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Hazel Oh April 10, 2023

Cute Korean Women, Cute Korean Girls: *Kawaii* Digestibility in *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca*

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Abstract

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By Hazel Oh

In *Crying in H Mart*, Michelle Zauner details her Korean American identity and relationship with her mother, Chongmi, as well as the pain of loss after Chongmi passes away from cancer. Given that Zauner writes of serious topics in her memoir, this thesis examines cuteness and how Zauner's Korean female family members appear to be cutified. To contribute to interdisciplinary discourse, I outline Korean Americans' unique position on cuteness during a time of Korean popular growth and their relation to Japan and Japanese cute, or *kawaii*. Building upon present understandings of cuteness, this thesis involves close reading of various "cute" scenes and raises the possibility of an imperialistic, *kawaii* cuteness furthering a digestibility that entails less accuracy and authenticity for Korean and Asian American female representations and women in the real world.

When combined with serious topics, the cuteness attributable to the food and childlike portrayals in *Crying in H Mart* can be detracting and distracting, not leaving space for fuller contemplation and more realistic descriptions of topics such as trauma, identity struggle, and grief. Moreover, those illustrations of the Korean women as childlike are questionable considering existing associations between Korean and Asian/American women and cuteness. Korean and Asian American women writers who notice the memoir's cuteness and popularity may come to believe that they should produce similarly cute, digestible works, prolonging expectations of Asian feminine cuteness. Ordinary individuals may also think to embody cuteness in general, even in serious contexts, a sentiment outside consumers may (continue to) hold. For another object that points to *Crying in H Mart*'s creative patterns, this thesis includes a section on *Pucca*, a Korean television show that raises questions of caricature, pan-Asianism, misogyny, imperialism, and overall digestibility. If such similarities exist between the two works, Korean-affiliated creators are likely fulfilling expected patterns, which can be broken upon their realization.

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Introduction

Upon its release, Michelle Zauner's memoir, *Crying in H Mart*, received critical acclaim from readers within and outside of the Asian American community. *Crying in H Mart* began as a briefer essay of the same title published for *The New Yorker* in 2018, which Zauner expanded into a full-length book three years later. Throughout it, she details her experiences as a multiracial Korean American woman who connects to her Korean identity through food and her mother, who tragically died of pancreatic cancer. Writing for NPR, Kristen Martin claims that *Crying in H Mart* "powerfully maps a complicated mother-daughter relationship," "plumb[ing] the connections between food and identity" in an authentic way.[1] Others appear to echo this sentiment; numerous reviews include favorable terms such as "deeply moving," "honest," "profound," "candid," and "frank" to describe Zauner's work.[2]

Specifically for Asian Americans, who have traditionally been excluded from the American literary sphere and were confronted with heightened and explicit racism during the COVID-19 pandemic (with its peak being around the year *Crying in H Mart* was released), *Crying in H Mart*'s high, positive visibility provided some respite and hope for Asian Americans, who saw their difficult experiences reflected in the passages. As one Asian American reviewer claims, the book allowed her to feel understood and "is an exceptional example of the common struggle Asian-Americans undergo" in relation to identity and being "inextricably tethered" to Asianness and Americanness.[3] For many Asian American readers, *Crying in H Mart*

[1] Kristen Martin, "A Daughter Grieves Her Mom, And Finds Herself, In 'Crying In H Mart,'" review of *Crying in H Mart*, by Michelle Zauner, *NPR*, April 20, 2021.
[2] These and other terms can be seen on *Crying in H Mart*'s dust jacket. The majority of the included reviews do not appear to be written by Asian American authors and/or scholars.
[3] Brianna Hirami, "Book Review: Crying in H Mart–A Memoir by Michelle Zauner (2021)," review of *Crying in H Mart*, by Michelle Zauner, *Asia Media International*, October 31, 2021.

and Zauner were serving as a voice for the voiceless, a beacon in a sea that cast Asian Americans aside while upholding them as scapegoats for a strange, new world marked by a nascent virus.

If Asian Americans as a group have historically faced exclusion in a number of spheres, witnessing the approval of a Korean American work written by a Korean American woman pointed to the possibility of increased representation within literature overall and Asian American literature in particular. Moreover, *Crying in H Mart* appeared to hold a special mass appeal; numerous non-literary individuals were enjoying the book, likely attributable to a new wave of attention to Korea taking place in the 21st century.[4] As a Korean American woman who spent her adolescent years without seeing Korean culture attain this level of visibility, I was excited that a Korean American piece of literature by another Korean American woman was receiving such praise and rising in popularity. Like other Asian and Korean Americans, I recognized my life in Zauner's pages detailing her struggles with her identity and disconnect with an immigrant parent. Hoping to use my project to further explore and analyze my Korean American identity, I began with the aim of focusing on the ways in which food produces and represents the ambiguity Korean Americans feel as a marginalized group. However, as I began to close read *Crying in H Mart*, I noticed its distinct cuteness, particularly in the form of cutesy, childlike representations of Zauner's Korean female family members. Once I perceived this, I wondered if the book's popularity might be based on those cute aspects and the growing appeal of cute Asian and Asianized objects in America. Despite my genuine appreciation for parts of Zauner's work, with the knowledge that cuteness carries potential harms (and especially for Asian American women), I now desired to search for the answers to new questions surrounding

[4] I expand on this Korean *hallyu* wave in the section titled "Japanese Soft Power, Cute/*Kawaii*, and Korean American Women."

Korean and Asian American women's representation, infantilization, and other related points arising from a work for which very little, if any, literary criticism seems to exist at this time.

Upon proceeding with my active search for such cuteness in the text, I was surprised by the extent to which I was able to observe it throughout. I came to wonder whether Zauner had even realized that she was cutely portraying her Korean homeland and culture and the women who were part of it, and I questioned what impact this may have on Korean American women like me. Although the women who are cutified are Korean and not Korean American, Zauner being a Korean American woman entails that her book relate to Korean American women more broadly. If she could have known that her work containing cute portrayals of Korean women might extend in this manner, why had she opted for these representations to begin with, and what could they imply? In addition, even as Asian American scholars including Leslie Bow, Erica Kanesaka, and Sharon Tran have been discussing the significance of cuteness for Asian American women, I hoped to intervene as a Korean American woman myself who could bring in unique perspectives on Japanese imperialism and cute, or *kawaii*, influence. In other words, given Japan-Korea's imperial history and Korea's following suit in pursuing global popularity through the spread of soft power, I wished to examine how a Korean American woman writer like Zauner is affected by Japan and its cute soft power, as well as the connection between the rise of her book and Korea's rise as a nation.[5] Hence, in this project, I intend to incorporate both specificity and generalizability, with the understanding that the questions I am contemplating have resonances going beyond ethnic specificity and pertaining to the larger political category of Asian America.

[5] By "following suit," I mean achieving global popularity after Japan. Korean cultural products such as K-pop appear to have become popular in America after Japanese products such as anime have become (and remain) popular.

