

# The Transnational Imagination and Historical Geography of 21st Century Korean Novels

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## Abstract

*This paper sheds light on the characteristics and significance of historical geography in 21st century Korean novels. While drawing on the idea of imaginary geography in peripheral areas including today's Vietnam and Mexico in the twentieth century, Korean novels can be read as a literary form of Koreans' sense of self-expansion as a country that can no longer be called Third World. Furthermore, the paper notes that this transnational imagination coincides with the attitude that the 38th parallel is the true national border. Empire of Light by Kim Young-ha tells the story of a North Korean spy who becomes a legitimate citizen of the Republic of Korea, whereas Rina features a woman who refuses to be a Korean national. Appearing in opposition to each other, the two novels are driven by the paradigmatic shift from minjok to gungmin.*

*The transnational imagination presented in both Black Flower and Sim Cheong set in the early twentieth century laments the end of the masculine subject in modernity, through the combination of global capitalism and female sexuality. The gender politics in these books express the end of the modern masculine subject formed from the masculine alliance of the working class and peasants on the one hand, while concealing capital-male domination on the other.*

**Keywords:** Korean novel, historical geography, transnational, diaspora, the 38th parallel, modern masculine subject, from *minjok* to *gungmin*, Kim Young-ha, *Empire of Light*, Hwang Suk-young, *Sim Cheong*, *Rina*, Kang Yeong-suk

## New Historical Geography of Korean Novels

The study of modern Korean literature, as part of an academic trend that took full shape at the turn of the century, has not only provided momentum for reflecting on the historical philosophy that underpins Korean novels—a genre born during the modern period—but presented the historical geography of the novel as a new topic of significance. That is, the novel has been described as a genre that defines the racial, territorial, and linguistic boundaries of a nation or nation-state, both concepts that are also modern inventions. Yi Gwang-su, a pioneer of modern Korean literature, argued that even though many classic stories were written in Korean, they could not be considered Korean literature, since the novels were set in China. He had also previously pointed out that even if a novel is written by a Korean writer and focuses on the lives of Koreans, it cannot be considered a Korean novel if it is written in a foreign language.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Korean literature has long been defined as that which reveals something about the lives and emotions of Koreans, as written by Koreans, and in the Korean language. What is significant is that this definition has never been questioned. As we will see later, while experiencing the influence of colonization, liberation, national division, Korean War, and the Cold War, the boundaries of Korean identity and the Korean nation have not been fixed. But, it is no exaggeration to say that the ideological and institutional foundation of Korean literature has taken for granted the principles that prioritize the Korean nation, Korean national territory, and the Korean language. Some recent Korean novels, however, seem to blur these principles of Korean nation and territory, as if in keeping with the reconsideration of nationalistic mechanisms of incorporation, exclusiveness, and their resulting violence, embedded in Korean literature.

For example, *Geomeun kkot* (Black Flower) (2003) by Kim Young-ha (Kim Yeong-ha), a novel about Korean emigration to Mexi-

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1. For this definition of Korean literature, refer to Hwang J. (1997).

co, uses the Mexican and Guatemalan Revolutions as an indispensable element of the narrative. Hwang Suk-young's (Hwang Seok-yeong) *Sim Cheong* (2003), a story set during the period following the mid-nineteenth century, when Western imperial powers competed with each other for influence in Asia, features racially diverse characters from various countries including China, Taiwan, the Netherlands, Okinawa, and Japan. Similarly, the geographic settings are also quite diverse, ranging from Nanjing and Jinjiang in China, Jirung and Danshui in Taiwan, to Singapore, as well as Okinawa and Nagasaki in Japan. In "Rapsteo-reul meongneun sigan" (Time for Lobsters) (2003) and "Jonjae-ui hyeongsik" (Form of Being) (2002), Bang Hyun-seok (Bang Hyeon-seok) reveals the self-consciousness of the "386 generation" against the backdrop of Vietnam. *Namaste* (2005) by Park Bum-shin (Bak Beom-sin) describes an international love affair between Sin-ae, who returns to Korea from the United States after losing her father and brother in the 1994 LA riots, and Kamil, a Nepalese migrant worker. The story also deals with the struggle over human rights and racial discrimination against migrant workers in Korea. In addition, Cheon Un-yeong's *Jal gara, seokeoseu* (Good Bye, Circus) (2005) addresses the tragedy of a Yanbian Korean woman who marries a Korean man. More recently, Kang Yeong-suk wrote *Rina* (2006), a novel about a woman whose ethics and way of life are transnational escape.

Viewing Korean literature in rough sketches, the historical geography of the Korean novel can be seen to have entered a new stage with the new millennium. Here, when asked how to define a text that transcends the boundary of the nation-state, which is an extended landscape, it is worthwhile to consider the "modern epic" or "world text" suggested by Franco Moretti as a frame of reference. While the novel has served as an element for constituting national identity while limiting itself to the bounded territory of the modern nation-state, the "world text" suggested by Moretti can be defined as one that represents the "synchronism of asynchronism" while establishing its geographic frame of reference as a continent or world system as a whole. According to Moretti, the "world text" was born in the semi-periph-

ery, an area that produces such hybrid identities as the "synchronism of asynchronism" and a mixed form of core and periphery. What interests me among Moretti's concepts is not so much the "world text" but the "semi-periphery," since the extended landscape and transnationality mentioned above cannot be dismissed as a coincidental trend found in some novels. What then makes this new historical geography possible? I credit it to Korea's current situation, in which that nation can no longer be called "peripheral" or "Third World."

During the 1970s and 1980s, just one generation ago, Korean radical intellectuals liked to use the concept of the "Third World" to define the status of Korea in the world. Given that Korea had already been included in the group of newly industrialized countries (NICS) during the 1970s, it seems there was another reason for them to call Korea a member of this group. For Korean intellectuals at that time, the Third World signified not so much poverty and underdevelopment as revolution and liberation. However, no one calls Korea a Third World country today, and the Third World itself no longer signifies the more radical goals of revolution and colonial liberation. Rather, the only remnant of this thinking is the sudden popularity of Che Guevara, apparent in popular culture at the start of the new millennium. Nowadays, the concept of the Third World has been used to signify poor and underdeveloped countries, whose historical context differs entirely from that of Korea. This fictional aspect overlaps with the renewed landscapes of Korean novels, which now feature other peripheries, such as Vietnam, Nepal, Mongolia, Thailand, and Mexico. These new settings represent Korean pride, based on its upgraded international status as a wealthy country, regardless of which content or form each work contains.

