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Postmemory Generation and Family Tragedies in South Korea: *My Father's Emails (2014) and Dear Pyongyang (2006)*

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Abstract

This essay applies Marianne Hirsch*'s theory of the postmemory generation to* Jaehee Hong*'s* My Father's Emails *(2014) and* Yonghi Yang*'s* Dear Pyongyang *(2006), personal documentaries on their father's traumatic experiences during the* Korean War *as seen from the daughters' perspectives. Both documentaries underscore the father's absence and silence and the lack of direct knowledge of the* Korean War *and subsequent ideological conflicts, two important traits of the experiences of the postmemory generation. First, inspired by feminist discourses on historical accounts and Hirsch's theory of postmemory, I focus on how these female filmmakers utilize personal memories of their fathers to question the official historical narrative, dominated by frustrated and violent manhood, in postwar South Korean cinema. Second, this essay also deals with* My Father's Emails *and* Dear Pyongyang *as important examples that challenge traditional definitions of documentary; both films consist of archival photography as well as fictional and interpretative elements—fluctuating between remembrance and oblivion or between understanding and confusion. The unsettled relations between the fathers and daughters, in a way, well reflect the ambiguous role of personal documentaries in resolving the gap between the war survivors and the postmemory and postwar generation in South Korea.*

Keywords: Korean War, Cold War, personal documentary, generation of postmemory, Marianne Hirsch, Jaehee Hong, Yonghi Yang, *My Father's Emails, Dear Pyongyang*

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The Rise of Personal Documentaries and the Generation of Postmemory in South Korea

This paper examines two documentaries about family suffering from the Korean War and ideological feuds in South Korea. *Hong Jaehee*'s documentary, *My Father's Emails* (*Abeoji-ui imeil*, 2014), initiated by a father's emails, was later published in 2015 as a book under the same title. Up until three days before his death, the father of the title sent regular emails to his second daughter, the filmmaker *Hong Jaehee*. The book, as well as the film, follows the father's life story as an internally displaced person, called a *Silhyangmin* (a person forced to leave his/her hometown in the North).[1] Similarly, *Yang Yonghi*'s *Dear Pyongyang* (*Dieo Pyeongyang*, 2006) focuses on family tragedies. The filmmaker's father moved from Korea's Jeju Island to Osaka, Japan in the aftermath of the Jeju April 3rd Incident (1948–1949), one of the largest massacres in modern Korean history, and which occurred in the interim between Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.[2] As a result of the incident and the prolonged battles between local insurgents and South Korean government forces, 40,000 of the island's residents, including Yang's father, fled to Japan. Moreover, in the early 1970s, Yang's father, who was a member

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1. Theodore Hughes makes the distinction between the *Wollnammin* (people coming South) and *Silhyangmin* (people forced to leave their hometowns, largely due to the Korean War), but the difference is not as clear as Hughes presumes (Hughes 2008, 104). Hong's father is a *Wollnammin*, according to this distinction, yet the majority of *Wollnammin* came to the South before the Korean War in the context of an economically, politically, and socially devastated interim government in the North, and therefore, both *Wollnammin* and *Silhyangmin* are involuntarily displaced people within the Korean Peninsula. In referring to Hong's father in *My Father's Emails*, I prefer to use the term *Silhyangmin* as it more clearly conveys the father's sense of loss and nostalgia regarding his home in North Korea before the Korean War.
2. This incident was ignited by those protesting the separate elections in the South held by the United Temporary Commission on Korea under the supervision of American Military Forces in 1948, and was followed by the South Korean government's anti-communist crackdown that lasted through May of 1949. For this fifteen-month period the total casualty are estimated between 14,000 and 30,000 people—or about 10 percent of the island's population (H. Kim 2014, 13–41).

of the *Jochongnyeon*, an association of Korean ethnic communities living in Japan, sent all three of his sons to North Korea in the hope they would avoid the social segregation and prejudice experienced by the Korean Japanese, called *Jaeil gyopo* or *Zainichi*, meaning literally, "to stay in Japan." *Dear Pyongyang* was shot during a 2001 family trip to Pyongyang to celebrate the father's 70th birthday party, for which the entire family reunited.

To analyze personal documentaries about the Korean War and the Korean Diaspora, I apply the notion of the generation of "postmemory." Emphasis is placed upon ordinary individuals and families who are reluctant to share their stories, and, as I assert, the theory of a postmemory generation can shed light upon the unique circumstances of South Korea, where, since the end of the Korean War in 1953, ideological and militaristic conflicts have continued to forge different perceptions of that war and to generate ideological divisions between older and younger generations for more than six decades.

The term "the generation of postmemory" was popularized by the cultural anthropologist *Marianne Hirsch*. In her work, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), Hirsch explicates the term "generation of postmemory" to refer to "those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (Hirsch 2012, 5).[3] While Hirsch's theory of a postmemory generation may seem arbitrary considering the layered and diverse relationships to traumatic events among the generations, it serves as a useful framework for examining recent documentaries about personal and family tragedies related to ideological conflicts in South Korea.

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[3] In contrast, Susan Suleiman, author of *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, proposed the theory of the "1.5 generation" in reference to child survivors of the Holocaust. Unlike the generation of postmemory, whose encounters with a tragic history were entirely indirect, in-between generations might have direct experiences of horrific instances: "the 1.5 generation is child survivors of the Holocaust, too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have been there during the Nazi persecution of the Jews" (Suleiman 2006, 277). Beatriz Sarlo critiques "postmemory" as an ambiguous term, since all historical and fictional narrative is somehow a "re-representation" colored by a range of social, political, and circumstantial influences (Sarlo 2005, 132).

