or a concubine due to her low social status. See Seol (1998) for a compilation of *The Tale of Chunhyang.*

10. While the heroine of the story is Chunhyang, one must also note that Chunhyang's mother, Wolmae, is a single mother who largely raised Chunhyang alone.

11. Although the core characteristic of Chunhyang remains as the one described above, this is not to say that there haven't been interesting parodies made of Chunhyang's faithfulness in popular culture. A recent Korean milk commercial shows a Chunhyang who submits to Byeon Hakdo's advances upon seeing him drink milk, implying that the milk drinking governor had become more attractive than Yi Mongryeong. See http://video.naver.com/2008070422174338281. In another milk commercial, Yi Mongryeong mistakens Hyangdan, Chunhyang's maid, for Chunhyang who has not been drinking milk. It implies that Hyangdan who has been drinking milk becomes more beautiful than Chunhyang upon which Yi Mongryeong chooses the more beautiful maiden. See http://video.naver.com/2007081209343704671.

more urgent project during the waning years of the Joseon dynasty, then how did Korean intellectuals and writers reconceive the nation and the question of women during the growing Japanese militaristic imperialism? And how did Japanese colonialism, military imperialism, and modernization (that is what I conceive as constituting early globalization; where a nation and its people are intertwined in a far greater network of capital, culture, and movement) challenge or strengthen the indigenous nationalism? Was the Neo-Confucian patriarchal order still able to govern women's lives and the family structure or did globalization alter them in some way?

The second part of this essay examines Bak Gi-chae's film *The Straits of Joseon* (Joseon haehyeop, 1943) and explores where women fit in to the globalization-nationalism spectrum. I will attempt to show that during the Japanese militaristic expansions, especially during the post-1940 period, Korean filmic works created only minor ripples in challenging the deeply ingrained Neo-Confucian ideology which operated under *namjeon yeobi*, a term claiming the belief that men are revered and women are debased, and the revitalized nationalist as well as imperialist slogan *ryosai kenbo/ hyeonmo yangcheo* ("good wife, wise mother"). *The Straits of Joseon* shows that a woman's position in Korean society was still confined by a patriarchal family system that placed working for the nation and the family before women's independence and self-sufficiency. This monumental task was difficult to hurdle especially for single mothers who lacked the socio-economic and familial support in the first place.

Although film historians have categorized Bak Gi-chae's 1943 Japanese language film *The Straits of Joseon* as a pro-Japanese propaganda film, the story itself falls more in line with a melodrama about a couple whose love marriage is opposed by his traditional parents because of the women's low social-class status.[12] Despite the mounting odds, Kin Shuku, played by the legendary actress

12. The Joseon Film Production Corporation was established by the Japanese colonial government in September 1942 in order to consolidate the Korean film industry and to produce films to promote Japanese imperialism in Korea. This meant that anyone on the peninsula who wanted to make a film had to go through this production company. Beginning in 1942, all films also had to use the Japanese language as Korea's national language as part of the *kominka* (imperialization) policy. As such, *The Straits of Joseon* is entirely in Japanese, and the characters' names, following the name change policy (*changssi gaemyeong*), are also in Japanese. These characteristics have marked *The Straits of Joseon* as a pro-Japanese propaganda film as well as labeling the people involved in making the film as collaborators, but for many who made their living through this art form, the only way to do so was to be part of the Joseon Film Production Corporation and follow their dictates. *The Straits of Joseon* was produced and released on June 16, 1943.

Mun Yae-bong, waits faithfully for her "husband" Lee Seki to return to her.[13] And while Seki is away, having enlisted in the volunteer military corps, she gives birth to their son with the help of her female friends, works in a factory sewing military uniforms, falls ill, and is eventually hospitalized. Although the final scene does not show if they are ever reunited, the film ends with a sequence where the couple is at long last brought together through a brief telephone conversation: Kin Shuku remains in the hospital while Lee Seki, who is recovering from his war injuries, stands on a beach looking across the ocean.

