



## ***Teumsae e-kki-in yosong: Korean American Women Between Feminism and Nationalism\****

**Elaine H. Kim**

---

This essay discusses the complex relationships between gender, class, and national identity in the formation of Korean American women subjects in the interstice of exclusionary Korean nationalist masculinity and gendered racialization of Korean women in the U.S.

*Keywords: state nationalism, feminist nationalism, racialization, interstitiality, structures of feeling*

---

Cultural geographer Bernard Nietschmann lists North and South Korea as among the world's very few actual "nation states," which he describes as distinct from either nations ("geographically bounded territories of a common people") or the state ("a centralized political system ... that uses civilian and military bureaucracy to enforce one set of institutions, laws, and sometimes language and religion within its claimed boundaries ... regardless of the presence of nations"). According to Nietschmann, the non-interchangeable nation state, then, is "a common people with a common historical territory that is governed by an internationally recognized central political system" (1987: 1-3).

Powerful Korean state nationalisms, both North and South, expect

\* PAPER DELIVERED AT AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE, TO BE PUBLISHED AS "*Teumsae e-kki-in yosong: Korean American Women Between Feminism and Nationalism*," *Violence and the Body: Race, Gender, and the State*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, forthcoming 2002.

Koreans within as well as beyond state boundaries to identify with them. Korean American women are continually called upon by the Korean nation state to “be Korean,” embraced and rejected in turn. The Korean American visiting South Korea is harshly berated for not being fluent enough in Korean because the taxi driver imagines her as solely and exclusively “Korean” and views her broken Korean language as a betrayal of the nation state. Her shame at not being fluent emerges from a similar, if not the same, viewpoint. If she visits North Korea, she will probably be enjoined to somehow serve the fatherland abroad “as a Korean” after she departs. The Korean American struggles to master the language and tries to serve the fatherland, in some part because she wants to avoid the heartbreak of rejection that Theresa Hak Kyung Cha represents in *DICTEE* (1982):

You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away. Every ten feet. They ask you identity. They comment on your ability and inability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you were. You say who you are, but you begin to doubt.... Not a single word allowed to utter until the last station, they ask to check the baggage. You open your mouth half way. Near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you. I have waited to see you for this long. They check each article, question you on foreign articles, then dismiss you. (57-58)

Cha's work is marked by concomitant invoking of and calling into question Korean national identity and “tradition.”

“Being Korean” is ultimately not possible for the Korean American feminist, who must in some sense let go of Korea. At least she must let go of Korean state nationalism, which checks the baggage, looks at the papers, adjudges the appearances and “realities” of identity, and requires acceptance of female marginality and subordination. At the same time, she must defend herself against the material violence occasioned by racial and sexual discrimination and political and economic inequality in the U.S. and the psychic violence of both abjection and

homogenization into conceptual invisibility by the U.S. racialized state.

Certainly Korean and Korean American women have had to grapple continually with androcentrism and sexism within dissident South Korean movements for social change. The labor movement in South Korea was sparked by women textile workers, who comprised almost 90% of the textile work force that jump-started South Korean modernization from the 1970s onward. When they began to organize, male goons were hired by company bosses to terrorize the women workers, some of whom were killed or badly injured. Male thugs of similar class backgrounds were hired to rub human excrement into the women's hair and mouths. Even today, when much South Korean effort has gone into writing revisionist histories of those dark days of martial law, when criticizing a government policy could result in arrest and even execution, the pivotal role of women workers in building what ultimately became the world's most spectacular labor movement is far from being fully recognized. Instead, they are bypassed and sidelined because minjung nationalism agrees with the state that only men can be the real subjects of History. Thus Pak Kwang-su's moving film *A Single Spark* (*Chŏn T'ae-il*, 1995), which revisits the Peace Market textile factories of 1970, centers on the male worker who immolated himself to bring attention to the plight of the mostly female factory workers. Chŏn T'ae-il must "save" the young female bodies that need menstrual leave and bathroom breaks. Delicate, pretty, innocent, sweet, and utterly without agency, they are deserving of his strategizing, his help, and his ultimate sacrifice.