For Asian American women as a group, cuteness has difficult racialized and gendered dimensions that partially originate in "the social and gender-specific context of East Asian societies"[6] and are prolonged by American/Western notions of (East) Asian American and (East) Asian diasporic women as cute in general.[7] Even as these associations have harmful implications for Asian American women, they are not often viewed as such. As evidenced by the overwhelming positive response of *Crying in H Mart* and perhaps its cuteness, cuteness and the label of cute are widely regarded in a positive light. Cute objects are linked to positive, affectionate attachments related to "caregiving" and "protection," the kind parental figures exhibit toward their precious infants and children.[8] However, even as the realm of the cute is associated with positive feelings, I argue that cuteness may carry an insidiousness that is not always obvious due to its general positivity, reiterating Leslie Bow's idea that certain "[c]ute things betray uncertainties…nevertheless *veiled by positive feeling*" (emphasis added).[9] Given that cuteness involves the positive feeling of a parental affection that then includes a dynamic of "I am inclined to take care of you," I raise the possibility of such a dynamic evolving into a harmful power structure in which "I am inclined to take care of you" transforms into "I feel power over you, and I do not view you as a full human being," especially when race and gender positionalities enter the picture.[10]

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[6] Aris Teon, "'Pretty, Innocent Asian Girls': The Cult of Cuteness in East Asian Societies," *The Greater China Journal*, April 21, 2016, https://china-journal.org/2016/04/21/pretty-innocent-asian-girls-cult-of-cuteness-asia/.

[7] While this project focuses on East Asian diasporic women due to the high level of association between this group and cuteness, South and Southeast Asian diasporic women may also relate to conversations surrounding cuteness and should be included in them for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Due to the scope of my project, I am not able to do so here but hope to as a future direction.

[8] Morten L. Kringelbach et al., "On Cuteness: Unlocking the Parental Brain and Beyond," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20, no. 7 (July 2016): 545.

[9] Leslie Bow, "Racist Cute: Caricature, *Kawaii*-Style, and the Asian Thing," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (March 2019): 33.

[10] Regarding the point of power, Sianne Ngai states that "the experience of cute depends entirely on the subject's affective response to an *imbalance of power between herself and the object*" (54, emphasis added).

In her article "Stop Calling Asian Women Adorable," R.O. Kwon states that as a Korean American woman writer, she is frequently called "cute" or "adorable" in professional settings, an experience shared by numerous Asian American women throughout America.[11] While these and other comments appear to be "compliments," Kwon claims that they amount to "a racism of flattening and erasure, a continuing unwillingness to recognize Asian people as full human beings." In a case such as this, the positive veil of nurturing and affection can conceal and mold into the view that Asian and Asian American women are powerless rather than whole, independent individuals to be taken seriously. In addition, the distinct caretaking desires surrounding the cute thing point to a certain infantilization when applied to these adult women. Thus, regardless of initial effect or intent, the label of cute has the potential to turn sinister, contributing to the dismissal and infantile treatment of Asian American women as a whole.

In participating in the cutification of Korean and Asian American women, my concern is that Zauner contributes to their dismissal and infantilization by feeding into representations that depict them as cute, somewhat trivial beings. Specifically, I aim to examine what would happen if a Korean/Asian American woman writer such as Zauner were the one to cutify those like her, hence participating in her own labeling as cute rather than being given the label by external sources. Furthermore, considering *Crying in H Mart* is a book about grief and trauma (Zauner writes of her mother's illness and death), a primary question revolves around the complicated implications of Zauner's cute Korean/Asian female portrayals for other Korean and Asian American women who aspire to create works on serious topics. If cuteness can strip away seriousness, perhaps such cuteness takes away from the gravity of Zauner's work and sets expectations for other women to write in a way that is unlikely to be taken seriously if cutified.

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[11] R.O. Kwon, "Stop Calling Asian Women Adorable," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/opinion/sunday/calling-asian-women-adorable.html.

Broadly speaking, the general public may come to have emerging or strengthened expectations of what the women are to embody and how they ought to be treated in different contexts, including serious ones. My argument here is that both creative and cultural/social expectations are at stake. The cuteness of the text may be perpetuating expectations for Korean and Asian American women writers to produce similarly cute works and for Korean and Asian American women as a group to embody an unwilling cuteness in the real world.

Before moving forward with my analysis, I would like to acknowledge that 1) Zauner might not have intentionally made elements of her book to be so cute and 2) she and other Asian and Korean American creators cannot be blamed for expectations of Asian cuteness that have already been established and existed before their time (i.e., these creators have simply observed what people seem to like and what is popular and emulated that; the fact that cute Asian things are popular also speaks to existing expectations). Nonetheless, it is worth examining the act and implications of creators perpetuating such expectations and to note that they, as creators, have a responsibility to avoid potentially harmful representations and be cognizant of what their disseminated work is doing on a wider scale. As one public example, with the knowledge that many Americans are unaware of or indifferent to distinctions between Asian-born and American-born Asians, a layperson who reads the book and its cute portrayals of the Korean women can come to (subconsciously) link and/or expect anyone who looks like the Korean women to be cute and less serious subjects. Meanwhile, another ordinary reader may place this expectation onto Korean and Korean American women, with the consideration that Korea is increasingly being associated with cuteness in America. Thus, Zauner's seemingly harmless cute representations carry real, negative entanglements for Asian American and ethnically specific Korean American individuals.

Chapter One: Cuteness and the Korean/Asian American Female Sphere

Before beginning to discern the way in which I am searching for and analyzing cuteness as it relates to Korean and Asian American women, it is beneficial to provide context regarding cuteness as it operates in America and Asia. Such context will allow for a fuller understanding of issues surrounding Korean American perspectives and Asian American women's treatment and literature. Thus, in what follows, I will outline various historical and contemporary facets of cuteness and how cuteness fits into a broader conversation on Asian American women's writing. With sufficient awareness of the intricacies of these facets and more, one can discern how the central objects of my study, *Crying in H Mart* and later *Pucca,* are parts of a larger structure that appears to be ongoing yet holds transformational potential.

American "Cute" and Asian American Women

To highlight how the English word "cute" evolved to signify the same or similar qualities often attached to Asian American women at present (e.g., smallness, femininity), I will provide context for the word's etymology. "Cute" first appeared in 1731 and was a shortened form of the word "acute," meaning "shrewd," "keen," or "clever."[12] While "cute" did not initially carry associations "with the infantile and the feminine," Sianne Ngai writes:

> [T]hese associations immediately surface in the suggestive list of usages compiled by the *Oxford English Dictionary,* which begins in 1857 with a female exclamation (*Virginia Illustrated*: "What cute little socks! said the woman"), turns to a comment implying the term's national specificity in 1900 (*Daily News*: "A small and compact house, what the Americans would call 'cute'"), and then, in the postwar period, brings us to these two Aldous Huxley quotations: "The tiny boy…looking almost indecently 'cute'…and "a

[12] Katy Waldman, "The Totally Adorable History of *Cute*," *Slate*, February 27, 2015, https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/02/cute-etymology-and-history-from-sharp-keen-or-shrewd-to-charming-and-attractive.html.

> French accent so strong, so indecently 'cute,' so reminiscent of the naughty-naughty twitterings of a Parisian miss on the English comedy stage."[13]

Ngai asserts that these "cute" varieties point to "an extension of the term['s] applicability," and a value shift "from the unequivocally positive (the charming socks), to the ambiguous or potentially negative (the indecent boy)." The final example of the "twitterings of a Parisian miss" associates the term with the feminine sphere. Here, Ngai's etymological observations are worth noting in their potential relation to how cuteness is presently thought of. The meaning of "cute" has evolved throughout time, and the majority of Americans have come to consider the word in light of its aesthetic connotations and specifically small size and feminine-affiliated qualities such as "attractive," "pretty," and "charming."[14] In addition, the word's evolutionary shift from sharp wit ("acute") to a surface-level aesthetic marker might relate to how some Americans employ "cute" when referring to something of a more superficial, less significant or serious kind.