The film certainly does incorporate elements of Japanese militaristic propaganda in its plot and mis-en-scène in order to adhere to the new film policies of the Government-General.[14] But even the parts where it is supposed to explicitly show its pro-Japanese militaristic position, the love story overtakes or cushions the militaristic propaganda elements. For example, the film begins with Seki bowing at an altar set up for his elder brother who had died in the war, and then moves several scenes later to Seki's visit with his uncle. Looking out of his uncle's office window and seeing a military march, Seki comes to a sudden realization that he should volunteer to join the military. These two scenes undoubtedly attempt to encourage Korean men to volunteer for the Japanese military, which is similar to the earlier film *The Volunteer* (Jiweon byeong, 1941).[15] But unlike Chun-ho in *The Volunteer* who enlists because he saw it as his duty, Seki sees it as a solution to buy time until he could appease his parents' anger, elicit their permission to marry, and most of all, please them by honoring his dead brother who had fallen in the war. Indeed, for his parents, who were very unhappy to see their now only son insisting on marrying a woman they vehemently opposed, Seki's decision to enlist in the Japanese Imperial Army was wholeheartedly welcomed. To them, Seki is a prodigal son. Even in the climactic scene where the much awaited phone call from Seki comes through to Kin

13. Similar to Chunhyang and Yi Mongryeong, these two are not formally or legally married but had consummated their relationship.
14. See Lee Soon-jin's introduction to the 2008 DVD collection *The Past Unearthed:Feature Film Collection of the Japanese Colonial Period* and Brian Yecies (2005) for more on film policy and censorship during the colonial period.
15. *The Volunteer* is slightly different in that it was made two years earlier in 1941. In the film, an announcement is made "granting" Korean men the eligibility to join the Japanese military; whereupon, Chun-ho promptly enlists. In reality, the Japanese army began accepting Korean volunteers on February 22, 1938, and the drafting of Korean men began in 1944 although declaration of conscription was announced in 1942 (Miyata 1997:154-7).

Shuku, the melodramatic quality of the scene engulfs the dialogue and renders her gasping exhortation to Seki—"get well soon and be a proud solider"—almost hollow. As she finishes these words, she faints; hence, the film turns the focus to her.

As the Pacific War escalated and Japan was beginning to experience a large number of casualties on the war front, it became more crucial to recruit men and to build morale among them. Film thus served as an effective medium for recruitment. As seen in *The Straits of Joseon*, the story line concerning Seki's enlistment adequately promotes volunteerism and more specifically shows Korean men joining the Japanese military not only as obligatory imperial subjects but as supporters of the "Japan and Korea as one body" (*naisen ittai or naeseon ilche*) policy. Thus, this act of volunteerism symbolically gives birth to a new New Man; the New Man who will sacrifice his body and spirit for Japan unlike the earlier generation of the New Man as represented by Jo Sang-hun or Jo Deok-gi.

However, this film really aims to tell a story about Kin Shuku as a "wise mother, good wife," who through her faithfulness toward Seki and devotion to her son eventually earns Seki's parents' approval. The film is very loose on details, making it difficult to tell if Shuku is a New Woman or a traditional woman. That they are living together without the blessing of his family is akin to the boldness of the New Woman or the Modern Girl but in every other respect, she bears a greater resemblance to the traditional wife. She wears *hanbok*, the traditional Korean dress, and her hair is neatly tied up in a chignon like a married woman would have while her female friends wear western clothes or kimonos and have short hairstyles with permanent waves.[16] After Seki leaves, she earns money by sewing (traditionally, very much female work), first at home, then at a factory. She is described as "poor but kind and good" by Seki and indeed the film presents her as a respectful, soft spoken, thoughtful woman. At the same time, she appears to be extraordinarily independent and strong minded. For example, when Seki departs and she is left alone to manage the

16. Two of her friends appear to be nurses while her friend Eiko later works at the same factory sewing military uniforms with Shuku. Just as Seki enlisted in the Japanese Imperial Army, the film suggests that Shuku had also "volunteered" to serve Japanese imperialism by working in a factory manufacturing military uniforms. It is likely that she was recruited as part of *Kokumin seishin sōdōin undo* (National Spiritual Mobilization Movement), which drafted women to work in factories producing wartime goods.

house, she dismisses her maid and does the housework herself. Secondly, when her friend Eiko suggests she move into her house, she refuses to move and continues to live alone in the same house trusting that Seki will return. Lastly, she befriends Seki's sister Kiyoko but does not insist on her mediation or demand charity or sympathy from Seki's family. In fact, Kiyoko tells her mother that Shuku is the type of person who would probably not want their help. The film constructs a character who is a calm, thoughtful, but above all, diligent, hard-working, honest woman who will serve her nation. Although she urgently longs to see and meet Seki, she never seems to lose control. For example, there are several moments in the film where the two just miss meeting each other. On one occasion, she is carrying her newborn son when she happens to pass by a parade where she gets a glimpse of Seki. Unfortunately, Seki does not see her or his son. On another occasion, she is only a step too late in meeting Seki who was about to board the train that would take him to the battlefield; and as she rushes to the train station, the train carrying the soldiers pulls out. At all of these moments, Shuku's expressions reveal that she is obviously devastated and heart-broken but there are never emotive outbursts as there would be in *sinpa* theater or *pansori*. Her calmness in effect amplifies her role as a resilient wife who will endure all lengths to wait for her husband's return, for this is the role of a good wife and good citizen.