Korean American progressive social movements have also been built around belief in the ultimate importance of male political and social centrality, and Korean American women have historically found themselves serving food, being subject to sexual harassment, objectified as sexual conquests, and sometimes becoming victims of physical violence by men even within these movements. Thus the putatively progressive Korean American male leadership all too often reinforces, rather than challenges, South Korean state-promulgated gender norms and values which emerge from the blend of "old" Korean neo-Confucianism and "new" militarized masculinity.

Korean American feminists have understandably been attracted to pan-Asian American progressive women's organizations, such as the

Asian Women's Shelter (AWS) and Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA), just to name two San Francisco Bay Area organizations. AWS serves women who are victims of domestic violence; AIWA serves super-exploited Asian immigrant women workers. The effectiveness of these organizations lies in part in their ability to forge networks and alliances across ethnicities and language groups as well as even social classes, while deploying what can be termed "female styles of organizing." This might mean that in place of conventional hierarchical decision-making processes, rank and file opinions and input are solicited and utilized. AWS pays special attention to the children of battered women. AIWA meetings include family members and feature childcare because the women organizers understand, as many Korean American male organizers do not, that the women's paid jobs, unpaid household labor, and participation in organizing efforts cannot be easily partitioned. In AIWA, lines of affinity between immigrant women workers and college women are reinforced not only through consumer boycott strategies but also in workplace literacy programs in which college women teach English to immigrant women workers while themselves learning first-hand about labor exploitation, anti-immigrant policies and sentiments, and gender and race inequality. But what Helen Heran Jun calls, in her brilliant essay "Contingent Nationalisms" (1997), the "woman's touch" (345) in community organizing is best seen in the ways AIWA and AWS negotiate their interstitial positions by calling in turns upon the resources of the labor and women's movements on the one hand and of the ethnic communities on the other, sometimes strategically leveraging these arenas off against each other with a kind of lithe flexibility that neither those movements nor those communities themselves possesses. This interstitiality that is the basis of the danger of Korean American women's conceptual erasure is also the place from which ever more heterogeneous and mixed strategies of resistance to domination and exploitation can emerge.

Aihwa Ong (1991) has argued that we must modify sweeping generalizations about East and Southeast Asian "patriarchy" as being solely responsible for the construction of unequal industrial relations in Asia. The "dialectic of gender and capital," Ong asserts, tends to "intensify, decompose, and recompose existing gender hierarchies." Thus, far from *destroying* traditional patriarchies, capitalism *rearticulates* them so

that oppressions overlap. At the same time, Ong notes, new patterns of “flexible accumulation” emerging after the worldwide recession of the early 1970s resulted in “mixed production systems” in countries like industrializing South Korea, where high-tech labor in free trade zones co-exists with work in family firms, home work, and subcontracting — all controlled by industrial capital. These mixed production systems can be located any and everywhere, including within the American heartland, where the largest beef packing plant in the world hires thousands of non-unionized immigrant Asian and Mexican workers in low-paying, dangerous jobs, housing them in trailer parks “in the middle of nowhere,” separated from others who previously inhabited these small southwest Kansas towns. The immigrant workers have never heard of Wyatt Earp, Truman Capote, or *The Wizard of Oz*. The fabled cornfields have been converted into odiferous feedlots that stretch as far as the eye can see. America is not what we are used to thinking it is, and analyses based on the core-periphery dyad should go the way of the pet rock.<sup>1</sup>

The Korean American woman may focus on what she shares with women workers in both North and South Korea under global capitalism and U.S. military occupation. She may trace her affinities with the Korean woman worker who, like her, is spatially and temporally distanced from the imperial center — *there* in what Laura Hyun Yi Kang has described as “extraterrestrial” free trade zones, military bases, and forbidden territories, and *here* in racial ethnic labor markets. The convergence of Korean and Korean American feminisms becomes visible when we focus on the relationship between immigration and the global restructuring of capitalism that is at the root of the present-day exploitation of both Korean and Korean American women, whether as factory workers or housewives, as peddlers or prostitutes (many South Korean bar girls and masseuses move in and out of various forms of

1. Recent Korean American writing points to gaping distances between positionalities. Europe, Africa and Asia were named by the ancient Greeks to identify the land masses bordering the Aegean Sea. Although the idea of these three continents has since become hegemonic, Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen point out that from a geographical standpoint Europe is merely a peninsula of the Eurasian land mass, which hardly justifies continental status. According to them, “It would be just as logical to call the Indian peninsula one continent while labeling the entire remainder of Eurasia — from Portugal to Korea — another.

