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# The Phantomic *We*: *Mapping the DMZ by Yong Soon Min*

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**Abstract**

*This article examines the ways in which Korean-American artist Yong Soon Min visualizes the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), an emblem of the division of her home country, highlighting her unique perspective toward the subject, which stems from her hybrid and diasporic identity as a Korean American. A series of works she created after her visits to the DMZ, such as Kindred Distance (1996), Bridge of No Return (1997), Bangapsubnida (2004), On the Road (2009), Both Sides Now (2018), Liminal Space (2018), and We did not cross the border, the border crossed us, twice (2019), embody Min's prolonged process of mapping the contested space of the DMZ. In this map-making journey, Min reveals her ambivalent and complex perspective as a Korean American toward the rhetoric of unification and the DMZ, which has drawn upon a Korean ethnic nationalism based on the homogeneity of ethnic identity, utilizing fragmented images and multiple languages.*

**Keywords:** Demilitarized Zone, Cold War, globalization, unification, diasporic identity

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## Introduction

Los Angeles-based Korean-American artist Yong Soon Min immigrated to the United States at the age of seven in 1960, along with her family, to escape the social and political turmoil of postwar Korea. Growing up, Min was deeply inspired by the Asian-American movement in the late 1960s and 1970s which attempted to mobilize a political coalition of different Asian communities in the US, protesting the long-standing idea of Asian immigrants as "foreigners" (Dirlik 1996, 5). Min also learned that post-1965 Asian immigrants were marked by their prior experience of social and political chaos in their home countries, chaos caused by war and US neocolonialism. Their home countries' continuing economic dependency on the US further facilitated the American exploitation of Asian immigrant labor and discrimination against Asian immigrants (Lowe 1996, 16).[1] Coupled with her realization of the intertwined relationship between her immigrant identity and her home country's post-colonial history, Min's eye-opening encounter with contemporary history of Korea, including the Minjung movement,[2] through the organization called "Young Koreans United,"[3] led her to abandon her earlier conceptualist works devoid of specific reference to Korean history, and to actively incorporate images related to her subjects, while calling herself a "Cold War baby."[4]

While Min began to express her interest in the subject of the division of her home country and the DMZ in her work in the early 1990s, it was her actual visits to the DMZ in the late 1990s that led to her active engagement

1. The 1965 immigration law in the US drastically modified the long-standing policy of US immigration law by eliminating quotas based on national origin.
2. The Minjung movement in South Korea emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in reaction to the country's authoritarian regimes. The movement was focused on the role of the common people, or *minjung*. See N. Lee (2007, 1–20).
3. YKU was founded by Yoon Han Bong in Los Angeles in 1981 and the New York office was founded in 1984. See Korean Resource Center, "Yoon Han Bong," accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.drupal-krcla.org/en/history/yoon-han-bong.
4. Yong Soon Min, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, August 17, 2010; interview by author via Zoom, May 22, 2023.

in the DMZ.[5] The art world's growing interests in the DMZ starting from the 2000s in South Korea, which paralleled the thawing of the inter-Korean relations, further inspired her to visit the DMZ in 2018 to produce her site specific works.

Min's series of works created after her visits to the DMZ, such as *Kindred Distance* (1996), *Bridge of No Return* (1997), *Bangapsubnida* (2004), *On the Road* (2009), *Both Sides Now* (2018), *Liminal Space* (2018), and *We did not cross the border, the border crossed us, twice* (2019) highlight her intense mapping of the paradoxical and contested space of the DMZ. Put together, these works represent Min's prolonged journey of map-making which has been completed in her most recent work, *We did not cross the border, the border crossed us, twice.* In this process of mapping, Min provides a distinct perspective of Korean-American subjectivity towards Korean ethnic nationalism, which was based on the idea of an ethnic homogeneity. While there is a generational gap in perceiving the issue of unification, scholars such as Gi-Wook Shin and Paul Y. Chung suggest that Korean ethnic nationalism, which developed during Japanese colonization as an underlying impetus for anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, continued to shape the rhetoric of the unification during the Cold War and the post-Cold War period. The scholars also noted that the globalization process in South Korea did not weaken the idea of Korean ethnic nationalism (Shin and Chung 2004, 120).

While intertwined with the discourse of unification, the discourse of the DMZ has been marked by paradox and complexity, reflecting shifting geopolitical climates surrounding the country both at the domestic and international levels. While the shift in discourse was not a drastic one, prior to the 1990s, the DMZ had been presented as a symbol of war and division of the country under the Cold War politics and the government's anti-communist ideology. It was perceived as an important site for *dark* or *security tourism*, proclaiming the message of anticommunism. Toward the 2000s, with the thaw in inter-Korean relations, the DMZ was reconceptual-

5. Yong Soon Min, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, August 17, 2010; interview by author via Zoom, May 22, 2023.

ized as a region of peace and unification. It was promoted as a peaceful and ecologically valuable tourist site, responding to a warming political climate and the growing global tourism industry. Despite these complexities in the discourse of unification and the DMZ, it is commonly acceptable that the idea of ethnic homogeneity based on common bloodline, race, and culture has been at the root of the discourse.

Min's distinctive perspective toward the subject of unification and the DMZ stems from her specific hybrid and diasporic cultural identity[6] as a 1.5 generation Korean American whose migration was directly affected by the traumatic Korean War. While strongly attached to these issues as a 1.5 generation immigrant (Min 2006, 244; Machida 2008, 150), she also addresses that her Korean-American identity marked by the experience of cultural displacement and racial discrimination in the adopted country does not correspond to the abstract and essentialist notion of "Koreanness" upheld by Korean ethnic nationalism. In her work, Min often uses fragmented images and blurred video clips with multiple languages, expressing her complicated position in relation to the rhetoric of the DMZ and unification, revealing her hybrid, diasporic cultural identity.