My Father's Emails and *Dear Pyongyang* reveal some of the key traits of postmemory-generation films, as both filmmakers are the daughters of the films' respective male protagonists. Ironically, the most prominent, and shared feature of these two documentaries is the absence of the father, who in both cases provides only fragmented information about his tragic historical past to his family. In *My Father's Emails*, the filmmaker learns of her father's experiences as a *Silhyangmin* via his e-mails, which she opens and reads only after he has passed away. The lack of emotional intimacy between the father and the rest of the family is underscored throughout the film. In *Dear Pyongyang*, the filmmaker's father has a very agreeable personality, yet he shares with his family neither his experiences of moving from South Korea to Japan due to the Jeju April 3rd Incident nor the inner feelings behind his decision to send all of his sons to North Korea. Indeed, as Hirsch argues in *The Generation of Postmemory*, artistic productions by the generation of postmemory are characterized by the absence of substantial historical evidence. The experiences that the generation of postmemory "remembers" are only through the stories, images, and behaviors with which they grew up (Hirsch 2012, 5). In Hirsch's theory, a postmemory generation's experience with tragic history is largely caused by that generation's belated experience of traumatic events, of which traces and oral statements are partial and scarce. In *After Such Knowledge* (2004), Eva Hoffman even denies that memories can be transferred from one generation to the other: "For the second generation, the anxieties, the symptoms, no matter how genuine in themselves, no longer correspond to actual experience or external realities" and that generation "has inherited not experience, but its shadows" (Hoffman 2005, 66).

In the case of South Korean filmmakers, distinctive historical circumstances prohibit ordinary families from sharing their personal memories and experiences related to the Korean War and the ideological and political repression that followed. In South Korea up to the late 1980s, people were abducted, tortured, and even killed due to false accusation that they were North Korean spies. In *My Father's Emails*, it is these same historical circumstances that result in the father's blacklisting by the government. More tragically, in *Dear Pyongyang*, Yang's father is very cautious about making any political or ideological comments, fearing that under the harsh North Korean regime his sons might be punished as a consequence.

The process through which the generation of postmemory retrieves its past experiences is as important as the final outcomes. Artwork and stories created by a postmemory generation can serve as invaluable references allowing us to determine how tragic historical events are memorized and recited among contemporaries. Hirsch calls the process an "imaginative investment," and it is an effective means for a postmemory generation to actively engage with the past insofar as the connection between postmemory and the past is "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 2008, 107). The literary historian and theorist Susan Suleiman add that slippage, mistakes, and false memory, rather than historical accuracy, constitute a significant part of historical interviews, narratives, and testimonies by a postwar generation (Suleiman 2006, 135).

The filmmakers of *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang* likewise utilize their "imaginative investment" or the "shadows" of partial and fragmentary information to revisit their father's tragedies and to represent both personal and collective memories related to the Korean War and ideological conflicts in South Korea on their own terms. First, such bold and creative personal interpretations of the lives of their fathers can prove an important means for female filmmakers to build personal narratives and documentaries that directly contest officially constructed history, generally seen from male-dominated perspectives. As Schwartz and Cook explain, the advent of "'professional' history in the nineteenth century… squeezed out the story-telling, the ghostly and psychic, the spiritual and the feminine (and of course all 'amateur' women practitioners), in favor of men (exclusively) pursuing a 'scientific' and 'professional' history" (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 16). Moreover, Hirsch surmises that women have traditionally played a significant role in spreading inherited stories from the ancestors. By citing important feminist writers whose works are drawn from their family narratives, Hirsch proclaims that "their focus on the position of the daughter might allow us to theorize not a female or daughterly but a feminist postmemory work defined by a particular mode of knowledge about the other, a particular intersubjective relation or 'allo-identification'" (Hirsch 2012, 98). These daughter-filmmakers share their fathers' stories with the rest of the family with whom the father is eager to reconcile; *Yang Yonghi* consistently visits the family in the North, serving as a link between family members in Pyongyang and Osaka. As will be discussed, the filmmakers' differences from their fathers—ideological and political—enable them to make personal documentaries about those fathers, figures whose stories have never fitted the official ideological binary of South and North Korea.

In modern and contemporary South Korean film history, women have been frequently portrayed as victims of male oppressors, men whose repressed masculinity finds its sole outlet in sexual violence and deviant sexual relationships. According to Kim Kyunghyun, postwar Korean males have struggled with their own masculinity as their country was colonized, first by the Japanese and subsequently by American economic and military power. As Kim claims, "Through the relegation of the political crisis onto the body of a woman, the male subjectivities in a modern environment are born…The two bullets fired during the climax of the two films, *Shiri* and *JSA*, one aimed at the female other (Yi Pang-hui) and the other one at the male self (Su-hyok) do not disrupt the masculine order and universe" (K. Kim 2004, 274–275). Contrary to Kim's assertion, I argue that in *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang*, it is the daughters who play crucial roles in uncovering the past trauma of their fathers and families. They both actively seek the repressed stories of their father (both his personal trauma and the wider tragedies of his generation), either by reconstructing that past or by asking the father directly.

More importantly, Hong and Yang endeavor not only to represent their respective father's own struggles, but also to render their own misunderstanding, ignorance, and obliviousness to his tragedies. In *My Father's Emails*, the daughter, Hong, adopts voice-over to emphasize her father's absence; she then juxtaposes reenacted scenes of herself and her father to overcome the temporal distance between past and present. Yang made her first feature film, *Our Homeland* (*Ani kazoku no kun* in Japanese, *Gajok-ui nara* in Korean) in 2012, as a means of allowing the characters of the uncle and sister to express their objections to the father's decision to send his son, Sungho, back to North Korea.