“self-employment”), whether as beef packers, garment workers, or small business operators.

To give up Korea without being abandoned to other oppressions, Korean American women might build an emancipatory but not atavistic or sentimental Korean American feminist nationalism that creates space for rearticulations of Korean and Korean American female subjectivity and community. This particular nationalism would exist in the kind of opposition to state nationalisms that David Lloyd suggests in “Nationalisms Against the State” (1997). Korean American feminist nationalism goes against both Korean and U.S. state nationalisms when joining the effort on behalf of the mostly female PICO Korea workers, who visited New York in 1989 to protest the sudden closing of the subsidiary of a New York-based company that ceased operations and left South Korea without paying the workers when they started to organize. Korean American feminist nationalism would also oppose Korean and U.S. state nationalisms when supporting the Mexican *maquiladora* workers now striking at the South Korea-based Han Young plant in Tijuana.

Korean American feminist nationalism might employ mixed strategies, differently applicable in differing situations, calling into question and subjecting to rearticulation and carnivalization what have been traditionally viewed as fixed and clear-cut boundaries between congealed entities — Korea and the U.S., workers and consumers, material and psychic needs, social structures and cultural representations, and perhaps even resistance and complicity.

So far, male-centered dissident movements have barely explored the possibilities of women’s cultural struggles, not just over wages and benefits but also for dignity and respect. The heroic South Korean women of the Dong-Il Textile workers strike of the mid-1970s said they wanted to be “treated like human beings.” In the early 1980s, Korean immigrant hotel maids in San Francisco struck for “respectful treatment.” As one Korean immigrant room cleaner said, she wanted to learn English so that she could say to her supervisor, “You don’t have to yell.” She explained, “Why can’t she just talk to me about how she wants the work done instead of screaming ‘Look at that! Look at that!’” (*Dust and Threads*, 1986).

Robin Kelley and others have suggested that we pay closer attention

to what Raymond Williams has called “structure[s] of feeling” that are a crucial part of social dynamics, so that we can consider how, through the development of new notions of self and community, and everyday attitudes and practices might lead us to not only resist but also challenge structures of exploitation and oppression in diverse and perhaps new ways.

In recent years, Korean American women writers and artists have been attempting to create alternative spaces for memory, performances of identity, and social critique by addressing both material conditions and “structures of feeling” in work about Korean immigrant women as well as about women in South Korea. In textual and visual or cinematic work by Korean women scholars and filmmakers in the U.S., one of the most frequent subjects is the Korean female sex worker, especially the prostitutes who work around U.S. military bases in South Korea and, after immigration, in America. Examples include Katharine Moon’s book about the implications and politics of camptown prostitution in South Korea, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (1997); Ji-Yeon Yuh’s writings on comfort women and work in progress on Korean military brides living in the U.S.; Hyun Sook Kim’s writings on comfort women and on military prostitution, as well as specifically on Kum Yi Yoon, a bar hostess murdered and mutilated by a U.S. serviceman who was finally tried by a South Korean court after months of Korean citizen demonstrations; and on Chong Sun France, the former “bar girl” who immigrated to the U.S. and was convicted of killing her child after a television fell over on him while she worked at a nearby night club; Hyunah Yang’s essays on Korean military comfort women; *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Woman*, Dai Sil Kim-Gibson’s film in progress, as well as sections of a book based on extensive interviews of surviving Korean comfort women; and a special issue of *positions: east asia cultures critique* titled the *comfort women: colonialism, war, and sex*, edited by Chungmoo Choi with contributions from Korean and Korean American as well as Japanese and Japanese American writers and artists. Also, Nora Okja Keller’s novel *Comfort Woman* (1997), about a Korean woman who escapes from military sexual slavery under the Japanese, marries an American missionary, and lives with her mixed race daughter in Honolulu; Hye Jung Park and J.T. Takagi’s *The Women Outside* (1996), a video documen-

tary on women living and working near U.S. military bases in South Korea; Diana Lee and Grace Lee's *Camp Arirang* (1996), a video on the same subject; and visual art work by Yong Soon Min that references military prostitution<sup>2</sup> and sex tourism.