## Min's Korean-American Diasporic Identity

The South Korean discourse of the Korean diaspora has been based on an ethnonational framework, emphasizing the ethnic ties of overseas Koreans

6. Initially, the use of the term "diaspora" was limited to indicating the historical experiences of forced dispersion of Jews and Armenians. Since the late 1970s, the use of the term has extended to encompass various kinds of dispersions of people from their original homelands. The term "transnationalism" was coined in the 1990s to describe migrant activities occurring across national borders. While the classical use of the term diaspora tends to emphasize distinct collective identity and cultural boundaries of certain ethnic or religious group in the host countries and their ties to countries of origin, over the past decade both terms have increasingly been used interchangeably to denote complex cross-border activities. This essay mostly uses the two terms interchangeably, see Bauböck and Faist (2010, 20–21).

to their homeland and categorizing them as *jaeoe dongpo* (overseas coethnics) (Park and Chung 2005, 3). Within this ethnonational framework, the complex and dynamic hybridity resulting from multiple connections and ties to homeland, adopted country, and other transnational communities have often been understated. American assimilationist ideas based on the rootedness in America has equally overlooked the specific heterogenous and diasporic experiences of the Korean-American community.

Encouraged by the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, Asian American scholars and activists coined the term "Asian American," by which they attempted to mobilize a political coalition of different Asian communities in the US. While emphasizing the common collective historical experiences of Asian Americans in the US and their unique cultural and ethnic heritages, scholars and activists protested the long-standing idea of Asian immigrants as *foreigners*. They rejected the term "Orientals," which perpetuated the foreignness of Asian immigrants, and instead presented the term "Asian American" to claim their rootedness in and belongingness to the United States (Dirlik 1996, 5).

Since the term was coined in 1968, Asian-American scholars have emphasized the idea of rootedness in America, discouraging the connection to specific Asian origins and cultures. However, they have simultaneously noted that the category often reduces the heterogeneous experiences of people of Asian descent into a monolithic and homogenous one (Wong 1995, 6–7).[7] The dramatic increase and diversification of Asian populations in the United States since 1965 further called into question the monolithic notion of the term. Concurrently, rapid global transportation and communications have rendered suspect the traditional notions of home and the nation that are restricted to geographic location or a homogenous national culture.

Reflecting upon the contemporary cultural terrain of globalization,

7. Wong states that as Asian-born new immigrants have constituted the majority of Asian American since 1965, the essentialist and a nation-bound definition of "Asian American" has been questioned.

Min's art rejects the essentializing notion of Asian-American ethnic identity, which is based on the US assimilationist approach that valorizes an American identity for Asian Americans. While her work argues for considerable attention to issues outside the nation-state in a globalized world, it nonetheless reveals the pitfalls of the universalizing and abstract notion of hybrid subjectivity acclaimed by globalization. She asserts the significance of the historical specificities of her hybrid cultural identity as an Asian American in the United States as part of an increasingly globalized world. While attempting to move beyond old assimilationist agendas of identity politics confined to the US domestic context, Min's work seeks to extend her concern to the contemporary history of her homeland, articulating the intertwined relationship between her hybrid identity as a Korean American in the US and the history of her home country. While assuming a diasporic attitude, Min firmly grounds her sense of hybrid identities in the specific material history of Korea.

Min's concern with the history of her home country was simultaneously affected by the unique immigration history of Korea and her pronounced nationalistic spirit within the immigrant community. While the Korean-American community shares experiences of racial discrimination and marginalization with Asian immigrant communities in general, it is distinctive in that members of the Korean-American community tend to maintain a strong sense of ethnic attachment. Although Korean immigration to the US started in the late 1880s, the first major influx of the immigrants took place only after the liberalization of the 1965 immigration law (Lowe 1996, 20). As a result, the Korean immigrant community consists mainly of first-generation immigrants and their children, who are often called the 1.5 generation, indicating immigrants who were born in Korea and immigrated to the US between the ages of five and thirteen. With the first-generation immigrants representing the majority of the Korean immigrant community, the community shows a distinctive sense of ethnic attachment. Scholars also note that the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of Korean society contributes to the strong ethnic attachment among Korean immigrants (Min 2006, 244). Additionally, pronounced nationalistic feelings in the community are closely tied to the historical condition of the first wave of Korean

immigration, which took place during Japanese colonization. Until the liberation of Korea in 1945, Korean immigrants remained vigorously committed to the cause of national independence, sending money and aiding various military and diplomatic activities (R. Kim 2011, 8). In addition to the strong legacy of colonialism, the lasting impact of the Cold War and the division of the country made the lived experiences of Korean Americans distinct from those of other Asian immigrant communities. In addition, post-1965 Korean immigrants with higher levels of educational attainments and economic status brought a strong sense of their ethnic heritage and continued to maintain close contact with their home countries (Min 2006, 234).

Min's endeavor to connect to the history of her country of origin cannot be equated to another old essentialist approach. Rather, what she strives to achieve is to reconfigure the meaning of Asian-American identity in an increasingly globalized world by firmly grounding her hybrid cultural identities as a Korean American in the specific material histories and thus excavating the specific difference of her hybrid identities.

## Korean Ethnic Nationalism and the Discourse of Unification

In "Paradox or Paradigm? Making Sense of Korean Globalization," Gi-Wook Shin and Joon Nak Choi argue that despite rising globalization, Korean ethnic nationalism based on shared ancestry has not weakened. Rather, the fundamental impetus for globalization is nationalistic spirit, calling for a national unity to survive in the international community. Shin and Choi further noted that ethnic nationalism remains the defining factor in the discourse of unification (Shin and Choi 2008, 251).

As Gi-Wook Shin has noted, Korean ethnic nationalism, which developed during Japanese colonization and is based on common ethnic origin and cultural heritage, became an underlying political ideology for the first Republic of Korea. President Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) proposed the *ilmin juui* (One People Principle) as a guiding political ideology, which was based on the homogeneity of the Korean people as embodied in the

foundation myth of Dangun.[8] The principle proclaimed the necessity of restoring the unity of the nation by eliminating communism. Maintaining the anticommunist rhetoric of Rhee's authoritarian regime within the intensified Cold War political context, Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) promoted revitalization of Korean indigenous culture and national identity to achieve a modernization of the country while legitimizing his dictatorship (Shin 2006, 104).