The use of both archival photographs and interviews—conventional materials for non-fiction documentaries—alongside reenacted dramatizations, further challenges the traditional definition of personal documentary. A number of photography and film theorists have pointed out the problem with a straightforward notion of documentary. Stella Bruzzi, for instance, claims that documentary should be seen more or less as "a process of mediation between aspiration and potential" for the truthful and objective representation of reality. She states further, "documentary is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text reveals the tensions between documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility with this aim" (Bruzzi 2006, 6–7). Bruzzi's reservations about the documentary being the "most authentic mode of factual representation" are useful for reconsidering the complicated relationship between past and present, older and younger generation, or truth and fiction in *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang*. Indeed, the philosophical investigation of photography and photographic reality also questions the truth claims of family photography. In *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade* (2003), Robert Nelson and Margaret Olin propose the notion of the "performative index" or an "index of identification." They cite Roland Barthes's famous *Camera Lucida* (originally published in French as *La chambre claire* in 1980) to further explicate the significance of "punctum," less in the light of the philosophical question of truth and presence than in the light of the relation between Barthes and his mother (Nelson and Olin 2003, 144–145). Inspired by Nelson and Olin's insights and the hybrid notion of the new documentary, I treat *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang* as illustrative of efforts by a postmemory generation to examine its relationship with its father's generation beyond merely recovering the personal and collective wounds related to the Korean War.

Trying to Break the Silence of the Fathers

My Father's Emails and *Dear Pyongyang* both center on a daughter's persistent pursuit of her father's life story, a story only partially known to her and with aspects never before revealed to the family. In both cases, the father is a distant figure who provides hardly any substantial information about himself and his life decisions. In *My Father's Emails*, it is 43 emails sent by the father to his daughter just prior to his death in 2008 that prompt the daughter's endeavors. The filmmaker was not able to directly interview her father, and so she researched her father's history through interviews with her mother, siblings, aunts, and neighbors.

While *Yang Yonghi*'s father in *Dear Pyongyang* has a sweet personality, his decision to send all three of his sons to North Korea in the 1970s resulted in the permanent break-up of the family, causing the daughter-filmmaker to repeatedly ask her father the same question: Why did you send all the brothers? Don't you regret it? Throughout the film, Yang's father remains silent to his daughter's questions. This is made inevitably when a stroke destroys his ability to speak in 2004, and he eventually passes away in 2009, while Yang is still working on her film.

Therefore, in both films, the daughters are left with very limited information about their fathers. According to Hirsch, the connection of the generation of postmemory to the past is "shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (Hirsch 2012, 5). Ironically, in a sense, the cause of Hong's and Yang's incessant search for the details of their fathers' traumatic lives is the fact that they could not sympathize with their fathers in the first place. Ernst Van Alphen, the author of "Second Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory," asserts that the gap between generations is much more dramatic than is usually assumed: "The dynamics between children and survivor parents is, rather, defined by dis-connection, hence dis-continuity: disconnection in not an emotional, personal sense, but in terms of intelligibility" (Van Alphen 2006, 488).

Hong's motivation for making *My Father's Emails*, and publishing a book under the same title, was to come to personal terms with her father's life journey as described in his emails, although to Hong these stories may remain "incomprehensible," to borrow Van Alphen's expression. Hong's father sent his emails to his second daughter (the filmmaker) in the course of one year (2008), yet she opened them only after he had passed away; until then she had ignored them, perhaps out of her unhappy memories of an alcoholic and abusive father. Most of the interviews she conducts with her mother take place inside her old home, which was bought with the money her father earned from serving in the Vietnam War. The filmmaker also makes her mother read her father's emails. Kim Minju, author of the MA thesis "Study on the Representation of Family and the Aesthetics of Feminism in Personal Documentaries," claims that the lack of the father's voice is one of the most distinctive features of *My Father's Emails*. On the one hand, the filmmaker wants her mother to gain a better understanding of her late husband's life by forcing her to read his writing; on the other hand, the mother's reenactment also serves to heighten the sense of his absence—namely, his inability to speak for himself (M. Kim 2014, 76).

As the film progresses, one learns the extent of the father's alienation, from both family and society. His brothers-in-law were accused of being communist sympathizers and associated with Kungmin bodo yeonmaeng (Federation Protecting and Guiding the Public; FPGP), the largest South Korean organization subjected to the anti-communist campaign during the Korean War.[4] As a result, the father bore the weight of the disadvantages of perceived pro-communist families in South Korean society. Hong's father came under surveillance following his return from the Vietnam War in the 1960s and from Saudi Arabia in the 1970s. He was not allowed to emigrate abroad, as the South Korean government strictly controlled the international movements of its citizens until its liberalization of overseas travel in 1989.

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[4] The FPGP was institutionalized under the Syngman Rhee administration immediately following the 1945 liberation with the purpose of converting communists or communist sympathizers to the side of a liberal democratic government. With the outbreak of the Korean War, however, the people who had been registered as members of FPGP were slaughtered nationwide out of fear that they might betray the liberal government in the South and assist the North Korean army. According to research data, it is estimated that 100,000 to 300,000 FPGP members were killed.

After realizing his plans to leave South Korea for good could not be realized, he became an invisible man. He sequestered himself in a small room, only sporadically working low-paying jobs. As interviews with the family members revealed, the father was mostly remembered as an alcoholic who regularly beat his wife. Until the filmmaker read her father's emails, the family, particularly the children, knew little about his personal struggles deeply intertwined with contemporary Korean history.