These qualities indeed pose complications when attempting to name and situate Kin Shuku, especially if we try to define her based on borrowed standards and characteristics of the earlier decade's New Woman. But if we place her in the historical context in which she lived—of the 1940s—it becomes much clearer. Kin Shuku is not and can no longer be a New Woman, for the New Woman seems to have vanished. She is neither identifiable as an elite New Woman of the 1920s or the consumer oriented Modern Girl of the 1930s. As in Marilyn Ivy's use of the trope "vanishing," the New Woman's movement can be characterized as "something passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence, located at a point that both is and is not here in the repetitive process of *absenting*" (Ivy 1995:20). Analogously, the vanishing of the New Woman does not necessarily follow the materialization of a new figure, for the New Woman does not completely disappear. Rather, they seem to co-exist together, suspended in tension or vacillation, and at times, one appearing more visible than the other. The historical circumstances of 1943 do not permit her to materialize as a female student or a café girl wearing western dresses, high heel shoes, and carrying a handbag or a parasol. Rather, she materializes as a young

woman earnestly working to be a good, faithful wife, a wise mother, and a productive laborer.[17] As Kim Keong-il accurately describes, women in that period had to "throw away their dresses to become women warriors" (Kim 2004:55). Perhaps it is more appropriate for figures like Kin Shuku to be called a Modern Woman—a term that Kim Keong-il suggests. The film constructs Kin Shuku as a modern woman who "emerges intimately linked to the revisions of the materialized modernity of the post-1930s era" (Kim 2004:56). In particular, Shuku is constructed as an amalgam of the old New Woman and the old traditional woman where "new" and "traditional" lose their once judgmental tones, for in order to be a good imperial citizen she needs to embody both the new and the traditional. Furthermore, single mothers, in particular, are folded into the Japanese imperialist project where their singleness, in effect, becomes constructive for it better enables them to serve the nation and Japanese war efforts. Hence, women during the looming war years are reconstituted as national subjects through their roles as wise mothers and good wives. Thus, when Seki's father finally concedes and tells Shuku, "I'm sorry for what I have done. Get better and take care of your son," the social antagonism between Shuku the single mother and the traditional, patriarchal family structure is not resolved but rather reinforced so that she can support her husband who is away at the front and raise a strong son who in turn will grow up to be a strong, brave imperial citizen. This then is the propaganda message *The Straits of Joseon* sends.

Conclusion

The Japanese colonial period with its incipient modernization process opened Korea to the larger world while simultaneously rupturing various traditions, ideologies, and everyday life practices. These ruptures or "crisis" as Antonio Gramci calls it, however, were equally bridged by desires for preservation of not only the past but the past as the pure body of the nation. Gramci expresses it

17. This is similar to what I have noted about female characters in Taiwanese literature of the late Japanese colonial period. My analysis of Yang Qianhe's short fiction "When the Flowers Bloom" (Hana saku kisetsu), published in the July 1942 issue of the journal *Literary Taiwan* (Taiwan wenyi), underscores the ambivalent position of young Taiwanese women who seemed to be shifting between characteristics of the New Woman and the Modern Girl, but also being neither (Kim 2006:10-50).

poignantly when he describes the moment of crisis in history as the space between death and birth where death has not erased history but neither has birth brought forth the new.[18] During these historical moments, especially during colonialism, women became the convenient embodied site from which one could debate about traditional moralities and enlightenment rationalities. As Partha Chatterjee has shown, nationalism and colonialism were not complete opposites, especially in the ways in which both institutions safeguarded the ideological dichotomy of material versus spiritual (Chatterjee 1993:116-57). In Chatterjee's schematic, women were omnipresent, if not over-present and hyper-represented. Likewise, Kyeong-Hee Choi, in analyzing the relationship between Korean women and the making of a modern nation-state in early twentieth century Korea, writes that "far from having too little, Korean women perhaps have had too much of the nation" (Choi 1999:223). Writers and filmmakers of all persuasions actively participated in this conversation to the extent that the vast majority of early twentieth century literary works took up the question of women in one form or another and especially in the materialization of a new figure called the New Woman. The historical emergence of the New Woman caused such a stir in Korea, to the extent that boundaries between the real historical figures (biographies) like Na Hye-seok, Kim Won-ju, and Kim Myeong-sun, and fictional representations of the New Woman were often greatly blurred, if not lost all together.[19] Women became hyper-visible especially in literature and film.