While nationalism for South and North Korea is based on mutually exclusive political systems and ideologies, (anti-imperialism manifested in Juche ideology and anti-communism in democratic ideology respectively), a shared sense of ethnic unity is still perceived as the significant driving force for the unification process of both regimes.

Reflecting the post-Cold War geopolitical changes and the domestic democratization movement, President Roh Tae-woo initiated a more conciliatory policy towards the North, which led to the joint signing of the pact titled "Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North" and the signing of the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in 1991 (Kang 2011, 126).[9] The Sunshine Policy initiated by President Kim Dae-jung in 1998, which emphasized the peaceful coexistence of North and South Korea through increased socio-economic exchanges, led to the launch of Geumgangsan mountain tourism. The first inter-Korean summit meeting since the Korean War also took place under the Sunshine Policy in 2000, where the two Korean leaders agreed to establish the Industrial Complex in Kaesong (Gaeseong), located in North Korea just across the DMZ (Moon and Yin 2020, 116). Sustaining the Sunshine Policy, in 2007, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun intensified reconciliation efforts by meeting North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang and agreeing on the peace and reunification of the peninsula without the intervention of outside parties.

8. According to this Korean foundation myth, Dangun was the son of the divine king Hwanung and he established the Old Joseon kingdom in 2333 BCE. On this, see Pai (2000, 61).
9. On the wording of this declaration, see MOFA (2008).

However, the successive conservative presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye adopted an unyielding policy toward the North's nuclear weapons program, dampening the peaceful climate (Moon and Yin 2020, 116).

During the presidency of Mun Jae-in, the "Panmunjeom Declaration" and the "Pyongyang Joint Declaration" were signed and the two North Korea-US Summits were held in 2018 and 2019. Yet despite joining in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985 and signing the1992 Join Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, North Korea continued its pursuit of nuclear weapons, declaring the completion of nuclear tests in 2007. The three meetings between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 also failed to make any progress towards denuclearization of the North (Moon and Yin 2020, 116).

As Dong-ho Han and Yeowon Lim have noted, the reconciliatory policy toward North Korea during the 2000s likewise reveals the underlying idea of ethnic nationalism based on a shared bloodline (Han and Lim 2023, 291–292). The 2018 Panmunjeom Declaration of Peace, Prosperity, and Unification stated, "South and North Korea will reconnect the blood relations of the people and bring forward the future of co-prosperity and unification led by Koreans by facilitating the comprehensive and groundbreaking advancement in inter-Korean relations,"[10] revealing the persistent notion of the ethnic homogeneity of the Korean people.

On the other hand, as Emma Campbell has argued, South Koreans in their 20s and 30s are increasingly disinterested in the issue of unification. Reflecting the increased economic and cultural status of South Korea in the era of globalization, their idea of ethnic nationalism came to exclusively focus on the nationalism of globalized South Korea (Campbell 2016, 51). The generational gap in perceiving unification has also developed in the Korean-American community (Namkung 1998,158).

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10. See MOFA (2018).

## The Shifting Rhetoric of the DMZ

Since its establishment as a buffer zone in 1953 at the end of the Korean War, the DMZ, a 155-mile-long and 2.5-mile-wide strip of land, has been perceived by many Koreans as a symbol of war and conflict. The devasting Korean War resulted in the intensified mutual antagonism and competition for legitimacy between North and South Korea in the 1950s and 1960s. Over the succeeding decades, a series of skirmishes occurred along the DMZ leading to the deaths of numerous South and North Korean soldiers and American soldiers.[11]

During these periods until the 1990s, while South Korean government policy toward North Korea was based on the idea of a shared bloodline, it simultaneously upheld a strict anticommunist political system and ideology. This contested idea of nationalism is manifested in the ways in which the DMZ is presented to the public. In the Cold War political climate, the DMZ has been presented as the symbol of division and war. Under South Korea's anticommunist rhetoric, the DMZ was promoted as an important site for "dark" or "security tourism." (Lee and Viejo-Rose 2023, 51–53). While the Imjingak, a park in Paju built in 1972 to console the separated families, reveals the aspiration for eventual unification, such sites as the Joint Security Area (JSA), where the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed, the Third Infiltration Tunnel dug by Norh Korea under the DMZ and discovered by South Korea in 1978, the Bridge of No Return, which had been used for prisoner-of-war exchanges, and the remnants of a rusty train derailed by wartime bombing, are presented as symbols of Cold War confrontations and continuing tensions.

Reflecting the post-Cold War geopolitical changes and the domestic democratization movement in the late 1980s and 1990s, the South Korean government shifted to a more reconciliatory policy toward North Korea, while maintaining the idea of the inevitability of unification based on a common ethnic origin. Reflecting the new reconciliatory political climate of

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11. See Ministry of Unification Panmunjom Tour, "Historical Events," accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.panmuntour.go.kr/nlgn/pblc/guidance/eng/epoch.do.

the 2000s, both local and central governments in South Korea began to promote the DMZ as a place for peace, hope, and ecology (Lee and Viejo-Rose 2023, 47). Numerous leisure sites such as Pyeonghwa-Nuri Park (Peace Park) (2005) and Pyeonghwa-Nuri Trail (2010) were constructed in the Paju DMZ, and cultural events such as the DMZ International Documentary Film Festivals (2009) and the DMZ Peace Art Festival (2019) were launched to promote the idea of peace and reunification (Choung 2021, 27–28).