Why Korean American women's fascination with this topic? Is it because it is sensational and attention-getting at a time when so many stories compete so fiercely for public attention? Is it because it's relatively easy, since oppression of prostitutes is less complex and less ambiguous than the exploitation of, say, Korean immigrant women electronics assemblers or hotel room cleaners, some of whom hail from the South Korean middle classes and know very well the difference between MIT and Cal Tech as destinations for their sons? Is it because we are locked into a kind of Puritanical thinking that separates the "good" girls from the "bad" so that we still have trouble considering sex work as legitimate labor? Or is it about the creation of a political and social agency for one class at the expense of another, as women racialized in the West as Koreans are positioned to "give voice to" and represent the subaltern who cannot speak?

*The Murmuring* is a 1995 internationally exhibited documentary about comfort women directed not by a Korean American woman but by young South Korean woman filmmaker Byun Young-joo. Byun's video peers into the modest rooms of several aging former comfort women, capturing their images as they prepare food, sleep, cry, talk about their feelings of loss, and describe how they were raped and sexually exploited. Their stories are framed and bracketed by Byun's off-camera questions. The video opens onto a Korean woman professor speaking on their behalf at a demonstration for Japanese government redress. We learn almost nothing about the filmmaker and nothing at all about the professors and other middle class women involved in the movement, although we hear in excruciating detail the testimony of

2. In *Remembering Jungshindae* (1992), the body of the military prostitute is recalled by the empty dress Min has fashioned by stretching starch-stiffened fabric over a wooden armature and then laying on paint, modeling paste, gravel, dirt, and charcoal bits to give the rigid structure a textured surface, all expressing the severity of the comfort woman's history. \*The dress is elegiac black, not a traditional color for a Korean dress, and wire mesh screen is placed at the opening of the neck so that the red light of the acetate seems to glow from inside. Also, gashes in the skirt emit red light like fire or bloody wounds. The Korean script translates: "Your story will not be forgotten."

one former comfort woman whose vagina was cut open with a knife because her captors found it too small. And despite this level of bodily detail, we do not have a strong sense of the women's voices or viewpoints. In one scene, the women talk a little about their visual art lessons, explaining the feelings they had when rendering various drawings. But even here, the filmmaker brackets their voices with the authoritative view of the art teacher, who tells us that their art work is good and talks about how surprised she was by the colors they selected. Elsewhere in the video, we hear the wordless sobbing of one woman while her daughter relates what *she* has been told about her mother's experiences. At times, the camera's aggressive probings seem to almost constitute another kind of rape. In one sequence, the camera focuses tightly and intrusively as a woman begins to weep, never loosening the gaze even as she gets up to leave, lingering first on her back and finally on the door she closes behind her. Near the end of the film, however, something that is almost a reversal occurs. The former comfort women have been singing and dancing around a food table at a new year's party perhaps arranged for them by the professors and other middle class advocates. One of the former comfort women grabs a woman professor, embracing, touching, and dancing with her while she sings about lost love and the "good old days." She begins to insist that the professor take a turn singing. After some struggle, the embarrassed professor slips away, the camera following *her* to the door.

But the video ends with the camera moving slowly and repeatedly over an aged female torso, scanning her sagging breasts and wrinkled belly and finally settling on a gnarled hand. Perhaps we are being encouraged to think that this body, formerly an object of male sexual desire, has survived the pain and abuse so vividly described by the women in the film and is now being caressed by a sympathetic granddaughter. On the other hand, the image falls short of being transgressive. There is no victory in these bodies' grandmotherly sexlessness. The former comfort woman can be included in the nation if she mouths, as the last comfort woman to speak in the video does, the Korean state position — that she wants nothing for herself as an individual, that for the sake of future generations of Koreans she wants the Japanese government to admit its guilt, build a monument, revise its school textbooks, and promise never to aggress against Korea again.