From the mid-2000s, an increasing number of documentary filmmakers began using personal narratives as a popular thematic reference to depict how ideological conflicts continued to influence the lives of ordinary Korean citizens. The recent growth in documentary films on ideological conflicts in South Korea over the last two decades have sought a more nuanced examination of the so-called political left and right (N. Park 2010, 209).[5] *Repatriation* (*Songwhan*, 2004) and *The Border City series* (*Gyeonggye Dosi*, 2002, 2009) illustrate how horrendous and arbitrary ideological definitions established by the South Korean government could be. *Repatriation* follows a Korean War veteran and prisoner from North Korea named Cho Changson, who held on to his communist beliefs while in a South Korean prison, from which he was finally released in 1999 after serving his maximum sentence of forty-five years. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Cho's story was his resolve not to renounce his ideological beliefs in order to protect his family in the North. In both the South and North, it has been common practice to impose social disadvantages upon families whose members were affiliated with the different ideology of the enemy, especially at the height of the military dictatorship in South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s.

In *The Border City 2* (2009), the Korean-born German professor Song Duyul not only questions the arbitrary nature of the ideological binary, but asserts that such a simplistic binary has remained firmly in place, even under the progressive civilian governments in South Korea in the 2000s.

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[5] Documentary filmmaker and critic Kim Dongwon has named these personal documentaries concerned with ideological issues "post age-of-resistance documentaries" (as cited in N. Park [2010, 209]). The term "post age-of-resistance" also refers to a period of loosening of censorship codes starting in the late 1990s, as a result of the establishment of civilian government in South Korea.

While en route back to Germany following a visit to South Korea in 2003, South Korea's National Intelligence Service arrested Song based upon his suspicious activities under the pseudonym Kim Chulsoo, including trips to North Korea in the 1980s and 1990s. Song, however, describes himself as a person on the borderline:

> I was perplexed when I was asked to answer whether I belonged to this or that side.…First, the notion of a person on the borderline is an unfamiliar one in South Korea, but common in Germany. By contrast, there is the concept called 'Red Complex,' which is unfamiliar in Germany yet well known in South Korea. (as cited in Ko 2010)

In *My Father's Emails*, the father's position as a social misfit might have also intensified his frustration and alienation within his family. The effect of the father's alienation and silence on his family is comparable to what Hirsch describes when, "Loss of family, of home, of a feeling of belonging and safety in the world 'bleed' from one generation to the next. As Art Spiegelman so aptly puts it in his subtitle to *Maus I*, 'My father bleeds history'" (Hirsch 2008, 112). *Maus I* is a graphic novel depicting the traumatic life experience of the artist's father, Vladek, a holocaust survivor. Elke Heckner further surmises the dual role of such distance in a postmemory generation's experience: "It is this distance, paradoxically, that enables a new generation to engage with Holocaust memory. Distance allows for a turning-away from continued and painful reliving. At the same time, Hirsch recognizes that such distance is inherent in the position of secondary. …witnessing" (Heckner 2008, 70).

In South Korean literature, the story of the absent father during the post-Korean War years constitutes an important literary genre. Cho Eun's *The House Made of Silence* (*Chimmuk-euro-jieun jip*, 2003), for instance, treats the deprived social conditions after the Korean War. Like the rest of her generation, Cho experienced harsh social realities. Some fathers were literally sacrificed during the war, but others experienced equally difficult times under the ideologically repressive years of the military dictatorship that soon followed. In *Geundae-e wonchogyeong* (Soyoung Kim 2010), Kim Soyoung argues that 20th-century Korean males suffered through some of the most dramatic and tragic experiences in modern history, from the Japanese colonial regime (1910–1945), to the Korean War (1950–1953), to the military dictatorship from the 1960s to 1990s, to the forced economic restructuring toward a global market after the 1998 currency crisis, also known as the IMF crisis. The political and economic sustenance of Korea has been devastated, and cropped images of male characters in Korean cinema, Kim notes, reflect modern Korea's unrealized political and economic independence (Soyoung Kim 2010, 130). In Han Hyoungmo's classic *The Hand of Destiny* (*Unmyeong-ui son*, 1954), the men's body parts are shot in an extremely long take. The sequences in which the hand of a man smoking a cigarette knocking on a door generated the illusion that it was a limb that had been severed from the main body but survived, and Kim associates this abnormal and awkward image with unstable subjectivity and masculinity in postwar South Korea (Soyoung Kim 2010, 132–133).

Kim Kyunghyun also explains that the predominant male character in Korean cinema tends to keep everything to himself; he cannot escape "psychological guilt and the weight of history that punishes even the slightest gesture of reconciliation between the North and the South" (K. Kim 2004, 11). According to Kim, there are two strands of masculinity in the New Korean Cinema: "First in forms of angry young men and second, more specifically, as intellectual writers" (K. Kim 2004, 20). One can say that Hong's father was a depressed and angry man while alive. However, just before his death, or at least while he was writing emails to his daughter, he was transformed into a writer. Nonetheless, he did not share his stories with the family, reminiscent of the character Tokpae's line in *A Good Windy Day* (*Baram bureo joeun nal*, 1980)—"It is best to remain mute even when you know how to speak." While Yang's father in *Dear Pyongyang* does not have the aggressive personality of Hong's father, he may have shared some of the key characteristics of frustrated fatherhood frequently found in postwar South Korean cinema. In the end, Yang's father involuntarily dispersed his family members between Japan and North Korea by sending all of his sons to the North in 1971, during the North Korean repatriation project (1959–1984).[6] Yang's father, however, remains silent throughout the film. Before the camera, he reveals neither his feelings nor his opinions about anything that might be controversial in the eyes of North Korean officials. He does once acknowledge that he never expected the state of extreme hostility between South and North Korea to last as long as it has, yet he sidesteps his daughter's more confrontational questions—such as whether he regrets his decision to send his sons to North Korea—usually by smiling or changing the topic. Yang's father continues to emphasize his absolute loyalty to the North Korean regime to avoid any controversy or any repercussions for his sons in North Korea. Near the end of the film, the filmmaker juxtaposes her father solemnly swearing his loyalty to the Kim regime with the portrait of Kim Il-sung, North Korea's first leader (from its establishment in 1948 until 1994), that is hanging above the dining table. The father's silence in *Dear Pyongyang* owes much to the ongoing ideological feuds on the Korean Peninsula.