This was not unprecedented in the history of modern Korean literature. It first appeared in the name of "national literature" (*gungmin munhak, kokumin bungaku*), more frequently known as pro-Japanese literature, when Japan invaded China and sparked the Pacific War under the slogan of the "Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere." At the time, the concept of national literature was coined by Korean writers who made it a goal in their writing to establish an

identity as imperial Japanese subjects rather than as Korean nationals. National literature presented a landscape that the Korean literature of the 1920s and 1930s, a period that gave birth to great literary works and writers, failed to present. In other words, the geographic settings of the novels expanded beyond Korea to reach the borders of Imperial Japan, ranging from Japan to Manchuria. The characters found in the novels were racially diverse and included Japanese, Manchurian, and Chinese, not to mention Koreans.

Koreans' sense of self-expansion was possible when the basis of identity shifted from *minjok* to *gungmin*. Of course, I have no intention of comparing today's literary reality with that of national literature in 1940. Still, in order to critically consider the experience of transnationality, one must ask not what is seen but why.

In order to sincerely answer this question, one must first consider that the reason why Korea became identified as the Third World, which was seen as a stronghold of revolution and liberation, was because Korea was a divided nation due to both the Cold War and post-colonial conflicts after World War II. Some argue that Korea, a country with a per capita income nearing US\$20,000, which overcame national bankruptcy at the end of the last century, cannot be called a Third World country. But it cannot be denied that Korea still remains a divided nation. Thus, it would be extremely nonsensical or politically ignorant to discuss transnationality without considering the issue of the 38th parallel.

### Imagined National Borders and the 38th Parallel

"From Mt. Baekdusan to Mt. Hallasan, the fatherland is one" was a famous slogan raised by South Korean unification movement forces—a movement that culminated with Rev. Mun Ik-hwan and Im Suyeong's consecutive visits to North Korea. The slogan represented the strong desire for national unification by recasting the geographical territory of Korea. Regardless of whether it was meant in support of the unification movement forces or not, the slogan reflected most

Koreans' perception of the nation's boundaries. Koreans define the northern border as reaching beyond the 38th parallel to the area bordering Manchuria and the Russian Maritime Province. Mt. Baekdusan is also a symbol of Korean territory. This idea is more than a socially accepted one. The Korean Constitution also supports this view, by stating that "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands" (Chapter 1, Article 3). This can be understood as a constitutional expression of the will to national unification, the idea that "one nation should build one state." This perception presupposes that the division is temporary and abnormal. In other words, North Korea cannot be recognized as a modern nation-state with an independent sovereignty, territory, and people, as found in the cases of Japan and, in particular, China, with which North Korea shares a border. Thus, according to this view, the 38th parallel does not constitute a real national boundary.

However, it should also be pointed out that, for Koreans, the 38th parallel has been a northern border in terms of immigration, thought, and expression. It is vividly revealed through the vocabulary of "crossing to the South" (*wolnam*) or "crossing to the North" (*wolbuk*), since any geographical move to the South or the North is nothing less than a political choice between the two.

National division beginning with the demarcation of the 38th parallel played the role of restricting and limiting the landscape of Korean novels. In 1947, Kim Dong-ri, for example, described in his short story, titled "Hyeolgeo bujok" (The Cave Tribe), the Koreans living south of the 38th parallel. In the story, Kim symbolically likened "being South Korean" to "being a member of a tribe," a term that denotes a smaller but more homogenous group than a nation that dwells in natural settings, such as "caves." Why the author used the concept of "tribe" instead of "nation"—a concept that had gained popularity since liberation in 1945—is apparent. As national division was becoming increasingly consolidated, North Koreans and communists became "Others" that had to be weeded out of the South (Jung 2006).<sup>2</sup>

2. Im Chong-Myeong explores how the Syngman Rhee regime reconstructed the

The term “cave tribe” is one that replaces the “Korean nation.” He chose “cave,” a place too narrow to include anyone other than family members, rather than “Korea,” a geographic term reminiscent of territory to the north of the 38th parallel. He also chose to use the term “tribe” in place of “nation,” since the latter’s homogeneity would be questioned if one lets go of boundaries. In this sense, Kim Dong-ri’s word choice can read as a simple but transparent response to the then-complicated and confused political situation.

In Kim’s story, war refugees from the North and Manchuria belong to the cave tribe. However, even around the time of liberation, North Korean refugees were not seen as only testifying to the wickedness of North Korea, but were also called “the wretched people from north of the 38th parallel,” or *sampal ttaraji*. *Sampal ttaraji* was a slang term coined to disparage those who fled to the South during the liberation period and the Korea War. The word testifies to the miserable life of North Korean refugees in the South. They crossed the 38th parallel while giving up almost all of their land, homes, and property, but they had no relatives or acquaintances they could rely upon in the South. As a result, they faced great difficulty in accommodating to South Korean society. What is worse, they suffered the prejudice and stubbornness of South Koreans. Although they could well have served to create and maintain an ideology supporting South Korea, they were in an unfavorable situation from the start, and thus it was highly probable that they would not fit into

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“nation,” a concept prevailed during the liberation period (Im 2004). The Republic of Korea, a separate government in the South, was criticized as “anti-national” by leftists and anti-separate government groups from its inception. Im analyzes how the South Korean government was approved as a state, utilizing the idea of the “cultural state project.” According to Im, a polity can obtain nation-statehood only when it can have statehood vis-à-vis civil society. That is, the Republic of Korea can have nation-statehood when it is represented and approved as an entity separated from civil society and a subject representing the nation. The cultural state projects of the First Republic culminated in legislation of the National Security Law as influenced by the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion. The “nation,” which was newly invented at that time, was not based on any natural, cultural, or historical homogeneity, but on anti-communism.