The final image of the headless, faceless, naked old torso works to freeze these aging women forever as only bodies — the bodies of sex slaves in ruin. They have significance only as comfort women bodies to be viewed, discussed, and rendered meaningful in relation to a “larger picture” of nationhood that otherwise excludes them.

In her groundbreaking (1998) essay “Si(gh)ting Asian/American Women As Transnational Labor,” Laura Hyun Yi Kang rightly connects South Korean industrial workers with sex workers in her discussion of what she calls their “intense corporeality” within the context of U.S., European, and Japanese political and economic domination of South Korea. She goes on to suggest that emphasis on Asian women sex workers, and particularly focus that makes use of visual images of these women’s bodies, are disturbing because they “uncritically [uncover and expose] the denuded ... body [putting it] on display” instead of focusing on the political and economic conditions that interpellate Asian women as exploited industrial or sex workers. Invoking Rey Chow and Frederic Jameson, Kang suggests that in view of the differential power relations in visualization and imaging, “uncovering” and “exposing” the Korean prostitute can be thought of as an unnecessary act of aggression, invasion, and exploitation, much like pornography, that could divert attention from the roots of these women’s oppression.

Gayatri Spivak notwithstanding, perhaps Korean American women can re-think the old core-periphery relationship between the so-called bourgeois woman of color intellectual residing in the West and the so-called subaltern woman still “stuck” in the “third world.” Just as it may not be useful to think solely in terms of class consciousness leading to class struggle leading to structural change along a linear trajectory, Korean and Korean American women’s identities may overlap in many places, making it difficult to place one as the sovereign and opportunistic voyeur and the other as idealized or victimized and completely without agency.

Korean patriarchy values above all else male lineage and female chastity to preserve that lineage. Abducted and raped women have no legitimate place in the hierarchy. “It does not matter how the vase was broken,” according to a Korean adage. Prostitutes, especially those who fraternize with foreigners (*yang saekssi* or western miss), and mixed

race children (*ainoko*, *chapchong*, *t'wigi*, Japanese, Sino-Korean, and Korean vernacular words for “mongrel breed”) of these relationships are outside the realm of Korean patriarchal legitimacy. Comfort women have been unrepresentable except as the nation to be avenged by Korean patriarchal nationalism.

Korean American feminist fascination with Korean military prostitution may be rooted in the desire to challenge conventional sexual moralism as well as the narrative of fidelity to the fatherland and to identify instead with the women derided as *yangkongju* (Western princess) or *yanggalbo* (whore of the West) and viewed as traitors to the nation, even when poverty and gender discrimination afford them few other viable options and even as they support their more highly valued brothers with their earnings and bring needed foreign exchange into the fatherland.

Korean American women may be interested in comfort women and sex workers because as Asian women living in the U.S., they too are marginalized and suspected as possible traitors to the Korean nation, and because they too feel subject to the processes of racialization and sexual objectification. Focusing on prostitution works against gendered Korean nationalism, which based its modernization efforts from the 1960s onward on the creation of an entire class of oppressed female industrial and sex service workers, and also against racialized U.S. nationalism, which forcibly distances both the Korean and the Korean American women as alien Others. Perhaps the Korean American women are turning their attention to the overlooked residues of history, the fragmented, sidelined elements that disrupt the totalizing narratives of South Korean and U.S. nationalism. Perhaps they focus on Korean comfort women and sex workers in an attempt to create space for the inscription of subjugated knowledge and haunting unarticulated histories swept aside as just so much inconsequential litter by the official “winners of History.” Perhaps it is their interstitial location between two powerful patriarchal nationalist discourses that allows these Korean American women writers and artists to recognize themselves in those sisters across the waves.