## Art and the DMZ

Parallel to the government's effort to redefine the DMZ, since 2012, an increasing number of critics and artists began to actively revisit the DMZ as a region of peace and unification by creating exhibition spaces and displaying artworks near the DMZ (Y. Kim 2013, 60–61). Some artists managed to address the complex and paradoxical nature of the DMZ in their works, interacting with visitors and engaging in the specific history of the site. Launched by South Korean curator Sunjung Kim in 2012, the Real DMZ Project has exhibited artworks dealing with the subjects of border and war in various domestic and global venues. Between 2017 and 2018, the Real DMZ Project hosted exhibitions in Cheorwon-gun, a small county in Gangwon-do, located just south of the North Korean border (Y. Kim 2013, 61).[12] Invited by the 2014 Real DMZ Project, South Korean artist Minouk Lim created a performance and installation work titled *Monument 300—Chasing Watermarks* (2014) in Cherwon. It involved a bus tour from Seoul to the Waterworks Center in Cherwon, focusing on the killing of 300 people at the site, all of them accused of being pro-Japanese and anti-communist, by the communist North upon national liberation. By engaging visitors in a symbolic retrieval of 300 people, Lim's work effectively highlighted the tragic history of ideological discord and national division. Another South Korean artist Suyeon Yun's photographic work *Camouflage Project*, created for the 2013 Real DMZ Project, likewise involved visitors and residents of Cherwon.

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12. See "Real DMZ Project," accessed February 1, 2023, http://www.realdmz.org/about.

Her photographs featured these people engaging in their everyday activities while wearing clothing printed with photographic images of the Civilian Control Line (CCL).[13] Yun's photographs also featured them within the specific sites shown in the printed images on their clothing.[14] Her work thus urged participants to reflect on the camouflaged images of the history of division associated with the specific sites, and the intertwined relationship between the history of the sites and residents' current everyday lives.

On the other hand, some artists drew upon a sense of wistful hope for unification and peace, based on the abstract notion of a unitary nation. Exhibited at Dorasan Station, which was one of the exhibition venues for the Art & Peace Platform launched by the Ministry of Unification's Inter-Korean Transit Office in 2021,[15] Ye Seung Lee's *Ruffling Landscape—Calling Us "We"* is a video work displayed on five curving scroll-like forms hanging from the ceiling and flowing down the wall of the station. Moving in one direction, images such as waterfalls, clouds, and flowers associated with traditional East Asian landscapes create a surreal scene in which the audience is surrounded by the varied moving landscape. While completed in 2002 for the transportation of freight trains between Dorasan and the Kaesong Industrial Complex, Dorasan Station was shut down in 2008 due to escalating inter-Korean tensions and thus stands as a symbol of hope for eventual reconciliation between the two countries. Focusing on the symbolic meaning of the station combined with Zhuangzi's Daoist idea of "carefree wandering,"[16] Lee expressed her idealistic and utopian hope for peace and unification. Part of the title of the work "Calling Us We" further suggests that her perspective is rooted in the notion of ethnic homogeneity.

South Korean architect Seung H-Sang's installation *Bird's Monastery*,

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13. Established as an additional buffer zone to the DMZ, the Civilian Control Line (CCL) refers to the border set at 10 km south of the Military Demarcation Line. On this, see Choung (2021, 18).
14. See Real DMZ Project, accessed October 30, 2023, http://www.realdmz.org/about.
15. See "2021 DMZ Peace & Art Platform," accessed February 1, 2023, https://dmzplatform.imweb.me/129.
16. See the artist statement, "Ye Seung Lee," 2021 DMZ Art & Peace Platform, accessed February 1, 2023, https://dmzplatform.imweb.me/018.

which was included in the 2019 Real DMZ Project,[17] exemplifies an ecological perspective on the DMZ, while similarly revealing an abstract and idealistic approach to the DMZ. Made of bamboo, the huge tower-like structure was constructed for wild birds to inhabit while encouraging people to contemplate the peaceful coexistence of man and nature. Virtually untouched by humans for more than six decades, the DMZ has become a sanctuary for wildlife. Focusing on the metaphoric meaning of the DMZ associated with its ecological value as a region of peaceful and pristine nature, the work attempts to challenge the past notion of the DMZ (Choung 2021, 25–26).

## Mapping the Paradox of the DMZ

In the 2023 interview with the artist[18] Yong Soon Min suggested that she sought to create a map depicting the absurdity of the DMZ in her 2019 work, *We did not cross the border, the border crossed us, twice.* She further implied that her long-standing interest in the theme of the DMZ expressed through her previous works based on her visits to the DMZ culminated in the 2019 work. In fact, her exploration of the subject of the DMZ manifests itself as a process of map-making. Coupled with her visit to the DMZ in North Korea from Pyongyang and the resultant works, the series of works based on her visit to the DMZ in Paju, Cherwon, and Goseong reveal her distinctive perspective as a Korean American.

### *Mapping the DMZ: Paju*

South Korean activist and college student, Lim Su-kyung visited Pyongyang in 1989[19] to attend the World Festival of Youth and Students without South

17. See "Seung H-Sang," Real DMZ Project, accessed February 1, 2023, http://www.realdmz.org/archive/category/9/page/7.
18. Yong Soon Min, interview by the author via Zoom, May 22, 2023.
19. Lim Su-kyung participated in the Festival as a representative of the activist student organization Jeondaehyeop. On this, also see Lankov (2012).

Korean government authorization, which made a great impact on Min, stirring her to visit the DMZ in person. Since citizens of both Koreas cannot cross the border freely without their respective government's permission, Lim's visit to Pyongyang despite the South Korean government's denial of permission, and Lim's resultant arrest upon returning to the South via the DMZ, shocked many, including Min.

Min's first encounter with the DMZ took place in 1995 when she visited it from South Korea as a member of an NGO group. Her works *Kindred Distance* (1996) and *Bridge of No Return* (1997) were based on her first visit to the DMZ.

*Kindred Distance* (Fig. 1) consists of four photographs Min took at the Odusan Unification Observatory in Paju DMZ of North Korean products displayed in its exhibition hall. The photographs feature everyday items, labeled with names, that are commonly used in North Korea. The last photograph shows South Korean tourists looking at clothing on the mannequins. The word "whe" (*wae*) which is the artist's phonetic transcription into English of the Korean "왜" (why), is printed over the first two photographs, while the third photograph includes the word "where" and the fourth has the word "아워홈" (*awo hom*), a phonetic rendering into Korean of the English words "our home" (H. Kim 2014, 33).[20] The simple and outdated designs as well as the names of the items indicate an irrevocable cultural gap and estrangement between the North and South Korean people caused by a prolonged separation. Under the political ideology of anticommunism, until the 1980s, the South Korean government prohibited public discussion of North Korea, conceptualizing the regime as the Other, the enemy while paradoxically presenting it a separated relative.