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[6] The "Return to the Fatherland Campaign" took place between December 1959 and 1984,

In order to understand the father's patriarchal masculinity in crisis, we should make note of his nomadic and in-between identity. Yang's father was among the Korean diaspora that settled in Osaka from Jeju Island during the late 1940s. After years experiencing Japan's social segregation of *Jaeil gyopo* (Korean Japanese), his father decided to send his sons to North Korea, which was to him his own beloved homeland. *Yang Yonghi* describes the unjust social circumstances faced by Korean Japanese as follows:

> The Japanese government gave Japanese residents the right to stay in Japan without extending their status, but this was a temporary measure. However, this 'intern measure' has not changed, even 60 years after the war. (Yang 2013)

Yang's brothers departed Japan in the early 1970s as part of a massive and systematic project in which the North Korean Government became actively

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and many Koreans in Japan who chose North Korea as their fatherland believed in Kim Il-sung's promises to ensure a good living, education, and vocation in their father's country. A total of about 93,340 ethnic Koreans ended up relocating to North Korea, to include about 6,730 who had Japanese nationality (Nam 2012).

involved in returning Koreans residing in Japan to North Korea.[7] From the time the agreement between the Red Cross Societies of Japan and North Korea was settled in 1959 and July 1984, some 93,340 Koreans living in Japan resettled in North Korea. Yang's father decided to send all three of his sons to the North in the hopes they might escape the extreme social inequities and alienation faced by Koreans living in Japan. When Yang's brothers were sent to the North in the early 1970s, she was just seven years old and, therefore, her knowledge of her brothers is very limited. In the film, Yonghi's father briefly mentions that when he made such a decision in the early 1970s he never thought the ideological division of the Korean Peninsula would continue for decades. Yonghi, the only daughter, also went to schools run by *Jochongnyeon*, the pro-communist organization of Korean residents in Japan, but she refused to follow her father's will and decided to study film abroad. Yang's father initially forbade Yonghi to apply for South Korean citizenship. Near the end of *Dear Pyongyang*, her father finally relents and allows her to take a path at variance with the rest of the family. While the father's decision in the 1970s separated the family in Japan and North Korea for more than three decades, Yang's decision to rebel against the dominant ideological stance of her family and become a filmmaker in the United States, ultimately enabled her to record family gatherings in North Korea and to reconnect the divided families by bringing news and images of her brothers' families in the North to her parents in Japan.

Similar to *My Father's Emails*, the father's silence in *Dear Pyongyang* prompts the generation of postmemory to either hunt down or imagine his tumultuous life from fragmentary historical information. In *My Father's Emails*, the daughter has communist leanings and was involved in the leftist South Korean student movement of the 1980s. Her father expressed his dissatisfaction with his daughter's political and ideological views as he himself remained a hard-headed anti-communist. His daughter's liberal and artistic tendencies, however, helped her to become the creative force to whom the father finally sent his story, which she transformed into film. Similarly, in *Dear Pyongyang*, Yang converted her citizenship to South Korea, further ensuring her participation in international film festivals as well as resolving her unstable social status in Japan. In her newfound role as filmmaker, she is able represent the tragic impact of Cold War politics upon her family.

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[7] Initially, the mass movement arose among Koreans in Japan in the late 1960s to demand their right to return to the homeland. Kim Il-sung, leader of North Korea, then extended an invitation to Koreans in Japan to "return to the socialist fatherland"—promising full citizenship and equal social rights in education and employment opportunity. Despite many obstacles, and opposition from South Korea, a repatriation agreement between the Red Cross Societies of Japan and North Korea was signed in August 1959.

More importantly, Hong and Yang became models for independent female creators who provide an alternative to the official historical account of ideological conflicts in postwar South Korean society. By using the personal stories of their alienating and troubling fathers, Hong and Yang challenge both the official narrative of South Korean history as well as its national boundaries, moving away from the enclosed notions of home/ homeland, the foundation for the official narrative of anti-communist South Korea during the post-Korean War years. In explicating the pervasive violent and frustrated male characters in postwar South Korean cinema, Kim asserts that, "Wrecked and disordered was the male subjectivity after the Korean War, the subsequence division, and the continuing legacy of colonialism through military dictatorship." What Kim calls the male lack "was located in every field imaginable; of the accoutrements of power in sexual potency, paternal authority, communal function, historical legitimacy, and professional worth" (K. Kim 2004, 11–12). One can say that *My Father's Emails* deconstructs such problematic fatherhood, whose silences and absence from home life is ironically nothing less than the expression of a repressed desire, echoing the sadistic and sexually aggressive male image of postwar South Korean cinema. Rather than being the victim of this aggression, Hong decides to investigate the father's personal struggles and to try to help the family reconcile with their own animosity toward the father. Yang also deals with the personal journeys of her father and brothers to reveal their ideologically as well as culturally marginal status in Japan, South and North Korea—stories that were left out of the official narrative of the Korean Peninsula during the post- Korean War years.