While Ngai herself addresses that cuteness is linked to the realm of visual aesthetics, an external sense of cuteness does not provide a comprehensive perspective of its meaning and insinuations. Given American racialized and gendered histories, and that "cute" as a part of the American vocabulary has evolved to carry attachments of youth/small size, femininity, and triviality, it is valuable to contemplate how these meanings are at work when applied to those with particular race and gender positionalities. As touched on, the direct word "cute" came to be affiliated with characteristics (i.e., youth/small size, femininity) that Asian American women are commonly thought to have, and, as I contend, *actively* employed to describe them.

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[13] Sianne Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 814.

[14] Waldman, "History of *Cute*"; Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 187.

From a historical standpoint, "cute" as a word and concept and Asian American women have appeared to converge into a fantasy of Asian American women as cute.

Lori Merish posits that the cute is "saturated with racial…meanings" and has been connected to the idea of racial and cultural otherness; cuteness previously emerged as a way to "domesticate" and "assimilate" the racially and culturally different Other.[15] From this notion, cuteness has become a way for "insider" individuals to interact with and manage "outsider" individuals while presumably maintaining a sense of power over them.[16] If the above can be applied to Asian American women and cuteness can mark the marginalized as other/outsider and thereby less than fully human, then to mark Asian American women as the cute other would be one way to maintain power over the group. Speaking to the idea of otherness, Erica Kanesaka writes of existing "Orientalist notions of Eastern childlike femininity" and that during the 20th century, there had been "an already well-established American tradition of associating Asian cultures and peoples with children's toys"; even prior, particular "imaginative associations [of cuteness, Japanese girls, and toys/dolls]…had significant repercussions for Asian American girls and women."[17] Extending the concept of Japanese feminine cuteness to that of the general Asian feminine population, Asian American girls and women of multiple backgrounds have been and continue to be regarded as doll-like, cute othered objects of an American/Western affection. Along with such historical views, the contemporary transnational rise of Asia and its cuteness only seem to reinforce the preexisting association between cuteness and Asian American women. In any case, if in some fantastical way, Asian American women have come to be associated as being (in relation to Ngai's ideas) the most youthful/small, the most feminine, and the most

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[15] Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics," 187–89.

[16] Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics," 188.

[17] Erica Kanesaka Kalnay, "Yellow Peril, Oriental Plaything: *Asian Exclusion and the 1927 U.S.-Japan Doll Exchange*," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23, no. 1 (February 2020): 95, 97.

"cute," Ngai's final shift of "cute" to something of a more trivial nature might correspond to these women as also being the most trivial.

If an Asian American woman were to be labeled cute, considering the aforementioned history and her experiences centered around cuteness in America, this label is likely not "potentially negative" but particularly negative. In addition to the above points, the negativity may arise from, for example, its association with caretaking and the trivial notion of the term. Whereas for infants and children, a higher likelihood of being designated as cute in appearance and afforded care is advantageous due to its positive correlation with proper development, the extension of that designation and care to adult women who are already developed and supposed to be regarded with significance and autonomy rather than superficiality and dependence, does not hold the same resonance as for infants and children who would be unable to survive without care. Furthermore, Asian American women do not have some innate trait(s) that necessitates their perception as cute. Instead, historically and socially, Asian American women of numerous appearances have been bound to a perpetual idea of cuteness and expectations of cuteness, which have resulted in infantilization and improper treatment in a range of contexts.[18]

Japanese Soft Power, Cute/*Kawaii*, and Korean American Women

To understand how the Korean American text *Crying in H Mart* (and the Korean *Pucca*) and its cuteness is in conversation with the dominance of Japanese cuteness, or *kawaii*, context regarding Japanese imperialism and influence is pertinent to our study. Considering Korea and Japan's volatile history, Korean Americans may hold ambivalent feelings about ongoing Japanese influence, and Korean American women may further experience this given that part of Japan's imperial past involves the use of sexually enslaved comfort women from Korea. At

[18] See Kwon again for examples in professional/workplace contexts.

present, although Japan does not have the military control it once did, it continues to experience extensive "soft power" through cuteness/*kawaii*, evidencing a shift from overt military force to a pleasurably cute leverage. Such soft power evidently applies to Korea, and Korean American women can be introduced to Japanese *kawaii* through its commercial capacity, thereby visualizing how this new form of power and influence is at work in the contemporary era. However, with an awareness of the above history, they may feel ambivalent about progressing currents of imperialistic power and how a Korea-related cultural product such as *Crying in H Mart* is a part of that order.

As a group, Korean American women grapple with the complicated historical context of America-Asia and Japan-Korea relations. From 1910 to 1945, Korea fell under Japanese colonial rule, which was a "contradictory [and harsh] experience for [its citizens]."[19] During this period, the Japanese military "ruthlessly crushed" dissent; Koreans were forced to follow orders surrounding factory work, soldier status, and name changes to Japanese ones. Additionally, a vast number of young Korean women became comfort women, or sexual slaves, for Japanese male soldiers. According to Beverly Bisland et al., the case of the comfort women "is the largest case of government-sponsored human trafficking and sexual slavery in modern history," with girls as young as twelve being forced into the system.[20] Importantly, many scholars have noted that the term comfort women itself is a "euphemism" that the Japanese military created to "obscur[e] the gravity of the crime." With the (translated) word "comfort" pointing to a sense of

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[19] Charles K. Armstrong, "Key Points across East Asia–by Era 20th Century 1900-1950," *Asia for Educators*, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_1900-1950.htm.

[20] Beverly Milner (Lee) Bisland, et al., "Teaching about the Comfort Women during World War II and the Use of Personal Stories of the Victims," *Asian Literature in the Humanities and the Social Sciences* 24, no. 3 (Winter 2019): 58.

positive support and relative harmlessness, the term appears to hold connections to cuteness in that it too entails positivity and harmlessness in general. Hence, in the way cuteness might have played a softening role in Japan's direct military project at the time, this section will later restate how cuteness/*kawaii* may still be playing a significant role in Japan's ongoing status and in the obscuring of some of the harms of its past.

Although Korean society experienced modernization and development throughout Japanese colonialism,[21] the reality that these facets did not necessarily emerge to benefit Koreans, combined with Japan's restrictive rule, would lead to unresolved feelings and lasting tensions even after the Japanese surrendered to the Allies in 1945 and no longer held control over Korea. In the 21st century, Koreans still "accus[e] Japan of painting a far too benevolent picture of the past–a picture that does not adequately recognize the pain and trauma inflicted by Japan's aggression and subsequent occupation of the peninsula."[22] As another example, from a Korean perspective, Japan "frequently exacerbate[s] the situation by playing down the extent of the imperial army's responsibility for initiating and conducting war" when its officials visit shrines "to honor the spirits of the war dead." Beyond any single location, the issue revolving around historical accuracy, representation, and continuation reflects an ongoing enmity between the two nations originating from a tumultuous past.

For Korean Americans who do not have as strong of nationalistic ties to Korea, this imperial history may not carry the same weight as it does for native Koreans. Second-generation Korean Americans, many of whom are growing up in an increasingly interconnected world, are even less likely to experience tensions that arise from being a direct citizen of a country once

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[21] This includes the growth of commerce, "forms of mass culture such as radio and cinema," and industrialization (Armstrong).