The image of South Koreans intently and proudly looking at the products of the North as museum artifacts in display cases in the fourth photograph denotes their national pride about their own prosperity and capitalist economy, while also revealing the desire to know the Other.

By placing herself outside of the photographic frame, Min positions

20. Yong Soon Min, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, August 17, 2010; interview by author via Zoom, May 22, 2023.

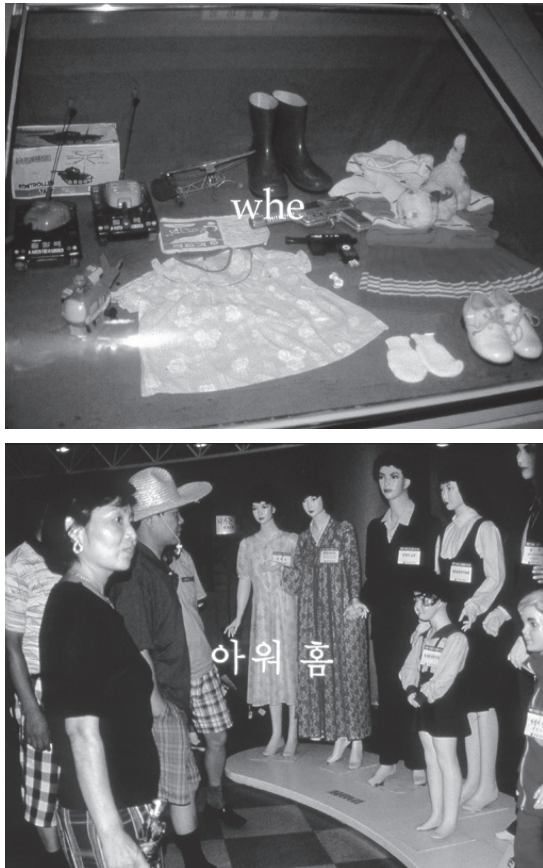


**Figure 1.** Yong Soon Min, *Kindred Distance*, 1996. The first and fourth photographs; Four parts color iris prints on Arches paper, 16” × 20” each

*Source*: Yong Soon Min, https://www.yongsoonmin.com/.

herself as another voyeur—a Korean American looking at South Koreans gazing at North Koreans. Min’s Korean-American identity makes it difficult for her to affiliate with either group of people. The overlaid phrase “아워홈” (‘our home’) further alludes to Min’s ambivalent attitude toward the homogeneous and essentialist notion of home and belonging underlying the rhetoric of Korean reunification.

During her 1995 visit to the DMZ in Paju Panmunjeom,[21] Min also saw the Bridge of No Return, and based on that experience Min created her installation *Bridge of No Return* (Fig. 2) in 1997. After the Armistice was signed in 1953, the bridge demarcating the MDL (*Military Demarcation Line)*, was used for the exchange of war prisoners between North and South. While the captured soldiers crossed the bridge on their own volition, once the decision was made, they were never to able to return to the other side (S.

**Figure 2.** Yong Soon Min, *Bridge of No Return,* 1997. Installation, 96” × 288”

*Source*: Yong Soon Min, https://www.yongsoonmin.com/.

21. Panmunjeom village, originally located north of the demarcation line, was the location the Armistice Agreement was signed. It commonly refers to the Join Security Area near the original site of the signing. The original Armistice Building is still in North Korea, which is now the North Korea Peace Museum. See, Ministry of Unification Panmunjom Tour, “Panmunjom History,” accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.panmuntour.go.kr/nlgn/pblc/guidance/eng/panmunjomIntrcn.do.

H. Lee 2001, 86). Foreshadowing a 70-year national partition, the bridge is emblematic of the stultifying division of the country and irrevocable separation of the Korean people.

Min's work *Bridge of No Return* consists of a tall S-shaped wall made of aluminum beams and wire mesh. The two sides of the wall are covered with language fragments printed on rectangular magnetic strips and rectangular one-handed clock faces printed with pale pink photographic images representing the South Korean side and blue images signifying the North Korean. One-handed clocks point to a twenty-four-hour time passage connecting the South and North Korean sides. Min also placed full-color tourist images of the two countries between the two sides. Min calls this space a "third space," as it is hidden behind the two sides of the metal wall.[22] The photographic images include the respective national flowers, propagandistic images, images of malnourished children for the North Korean side, and the images of Japanese colonization and the collapse of a department store in Seoul in 1995, which killed hundreds of people, along with the words "rampant consumerism" and "blind ambition" for the South Korean side.[23] These images and words suggest that both the totalitarian communist regime of North Korea and the materialistic capitalism of South Korea have neglected the wellbeing of the people while denoting the deep cultural, economic, and political gaps between the two countries. The "S" shape of the wall refers to the traditional yin-yang symbol with the yin representing the female principle and the color blue, and the yang standing for the male principle and the color red. However, rather than being polar opposites, the yin and the yang are both indispensable parts of each other and together, these symbols represent unity (Sizoo 2000, 46). The symbolic yin-yang shape of the installation, the one-handed clock connecting the two sides, and the transparency of the wall invoke the inextricably linked experiences of two Koreas and the history of the unified nation. However, by creating a third space in between the two sides, which expresses her own

22. Yong Soon Min, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, August 17, 2010; interview by author via Zoom, May 22, 2023.
23. Yong Soon Min, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, August 17, 2010.

diasporic and hybrid subjectivity, Min challenges the exclusive and antagonistic discourse of unification that is paradoxically intertwined with the idea of the common ancestral origin in Korean ethnic nationalism.