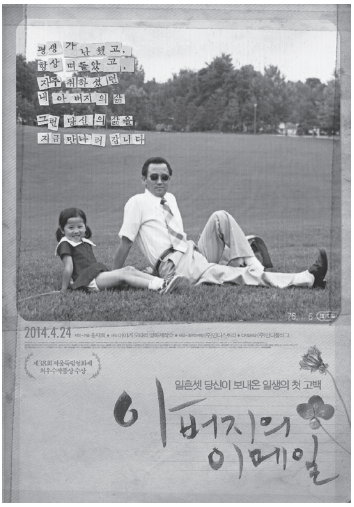
The Process of Reconciliation and Continued Trauma

My Father's Emails and *Dear Pyongyang* are rare examples of the female filmmaker's role in prompting, or even forcing, the father to reveal his personal traumas during and after the Korean War. Simultaneously, these personal documentaries by postmemory-generation filmmakers also demonstrate what Bruzzi calls "a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential," as there are always tensions between the "documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim" (Bruzzi 2006, 6–7). Bruzzi's explanation of the inherent problem in documentary film with its objective quality runs parallel with films, narratives, and arts created by a postmemory generation. Hirsch argues that the experiences of postmemory are "transmitted to them [the generation after] so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 2012, 5). She acknowledges the secondary nature of postmemory while proclaiming that there might be productive and positive potential in a postmemory generation's interventions into the past. The remnant photographs, traces, writing, and graffiti can serve as a "traumatic repetition that connects that second generation to the first, *producing* rather than *screening* the effect of trauma that was lived so much more directly as compulsive repetition by survivors and contemporary witnesses" (Hirsch 2012, 8).

Therefore, I contend, both Hong and Yang reconstruct scenes that might have less to do with actual historical truth than with the process of imagining, forgetting, and remembering among contemporary viewers. To begin with, one of the most notable incidents in *My Father's Emails* that demonstrate the filmmaker's process of coming to terms with the life and pains of the older generation is the sequence related to her father's forgotten luggage. These sequences are important not only because this luggage constitute the father's sole remaining possessions, but also because of the tedious and difficult process of opening that luggage. None of the family notices the father's luggage until the filmmaker finds it by accident, much as she accidentally opens her father's emails long after his death. Father's luggage had been lying in his room for years, and since he had not shared a room with his wife for decades, the family had been completely unaware of its existence. Inside the luggage, the father had put all his personal notes and photographs, which together are able to serve as a kind of substitute for the father's voice. Nevertheless, Hong cannot entirely come to terms with her father's life, and she is left with more questions than answers. The father's luggage plays a dual role in *My Father's Emails*: it symbolizes a small window through which members of a postmemory generation might catch a glimpse of the tragic life story of their father, while also serving as proof of that father's disconnect from his family. With no one knowing the combination to the luggage's lock, Hong resolves to take it to a locksmith. The ride there is very bumpy, and the camera angle is lowered to enlarge the image of the luggage rolling down the road. The relatively long route to the locksmith symbolizes the difficulty in unlocking the secrets of the father's past and thoughts. But on the way, Hong tries a random combination of numbers and is finally able to open the luggage.

The suitcase is filled with all manner of souvenirs the father acquired while working as a volunteer at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The father, who was forcibly separated from his mother in the North, could not get along with his own family in the South, yet by his 50s he could finally feel at home at an international sporting event, surrounded by athletes and other volunteers from around the world. Hong recalls how her father asked her to come over to the Olympic site where he was working as a volunteer—"I was not interested in it at all. … I did not know that he cared so much about the Olympics." Such a remark is strongly imbued with the filmmaker's complicated feelings of regret, confusion, and betrayal; the father wanted to reach out to and befriend people from other countries while remaining aloof from his own family. At the same time, Hong, like the rest of her family, had paid no attention to her father's interests. This reflects what Van Alphen noted as the complicated outcome of a postmemory generation's efforts to know their parent's experiences—"The more children feel disconnected from the past of their survival parents—the less they are able to understand it—the deeper they feel personally connected to them or the more they need that connection" (Van Alphen 2006, 488).

As Hong begins gathering information about her father, primarily from her mother and other relatives, she remains aloof from the collected historical evidence. In a sequence in which she revisits Seoul's Namsan area, which she had visited with her father in 2008, she touches upon her conversation with her father. "He never talked, but that day he talked to me. He asked me whether I remembered how he took a photograph of me here. That day, I wondered whether this old man could be the same person who harassed his family for so long. Now, I can no longer even remember his voice." This narration takes place as she juxtaposes the scene in which she visits the area alone with reenacted scenes of her visit with her father in 2008. The image of the actor playing her father is blurred, whereas the camera focuses sharply on the film director, who moves in and out of the scene, sometimes alone and sometimes with her father. These sequences are less about the father and more about the filmmaker herself, who consistently questions her father's identity and her own relationship with him. In this respect, the photograph of her with her father used as the cover of the book *My Father's Emails* looms large due to the filmmaker's narration, which expresses her confused feelings toward the image of herself and her father happily sitting next to each other (Fig. 1).


평생 가난했고,
항상 떠돌았고,
자주 취하셨던
내 아버지의 삶
그런 당신의 삶을
지금 만나러 갑니다
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제작·연출 홍재희 ● 제작 이야기보따리 영화제작소 ● 배급·홍보마케팅 (주)인디스토리 ● 디지털배급 (주)인디플러그
제38회 서울독립영화제
최우수작품상 수상
일흔셋 당신이 보내온 일생의 첫 고백
아버지의 이메일

Figure 1. Cover illustration for the book, *My Father's Emails* (photograph taken in the mid-1970s)
Source: : Hong (2015).