[22] David Hundt and Rolan Bleiker, "Reconciling Colonial Memories in Korea and Japan," *Asian Perspective* 31, no. 1 (2007): 62–63.

under Japanese control. Furthermore, as many Korean Americans self-identify as "Asian American" as a political identification and recognize that Japanese Americans have their own experiences with racial discrimination and similar experiences as Asian Americans, Korean Americans are not inclined to categorically separate themselves from Japanese Americans. Nonetheless, they can be aware of those tensions due to hearing of either the specific history of Japanese colonial rule, or various (sometimes casual) remarks, from their Korean immigrant parents or other adult family members with a different relationship to Japan as first-generation Koreans. Aside from a familial sense of learning, Korean Americans can learn about their ancestral pasts in institutional or private settings. Upon acknowledging the conflicting history of Japan-Korea, Korean Americans may come to have ambiguous feelings about Japanese imperial history and ongoing influence, even as they find themselves un/intentionally removed from such issues.

Echoing this idea of solidarity *and* ethnic individuality, Lisa Lowe writes that "what is referred to as 'Asian America' is clearly a heterogeneous entity…from the perspectives of Asian Americans, we are…more different, more diverse, among ourselves."[23] Considering varying experiences based on factors such as gender, generation, and culture, Lowe emphasizes the importance of establishing difference in part to challenge the dominant, problematic notion that Asian Americans are homogeneous.[24] At the same time, she acknowledges that the term "Asian American" is valuable for political solidarity and the possibility of Asian Americans coming together in realization of their present and historical commonalities.[25] In any case, Lowe maintains that it is necessary to remember existing differences; to forget them could entail

[23] Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 27.
[24] Lowe, "Heterogeneity," 28.
[25] Lowe, "Heterogeneity," 30.

that people "underestimate [Asian] differences and hybridities" and uphold ongoing racist dialogue that marks Asian Americans as "'all alike'" and fulfilling "'types.'" Therefore, to address distinctions within a single group is crucial on a personal and political level. In regard to what I have stated above for Korean Americans, establishing ethnic difference and feelings of ambivalence may actually help to prevent and resist this kind of essentialization.

Regardless of individual feeling, a primary way in which Korean Americans view ongoing influence is through Japan's current soft power. While Japan no longer has the same military dominance it held during the 20th century, it now has a different, softer stronghold, one distinguished by attraction and appeal. As Joseph Nye states:

> Soft co-optive power is just as important as hard command power. If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change.[26]

In other words, soft power entails that a nation achieve power through features such as cultural attraction and social values. Christine Yano, author of *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific*, introduces the notion of "Japanese Cute-Cool…as one part of Japan's 'gross national cool'" and soft power.[27] After its defeat in World War II and subsequent subordination to American/Western military powers, Japan turned toward the possession of a "'soft-power' capital" that would grant it access to wider influence without the need for (or possibility of) economic or military force. Yano posits the cute character Hello Kitty as one such, if not *the*,

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[26] Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (Fall 1990): 167.

[27] Christine Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 5.

example of Japanese Cute-Cool. In line with the hallmark of soft power, Japan has gained global reach through the cultural, cute appeal of "manga, anime, and Japanese videogames," and Hello Kitty herself has "draw[n] on the passing moment of the soft-power hype."[28] From 2002, Japan embarked on its "Cool Japan" campaign, with its government "officially and opportunistically jump[ing] on the bandwagon [of Douglas McGray's 'gross national cool' label]."[29] In 2003, the Japanese Cultural Agency spoke of the contemporary value of soft power: "Cool/Cute Japan" would not rely on military power but "influence, leadership, [and] control" through cute/*kawaii* icons such as Hello Kitty.[30] Five years later, Hello Kitty was named "Japan's official ambassador of tourism to China and Hong Kong," solidifying her status as a spokesperson for her nation and a far-reaching subject of a new type of influence.

Hello Kitty has been a tourism ambassador to Korea as well, and Japan's global soft power and "Cute-Cool" has arguably extended to the nation.[31] In part due to geographic proximity, Japan's soft power, which includes the Japanese sense of cute, or *kawaii* (かわいい), initially reached other East and Southeast Asian countries before moving beyond Asia. This, paired with Japan's previous control of Korea, would signify Japan transitioning to sizable ruling with an appealing, cute hand. In line with Korea once being under Japanese rule, it is likely not coincidental that after the inception of Japanese "Cute-Cool," Korea appears to be following Japan's footsteps and gaining its own soft power and "Cute-Cool"-ness in the 21st century. The modern term *hallyu* is used to describe "the rapid diffusion and export of South Korean popular

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[28] Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 31.

[29] Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 257; Douglas McGray's original article can be read here: https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/.

[30] Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 258.

[31] Christine Yano, "Hello Kitty and Japan's kawaii diplomacy," *East Asia Forum*, October 10, 2015, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/10/10/hello-kitty-and-japans-kawaii-diplomacy/; Hello Kitty was named a tourism ambassador to Korea and Taiwan in 2008.

culture to the global cultural markets," with its present global surge "not only expand[ing] South Korea's economy but also strengthen[ing] its soft power and cultural diplomacy."[32] Similar to how Japanese characters and products have grown in popularity through mass marketing, Korean commodities have transformed into the *hallyu* phenomenon through mass dissemination associated with technological and digital advancement and global interconnectedness. Owing to the expansion of its cultural industries, Korea continues to experience large-scale appeal and influence. Emphasizing these points and the importance of cultural cool, Euny Hong writes that South Korea's soft power involves "peddling cool" and that "it's not enough for Korea to make semiconductors and cars; *it has to be cool as well*" (emphasis added).[33] Like Japan has already managed to do, Korea aims to experience progress from a foundation of coolness, a kind that can bring about status through its easy prevalence in the wider (popular) culture. (Given that Hong's book was published in 2014, in 2023, it is clear that Korea has only strengthened and succeeded in this mission.)

Korea's currently coolest and most visible cultural product is K-pop, or more specifically, BTS. Debuting in 2013, the group has attained unprecedented heights in terms of popularity and global reach, with scholars such as Youna Kim noting that BTS has led the *hallyu* wave and Korea's economic progress.[34] Like Hello Kitty and the economic growth and soft power she has brought to Japan, BTS is effectively promoting Korea's rise and symbolizing the universal spread of Korean popular culture. In relation to Hello Kitty and Japanese cuteness, BTS has connections to cuteness in interesting ways. For example, its fandom acronym, A.R.M.Y., stands for "*Adorable* Representative M.C. for Youth," and a newer line of cute characters called BT21

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[32] Dal Yong Jin, "The Korean Wave," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, May 26, 2020, https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/05/26/the-korean-wave/.
[33] Euny Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* (New York: Picador, 2014), 5, 8.
[34] Youna Kim, *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave* (London: Routledge, 2021), 12–15.

has been developed by the Korean character series Line Friends in collaboration with BTS (Figure 1). The characters, with their large heads and simplistic features, are reminiscent of Hello Kitty and her *kawaii* image. To reiterate, if part of Japan's soft power is its cuteness, or *kawaii*, and Japan continues to hold some level of cultural and social influence over Korea through its soft power, it is likely that Korea and its cuteness have been shaped by the *kawaii* aesthetic. Thus, such characters as in BT21 and many other cute objects of or pertaining to Korea (such as the main object of my study, *Crying in H Mart*) are likely to take inspiration from *kawaii*, which Japanese people view as those things that evoke particular emotions related to nurture; i.e., as an affective concept.[35]

Figure 1. The BT21 characters as seen on a toaster at the Line Friends New York Times Square Store. Personal photo.

