

11-1-2009

Grace M. Cho. *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Keith Russell Ph.D.
Lindenwood University, krussell@lindenwood.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Russell, Keith Ph.D. (2009) "Grace M. Cho. *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol1/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

**Grace M. Cho. *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.**

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* has evolved into a touchstone of Korean American literature in the past fifteen years. Despite its opacity and radically disruptive discourses, including multiple languages, unidentified photographic images, and unconventional formatting, Cha's text has inspired a generation of artists and scholars of Korean American literature. Grace M. Cho, an assistant professor at the City University of New York, College of Staten Island, certainly draws on Cha's work; she quotes Cha often and with reverence in *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, an intriguingly unorthodox book that mixes scholarship and personal experience in ways rarely seen in traditional productions of those in academia.

Readers expecting a typically structured academic study will not find it in *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*. Cho swirls researched writing, narrative, and photographs to create a purposefully non-linear text. She chooses this style in part because of her admittedly unusual subject matter: ghosts. She asks her readers to reconsider their approach to a topic that is rarely addressed in serious study in the social sciences. Cho herself asks, "Why study a ghost at all?" (27). She draws on work by other theorists who have addressed this question such as Avery Gordon to argue for the legitimacy of spectral studies. Ultimately, however, some readers will need to suspend personal disbelief about the existence of supernatural presences to accompany Cho on her journey into the murky forms of the *yanggongju*.

At the center of Cho's text is the ghostly figure of the *yanggongju*, which she defines as "literally meaning 'Western princess,' [and which] broadly refers to a Korean woman who has sexual relations with Americans; [the term] is most often used pejoratively to refer to a woman who is a prostitute for the U.S. military" (3). She continues, "As an embodiment of the losses of Korea's colonial and post-colonial history - the deracination from indigenous language and culture under Japanese imperialism, the loss of autonomy under U.S. military dominance since 1945, the decimation of the peninsula and its people during the Korean War, and the deferral of the war's resolution - the *yanggongju* is the embodiment of the accumulation of often unacknowledged grief from these events" (5). She traces the appearance and disappearances of the *yanggongju* across these temporal periods and links these heavily militarized decades with the emergence of stories from comfort women, women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese during World War II, in the early 1990s (13). The primary theoretical model of trauma that Cho adapts to link and explore these issues is the concept of transgenerational haunting, established by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, whose work on the Holocaust influences Cho's project. "I want to offer the Korean diaspora in the United States as another site of transgenerational haunting," Cho observes (11). Koreans living in the United States who were not alive during the Korean War are still haunted by the secretive, spectral nature of that conflict, particularly in the paradoxically hypervisible and invisible *yanggongju* (12).

The five chapters of *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* seek to uncover some of the ways the *yanggongju* circulates in Korean and American settings. Chapter one posits the *yanggongju* as a source of discomfort for Koreans that contributes to pushing this figure to the margins (34-5). Chapter two documents the innumerable atrocities of the Korean War and shows the conditions that led some women to become sex workers in camptowns around U.S. military installations after the war. In one of many effective passages, Cho remarks, "Between 1950 and 1953, U.S. bombers dumped as much as 600,000 tons of napalm over the Korean peninsula; in Churchill's words, it was 'splashed' over the landscape. This was more napalm than had been used against Japan in World War II and more than would later be dropped on Vietnam" (71). These horrors are powerfully presented, although some of these occurrences are unnecessarily conflated with

those that transpired during the Vietnam War (56-58); some of Cho's polemic stances against imperialism by the United States also seem complicitous when made by a member of the American academe. Chapter three focuses on the *yanggongju*'s tenuous position in camptowns. Cho builds on the work of Katherine Moon and Ji-yeon Yuh in her analysis of camptown life and she deftly dissects the media and scholarly reaction to the death of Yun Geum-i, a prostitute who was murdered in 1992 (115-119). Chapter four moves from camptowns to Korean brides of American soldiers immigrating to the United States. She states, "It is precisely the gap between 'GI bride' and 'Yankee whore' – the silences among Americans surrounding issues of military prostitution, as well as *yanggongju*'s refusal to remember her traumatic histories when she comes to the United States – that create the conditions necessary for these trauma to be unconsciously passed across diaspora." (131). Cho critiques several literary representations of the denizens of camptowns dreaming of an escape to the United States in works such as Heinz Insu Fenkl's *Memories of My Ghost Brother* and Nora Okja Keller's *Fox Girl*; these readings are among the most incisive sections of *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*. Cho calls chapter five a "phantomatic return, through a multiplicity of voices and *altered repetitions of past experiences*, that reaches toward a final destination" (167). She delves into historical and fictional accounts of the sinking of the *Ukushima Maru*, a vessel carrying thousands of Koreans that was sunk by the Japanese nine days after the end of World War II (168-175). As she is treading through these narratives, Cho unravels a series of vignettes that might or might not constitute her own story of immigration, ending with her mother's death.

Cho's text is fascinating, but somewhat unsatisfying in a number of ways. Most troubling aspects of the book stem from a lack of clarity, not only with regard to her obviously opaque subject matter, but also concerning her research and definitions of terms. Defining trauma and its many manifestations has been a difficult and contentious task within trauma studies; Cho constructs a clear model for applying transgenerational haunting to the Korean diaspora in the United States, yet her exact conceptions of what constitutes trauma are sometimes fuzzy. Are all Korean Americans affected by the haunting presence of the *yanggongju*? Are reactions to this trauma alike among Korean Americans with very different life experiences? By casting a wide web in her delineations of trauma, Cho risks overgeneralization and essentialism. Additionally, while most of *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* is well documented and cited, several of Cho's assertions could be better bolstered by the inclusion of other sources or additional research. For instance, she states that the *yanggongju* represents, "...over a million Korean women who have worked in prostitution for the U.S. military and of the over 100,000 who have married America GIs" (4). These statistics are powerful, but they would be more effective if supported by researched claims; the 100,000 women who married American servicemen are well chronicled, but the figure of the million sex workers seems inflated when not developed with evidence.

Beyond these sometimes unsteady assertions, Cho's work is a bold project. For readers who are interested in the often jaggedly painful relationships between the nations and individuals of Korea and the United States, and who are willing to accompany Cho down intellectual paths that are not always well lit or conventional, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* is challenging and enlightening.