Minju Kim notes how the director inserts her own image in the middle of the recreated sequences of the father (M. Kim 2014, 9). Hong does this, for instance, to create the illusion that Hong follows her father—in one scene, the actor performing the father walks into his room and closes the door, followed by a scene in which the daughter then opens the same door only to find nobody there. As I argue, such an abrupt mix of past and present sequences not only reveals the temporary distance between the filmmaker and her father, it also highlights how the film director is actively participating in this process of searching for her father, though the stark darkness inside the room insinuates that her task is not successful. As Park Jinhee explains, the death of the filmmaker's father and the political circumstances that prevent her from visiting her father's hometown "challenge the documentary representation in which only the performance and unconscious space can suture the fissure between the absent indexical signs and her father's unfulfilled desires" (J. Park 2017, 444).

Despite the filmmaker's persistent efforts, the mother and older sister remain extremely hostile toward the father—while her younger brother expresses sympathy for him. Out of her disappointment, Hong says—"I thought that forgiveness started from remembrance, not from forgetting. But that may be too cruel for someone whose wounds are deep. My awkward hope of reconciling the father and the family ends up a failure." In that respect, the cover image of *My Father's Emails* can be interpreted as a representation of the filmmaker's own confusion about her relationship with her father, rather than as truthful evidence of past realities. According to Hirsch, the efforts undertaken by a postmemory generation often ironically bear the burdens of the parents' generation: such efforts "are shaped by the child's confusion and responsibility, by the desire to repair, and by the consciousness that the child's own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss" (Hirsch 2012, 112).

In *Dear Pyongyang*, the filmmaker's aspiration to understand the father's tragic decision involves an equally difficult process, although this difficulty is attributable less to ideological and diplomatic circumstances than to psychological ones. The filmmaker cannot enter North Korea again to unite with the rest of her family in Pyongyang after 2006; she made

Goodbye, *Pyongyang* in 2009 based upon footage taken before 2006. The North Korean government did not allow her an entrance permit—perhaps because her *Dear Pyongyang* had become successful and well known in international film festivals in 2006. *Dear Pyongyang* had gone on to win numerous awards, such as the Best International Asian Film Award at the Berlin International Film Festival, Special Prize of the World Cinema Judge at the Sundance International Film Festival, and the Best Digital Cinema Award at the Barcelona Asian Film Festival, all in 2006. The North Korean government might not have been pleased with the implied tragedy of a family that relocated to North Korea, as presented in *Dear Pyongyang*.

If the initial conditions for producing *Dear Pyongyang* required the generation of postmemory to work within the confines of available resources, the sequels to *Dear Pyongyang* are created from the filmmaker's own imagination. At the end of *Good Bye Pyongyang* (*Gut bai*, *Pyeongyang*, 2009), the second documentary in Yang's *Dear Pyongyang* series, Yang implies that she may never be able to see her niece Sunhee again. Her (fictional) film, *Our Homeland* (2012), was created around the time her brother, Sungho, was returning to Japan for medical treatment. Although her brother was permitted to enter Japan, the family was unable to arrange a doctor's check-up, not to mention surgery. The North Korean government limited his brother's stay in Japan to three months, which was too brief to obtain proper treatment. Yang's brother died of depression in 2009, soon after returning to North Korea.

In *Our Homeland*, her only fictional film, the uncle blames his brother for sending his sixteen-year-old son to North Korea. Without replying, the brother/father adopts a gloomy facial expression while the child, Sungho, now in his 40s, asks his father whether he can now stay in Japan. Again, the uncle yells that he cannot allow his brother to send his nephew back to the North. The conversation comes across as what Yang would have liked her father to have said in reality, although in the end this is fictional. By the time *Our Homeland* was shooting, Yang's father had already passed away. Further, the family was unable to send medication to the second brother in North Korea due to the international political fallout over the case of Megumi Yokota, who had been abducted by North Korean in 1977. From the late 1970s, North

Korean spies began to abduct Japanese fishermen and young people, both at sea and on the Japanese mainland, in order to train them as spies. After the North Korean government admitted in 2002 to abducting Yokota, the controversy surrounding her death and whereabouts continued to deteriorate Japan-North Korean relations. Therefore, *Dear Pyongyang* deals not only with the tragedy of Yang's parent's generation, but also with that of her own generation, including her brothers' fates in Osaka and Pyongyang. Yang's documentary indicates that the destiny of the family is very much at the mercy of unstable military and diplomatic tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Her feature film, *Our Homeland*, aims to portray the inner minds of the Yang family members, only in a fictional format, whereas their homeland (be it South or North Korea) has never provided them with the stable military and diplomatic conditions indispensable to a wholesome family life.

In her study of Andrés Trapiello's postmemory generation novel *Ayer no más* (Yesterday No More) about the perpetrators of the Spanish Civil War, Katherine Stafford points out the ambiguous outcome of the belated search for the older generation's tragic past:

> Breaking the silence does not always heal wounds as some are quick to believe, and justice is complex and often unsatisfying. No one, perpetrator or victim, finds any peace and reconciliation after their quest for truth. The novel ultimately promotes a different kind of empathy for the other side, who cannot find meaning, ideals, or heroes in history. (Stafford 2014, 15)

Returning to *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang*, the real-life outcome of these documentaries may seem unsuccessful—if the purpose of a postmemory generation's efforts to revisit traumatic memories is to reconcile with their parents' or predecessors' lives and decisions. To borrow Stafford's insightful comments, solely revealing the truth—whatever it might be—may not bring about positive and favorable results. In *My Father's Emails*, the mother and older sister, who continue in their refusal to talk about the father, became more hostile and resistant. For Yang, the brother can return to Japan only within a fictional film (*Our Homeland*). In reality, Yang's family continues to be separated between Japan and North Korea, just as their homeland Korea has been divided for decades by Cold War politics and ideology. More importantly, both *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang* problematize the simplistic definition of victim. The filmmaker Hong realizes that her older sister may have fulfilled her father's dream of escaping the Korean Peninsula, as she is currently living in the United States. At the same time, Hong ironically finds the mirror image of her father in her older sister's aggressive attitude toward her own son. In a way, her older sister has inherited her father's wounds, whereas the father himself tried to unleash his burden by writing emails to his second daughter. Yang's father is also a victim, although it was his ill-informed decision that led to the continued separation of the family for more than four decades and to the son's premature death from depression.