South Korean society, where capitalist ownership was maintained and reinforced as it was.<sup>3</sup>

The perception of today’s North Korean refugees as wretched and poor overlaps with that of North Korean refugees in the South. South Koreans have not politically welcomed North Korean refugees in terms of regime competition; instead, they have seen them merely as a social and economic annoyance with which South Korean society is saddled. For that reason, some South Koreans fear that by helping North Korean refugees become settled in the South, they will only increase their own financial burden. They also argue that equal assistance cannot be given to the North without also taking into consideration the alienated class in South Korea, including the unemployed, the homeless, and the disabled (Yoon 2001, 223). In a word, South Koreans began to see that in order to resolve the issue of North Korean refugees, they would have to share their money, houses, and jobs with North Koreans. In particular, with assistance to the North being viewed negatively, some felt that it would be less wasteful to share their wealth with socially vulnerable groups in the South, rather than supporting refugees from the North.

As long as South Koreans accept the definition of “nation” as having a shared language, history, and blood, South Koreans do not doubt they are part of the same nation with North Koreans. However, as can be seen earlier, some South Koreans refuse to share their wealth with those from above the 38th parallel. This attitude first surfaced amid criticism of the Kim Dae-jung administration’s North Korean policy as “blindly dumping to the North.” From this, it can be said that it is only recently that Korean nationalism has taken note of its exclusive ownership of capitalism. This can be also understood from another perspective; that is, Koreans no longer regard the North as an aggressive force seeking to overthrow the South.

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3. Analyzing the oral histories of families that crossed to the South or North, respectively, Cho Uhn has recently revealed an interesting research finding. According to these oral histories, families who came south did not feel the need to prove they were part of the “Korean nation.” Rather their sole interest was solving the issue of livelihood or survival. Cho (2006, 82-88).

This is vividly revealed when we look at how the characters of North Korean spies in Korean dramas and films have changed. According to one analysis, the description of North Korean spies has changed from the 1960s and 1970s' image of "a beast in a human mask, void of mind and heart" to those found in *Shiri* and *The Spy* (Gancheop Yi Cheol-jin). In *Shiri*, a female spy, Yi Myeong-hyeon, is depicted as a refined, urban woman, and Lee Cheol-jin, a North Korean spy from *The Spy*, is portrayed as an innocent boy, who is unfamiliar with the capitalist way of living (Yi 1999). The images of North Korean spies have been recast since the late 1990s, dependent on how well they cope with everyday life, culture, and norms in the capitalist South. These images hint at the changed direction and mode of aggression in North-South relations. In terms of popular culture, at least, it is no longer possible for the North to invade the South; rather, the North is seen as being captured by capitalism.

Kim Young-ha's recent novel, *Bit-ui jeguk* (Empire of Light) (2006), clearly depicts this change in attitude. The novel is about a 42-year-old man named Kim Gi-yeong who was dispatched to the South in his twenties. He forgets that he is a North Korean spy after living for more than ten years as a family head. The novel covers a single day in Kim's life, starting at 7 AM, when he begins his day as usual, and continuing to the next morning, which is the same as any other day. In the meantime, however, he experiences an entirely different day, as he is ordered by agents to return to the North via a mini-sub on the West Sea. A passage from the novel reads, "The past, which I thought might be all right to forget, a thing that concealed itself like a virus, has shown up in a sudden, decisive instance" (Kim 2006, 325). In order to reconstruct the past he has forgotten and inquire as to how and why the sudden order was given to him, he looks for those with a shared past. He confesses to his younger classmate So Ji-hyeon, with whom he has a close relationship while participating in university student movements, that he is a North Korean spy.<sup>4</sup> She responds:

4. Born in 1963, he was originally named "Kim Seong-hun." When he was a student

I know what you are. You're the type who likes hiresake, sushi, Heineken, Sam Peckinpah, and Wim Wenders. You're also the type who enjoys reading stories about Meursault, who murders people from Third World countries, and underlines the beautiful prose of Mishima Yukio, an ultra-rightist homosexual. You eat seafood spaghetti on Sunday morning and drink Scotch whisky at a bar near Hongik University. Don't you? It's because you don't want to return to the North that you confess what you are. You want me to keep you from going. Don't you? (Kim 2006, 289).

His identity that is defined by his current cultural and consumer preferences erases or nullifies two elements that make up Kim's past. While one is that he is a member of the North Korean Workers Party, having sworn allegiance to the party and its Great Leader, the other is that he belongs to the "386 generation." The "386 generation," a term coined in the mid-1990s, refers to those who are in their thirties (3), entered college during the 1980s (8), and were born during the 1960s (6). They attended university during the culmination of the Korean democratization and student movement, including the May 18 Democratization Movement and June 10 Democratization Movement. Also, Kim Gi-yeong, his wife Jang Ma-ri, and So Ji-hyeon were all university students during the middle and late 1980s, and were engaged in the National Liberation Faction, a leading student activist group at the time. It is therefore significant that this story features these overlapping images of Kim Gi-yeong—as a North Korean revolutionary vs. as a member of the 386 generation—and the dimmed

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at the Pyongyang Foreign Language University, he was selected as an agent. He was dispatched to the South in 1984 after training. Upon arriving in Seoul, he changed his name to Kim Gi-yeong by using the residence card of an orphan who had disappeared. He was ordered to take the university entrance exam in order to become a student in the Department of Mathematics at Yonsei University. At the university, he infiltrated the student activist group, the National Liberation (NL) Faction, which upheld North Korean Juche ideology. While monitoring the rapid growth of South Korean student activism, North Korea had planned to foster this activism further by planting a well-trained elite agent in their midst, disguised as a South Korean university student. Kim Gi-yeong was the model agent for the plan.

nostalgia for student activism of the 1980s as recollected through the eyes of a North Korean revolutionary.