Hye Jung Park, the New York-based co-director of the documentary *The Women Outside*, admits that she was motivated by her own contradictory feelings about her mother’s relationships with U.S. service-

men, something she had been ashamed of and had never admitted to other Koreans and Korean Americans before she began to understand the political context. *The Women Outside* is the Korean American visual text that can be said to most “display” the bodies of Korean sex workers, three of whom are interviewed at some length on film. The camera zooms in on their tears as they recall the psychological and physical abuse they suffered at the hands of their estranged American husbands. One woman is interviewed holding a mirror and seated, her legs wide apart as she applies face powder and eye makeup. The camera follows various women soliciting and keeping company with U.S. servicemen in diverse locales near the military bases. The film certainly represents sex work as strategic labor for economic survival. *The Women Outside* might be criticized for attributing the analyses to scholars and case workers and the “feelings” to the prostitutes, and for not doing more to “uncover” and “expose” Korean procurers and American johns. But the visualization of the women’s bodies does not displace discussions of the political and economic conditions out of which these “lived experiences” emerge and through which we can better understand and analyze. Park and Takagi trace some of the women’s family histories, exploring how a significant part of contemporary South Korean prostitution was formed in the nexus of Korean patriarchy and U.S. military occupation and cultural colonization, within the context of the economic consequences of colonization and war. Moreover, the film carries some of the stories of Korean women married to American military men to the U.S., where what is “uncovered” and “exposed” is the racial discrimination and injustices they encounter in America as working class immigrant women of color.

Some have criticized Nora Okja Keller’s 1997 novel *Comfort Woman* because they feel it misrepresents Korean military sexual slavery by fictionalizing it. But I invoke *Comfort Woman* here for the ways it connects Korean and Korean American women by establishing the centrality and subjectivity of the raped Korean mother and the molested Korean American daughter. As lower class females, one, a raped World War II military prostitute, and the other a mixed race incest victim, they are both “illegitimate.” The two women exist in excess of patriarchy, state nationalisms, and their cultures. Keller represents the raped and abused woman as someone who becomes a subject through rape rather than

being merely subjected to its violation.

The comfort women in the novel reclaim their selfhood through the language of the body. Forbidden to speak in the comfort stations, they learn to communicate with each other by humming or with their bodies - their eyes, their posture, the tilt of their heads. Before she leaves Korea, Soon Hyo ingests Korean river bank mud so that Korea will always be part of her. She drinks tea made with American soil when she is pregnant and rubs American earth across her nipples so that her baby will “taste America” with her mother’s milk. *Comfort Woman* is about female lineages across national boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Soon Hyo struggles to protect Beccah from what she thinks of as “the poison of male eyes and male breath” by showing her that her body is “hers to name in her own mind, before language dissects her to pieces that can be swallowed and digested by others not herself” (22). Years later, when Beccah is a teenager, she experiences the ways in which language used by men robs a woman of her body by naming it as detestable or desirable. Soon Hyo wants Beccah to have her own subjectivity and her own body, which are more than the nation spaces of Korea and America contained within the lines on world maps and which allow for letting go of patriarchal postcolonial Korea and making her own body her “home.” Thus she passes the embodiment of her female experience of Korean history to her American daughter.

In “Cooking American, Eating Korean: Food in the Lives of Korean Military Brides,” Ji-Yeon Yuh focuses on the intersections of the body, race, gender, class, and nation not through the Korean woman’s sexuality but through her relationship to Korean and American food habits and eating practices. Having spent more than three years meeting and interviewing Korean military brides in the U.S. to explore their encounters with American culture through their experiences of food and eating, Yuh finds out about their shopping for standard brands in chain grocery stores; about their learning to cook food that is called American but might in fact be ethnic Jewish, African American, Italian,

3. In *Comfort Woman*, Keller celebrates female lineages and networks by repeatedly acknowledging her debt, in terms of themes, images, and language, to other Asian American women writers who came before her: Maxine Hong Kingston, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Cathy Song, and Joy Kogawa.