Therefore, *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang* might not aim merely to provide the audience with historically accurate images and stories of fathers, but instead to demonstrate the complicated underpinnings of these daughter-filmmakers' relationships with their fathers—not to mention their long and difficult process of coming to terms with their fathers' separate tragedies. In *My Father's Emails*, Hong regularly inserts her own reenactments—such her opening of the door to follow her father inside his room and her visit to Namsan with her father in 2008. In the film's concluding scenes, she creates sequences of her father's imaginary home in North Korea. Shot from a distance, the black and white image of her father's home appears as idyllic as possible—reminding us of what Bruzzi calls the inherent "tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of his aim" (Bruzzi 2006, 6–7). Throughout his life Hong's father was eager to return to his home in North Korea, but these reenacted scenes only deepen a sense of distance and pessimism. Similarly, in her later film *Our Homeland*, Yang engages with what had been undermined or suppressed in *Dear Pyongyang* through the use of fictional settings and actors.

Hirsch's insight is useful here as she assesses how postmemory invites "an open-ended narrative that embraces the need for return and for repair, even as it accepts its implausibility" (Hirsch 2012, 225). Indeed, the unsatisfying conclusions these two daughters arrive at pose persistent questions regarding the complicated definition of victimhood, the difficulty of coming to terms with the idealized notion of family among South Korea's post-Korean War generation, and how the destinies of fathers and their offspring, who may look like ordinary individuals, become subjected to unstable military and diplomatic realities, the effects of which ripple beyond generations.

Conclusion: Open-ended Narrative of Postmemory

My Father's Emails and *Dear Pyongyang* complicate the seemingly fixed communism/anti-communism binary and classical definitions of documentary and fiction. These documentary films revolve around the sufferings and destruction wrought upon the lives of ordinary individuals and families by persistent ideological division, generational antagonisms, and misunderstandings. The fathers are both seen as inhabiting ideological and national borderlines. Their nomadic and personal upbringings, which underscore both their social alienation and the daunting gaps between generational worldviews in South Korea, also blur the pervasive gender division between the violent image of post-Korean War South Korean manhood and victimized female. First, the role of daughters here is important as it contravenes the pervasive image of the female in postwar South Korean cinema dealing with the Korean War and ideological conflict, which largely portrays her as passive recipient of violent male sexual desire. Indeed, their role as ethnographical filmmakers of personal documentaries defies the hierarchical relationship between personal memory, official narrative, and ideological categorization.

By juxtaposing archival historical materials with reenacted scenes, *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang* seek not merely to recover truth or revisit a father's traumatic memories. As Park Jinhee aptly points out, "the absence of the father is filled in by the imagery of reenactment and the filmmaker's own performance in the narrative construction," yet the mix of different genres deviates from the conventional definition of the "journalist report format" and the distinction between public record and personal interpretation (J. Park 2017, 444). The lack of substantial historical evidence in such personal documentaries is the result not only of the father's silence, but also of the family's ignorance of, and even conscious effort to erase, the father, who only reminds them of poverty and domestic violence. In the father's luggage in *My Father's Emails* rest some historical remnants of his life, waiting to be recovered; yet, the families are unaware of his luggage, let alone his tragedy. The repetitive scenes of a happy family gathering in *Dear Pyongyang* reveal their nostalgia and yearnings for an "ordinary" family, while in reality they cannot live together in one country. *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang* are, thus, less about the past tragedy of the fathers' generation than about contemporary reactions to repressed traumas.

What is more, the open-ended process of searching for real traces of fathers, which comprises the core theme of both *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang*, corresponds to Olin's "performative index." Contesting the truth-claims of photography based upon their indexical imprint of *having-been-there*, Olin claims that what Barthes wants to see from his mother's photography is not truth. Instead, Olin writes, "He wanted a relation. He tried to use photography to satisfy his desire to possess or commune with his mother, to absorb her into himself and preserve her there through identifying with her" (Nelson and Olin, 2003, 145). While the photograph of Barthes' mother may serve as a mummified surrogate, for Hong, the father figure and the childhood photograph with her father still remain obscure and uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it is possible to surmise that the photograph serves as a means by which the daughter consistently projects herself and tries to figure out her relationship with her father. Hong calls the veracity of the photograph into question by citing her estranged relationship with her father, while utilizing an archival photograph that shows the happy moments between father and daughter for both her documentary and her book. The documentary is, for that matter, like Hong's photograph with her father, no longer conceived as the proof of factual truth; instead, both can serve as reminiscences of the daughter's own projection of "affect," "desire," and "confusion." Thus, rather than providing a definitive picture of a father's generation and how it suffered through war and ideological conflict on and beyond the Korean Peninsula, *My Father's Emails* and *Dear Pyongyang* reveal the complicated psychological relationships that exist and persist between generations in South Korea.

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