For example, while analyzing *Joint Security Area* by Park Chan-wook, Kwon Eun-seon pays attention to O Gyeong-pil, a North Korean soldier in the film. O Gyeong-pil raises the issue of anti-Americanism and sings a popular South Korean song by singer Kim Gwang-seok, a symbol of popular culture during the 1980s. According to Kwon, O Gyeong-pil is another iteration of the South Korean self and, above all, a self into which the 1980s—an era of revolutionary movements, such as the Korean student movement and the democratization movement—are projected (Kwon 2001, 128-129). Through the persona of O Gyeong-pil, *Joint Security Area* not only gives a nod to the historic 1980s and 386 generation, but expresses its regret that the millennium lacks the rationale of that era. Behind this acknowledgement and regret, undoubtedly, lurked nationalism. Vietnam, as described by Bang Hyun-seok in “Form of Being” and “Time for Lobster,” is also a representation of a Third World born of the consciousness of the 1980s. In the novel, liberation warriors represent the lost self of Korean intellectuals who were active during the 1980s, which they should have cherished though they are now old.

In contrast, *Empire of Light* does not give any acknowledgement to a specific era or its rationale. Rather, it is critical of such works, which recall the era in romantic and ideological terms. René Magritte’s *Empire of Light*, a painting that shares the same title as Kim’s novel and is also used on the cover, was drawn using the surrealist “dépaysement” technique. Dépaysement means “making a thing separate from its original use and context to place them in an unfamiliar place.” In this regard, “Hilton in Pyongyang” and “Juche ideology in the 1980s Seoul” utilize the dépaysement technique. “Hilton in Pyongyang” is realistically modeled after the streets of Seoul to train North Korean agents who will be sent to the South. “Juche ideology” is upheld by the South Korean university students, who enthusiastically model themselves after North Korean revolutionaries, even calling Kim Il Sung “Great Leader” (*suryeongnim*) and Kim Jong Il “General” (*janggunnim*). Kim Gi-yeong recalls that due to the

extremely exaggerated imitation, “Hilton in Pyongyang” seemed artificial, like a movie set, and he remarks that student activists in the streets of Seoul seemed to be performing a play. Kim goes on to state, “It felt obscene to see South Korean youth, who are twenty years old at most and were given a thorough anti-communist education, use the words, ‘Great Leader’ or ‘General,’ like hearing a virtuous woman use the slang term for genitals.”

The author criticizes the blind imitation seen in the two—“Hilton in Pyongyang” and “Juche ideology in the 1980s Seoul”—without realizing that it is fundamentally impossible to completely imitate something on the one hand, and that the two have a fundamental similarity that makes this blind imitation possible on the other. This is why the dépaysement technique employed in *Empire of Light* differs from the surrealist technique, by which causally unrelated things coexist. The way each object is placed, as seen in Pyongyang (experienced by Kim twenty years prior) vs. Hilton, Seoul vs. Juche ideology, and Hilton in Pyongyang and Juche ideology in Seoul, is identical to the matrix of national division vs. the Cold War. As a whole, there is an analogy between them. “The South Korea first witnessed by Kim Gi-yeong in the 1980s is more similar to North Korea than to South Korea as we see it today” (Kim 2006, 198). South Korea during the 1980s was characterized by lifelong employment, college students who did not worry about finding jobs, a covalent authoritarianism between parents and children and between the state and individuals, a dictatorial regime, ignorance of the world outside national borders, corrupt officials, air raid preparation and trainings, and above all, individual mental pathology, as found in a society that stressed origin and goal achievement.

Kim Young-ha’s description is in keeping with the criticism of fascism and nationalism that was fueled by publication of the book *Uri an-ui pasijeum* (Fascism Inside Us) in the Korean intellectual community (Lim et al. 2000). It was possible to keep one’s distance from the 1970s and 1980s when intellectuals criticized themselves, referring to the era as one of revolution. However, self-reflection can only view the past from the present, and accordingly, is possible only

when the relationship between the present and the past is formed *ex post facto*. Where is Korea placed now? An episode from *Empire of Light* boldly answers this. Bak Cheol-su, an intelligence agent, tries but fails to follow Kim in COEX mall, a shopping center in Seoul with adjoining hotels, a trade center, city airport terminal, multiplex cinema, subway station, and convention center. Moreover, Bak is ordered to identify himself by the police, who suspect him. In response, Bak takes out his identification card and states that he was tracing the spy, but he is humiliated. This degraded status for a national intelligence agent shows that anti-communism has increasingly lost its power. Does not an agent from the National Intelligence Service who is locked in COEX mall, signify the state captured by capital? Here we return to the issue of capital.

Today's Seoul is virtually an entirely different country, sharing nothing in common with South Korea of the 1980s. To be sure, it became another kind of country from North Korea as well. In a way, it came closer to Singapore or France rather than North Korea. . . . He thinks about the three countries where he lived while sitting on a red plastic chair on Jongno 5-ga: *North Korea, South Korea in the 1980s, and South Korea in the 21st century. Among them, one has already disappeared* (Lim 2000, 199. Emphasis mine).

Kim Gi-yeong unconsciously crossed the border again from 1980s South Korea to twenty-first century South Korea. According to Kim Young-ha, the “national border” in the twenty-first century is not so much a geopolitical boundary as the tremendous power of time, and that power is fueled by capital. This is why Kim Young-ha—who makes no mention of any political trajectory or causal relationship starting with the direct presidential election followed by the June 10 Democratization Movement, transfer of political power, June 15 North-South summit, and election of Roh Moo-hyun as president—points to the “advent of the IMF” as the most decisive factor in making 21st century Korea completely different from Korea in the 1980s, “just as the U.S. military government did in 1945.”

### Gender Politics in the Transnational Imagination

Moving from the 1980s to twenty-first century South Korea, Kim Gi-yeong might represent the most common form of diaspora. National borders and people have followed the movement of capital, and in the process, many had to leave their hometown to go somewhere else. Diaspora is formed by both those who move “to sell” and “to be sold.” But ironically, they aspire to “settle down” in places where they can be safe and wealthy at the cost of humiliation and discrimination, even when their goal proves to be only subjective and wishful thinking. Particularly with globalization, modernity is nothing less than a set of experiences brought about by the movement of capital, which deconstructs all identities that are limited by time and space. Transnationality constitutes the basic form of these experiences. The novel, *Empire of Light*, can be called a variation of *Black Flower*, a novel also written by Kim Young-ha about the collective Korean emigration to Mexico a century prior. Undeniably, as in *Black Flower*, one axis of the novel is made up of a narrative about modern nation-state building—loss of nation, colonization due to imperial aggression, revolution and war. However, the novel can also be read as a criticism of nationalism and a joke on the state, as it says that capital is the supreme logic of the world, and that it goes beyond the modern nation-state and even governs the state.