[35] For more information on the concept of *kawaii* as an affective response, see Hiroshi Nittono's article, "The two-layer model of 'kawaii': A behavioural science framework for understanding kawaii and cuteness."

Regarding the commercial culture aspect of *kawaii*, in the 1970s, Japan observed "the rise of the kawaii…in a way unseen before."[36] Companies like Sanrio established their businesses "at the intersection of youth culture and commercial goods by developing cute characters [such as Hello Kitty]" for "fancy goods," drawing on the cute and innocent components of *kawaii*. However, *kawaii* culture experienced decline during the 1990s until a new wave arose out of strategized marketing toward younger people and "soft-image bureaucracy." The "cute craze," or global phenomenon that is *kawaii*, has its origins in "this revival of 'cute' that emerged against the struggling economy and aging population in Japan." In the modern era, Japan and *kawaii* seem to have gained a soft stronghold not only in Asia but around the world, centering and dominating through a harmless cuteness that offers a unique promise of economic gain through its wide-ranging commercial potential and presence.

Given *kawaii*'s extensive influence, the concept impacts Korean creators' ideas of cuteness; the same point may be made for Korean American creators, who can be exposed to *kawaii* during their youth/adolescence in some way. As one example, many Korean (and Asian) American girls are introduced to Hello Kitty and Sanrio in the form of the above "commercial goods" or "'fancy goods'" at a young age (Figures 2 and 3). Even as they are not yet aware that a character like Hello Kitty is Japanese, such exposure may still play a formative role. In addition, considering that Japanese conceptions of cuteness remain prominent on an extensive scale, a Korean American girl can ultimately have notions of cuteness that carry particular Japanese, *kawaii* attachments. With these points in consideration, a Korean American woman author like Zauner has plausibly been influenced by *kawaii*, and elements of *kawaii*

[36] Kumiko Sato, "From Hello Kitty to Cod Roe Kewpie: A Postwar Cultural History of Cuteness in Japan," *Education About Asia* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 38–40.

would appear within and outside of her work. Since *kawaii* has also increased in popularity in America and American cuteness is heavily associated with Japanese cuteness for Asian Americans, Korean American women (who are part of both Korean and American spheres) are even more likely to have *kawaii*-influenced impressions of cuteness. However, as touched on, given the fraught history between Japan and Korea, it is possible for Korean American women to experience ambivalence regarding any direct imperial aspects or the generally *kawaii*-inspired cuteness of a book like *Crying in H Mart* or Korean television show like *Pucca*.[37] Notwithstanding generational or cultural distance, knowledge of a history that evidences the pain and trauma of one's ancestors elicits complicated feelings, and present observation of a lack of historical acknowledgement can evoke further questioning of whether Japan has and continues to gloss over an afflicting past through the positive veil of cuteness, as well as what this implies for Korean American women as a group.

Figure 2. The author on her fifth birthday. Personal photo.

[37] While I am not elaborating much on *Pucca* in this introductory section, I discuss the show in Chapter Three ("Cuteness in *Pucca*") and consider important similarities between *Pucca* and *Crying in H Mart*.

Figure 3. Several Hello Kitty goods received as gifts for the author's fifth birthday. Personal photo.

The Cuteness of Food, Digestibility, and Asian American Women's Writing

Aside from being cute/*kawaii* Korean-associated objects, *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca* intriguingly involve food, which has distinct ties to the idea of cuteness. While *Crying in H Mart* contains numerous, vivid descriptions of Korean snacks and food items and scenes of eating, the character Pucca's backstory incorporates food–her three uncles, Dumpling, Ho, and Linguini, own a jajang noodle shop, and Pucca serves as their delivery girl. Although food alone does not necessitate a sense of cuteness, there are marked ways in which it is connected to being cute. One such way is that food shares the essential cute characteristics of malleability and helplessness/harmlessness. As Ngai notes:

> The smaller and less formally articulated or more bloblike the object, the cuter it becomes–in part because smallness and blobbishness suggest greater malleability and thus a greater capacity for being handled…From here it is only a short step to see how the

formal properties associated with cuteness–smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy–call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency.[38] More generally, food has "malleability" and is "helpless" in its purpose of being consumed by people; i.e., it is meant to be pliable enough to be eaten and powerless in that it cannot do anything about being eaten. Certain foods that are especially "bloblike" and thus malleable and helpless are more likely to be cuter, with examples including the Korean tteokbokki (small, round rice cakes) or gimbap (small, round rice rolls) Zauner frequently mentions in her book.

Additionally, if cute things and food share characteristics surrounding physicality and helplessness, the two being somehow combined entails a sense of double cuteness. That is, with its helplessness doubly emphasized, the cute and food-like object is likely to appear *extra* cute. As a common example, some parents and pet owners enjoy dressing up their infants and pets in costumes resembling food items (usually of a "bloblike" sort, such as a hot dog or cupcake), and the idea of double cuteness may explain why many find such a cute example to be the cute*st*. An infant or puppy has cute physical features and is considerably helpless, and food adds to her or his cuteness by making her or him appear even rounder, softer, and more vulnerable. Presently, as the realm of the cute and the popularity of Asia are on a parallel rise, products involving the especially cute cuteness and food, such as stickers of animals combined with food that can be found in numerous stores around the world, are increasing in prevalence.

When one views something that is doubly cute, she or he would have an according double affection for the very cute object. However, as Ngai asserts, "[I]t is crucial to cuteness that its diminutive object has some sort of imposed-upon aspect or mien…that it bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily *de*-formed under the pressure of the subject's

[38] Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," 815–16.

feeling or attitude towards it…cuteness might provoke ugly or aggressive feelings, as well as the expected tender or maternal ones."[39] Even as cuteness elicits feelings of the more positive affection, it has an "aggressive" side that materializes as the subject understands that, owing to the cute object's malleability and pliancy, she or he has the ability to destroy it. Ngai continues, "[I]n its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer's *sadistic desires for mastery and control* as much as his or her desire to cuddle" (emphasis added). Here lies an important truth about cuteness: cuteness involves a power dynamic evidencing the exact opposite of those feelings of care and nurture evoked by the term. One phrase exemplifying such aggression is "'You're so cute I could *just eat you up*'" (Ngai), a common phrase people use to express the extent to which they find some object to be exceedingly cute. Through this phrase, Ngai's notion of the aggression people feel toward cute things is made evident. Moreover, the phrase implies a level of digestion that relates to a power imbalance–eating something up and digesting it signals a more dominant subject claiming and acting on the power she or he has and placing it onto an object unable to resist.