*Mapping the DMZ: From Pyongyang*

Min's second visit to the DMZ took place in 1998, which led to the creation of *Bangapsubnida: Rainy Day Women* (2004), *On the Road* (2009), and *Both Sides Now* (2018). Invited by the Overseas Compatriots Group of the DPRK, Min, along with Korean-American scholars Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi, embarked on a ten-day trip in July 1998 by entering North Korea through Beijing.[24] Half of the trip's itinerary included visits to the major North Korean monuments, such as the Juche Tower, Kim Il Sung Square, the Mansudae Art Studio, and the Mass Games in Pyongyang. Since the group was also allowed to have their own free time, they chose to visit the DMZ and Geumgangsan mountain. Min's American passport enabled her to enter the other half of her motherland and to cross the DMZ from the North in 1998, while for most Koreans crossing from the other side was forbidden. Her status as a Korean American imbues her with a more fluid perspective on the divisive discourses of unification and nationalism.

Min's single channel video *On the Road: Northern Exposure* (Fig. 3) was taken on the road from Pyongyang to the DMZ. The video begins with blurred images of roadside views with voiceover narration by Min. The English, Korean, and Spanish captions move rapidly from right to left. Min's voiceover alternates with the conversations among the group in the car, and between them and a North Korean host. Due to the background noise and music, these conversations are sometimes hard to follow. Min's video captured people walking on the sidewalk, a distant field, the Mansudae Monument in the distance, and a policewoman controlling traffic. The video abruptly shifts to slow motion when featuring school children walking on

24. Yong Soon Min, interview by author via Zoom, May 22, 2023; Min stated that the Overseas Compatriots Group of the DPRK aimed to establish better ties with overseas academics.

**Figure 3.** Yong Soon Min, *On the Road: Northern Exposure*, 2009. Single Channel Video, TRT: 19:03 minutes

*Source*: Yong Soon Min, https://www.yongsoonmin.com/.

the sidewalk and waving at the group in the car and a policewoman standing in the middle of the road to direct traffic. The video continues to capture roadside views toward the DMZ, where South Korean and North Korean flags are seen from a distance. While photographing the DMZ was not allowed, according to Min's accounts, she visited a series of tourist spots in the DMZ and purchased souvenirs at a gift shop. She was also impressed by the sheer height of the flagpole erected in Gijeong-dong village in the North. Rather than focusing on scenic landscape or monuments, the video tries to capture mundane everyday lives of the people and the roadside view. The use of different languages in the captions, the alteration between regular and slow motion, the distracting noises, and the conversations among people create an overall sense of disjunction and fragmentation. While some of the images, such as waving school children, evoke a sense of intimacy and connection, the stiff posture of the policewoman and the blurred images of the barren landscape simultaneously create a sense of distance. The overall sense of fragmentation and blurriness, and the use of multiple languages in Min's video *On the Road: Northern Exposure* reveals her sense of hybrid and diasporic identity.

Based on her visit the next day to a neighboring village near Geumgangsan mountain, Min created *Bangapsubnida: Rainy Day Women #64* (Fig. 4). It consists of sixty-three photographs attached to a panel with video images projected on the photographs. Taken from a booklet of North Korean ceremonial postage stamps that Min bought at a hotel in China, the photographs feature faces of long-term unconverted North Korean prisoners of war who were held in the South for up to forty-five years (N. Lee 2007, 102)[25] and finally repatriated to North Korea with the 2000 amnesty declaration by then South Korean president Kim Dae-jung (S. Kim 2001, 19).

The video captures North Korean women singing and dancing in traditional dresses at the entrance to an election hall on a rainy day, likely celebrating the re-election of Kim Jong-il to the head of the Supreme People's Assembly. Along with other visitors from the United States, Min was invited

**Figure 4.** Yong Soon Min, *Bangapsubnida: Rainy Day Women #64,* 2004. 10' × 16', projection over photographs

*Source*: Yong Soon Min, https://www.yongsoonmin.com/.

25. The ideological conversion system introduced during Japanese colonization was abolished after World War II, but with national division and the establishment of the National Security Law, it was revived in South Korea in 1956.

to vote. The title *Bangapsubnida* means "welcome" and is also the title of the song sung by these women.[26] The juxtaposition of the images of welcoming women with those of the faces of former prisoners alludes to the hero's welcome these former prisoners received upon returning to North Korea. While the parallel between the stillness of the photographs and the moving images of women dancing and singing creates a visual contrast, both images denote the totalitarian nature of the North Korean regime; the strong loyalty of the sixty-three long-term prisoners toward Kim Jong-il, which caused them to sacrifice their entire youth in prison, and the mobilization of women for the celebration of the Great Leader, refers to the totalitarian control exercised by the government. By adding a subtitle from Bob Dylan's song *Rainy Day Women* from the 1960s, a song that was favored in the civil rights era in the US, Min alludes to her ambivalent position as a Korean American in relation to the oppositional and antagonistic national ideologies.

Based on her visits to the DMZ in 1995 and 1998, in 2008, Min created a work titled *Both Sides Now* (Fig. 5). When she had visited Panmunjeom during her two trips, Min purchased ten sets of postcards at the souvenir shop, with each set representing the significant historical events or monuments in North and South Korea. Targeting global tourists, the postcards include English text identifying the events or monuments.

Min selected five images from each set of ten to create *Both Sides Now.* The five postcards purchased at the North feature images of the interior of the North Korea Peace Museum where the 1953 Korean Armistice was signed, South Korean activists who crossed the border, Panmungak[27] seen from the North, and the Monument to the Autograph of President Kim Il-sung. The postcards from the South feature images of the distant view of the North Korea Peace Museum, the Bridge of No Return, Panmungak seen from the South, and the U.N Plaza at Camp Kitty Hawk. Min sliced the postcards and reassembled them by alternating images of North Korea and South Korea. In the first postcard of this series, the sliced images of the

26. Yong Soon Min, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, August 17, 2010.
27. Panmungak is a building located on the North Korean side of Panmunjeom.