However, if the diaspora found in *Black Flower* took the form of geopolitical migration, then, does this mean that diaspora in the twenty-first century, which has been made possible without physical migration, is a more universal form of life as compared to a century ago? It was in *Sim Cheong*,<sup>5</sup> written by Hwang Suk-young, a novelist

5. This novel is a reinterpretation of *Sim Cheong jeon*, a story about filial piety. The story of Sim Cheong is well known across diverse genres, including folktales and *pansori*. Sim Cheong is the daughter of a blind man who offers her life as a sacrifice, selling herself to Chinese merchants in exchange for rice to be offered to Buddha to restore her father's sight. Rescued by the Sea King, she becomes a queen and meets her father again. When they are reunited, her father opens his eyes and is able to see again. The story has been reinterpreted in various genres including

from an entirely different generation from Kim Young-ha and a leader of “1980s literature” and “unification literature” during the national division era, that I inadvertently encountered a wisdom and sensibility for experiencing life in this world.

Sim Cheong imagined her paths of life as a series of pictures. Sim Cheong said, “Now, I am not afraid of unfamiliar places. As I have seen, all were places where people can live” (Hwang S. 2003, part 1, 305).

After being sold in the port of Jemulpo, Korea, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Sim Cheong travels around many regions, the so-called “odyssey of a prostitute,”<sup>6</sup> ranging from Nanjing and Jinjiang in China via Jirung in Taiwan, Singapore, to Ryukyu and Nagasaki in Japan. In the meantime, whenever she is sold, she changes her name from “Renhua” to “Lotus,” then to “Renka.” This may signify her “de-nationality” and “being affiliated with nothing,” but it cannot be understood as hybridity as is argued in postcolonial discourse. Her names are the Chinese, English, and Japanese pronunciations of the Korean word *yeonkkot*, or lotus flower. The flower signifies the symbolic place where the character known as Sim Cheong is reborn, but the *signifié* (signified) is set as identical, because there is no place that is unfamiliar to her. There can be no identity confusion for Sim Cheong, who says, “Every place looks the same to me” (Hwang S. 2003, part 2, 71).

The “odyssey of a prostitute” is interchangeable with the “odyssey of capital,” where the former is both the reality of and a metonym for East Asian modernization, which began with free trade

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short fiction, novels, plays, and opera. These reinterpretations take diverse approaches. Some question whether filial piety is recommendable for modern society, while others focus on the status of modern women who are in charge of supporting their families. Other studies focus on the nationalist significance of the novel, especially considering the fact that Sim Cheong sells her body to merchants from Qing China.

6. This idea is revealed by the author himself. Hwang S. (2003, 330).

and the market. Here, the idea that “all worlds and lives are the same” appears to internalize capital’s claim to “be the same not an ill-fated woman’s resignation but capital’s claim to “be the same and be. . . to it.” Would it be an exaggeration to say that the female protagonist in Hwang Suk-young’s novel, who changes her name each time she moves as well as mastering the local songs and dances, is a kind of personified transnational company, conducting differentiated marketing to match local conditions, hiring local workers, and sometimes even performing charity?

The very portrait of a good capitalist! We can take the portrait as a fantasy in which romantic anti-capitalism is often entrapped. However, it is quite unusual that the author, instead of consciously refusing to treat women as a symbol of national suffering, combines capital and female sexuality. However, given that this combination is not confined to Hwang Suk-young’s *Sim Cheong*, we can pose a question about the gender politics embedded in the transnational imagination. Yi Yeon-su, the protagonist of *Black Flower*, is descended from the imperial family. She is described in the novel as possessing a sex drive and smelling of deer blood (female scent). All of the male characters die in the whirlpool of revolution, whereas she devotes herself to making money through the usury and entertainment business, as easily as raking up the leaves. In the end, she is the last to survive. The novel depicts nature and the market as having no regard for the values created by civilization and ideology, and behind this attitude lies the acceptance of the uncontrollable and universal power of capital and the market (Kim T. 2003, 19-21). These female characters’ naturalized sexuality stands in for naturalized capital.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Using women to represent the nation substantiates and naturalizes the concept of nation. “Capital-women” also repeats the national narrative, because women are a mechanism that enable the naturalizing of capital. Still, this representation is not new, for Yi Sang, a pioneer of Korean modernism, introduced the combination of capital (money)-female sexuality earlier. What differentiates the latter from the former is that while Yi Sang displays the self-consciousness of the male elite, who were degraded to the status of lumpen proletariat during the colonized modern era, by symbolizing their economic incapability and loss of moral dignity as well as sexual impotence.



It is ironic that while *Black Flower* uses the historical setting of aggression, war, and revolution, when imperial aggression and the anti-imperial struggle were closely geared with nation-state building in peripheral states in Asia and Latin America, it also attempts to erase the “nation.” I believe there is a subconscious intent behind the irony. It is worth referencing Rita Felski and Joan Scott. Rita Felski brings the issue of gender in modernity to the fore by arguing that the Western texts that make up the modernity discourse assume the modern individual to be an autonomous man free of familial and communal ties (Felski 1995). Joan Scott captures the paradox of modern republicanism and democracy by revealing that the universal “individual”—the modern subject of liberty and equality—commonly refers to masculinity (Scott 1996). It was through the masculine alliance, made up of enlightenment thinkers, the military, revolutionaries, peasants, and the working class, that the modern subject was formed during the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. This collective subject was formed in the course of demands for nation-state sovereignty, or the so-called “subject with citizenship.” Moreover, the “nation” was a powerful and widespread invention intended for masculine subjects to obtain citizenship, and to exclude a specific group from the citizenry. Still, almost all men found in the two novels, *Sim Cheong* and *Black Flower*, are described as dead, downfallen, or socially maladjusted. It is only women that survive. Can this not be read as an unconscious mourning for the end of masculine subjectivity, one that would be witnessed, a hundred years later, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century Korea?