In a somewhat unlikely manner, the concept of digestibility can be extended from the visual or tangible realm to that of the textual. When applied to a text such as *Crying in H Mart*, digestibility signifies a number of other ideas, including palatability, familiarity, simplicity, and easy ability to understand the material. *Crying in H Mart*'s initial digestibility is revealed through its straightforward writing, and Zauner's numerous, vividly described scenes of food and eating would be familiar to readers given their own experiences of consumption. (*Pucca* also contains digestible depictions of food, and as a show targeted toward children and adolescents, includes simple characters and storylines that do not require younger audiences to think with

[39] Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," 816.

depth.) Moreover, if the act of digestion is one of exhibiting and enforcing power, the imperial currents of *Crying in H Mart* could contribute to the text's digestibility. Imperialism is based on an inherent imbalance of a more powerful nation asserting its dominance over a less powerful one, and digestibility entails a similar sort of application through which a more powerful subject destroys the less powerful (or totally powerless) object that is food.[40] Therefore, the reader-as-subject who feels a sense of power over a digestible text such as *Crying in H Mart* can experience a greater sense with the knowledge that the text contains imperialistic facets. That is, upon recognizing Japan's imperial history and ongoing soft power and *Crying in H Mart*'s Japan-inspired qualities, the reader could experience a level of vicarious power gain whereby she or he perceives the more powerful Japan asserting force over the less powerful Korea and might even feel a kind of power over Korea her or himself (this is what I mean by "vicarious"). Although such currents are not as detectable to those unaware or less knowledgeable of Japanese colonialism and soft power, eventual awareness of imperial influences within a Korea-related product may allow the attentive reader to more extensively "consume" the text. Relatedly, *Crying in H Mart*'s cuteness advances digestibility in light of cuteness' core tenet of non-imposition, or helplessness; this non-imposition is akin to the above vulnerability of the colonized/the object. Overall, when the two aspects (imperialism and cuteness) are combined and one observes significant powerlessness at work, she or he can find that a given text is particularly digestible.

As a work of Asian American women's literature, *Crying in H Mart*'s digestibility points to broader scholarship suggesting that Asian American women authors write in a way that is overly digestible and thus accessible to a mass audience. Various writers have been accused of

[40] See the previous discussion on Ngai.

perpetuating the commodification of Asian American women's literature by making their works so digestible and accessible for increased marketability toward often white American/Western readers, who are searching for an easy "exotic" experience via a simplistic narrative without much nuance or difference. For instance, the seminal Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston has faced criticism for pandering and catering to Western appeal following the release of her book, *The Woman Warrior*.[41] Considering that the general public does commonly enjoy reading Asian American women's literature as a window into the exotic life of an unfamiliar, othered being, such criticism underscores the concern Asian American scholars have with the fetishization of Asian American literary works and the women who produce them. More generally, from personal conversations regarding *Crying in H Mart* as a work by an Asian American author, I have discerned that it too falls under this critique by being a cute family story that is accessible and plays on Western desires to read minority stories about family and food and the reductive promise of an "authentic" Asian experience.[42]

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong would note that the notion of catering to Western appeal is somewhat of a "survival strategy" related to food, or what Frank Chin calls "'food pornography': making a living by exploiting the 'exotic' aspects of one's ethnic foodways" and "exaggerating one's otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system."[43] In the way Asian American people attempt to acquire this foothold by actively preparing food that serves "curious…'outsiders,'" Asian American literary authors like Zauner may write digestible,

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[41] Klara Szmańko, "Between Solid America and Fragile Chinatown in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior," Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, 9 (2021): 56.

[42] I acknowledge that the criticism I am underscoring has certain misogynistic origins and further address this point in my conclusion.

[43] Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Big Eaters, Treat Lovers, 'Food Prostitutes,' 'Food Pornographers,' and Doughnut Makers," in *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 55.

palatable works to find acceptance from a dominant, similarly "curious" American/Western readership.[44] However, "[w]hat appears to be hospitable acceptance of the outsider is really the ethnic's appeal for acceptance by the mainstream customer [or reader], who has the power to decide what is agreeably authentic and what is unthinkably outlandish." Often, the Asian American hoping to be seen and acknowledged within wider society is pressured to put forth "agreeably authentic" cultural products (whether food or text) that invite Western attraction without containing any mark that would make the Asian product *too* "outlandishly" other. This reality could account for the presence of Zauner's many detailed scenes of Korean food and cutified Korean women. Many exotically consumable and potentially stereotypical depictions might best fulfill the desired Western balance of unfamiliar and acceptable, "at once adventurous and tame [but] leaving their sense of cultural superiority intact at the end."[45]

Beyond this discourse of exoticization, a broad criticism of Zauner's memoir is that it does not offer much substance in a political sense due to its status as a simple and sentimental piece. As Leslie Jamison observes in her essay collection, *The Empathy Exams*, sentimentality and real artificial sweeteners entail a "shallow, exaggerated or undeserved" quality.[46] At their core, both spheres of the sentimental and (artificially) sweet are too readily accessible, requiring almost nothing of the subject who gains "undeserved" experiences of emotion and taste. For *Crying in H Mart*, Zauner's readily edible depictions of delectable Korean food and the sharing of it are just one contributor toward the book's sentimental quality. Jamison continues:

> [S]entimentality offers feeling without the price of complication…you need to *earn* your reactions to art, not simply collect easy sentiment handed out like welfare. How do we

[44] Wong, "Big Eaters," 56–57.
[45] Wong, "Big Eaters," 57.
[46] Leslie Jamison, "In Defense of Saccharin(e)," in *The Empathy Exams* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 113.

> earn? By parsing figurative opacity, close-reading metaphor, tracking nuances of character, historicizing…We think we should have to work in order to feel.[47]

A primary issue with sentimentality lies in its lack of metaphor and nuance, which allows for an excessive, emotional simplicity as opposed to merited "reaction." Absorbing a sentimental work is akin to receiving "easy welfare" and does not carry much, if any, force. While Jamison seems to go on to suggest that sentimentality is not solely problematic, for writers with a differing positionality, this subject can be a heightened issue due to its affiliation with the political and political stakes. That is, for Asian American women writers, sentimentality and its lack of political force are concerning because the simple, surface-level nature of sentimentality inhibits their ability to provide portrayals accurately reflecting their racialized and gendered experiences, as well as move outside readers to action and/or deeper thinking that would contribute to Asian American women's lives in a transformative way. If many Asian American women writers' goal is to contribute to fuller portrayals and push readers to reflect on their roles in existing structures and systems, a sweet, effortless retelling of Asian American lives and readers experiencing sentimental feelings is unlikely to result in change.[48] Like harmless cuteness, sentimentality merely contributes to an easy digestibility, one that is pleasant in the moment but not resulting in more real, meaningful movement.

Crying in H Mart's simplicity and sentimentality, along with its relation to general digestibility, commodification, and fetishization, point to the memoir and Zauner being one part of a larger discussion. While there will always be multiple reasons for why an Asian American woman author does or does not write in a certain manner, the focus of this project is what occurs

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[47] Jamison, "In Defense of Saccharin(e)," 119–20.

[48] This idea of pushing readers toward deeper reflection is inspired by Toni Morrison's forward to her commendable novel, *The Bluest Eye*.

when an Asian American woman author herself writes in a style that directly plays into and up these key points. If an author like Zauner produces a digestible work that then becomes popular and holds mass appeal among a (white) majority audience who impacts production, this could imply that other Korean and Asian American women who desire to tell stories with more complexity and nuance conclude that only those digestible texts are preferred and produced by the society they live in. Consequently, this population may internalize the limiting belief that the way for them to tell their stories, regardless of the level of seriousness or subject matter, is to do so in a digestible way, packaging powerless, cute narratives that uphold a self-orientalizing script and enable American/Western fantasies of the other to continue.

Chapter Two: Cuteness in *Crying in H Mart*

In the following section, I will perform a close reading of selected scenes from *Crying in H Mart*. During my re-reading of the book, I found these to most exemplify the various ways in which *Crying in H Mart* and Zauner uphold notions of Korean/Asian American cuteness and digestibility. For each scene, I will identify what contributes to the text's cute quality and situate it such that I may discuss creative and cultural/social implications, in addition to how the scene points to details surrounding cuteness and existing themes within Asian American women's literature.