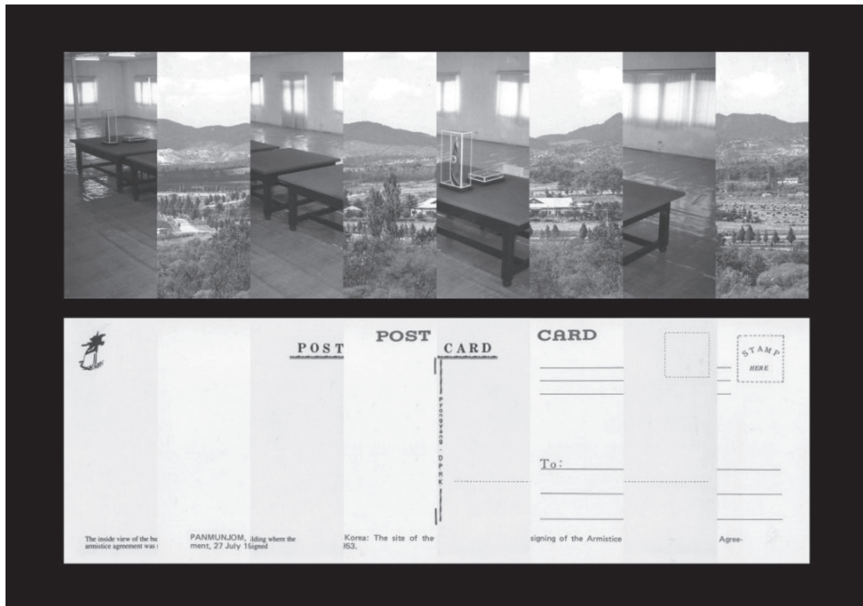


**Figure 5.** Yong Soon Min, *Both Sides Now*, 2008. Based on the postcards purchased at the DMZ

*Source*: Yong Soon Min, https://www.yongsoonmin.com/.

interior of the North Korea Peace Museum where a series of green tables are placed with the flags of the UN and North Korea on them are alternated with the images of an aerial view of the exterior of the same building seen from the South Korean side. The juxtaposition of the images from the South and North Korean sides reflects Min's own experience of walking between the green tables in the building. The second one consists of juxtaposition of the image of South Korean activists draped with blue unification flags and the image of the Bridge of No Return with the guarding soldiers in front of it, while the third one shows the images of the U.N Plaza with the flags of 16 nations alternated with the image of the huge slab monument with the incised replica of Kim Il Sung's last signature.[28] The alternation of the images

28. Min, interview by author via Zoom, May 22, 2023.

from the South with those from the North highlights the competing and conflicting discourse of peace and reunification of the two regimes while revealing Min's fluid identity as a Korean American that enabled her to cross the border from both South and North Korean sides.

*Mapping the DMZ: Cherwon*

While responding to the shift in the meaning of the DMZ from a symbol of war and division to one of peace and unification, Min continued to express her complex perspective resulting from her hybrid and diasporic Korean-American identity.

In 2018, Min participated in the Real DMZ Project, creating a site-specific installation (Fig. 6) for the interior of Woljeong-ri station located in Cherwon while visiting a series of sites, including the Korean Workers' Party Headquarters, built in 1946 and used by North Korean's ruling Worker's Party.

Woljeong-ri station was originally a small station on the Gyeongwon Line which was constructed in 1914 as the first east-west trunk line connecting Seoul to the important east coast port of Wonsan. Following the partition of Korea, the line was divided between North and South Korea. Now, the abandoned Woljeong-ri station in the DMZ marks the northernmost end of the Gyeongwon Line in South Korea.[29] Combined with the rusty remnants of a train used by North Korean soldiers during the war that is kept behind the station, the Woljeong-ri station remains a vivid symbol of the devastating war and the division of the country.

Min's site-specific installation consists of her work *Both Sides Now*, in the form of handheld fans hung on the wall, the two videos *On the Road: Northern Exposure* and *Bangabsubnida: Rainy Day Women*, and two benches with written texts, placed in front of the videos.

A purple bench has text reading "cold war, warm peace" in English, while a pale green bench across has the popular phrase "남남북녀" (*namnam*

29. See Cherwon: Dream for Unity, "Woljeong-ri Station," accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.cwg.go.kr/eng/contents.do?key=1083.

**Figure 6.** Yong Soon Min, *Real DMZ Project*, 2018. Mix-media installation, size variable

*Source*: Yong Soon Min, https://www.yongsoonmin.com/.

*bungnyeo*, 'southern men and northern women'), meaning southern men and northern women are more attractive than northern men and southern women, respectively, which further suggests that the unfulfilled romantic relationship between them was caused by the division of the country. In addition to the previously discussed images and formats of her works *Both Sides Now*, *On the Road: Northern Exposure,* and *Bangabsubnida: Rainy Day Women*, the juxtaposition of the contrasting words "cold" and "warm," as well as "war" and "peace" written on the benches denotes the reality of the continuing tensions and lingering Cold War in Korea, despite the supposed peaceful climate. By inserting her earlier works based on her visit to North Korea into the site of Woljeong-ri station, emblematic of war and the division, Min further asserts her fluid, diasporic identity as a Korean American.

## *Mapping the DMZ: Goseong*

In 2018, Min was also invited to the exhibition titled "Liminal Space," held at the DMZ Museum in Goseong, Gangwon-do. While visiting Goseong, Min had the opportunity to see the three-story summer villa of Kim Il-sung built in 1938, which is located near the DMZ Museum. For this exhibition, Min transferred the images from the postcards used in *Both Sides Now* onto small flags whose poles were attached to the top of electric fans placed on the floor of the museum (Fig. 7).