In *Empire of Light* as well, the author describes the average middle-aged man, including Kim Gi-yeong, in the following manner: “The lives of his school fellows, who were fascinated with the ideology prohibited by the law for a while and then realized the harshness of capitalism but were willing to surrender to it, are not that different from his” (Kim Y. 2006, 92). The end of masculine subjectivity is also represented in *Empire of Light* through the portrait of a spy who was sent to the South then settled there. One North Korean spy, who crossed the border with Kim and helps him get settled, feels weary

enough about life to become a believer in eschatology. Another feels utterly exhausted with life. He, as the head of his family, has been very busy making a living. The eschatologist, who busily preaches his beliefs inside a subway train, and the depressed family head both constitute a social code that represents the reality of post-IMF Korea. Here, it is worth noting that Kim Gi-yeong’s colleagues, who are either North Korean spies or friends at a South Korean university, all devoted their youths to political rationales, such as anti-colonial, anti-capitalist national liberation. *Empire of Light* understands their “surrenders to capitalism” not as betrayal or conversion (in terms of subjectivity), but as inevitably brought about by the harshness of capitalism (in terms of objectivity). Thus, the end of the masculine subject and the victory of capitalism are simultaneous. Such an end is also presented as a cultural phenomenon. For example, a boy, who draws Kim Gi-yeong’s attention in a subway train, looks like Bart Simpson, an American cartoon character. The boy is wearing a t-shirt with Che Guevara’s face on it. Also, Ko Seong-uk, who is a law student involved in a ménage à trois with Jang Ma-ri, Kim Gi-yeong’s wife, reads *Red Star over China* by Edgar Snow and prefers images associated with communism, revolution, the color red, and machines. The images created by young people in twenty-first century Seoul, which are impossible for the 1980s generation to understand, represent the degeneration of the masculine subject through the iconography of dead politicians or that aura.

More than anything else, Kim Gi-yeong’s failure to return to the North can symbolize the end of the modern masculine subject in the Korean context. Kim Gi-gyeong accepts the North’s orders to return as a chance to reflect on his life, which is not that different from others’. A passage from Paul Valéry’s poem, “You should live as you think. If not, you will think as you live,” seems to summarize this idea, and it suggests recovering the self as a single individual from an average life trapped in a world of sameness, rather than ideologically and politically theorizing about surrender to capitalism. Recognizing that his South Korean university colleagues and North Korean colleagues all have maintained similar lives, and that his does not differ

either, Kim Gi-yeong might consider “crossing to the North” to be his last chance to differentiate himself from others. Of course, his return to the North is aimed not at reconnecting his life to the “fatherland,” “Great Leader,” “national liberation,” and the “unified fatherland,” but at ultimately restoring his life to his own and regaining a sense of sovereignty.

This is also the case with Kim I-jeong, who is involved with the anti-Dias revolutionary forces in Mexico. Without any sympathy or shared interest in the justification for the Mexican Revolution, Kim I-jeong inadvertently joins the revolutionary forces. This is also the case with Bak Jeong-hun,<sup>8</sup> who sides with the government forces. Kim feels comfortable enjoying “the world of men” in an “aimless state” and “being exempt from any responsibility in the world” (Kim Y. 2003, 251). For him, revolution is a game. While remaining aimless, Kim seems to view his life as an object of aesthetics. As has been pointed out, his idea of nation-building is overcoming the boredom he feels during the battle in a Guatemalan jungle. History in *Black Flower* is an oxymoron of “history as dandyism,” in which vitality, derision, and melancholy are painted one after the other (Seo 2003, 238-239). Still, Kim believes that although revolution and nation-building are no longer related to the modern, ontological narrative, he finds himself able to take charge of his own life when he is engaged in revolution and nation-building, rather than staying on a henequen farm where the workers are only fed meager rations of food when they finish their assigned work.

Just as Kim I-jeong ultimately fails at nation-building, Kim Gi-yeong in *Empire of Light* fails to return to the North. It might be too poetic to consider “crossing to the North” as part of attaining the self.

8. Kim I-jeong, raised as an orphan, joins the collective Korean emigration to Mexico in the early twentieth century, where he falls in love with Yi Yeon-su. However, the misery of working on a henequen farm hinders their love. Kim, who escapes the farm and tries to enter the United States, accidentally joins the Mexican revolutionary forces. Bak Jeong-hun, a former soldier of the Great Han Empire military, becomes a barber in Mexico. He happens to cut the hair of a Mexican general, and then is impressed into the Mexican government military.

Kim finds prosaic reason to return to the North. He does so despite his worry that he will be assassinated by North Korean spies, and despite the fact that his wife threatens to break up with him for fear of the prejudice and discrimination she will endure by staying with him. However, he fails because he is watched constantly by South Korean intelligence agents. There is no secret, inner mind where he can become his own self.

*Black Flower* and *Sim Cheong* are like a silent requiem, one that says, “As modern masculine subjectivity already came to an end one hundred years ago or with the advent of modernity, do not lament it too much.” However, I do not believe this requiem is sufficiently self-reflexive to reconsider a gendered modernity, simply because the narrative that glorifies women as eternal capital cannot be less oppressive than those nationalist narratives that rely on the suffering of women. Does not capital discriminate by both gender and race?

*Rina* by Kang Yeong-suk offers a sincere response to this question. As quoted below, *Rina* concretely captures the transnational experience of a woman who appears to be a North Korean refugee, while showing how the movement of capital is fundamentally nothing less than the movement of a phallus.<sup>9</sup>

I was born in a small country located to the east of this national border. I tried to go to country P where people speak my home language, but they were completely different. I crossed the border to be here. I first went west, then southeast, and finally northeast (Kang 2006, 344).