Memories through Korean Snacks from H Mart

In Chapter 1 of *Crying in H Mart*, Zauner writes three scenes of eating three different Korean snacks with her mother, Chongmi, and aunt, Eunmi (she is reminded of these memories when viewing particular snacks at H Mart). For my first close reading section, I will analyze the three and attempt to delineate the factors that make them cute.

1. Scene One

Writing about the Korean snack Jolly Pong, Zauner states, "I think about the time Mom showed me how to fold the little plastic card that came inside bags of Jolly Pong, how to use it as a spoon to shovel caramel puffed rice into my mouth, and how it inevitably fell down my shirt and spread all over the car…I wanted to like all the things she did, to embody her completely."[49] A single Jolly Pong package contains a "little plastic card" one can use as a "spoon" to eat the bits; the word "little" evokes smallness and a sense of cuteness, as cuteness is typically linked to small size. Regarding the direct snack, Jolly Pong is packaged in a youthful, bright butterscotch yellow bag containing tiny, round rice puffs. I will establish here that if, as touched on, youth,

[49] Michelle Zauner, *Crying in H Mart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), 5.

children, and their related qualities are cute, their behavior and anything generally affiliated with them, such as a food item targeted toward the group (e.g., Jolly Pong), is cute by extension.[50] As an initial thought, like many of the other visual, childlike scenes Zauner writes in her memoir, this Jolly Pong scene is one that I read as cute in its perceptible relation to children and childhood.

Jolly Pong is common for children due to the ease with which they can scoop the pieces up with their bare hands or the included "little plastic card." Combined with a sense of nostalgia, Zauner's inclusion of this children's/childhood snack, with its bright color and small, round qualities, works to establish a cute sort of scene (if bright colors and smallness and roundness can be correlated with the visual wear and appearance of children as well). The scene's childish cuteness is furthered by a description of the young Zauner's way of eating the snack. She writes that she was taught to "*shovel* [the rice snack] into [her] mouth" (emphasis added). While an adult would "put" or "place" a food item into her or his mouth, children are more likely to "shovel," eating larger quantities quickly. Thus, here, the word "shovel" signals particularly childlike, potentially messy behavior. Lacking the motor skill and cognitive control necessary to eat in a refined manner, children often do eat messily as the young Zauner did, Jolly Pong "f[alling] down [her] shirt and spread[ing] all over the car." In contrast to older adolescents and adults, who are expected to have the physical and mental faculties to eat without making a similar mess, childlike messiness is more likely to be viewed as cute due to its direct association with children and the different, more tolerant expectations people have toward them.

The childlike messiness that makes this scene cute may be connected to both tolerance and Ngai's aforementioned idea that "helplessness" is a crucial component of why something is

[50] Moving forward, I will only mention the term "children" for clarity but am also considering infants as cute beings.

cute. To restate, if softer contours indicate "pliancy" or responsiveness, the less formally articulated object will be cuter and elicit "minor negative affects[, including] helplessness."[51] Specifically due to their softness and pliancy, these types of "bloblike," soft things elicit helplessness because their softness entails that they are unable to resist molding and potential destructibility at the hands of others.[52] Extending this notion, when tangibly helpless objects or beings, including children, exhibit their helplessness through helpless *actions* (as in this example of messy eating; Zauner as a child messily eats because she is helplessly unable to know better or how to eat properly), the reader may find such observable helplessness and ignorance to be exaggeratedly cute.

In addition to messiness and helplessness, another childlike quality exhibited in the Jolly Pong scene is imitation, whereby a child copies someone who is usually older, such as an older sibling or parent. In this instance, Zauner has learned from ("Mom showed me") and copies someone who is older and relationally close to her, stating that she "wanted to like all the things [her mother] did, to embody her completely." The words "all" and "completely" in "*all* the things" (emphasis added) and "embody her *completely*" (emphasis added) underscore the extent to which Zauner wishes to follow her mother as a young girl; "embody" suggests a full following, if not manifestation, of her mother's very being. A child wanting to perform behavioral acts of mimicry may be cute in part because the child, who does not know any better (epitomizing a kind of innocence) and is helpless (returning to Ngai's idea), performs them to more appropriately fit into a world with which they are still unfamiliar. Given her or his own

[51] Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," 815–16.
[52] Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," 815.

"pliancy" and vulnerability, the cute child poses no harm or threat to this world, only requiring imitable guidance as she or he learns to move about in it.

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The cuteness of this scene is attributable to the physical qualities of Jolly Pong and its relation to children and childhood, as well as childlike behavior. Combined with a tinge of nostalgia, Zauner's inclusion of the behavioral acts of messy eating and desiring to copy an older figure allows the scene to maintain familiarity, since the average reader can relate to having eaten messily as a child and to the idea of desirable mimicry. Moreover, Zauner's uncomplicated, non-figurative language and somewhat sentimental feelings of happiness and pleasurable messiness contribute to the scene's simplicity and easy reading. Here, however, it is important to note that Zauner is thinking about her mother, who has died by the time she writes this. While Zauner presents the eating of Jolly Pong with her mother as a memory that was meaningful, the past tense "I think about the time Mom showed me" (and the book's first line "Ever since my mom died"[53]) evidences an element of grief since her mother is gone and only Zauner's memories of her remain in the present. Throughout the book, Zauner also points to how she, especially as a multiracial Korean American woman, felt connected to her Korean identity through Korean food and her mother, who introduced her to Korean snacks such as Jolly Pong. Yet now that her mother has died, Zauner must grapple with the reality of no longer having this concrete cultural anchor. In addition to being a direct connection to Korea, Zauner's mother seems to have been a role model for her daughter. Through the final "I wanted to like all the things she did, to embody her completely," Zauner suggests her admiration for her mother, a significant individual who guided her in her cultural and personal development.

[53] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 3.

To elaborate on this last statement, Zauner possibly yearned to embody her mother in a "complete" way because she felt most tethered to her Korean identity through her Korean mother as a multiracial individual. This feeling is evidenced by her deep fear of losing that connection once her mother is dead: "I no longer had someone whole to stand beside me, to make sense of me. I feared whatever contour or color it was that signified that precious half was beginning to wash away, as if without my mother, I no longer had a right to those parts of my face."[54] Furthermore, as a multiracial Korean American, Zauner has experienced the amplified struggle of not fitting into either her Korean or American side and in this case may wish to be acknowledged as Korean, or Korean enough.[55] If she desires to be acknowledged as such, she would aim to be as similar as possible to (and fully embody) that person in her life who is Korean; i.e., her mother. If Zauner has also viewed her mother as a cute being by way of growing up with associations of Korea and cuteness, perhaps part of her desired embodiment here is to be cute. Considering that cuteness has a relation to becoming like the cute object at hand, Zauner may have a desire to be like her *cute Korean* mother to maintain her specific connection to a sense of Koreanness. This whole line of thought could then explain why she includes such cute portrayals of the Korean women throughout the book (i.e., she understands Korea through a lens of cuteness) and why she chooses to include one of her childhood self as an adult writer who still longs for some cultural anchor to Korea.

Even as Zauner touches on serious points of memory, grief, and identity struggle, the cuteness I have delineated takes away from some of the seriousness (as mentioned, cuteness

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[54] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 226.