As the fans unfurl the flags, the images of the postcards from the North and South sides are turned into a complicated mixture of images, becoming blurred and abstract moving forms. The format of the flags refers to the small original flags placed on the tables in the Armistice Building that Min saw during her visit to the DMZ from the North Korean side in 1998. The flags further echo the North and South Korean flags flown atop tall flagpoles, which were erected on the northern and southern sides of the DMZ near

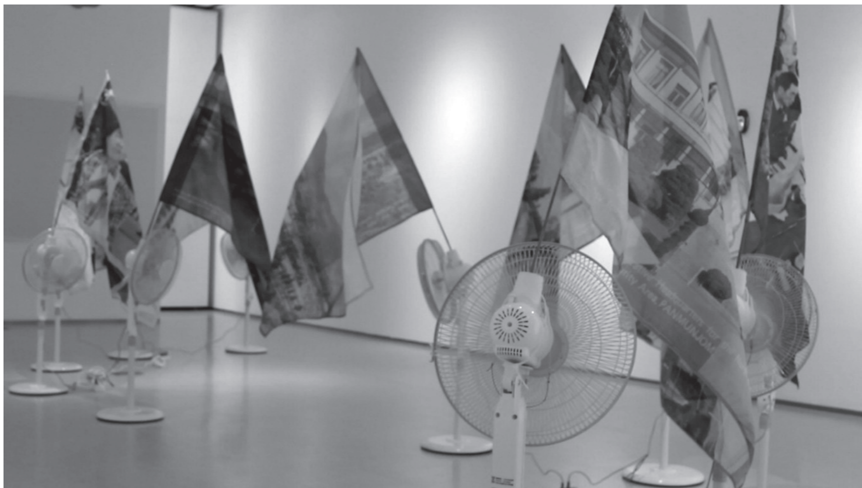

**Figure 7.** Yong Soon Min, *Liminal Space,* 2018. Mix-media installation, size variable

*Source*: Yong Soon Min, https://www.yongsoonmin.com/.

Panmunjeom, in Gijeong-dong and Daeseong-dong, respectively, and which competed for height during the *flag war* of the 1980s.[30] By transforming the flags symbolizing the competing and antagonistic claims on sovereignty into blurred and abstract images, Min challenges the divisive and essentialist rhetoric of unification.

*The Final Map-Making*

While participating in the artist-residency program at Davidson College in North Carolina in 2019, Min created *We did not cross the border, the border crossed us, twice*, a map combined with other objects. The work represents a compilation of her past mapping process embodied in her series of works based on her visits to specific DMZ sites—Paju, Cherwon, and Goseong, along with the visit to Pyongyang.

The map drawn on the floor of the university galley at Davidson College encompasses the histories of the three specific sites: Kaesong, Cherwon, and Goseong. These sites experienced a territorial shift during the tumultuous period between the establishment of the 38th parallel and the redrawing of the border with the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) and the DMZ at the end of the Korean War. Min previously visited the DMZ in Cherwon and Goseong. Drawn along the narrow space of the three sides of the gallery floor, the map features a broad curvilinear strip representing the DMZ, with yellow-black chevron pattern imitating concrete road barriers that are often seen at the checkpoints in the DMZ, while a thin red line in the middle of the strip indicates the MDL. Placed on the westernmost site on the curving DMZ are an old map of Kaesong, a photo of an old palace site in Kaesong, which was the ancient capital of the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), and a black-and-white photo showing a casually drawn 38th parallel line on a road in a village. In the middle of the DMZ is Cherwon, which was a fierce battleground during the Korea War, featuring a photo of the Korean Workers' Party Headquarters built in 1946. The easternmost site of Goseong shows a Google satellite map of the area with a large red pin and a photo of

30. For more on this, see Hancocks and Lee (2007).

**Figure 8.** Yong Soon Min, *We did not cross the border, the border crossed us, twice*, 2019. Mixed Media

*Source*: Yong Soon Min, https://www.yongsoonmin.com/.

Kim Il Sung's summer villa built in 1938. Additional texts narrating the specific history of the sites and several objects were included. A glass box hanging from a ceiling evokes a sense of physical tension and vulnerability, while Choco Pie snacks, one of North Koreans' favorite South Korean

snacks, are scattered over Kaesong, a reference to to the establishment of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the thawing relationship between the two Koreas.[31] An inflatable yellow-black spikey drum barrel, imitating road barriers at checkpoints along the DMZ, is placed on the DMZ, enhancing the idea of the strong presence of a border, while its inflatable form suggests the absurd and arbitrary nature of that border. Drawn on the floor, Min's work invites the viewer to walk along the DMZ from west to east, experiencing the specific history of each site. With several doors along the three sides of the room opening directly on to the map drawn on the floor, viewers are further urged to cross the DMZ from the North, in addition to from the South. While the vivid yellow-black DMZ attracts the viewer's attention, the long English texts, superimposed photos and maps, and additional objects in varying sizes and forms, evoke a sense of complexity and confusion, which point to the layered and shifting histories of the sites, and the paradoxical nature of the division and the DMZ. Combined with the suggested idea of a flexible border crossing, these complexities of the mapping further allude to Min's fluid and layered position as a Korean American in relation to the discourse of the unification of her home country, which is rooted in the notion of a homogenous Korean ethnic identity.

## Conclusion

Having immigrated to the US at the age of seven along with her family and raised in California, Yong Soon Min developed an affinity with the subject of the Korean War and the division of her home country from early on in her artistic career in the 1980s. While maintaining a keen interest in the issues related to the Asian-American experience, such as stereotypes and racism, she deepened her commitment to the subjects of war and division in Korea, embracing the DMZ demarcating North from South Korea as one of the central themes of her work. Min's series of works created after her visits to the DMZ, such as *Bridge of No Return*, *Both Sides Now*, and *On the Road*,

31. Yong Soon Min, interview by author via Zoom, May 22, 2023.

embody her attempt to map the paradox of the DMZ, which resulted in her 2019 work, *We did not cross the border, the border crossed us, twice*. During this mapping journey, Min revealed a distinctive approach to her subject, which was embodied in the use of fragmented images, complex structures, and blurred video clips with multiple languages. While responding to the shifting rhetoric of the DMZ reflecting a reconciliatory political climate beginning in the 2000s, Min appears to continue to distance herself from the discourse on unification and the DMZ with an underlying notion of ethnic homogeneity. Rather than aligning herself with the increasingly popular discourse of the DMZ as a symbol of peace and unification that continuously draws up the essentialist ideas of Korean ethnic nationalism and common ancestral origin, her work reveals a layered complexity related to her hybrid, diasporic cultural identity.

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