*Rina* does not make clear where the fictional geographical setting is actually located. By doing so, the novel presents a world where diaspora is a way of life, while claiming to resist the imaginative geographic cliché that has already been fixed in a textual form, and to make flexible national borders. However, based on the images of drug smuggling, sex trafficking, forced prostitution, slave labor, pol-

9. For more detailed discussion of *Rina*, see Lee (2006, 115).

lution-generating multinational companies in free trade zones, workers from diverse countries, and white people taking photos and drugs in subtropical cities and prostitution belts, one can guess that the novel is set in Asia or a non-Western region. While dealing with the return of modernity in developing Asia, the return to slave labor and the feminization of immigration, and catastrophic environmental pollution, the work generally ignores the post-capitalist discursive project represented by transnationality, the end of work, and nomads. For example, all cities seen in *Rina* are described as being filled with Westerners and the homeless, which properly represents “the end of labor” and “nomads.” Westerners, who wander around exotic cities addicted to consumption, and the homeless, who live by scavenging and begging, constitute two extreme types of nomads.

Above all, *Rina* declares that neither the attractive bourgeois subject nor the subject of labor exist, as Marshall Berman describes in Marx’s words. *Rina* shows that modern subjects, who transform their society and environment into a base upon which to improve themselves and implement social reform, have disappeared. This is clearly revealed through the author’s comments about the end of the working class, who had a collective consciousness of social change. For example, Rina and other women kill the abusive manager of a chemical factory. They run to a house where workers are living and yell, “Everyone, now you are freed. Please run away.” But “no one gets up, and instead they shrink down more and more” (Kang 2006, 71-72). When a foreign worker is shocked to death in a factory in the free trade zone where Rina works, his colleagues hold a demonstration on top of a 50-meter tall tower.<sup>10</sup> But a manager says one word of warning that makes the other workers stop supporting them, and they safely descend, like dead insects, by a rope hung from a helicopter (Kang 2006, 237). The slogan, “Hurrah, workers!” that had been shouted by workers in the past, who were ready to die for their

10. This demonstration is reminiscent of the strikers at Hyundai Heavy Industries in 1990, who climbed the Goliath crane. This event played a decisive role in figuring the Korean working class as a representation of strong masculinity.

cause, was not heard in the literally “international” free trade zone where workers from diverse countries gathered. Instead, “Hurrah, workers!” was the last words of an urban worker who met his death at the hands of a pimp in retaliation for killing a prostitute. This event horrifically demonstrated the disregard for gender among the working class, another modern subject.

In this way, *Rina* is an extreme form of black humor for modern masculine subjectivity. The men in the novel include Rina’s father, who tries to escape with only his wife and son, leaving Rina behind; the men who extort money from their fellow countrymen and make a living by human trafficking such as producer Kim and Missionary Jang; and mean male workers who put on airs in front of the prostitutes. The story ultimately rejects labor, settling down, and the modern patriarchal system. This can be interpreted from the fact that Rina disregards her family members even though she discovers that they are planning to enter the country after she escapes from a chemical factory, where she was trafficked. Rina escapes from the factory with Ppi, who is the only person with whom Rina experiences intimacy and heterosexual love. However, as he becomes a skilled worker, their relationship turns uncomfortable. This changed relationship between Rina and Ppi, who can only play at being wife and husband, is due to Rina’s denial or the impossibility of labor, settling down, and the family system.

Rina hates the social norms related to the world of labor, as well as labor itself. Labor is what she was forced to do after school at fifteen years of age. And it was also something inhumane that she witnessed and experienced since leaving her hometown. She does not therefore want labor to regain its impaired reputation. “Prostitute Rina” (Kang 2006, 143) embodies not only her refusal to work but her rejection of the norms that are forcibly imposed by work. Instead of doing a trifling job in a factory, Rina sings and sells her body, liquor, and even marijuana. She also drinks her fill without ever forgetting about smoking marijuana and steals money. Likewise, Rina’s refusal to work allows her to do everything without feeling the humiliation that working ideology forces upon us; in other words,

she makes herself a commodity. Rina openly takes out money from her underwear to pay for food. Although Rina's behavior is based on capitalist ideology, which leads people to "work during the day" but "squander their money at night," Rina's subversiveness lies in the fact that the two worlds originated from fundamentally the same one—capital and the phallus—which alternate between stillness and movement.

Rina's refusal of this phallic world is revealed not only through her rejection of work but also through her killing of male rapists with the help of other women. Rina makes one feel that "the vulva, pink like fish meat" (Kang 2006, 260), and the vagina are the very site of suffering. These shared sufferings cause Rina to sympathize with women. Women, "who bleed profusely from the privy parts" (Kang 2006, 185) due to masculine violence, constitute the deepest sorrow for Rina.

As has been pointed out, *Rina* also speaks about the end of the modern masculine subject, which pursues self-innovation and social reform. However, the novel shows that the end of masculinity, accelerated by capital globalization, can rather serve to reinforce masculine violence, instead of bringing male domination to an end. Viewed this way, it is difficult for the representational collusion of capital and female sexuality to avoid being accused of the shameless self-escape of phallus-centric ideology.

### Nation-States Getting Settled and the 38th Parallel Revisited

A gas explosion destroys an industrial area, rendering it uninhabitable. Rina loses all of her friends: an elderly woman who was once a singer, an elder female worker who had worked in a sewing factory, and her son. From the very start, it was impossible for her to settle down in any one place. Moreover, Rina's passport was forged, and she considers settling down humiliating. Relief groups from all over the world ask survivors to put their suffering on display; adding their names to a list of survivors. The people remain there, living on relief

supplies.

Rina could not register her name on the list and gave up on trying (Kang 2006, 287).

The industrial complex collapsed. Nonetheless, people continued to try to live there while building homes and bringing in telephones. They wanted to live there until their death. I want to go to a northern country beyond the national border" (Kang 2006, 239).

At the end of the novel, for Rina, "crossing the border" constitutes a genuine individual affair, one that cannot be reduced to the world of totality.

Still, Rina refuses to legally belong to a specific country, and her transnationality is based on the presupposition that Rina does not go to country P. That is, country P, which is described in the novel as only message and rumor, is paradoxically a precondition for forming Rina's inner world. By leaving country P as one that should not be and is not experienced, Rina makes one feel the substance of the country more strongly. While country P can signify any place (empty *signifié*), it is rather a surplus of *signifié* in that it is thoroughly blocked from being experienced. In any case, given that it is consciously invented *signifié*, one believes that *Rina* may be a difficult reflection of a nation-state in the process of getting settled.