and so forth; about their trying to incorporate altered Korean dishes into so-called “American” meals or to serve some Korean food “American” style; about their longing almost to the point of starvation for the Korean food that signifies home and identity; and about their experiences of this longing as a powerful daily reminder of their difference as they find themselves seeking out other Koreans to share meals with or having to eat Korean food alone because their American husbands, in-laws, and children reject it. Yuh is able to show concretely how power inequities—in terms of gender, race, and culture—are expressed in food choice, production, and consumption within the women’s families. But what is particularly exciting about Yuh’s project is the absence of hierarchy between herself as researcher-writer and the women she meets. It is clear that as a researcher-writer, Yuh has the background to frame, organize, analyze, interpret, and conjecture about the “larger significance” of what the women told her. Indeed, like her interview subjects, she knows from everyday life experience about certain kinds of domination and discrimination. Like them, she has already tested the possibilities and limits of “biculturalism” in inequality. As a Korean American woman, she also knows about the power dynamics in American gender politics. But she can speak *beside* instead of only *about*—or, as Kobena Mercer (1994: 251) and others have said, *from* instead of *for*—the women she interviews because she too yearns for and loves to talk about Korean food. She can share meals with her interviewees, who might ask her how her mother prepares a certain dish or who exclaim, “It’s more than just fun to talk about this, don’t you think?” According to Yuh, this particular woman notes “that she has lived in the United States for so long that it seems like home [but] at times like this, cooking and eating Korean food with another Korean woman, even a stranger like myself, gave her an indescribable feeling. ‘Maybe something like drinking water after being thirsty for a really long time...’” (1998).

I like to think that the Korean American feminist writer’s and film maker’s “woman’s touch” does not push the reluctant Korean female body onto a stage lit up for pornography and commodification but instead reaches for the lines of affinity that might link us in a mutual struggle to understand and struggle against our respective experiences of colonization, racialization, and gender oppression.

## References

- Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung (1982). *DICTEE*. New York: Tanam Press.
- Jun, Hellen Heran (1997). "Contingent Nationalisms." *New Formations, New Questions: Asian American Studies*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Lisa Lowe, a special issue of *positions: east asia cultures critique* 5, No.2 (fall): 325-355
- Kang, Laura Hyun Yi (1997). "Si(gh)ting Asian/American Women As Transnational Labor." *New formations, new questions: asian american studies*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Lisa Lowe, a special issue of *positions: east asia cultures critique* 5, No. 2 (fall): 403-437.
- Keller, Nora Okja (1997). *Comfort Woman*. New York: Viking.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. (1994). *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press.
- Lewis, Martin W. and Wigen, Karen E. (1997). *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageograph*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lloyd, David (1997). "Nationalisms Against the State." In *The Politics of Culture In the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, Durham, 173-197. N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Mercer, Kobena (1994). *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Nietschmann, Bernard (1987). "Miniaturization and Indigenous Peoples: The Third World War." *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 11, No. 3: 1-15.
- Ong, Aihwa (1991). "The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20: 279-309.
- Spivak, Gayatri (1994). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 66-111. New York: Columbia.
- Yuh, Ji-Yeon (1998). "Cooking American, Eating Korean: Food in the Lives of Korean Military Brides." Philadelphia: Balch Faculty Forum.

**Elaine H. Kim** is Professor of Asian American literary and cultural studies and Associate Dean of the Graduate Division at the University of California at Berkeley. Her most recent works are *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (forthcoming 2003) and *Echoes Upon Echoes: New Korean American Writing* (co-edited with Laura Hyun Yi Kang, 2003). She is Executive Producer of *Labor Women* (2002), a 30-minute video documentary on Asian American women labor organizers in Los Angeles. She is a co-founder of Asian Women United of California, which produced such books as *Making Waves: Writings By and About Asian American Women* (1989), *Making More Waves: New Writings By Asian American Women* (1997), and *InvASIAN: Asian Sisters Represent* (forthcoming 2003), as well as the videos *Slaying the Dragon: Asian Women in U.S. Television and Film* (1988) and *Art to Art: Eight Asian American Women Visual Artists* (1993). She is also a co-founder of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates and the Korean Community Center of the East Bay in Oakland, California.