While the emergence of the New Woman sent shock waves and signaled new opportunities available for women, many literary and filmic works continued to depict Korean women in their traditional roles. As I have shown earlier in this essay, female protagonists like Chunhyang, with her devotion, faithfulness, chastity and filial piety, come to represent the enduring characteristics of a virtu-

18. Gramci calls this space an "interregnum" where "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramci 1971:276).

19. Female writers themselves contributed to this blurring through their semi-autobiographical or confessional writings, but male writers were probably guiltier of taking the license to blur the real biographies of the New Woman, whom they were critical of, with creative exaggerations. Kim Tong-in's short story "The Tale of Kim Yeon-sil" (Kim Yeon-sil jeon, 1939), for example, is about Kim Myeong-sun. Yom Sang-seop's specifically takes Kim Myeong-sun, Na Hye-seok, and Kim Won-ju as subjects of his stories in "New Year's Eve" (Jeya, 1922), "Sunflower" (Haebaragi, .1923), and "What did you gain?" (Neoheudeul eun mueosseul eodeon neunya?, 1923). These literary works detail the three women's biographies while trying to account for the reasons for the critical reception of the New Woman in Korea.

ous woman.[20] Chunhyang-esque characters were to be found in a number of other works including important modern literary texts such as Yi In-jik's new fiction (*sin soseol*) *Tears of Blood* (Hyeolui nu, 1907) and Yi Gwang-su's novel *The Heartless* (Mujeong, 1917). Sheila Miyoshi Jager argues that nationalists such as Yi Gwang-su appropriated both traditional and new systems of gender in early twentieth century Korea in an effort to construct narratives of the nation (Jager 2003). I agree with Jager's point and believe it is, therefore, problematic to declare that the characterization of women in modern texts marked a radical break from traditional narratives.[21] For example, Ong-nyeon in Yi In-jik's *Tears of Blood* completes her education in the United States and together with Ku Wan-seo decides to return to Korea with the hope of educating other female students. The four young people in Yi Gwang-su's modern novel *The Heartless* depart on their own paths of study so that they too could return to Korea and educate the masses with modern ideas. They see this as a way to serve and strengthen their nation, and self-cultivation is merely the path through which the ultimate destination can be reached.

Single mothers in Yom's *Three Generations* and Bak's *The Straits of Joseon,* likewise, do not call for equal rights for women or signal a move toward feminism. All of them yearn for legitimacy, acceptance, and security of a family while they patiently wait for their partners to return home. Simultaneously, the time they spend without their partners and the devotion they demonstrate toward their missing partners is presented as opportunities for them to gain some sense of equality, especially through their work outside the home. However, while characters such as Hong Gyeong-ae and Kin Shuku take up work outside the home as a café waitress and factory worker respectively, their work does not represent a progressive move toward economic independence or individualism. Rather, their outside work stands as a mere front for the anti-colonial underground movement in *Three Generations* and as an endorsement of the Japanese imperialist project (the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere) in *The Straits*

20. *The Tale of Chunhyang* or *Song of a Faithful Wife* as translated by Richard Rutt and Kim Chong-un (1974) is included in the collection of translations appropriately titled *Virtuous Women: Three Korean Classic Novels.*

21. See Ann Sung-hi Lee (2005) for further analysis of Yi Gwang-su's *The Heartless* and its important dialectical characteristics not only in ideology but also through language. See Jina Kim (2003) for a discussion of Yi In-jik's *Tears of Blood* and the female student Ong-nyeon's travels and studies abroad in Japan and the United States.

of Joseon. In many ways, these texts show that women in the late colonial period experienced only minor changes within the context of colonial modernity that was rapidly placing Korea in the center of East Asia and the bigger global network. The texts also show that women were unable to become modern subjects with real choices. In many respects, concerns associated with a woman's position in Korean society, such as women's education, marriage and motherhood, were subsumed under larger concerns of the recovery, building, and defending of the nation, which ultimately restricted women to continue to operate within their traditional roles. That is they were to be faithful to their missing partners as good wives and devoted to the nation as loyal subjects.

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