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Book Review: Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America

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Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America. 2002. Ji-Yeon Yuh. New York: New York University Press. pp. 283. \$25.95, hardcover. \$19.00, paperback.

Reviewed by Mire Koikari¹

With an increasing demand to globalize our undergraduate curriculum, Women's Studies educators often wish for a book that would present issues of gender, race, nation, and transnational politics in a manner sufficiently complex yet still accessible to undergraduate students. Ji-Yeon Yuh's book just does that. Drawing on insights from feminist studies, ethnic studies, post-colonial studies, Asian studies, etc., Yuh, historian and former reporter for *Newsday*, provides an in-depth study of everyday personal resistance and negotiations by the nearly one hundred thousand Korean women who married American servicemen (black or white) and settled in various regions within the US from the 1950s to the 1990s (2). Situating these military brides' "personal" and "private" experiences within historical and institutional contexts, Yuh shows how "even the most personal of relationships (between Korean women and their American husbands) are deeply rooted in and shaped by historical and social circumstances" such as Japanese and American colonialisms in Asia, Korean patriarchy and nationalism, and American gender, race, and immigration politics (7). By shedding light not only on the military brides' experiences of race-based and other kinds of oppressions, but also on their negotiations and resistance in the US, Yuh challenges American celebration of multiculturalism on the one hand and feminist Orientalist understanding of Asian women as simply victims on the other.

Yuh's study interweaves oral interviews of sixteen Korean military brides with rich historical analysis. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the origin of post-WWII camptown prostitution (prostitution in the areas surrounding US military bases) to Japanese colonial rule before 1945 and then to the subsequent American (neo)imperial domination in Korea. Emphasizing the continuity between the "comfort women" system (the sexual slavery of Korean and other Asian and Pacific women during Japanese colonialism) and that of camptown prostitution under post-WWII US domination, Yuh argues that in both instances, sexual subordination of Korean women reflects the gendered and gendering nature of international relations, i.e., masculinization of the conquerors (Japan and the US) and feminization of the other (Korea). She effectively shows that the lives of Korean military brides (especially their sexuality) are deeply embedded in these geopolitical and historical dynamics. As these women marry and immigrate to the US, their lives are additionally affected by Anti-Asian racism and Orientalism in the United States. American celebration of multiculturalism notwithstanding, these women often lead economically and emotionally difficult lives, with their Korean culture and identity being marginalized, even rejected, by their American husbands and children as well as by the

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mainstream society. Korean American communities, and Koreans back home, also stigmatize these women who are frequently from lower-class backgrounds and considered sexually and morally "unrespectable" due to their marriage to foreign soldiers. The complex intertwining of racism, sexism, classism, and colonialism in the lives of Korean military brides constitute the predominant theme in these early chapters.

Yuh never portrays Korean military brides as simply victims, however. Indeed the strength of the book lies in Yuh's sympathetic and careful analysis of these women's covert yet ingenious attempts to negotiate and even resist. Based on in-depth oral interviews, chapters 3 through 6 shed light on these women's use of "infrapolitics," or "a wide variety of low profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name" (85). The interviews with Korean military brides reveal that food constitutes a particularly salient site of contestations and negotiations. Catering to the wishes of their husbands and children who often reject Korean food, military brides learn American cooking, often to perfection. Their homes are more often American than Korean. Yet, when their husbands are away, they cook Korean food, invite other military brides to share meals, and recharge their Korean identity. Cooking and eating Korean food often becomes a method of "healing." At New York's Rainbow Center, a Korean military wives' collective, they feed the new arrivals, frequently victims of years of domestic abuse, with Korean food as a way of resuscitating them. Korean military wives' regional organizations also provide important opportunities to reaffirm their Korean identity, through cooking and consuming Korean food, speaking in Korean, associating with other women of a similar background, taking vacations together, and providing mutual help and support in other ways. These regional organizations, an "imagined community" created by the military brides, provide an important space where they collectively reaffirm their sense of self, network with other women, and generate and share material and emotional resources. By carefully documenting these individual and collective negotiations and resistance, Yuh calls our attention to the political agency of the women.

The picture of Korean military brides Yuh presents is that of first-generation immigrant women who have overcome obstacles and creatively and often successfully engage in familial and community lives. By portraying these women in this manner, Yuh explicitly challenges the predominant understanding of Korean military brides generated by social services providers. The social service provider studies, which focus on Korean military brides' struggles with social and cultural isolation, domestic violence, and the resulting and negative emotional consequences, tend to portray them as in need of help, and even pathological. In contrast, Yuh offers a picture of women who possess their own agency and will. While this is a critical and necessary intervention, one still wonders about the book's almost complete silence on the issues of violence, abuse, and dissolution of marriage that these women also encounter. Yuh's insistence on creating a positive image of military brides leads to yet another kind of erasure. She tends to under-emphasize various ways in which Korean military brides themselves become complicit in problematic dynamics. For instance, she fails to analyze how these women's insistence at reclaiming their respectability as "Korean" makes them willing participants in a Korean nationalism that is deeply gendered, raced, and classed. Equally problematic, Yuh does not discuss how these women, in their efforts to become "perfect" and "respectable" wives and mothers, participate in and reproduce Korean and American patriarchal assumptions about women and their roles in society.

Nevertheless, Yuh's is an important interdisciplinary study that skillfully interweaves Korean military brides' personal narratives with institutional and historical analysis of the 20th century gender, national, and colonial politics in the Asia-Pacific region. Well organized and concisely written, the book can be effectively used in combination with other books (such as *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia* by Saunder Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus), and films (such as "The Women Outside: Korean Women and the U.S. Military" by J.T. Takagi and Hye Jung Park), in Women's Studies undergraduate classrooms. Together, they will help facilitate meaningful and critical analysis about issues of American and Japanese militarism and imperialism in Asia, American multiculturalism, women and immigration, and the transnational migration of ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and nation.