Although *Rina* and *Empire of Light* appear to be the opposite of each other, they might place their origin within the same paradigmatic change. This change can be summarized as one from *minjok* to *gungmin*. Cho Hong Sik has pointed out that while "nation" has lost its meaning as a modern political community in East Asia, a primordial cultural ethnic community was emphasized (Cho 2005, 136-138). In translating "nation" into Korean, *minjok*, which signifies a cultural or natural community, was preferred over *gungmin*, which merely denotes individuals or groups that make up a state. This is because Korean nationalism has reinforced the concept of nation, a homogeneous cultural group with a shared history and mentality, during the colonial era when Korea was deprived of political, economic and administrative sovereignty. This is also because the political inspira-

tion of “one nation forming one state” means that national division is the failure to realize a community or complete state. In this context, regardless of whether South Korea confronted the North, the 38th parallel cannot be a national border. In *Empire of Light* and *Rina*, *minjok* was replaced by *gungmin*, and the 38th parallel was described as a real national border. While *Rina* deconstructs the nationalist narrative by refusing to identify with country P (maybe the Republic of Korea), *Empire of Light* deconstructs the narrative by identifying itself as Korean. Thus, the myth of *minjok* as sameness, which has tied *Rina* to country P and Kim Gi-yeong in the South to Kim Seong-hun in the North, loses its effectiveness.

In this sense, what *Empire of Light* implies is something more than nostalgia for the 386 generation or the post-capitalist social landscape. It is interesting to see how the National Intelligence Service requests that Kim Gi-yeong reveal himself. Kim performs a “show” (Kim Y. 2006, 375): when Kim Gi-yeong pretends to contact the North Korean mini-sub on the West Sea at 3 AM as ordered by the North, South Koreans make a show of preventing him from going north by illuminating the area with a flare gun. It is noted in the novel that the flare and search light that illuminate the imagined line connecting Kim and the mini-sub is reminiscent of René Magritte’s painting, *Empire of Light*, which depicts the sky as dark and the world as light (Kim Y. 2006, 386). Jeong, a South Korean agent, says to Kim, who went off-stage after the “show”: “The mini-sub will have returned safely. Since your ‘show’ is enough, they will not be suspicious of you” (Kim Y. 2006, 385). This suggests that the “show” foreshadows Kim Seong-hun’s (Kim Gi-yeong’s original name) death. For Kim, this “show” signals the death of his other self, Kim Seong-hun. Experiencing this performance, Kim Gi-yeong faces his first day not as an illegal immigrant but as a citizen of the Republic of Korea, a day spent with his wife and daughter in his apartment.

Here, it is worth recalling why and when Kim suddenly became afraid while he still remembered his identity as a North Korean spy. He was always worried that someone would show up to reveal his identity or take away his wife and daughter. “As marriage and child-

birth neared, the nightmare continued” (Kim Y. 2006, 359). By making a home, Kim, who was an orphan, comes to gain ownership or a socioeconomic stronghold in Korean society.<sup>11</sup> The 38th parallel might be nothing more than an imaginary thing to the extent of being replaced by an invisible line. Nevertheless, the “show” Kim performed demonstrates that even an imaginary line cannot be crossed and must not be crossed. The 38th parallel is a line of defense by which Kim protects and guarantees his ownership. This is not only because he was accustomed to capitalism. At a time when the term “crossing to the North” can only be found in history museums, despite the rise in tourism and visits to North Korea, and when Korean society becomes democratized to the extent that homeowners living in the wealthy Gangnam area demonstrate against property taxes, it is no longer possible for the Korean intellectual to be politically exiled, provided that there are no external factors. Does the fact that debates over nationalism only appeared from the late twentieth to the twenty-first century mean, then, that the nation-state system was only consolidated in Korea around this time?

The paradigmatic shift from *minjok* to *gungmin* might be most vividly revealed when the non-citizen is redefined in Korea. After liberation, the term *gungmin* meant “anti-communist citizen,” formed under supervision and control. It was not until the late twentieth century that the definition of *gungmin* as citizenship was widely accepted (Kim D. 1999). At that time, the concept of non-citizenship surfaced. *Rina* refuses to belong to country P, but nowadays we are more aware of people like *Rina* who are living in Korea. *Rina* can stand in for migrant workers, a class below a class, North Korean defectors, or Korean Chinese. *Rina* stands in for all the poor, whose

11. We can see from the novel that Kim Gi-yeong refers to *Straw Dogs* (1971) by Sam Peckinpah. At the time, Kim describes the mathematician’s struggle to protect his wife and home from villagers who break in and rape his wife as a violent, masculine instinct. By describing Kim as a math graduate, and by placing his wife and daughter in a situation where sexual deviation and threat are strangely mixed, the author seems to suggest some intertextuality between *Light of Empire* and *Straw Dogs*.

mere existence is testament to the evilness of the world. Additionally, one should recall how Rina refused to belong to country P. She abandons or is abandoned by her family—the origin and foundation of her growth. She also could not or would not form a family based on heterosexual love. Moreover, Rina gives away the money she makes by selling her body and becomes unexpectedly penniless. While Kim Gi-yeong graduated from a renowned university and comes to own a 100m<sup>2</sup> apartment, albeit not located in the Gangnam area, Rina has nothing, not even her family name. To draw parallels between Kim Gi-yeong and Rina, therefore, is to boldly face the deception, illusion, conflict, and rupture that is conceived or concealed by the transnational imagination, even as it seems to open the Pandora's box of modernity.

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**GLOSSARY**

<i>gungmin</i>	國民	<i>minjok munhak</i>	民族文學
<i>gungmin munhak</i>	國民文學	<i>sampal ttaraji</i>	三八따라지
<i>janggunnim</i>	將軍님	<i>suryeongnim</i>	首領님
<i>kokumin</i>	<i>gungmin</i>	<i>wolbuk</i>	越北
<i>bungaku</i> (J.) ▶	<i>munhak</i>	<i>wolnam</i>	越南
<i>minjok</i>	民族		

(J.: Japanese)