[55] In one part of the book, Zauner states the following passage that evidences her complex multiracial experience: "I didn't have the tools then to question the beginnings of my complicated desire for whiteness. In Eugene [the city I grew up in], I was one of just a few mixed-race kids at my school and most people thought of me as Asian. I felt awkward and undesirable, and no one ever complemented my appearance. In Seoul, most Koreans assumed I was Caucasian, until my mother stood beside me…" (33).

entails a stripping away of it) and advances an easier dismissal of these points due to its distracting quality. That is, the cuteness of the snack and the young Zauner's actions, which are described in a detailed way that enables a vicarious experience through reading/digesting the material, detracts from a more appropriately serious reading experience because the focus comes to lie on those digestible and enjoyable descriptions as opposed to the weight of Zauner's grief. Notably, such heavy points appear less elaborated on compared to the cute aspects; most of this sentence comprises descriptions of the cutesy food and Zauner's childlike consumption. Thus, the space that could exist for deeper contemplation is filled by a kind of empty cuteness. A primary concern is that upon reading such a scene, another Korean American woman writer who decides to approach the topic of her grief and Korean/Asian American identity complexities will consider that she too should write in a way that mixes significant matters with cuteness, making the work more "legible." Alternatively, if she wishes to directly mention grief and internal struggle, she may consider including a decent number of (cute) details that are ultimately not in support of the main topic(s) she wished to write on. Perhaps to a wider American/Western audience, genuine and gritty Korean and Asian American women's narratives are *too* genuine and gritty to find appeal in, hence necessitating a cushion of cuteness to soften their gravity and which results in a homogeneous lineup of cute works lacking full reality.

Furthermore, Korean and Asian American women who are members of the general public may believe that cuteness ought to be a part of the larger picture when they desire to be authentically serious. Some of these women may already hold such a belief, one that is established and reinforced by examples such as the Korean adoption documentary *Twinsters*, whose "cinematic narrative offers a palatable adoption tale."[56] A predominant sense of glamor

[56] Kimberly McKee, "The Consumption of Adoption and Adoptees in American Middlebrow Culture," *Biography* 42, no. 3 (2019): 670.

and cuteness frames this Korean American adoption narrative, mixing cuteness in with the weight of familial and sisterly separation. In *Twinsters*, "[a]doption and reunion are *happy objects*," and the biographies of the twins, Samantha Futerman and Anaïs Bordier, "are packaged for public consumption to center the 'happy reunion' over other possible narratives" that account for the seriousness of their adoption trauma. Echoing the cute Korean aesthetic of cultural products such as K-pop and K-beauty, the documentary's style and tone are cute (one can discern from the trailer that the packaging involves lighthearted music and scenes of smiling and fun). Ultimately, *Twinsters*' cuteness hinders it from being "an adoption film that critiques the system or raises explicit ethical concerns," existing as a satisfying, simplistically happy display that does not enable the genuine contemplation of loss and, somewhat like Zauner's writing, furthers expectations of Korean and Asian American women to embody cuteness, positivity, and pleasantness in general.[57] Troublingly, readers of a text that participates in this type of reinforcement can also leave with expectations of cutely packaged seriousness, as well as the idea that cuteness and seriousness are intertwined for Korean and Asian American women regardless of context. Translating this belief onto the real world, even in a setting not unlike the professional one R.O. Kwon highlights, various individuals may view Korean and Asian American women through cute-colored glasses that leave little room for proper treatment and instead observable indifference and ignorance.

2. Scene Two

Following her depiction of Jolly Pong, Zauner mentions another Korean snack called "ppeongtwigi": "Those little rice-cake Frisbees were my childhood, a happier time when Mom was there and we'd crunch away on the Styrofoam-like disks after school, splitting them like

[57] McKee, "The Consumption of Adoption," 677.

packing peanuts."[58] Similar to Jolly Pong, ppeongtwigi is cutely round and popular among Korean children, as it is devoid of sharp edges and ideal for children to hold and consume. Here, Zauner employs the word "little" a second time, describing ppeongtwigi as "little rice-cake Frisbees." In addition to "little" conjuring a sense of smallness and childishness (in terms of both size and youth), her word choice of "Frisbees" evokes childhood and play/playfulness given Frisbees' status as children's toys. Zauner deems these Frisbee-like snacks part of or comprising her "childhood, a happier time when Mom was there and we'd crunch away on [them]." As in the Jolly Pong scene, she again considers the past and attributes a happy nostalgia to it, recalling a shared activity with her mother and continuing in her associations of childhood and youth. However, in contrast to the pleasantness of the moment, "a happier time when Mom was there," with the comparative adjective "happier" and past tense verb "was," emphasizes how her mother is no longer with her (Zauner can compare the absence of her mother in the present to her presence in the *past*), adding an undercurrent of sorrow to an otherwise cute scene.

Additionally, like the term "shovel" used to illustrate the eating of Jolly Pong, "crunch" signifies less refined eating and more likely describes how a child would eat, with its denotation of loud chomping. If childlike mannerisms and behavior are cute through their association with real, visibly cute children, ppeongtwigi's connections to childlike eating and childhood, as well as Chongmi eating in a childlike manner ("*we'd* crunch away," emphasis added), enhance cuteness within the scene. Moreover, the "Styrofoam" of "Styrofoam-like disks" seems childish in that Styrofoam cups are frequently used by children. Like ppeongtwigi, the cups are easy to handle due to their smaller size and lack of hard edges, making them ideal for children to grasp and drink from. It is worth mentioning that in a single cutesy scene, Zauner incorporates three

[58] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 5.

American products: Styrofoam, Frisbees, and packing peanuts, all of which are traditionally used and prevalent in America. In considering why she might have done so, describing Korean ppeongtwigi with phrases featuring recognizable products such as “Styrofoam-like,” “Frisbees,” and “like packing peanuts” could make ppeongtwigi more identifiable to readers from America/the West, allowing for an American/Western audience to better make sense of the foreign snack.

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Like Jolly Pong, ppeongtwigi is a cute snack that has an affiliation with children and childhood; similarly childlike eating mannerisms and American elements related to children promote the scene’s cuteness. Zauner’s sustained nostalgic tone and mention of sharing snacks and American products permit familiarity for especially American/Western readers to better conceive the foreign Korean snack. An additional layer of sentimentality emerges from her emotional recollection of “a happier time when Mom was there,” which produces feelings of joy and sorrow. Here, Zauner details another memory of a mother who is no longer with her, continuing the thread of painful memories and grief. Through the inclusion of the three American products, Zauner also potentially nods to her personal identity struggle in that they could have colored her experiences as representations of her American side, which she knew through her white American father. The scene combines the Korean ppeongtwigi/the Korean mother who introduced it to Zauner and the American objects, perhaps pointing to and exemplifying Zauner’s ambiguous identity as a multiracial Korean American woman.

However, again, the cute depiction somewhat simplifies the complicated facets of grief and self-ambiguity. Although this scene is less vividly described compared to the first Jolly Pong one, there is still enough cute, affectionate imagery to overpower the weight of a clause like “when Mom was there” (notice the preceding word “happier,” which adds a tone of

lightheartedness and tenderness). In addition, the aspect of identity is not explicitly discussed; I am speculating based on existing details since Zauner herself does not elaborate on the implications of grappling with Korean and American influences in this particular case. While this section may have been a suitable place to express these implications and, as in the Jolly Pong scene, her present lack of a connection to Korea, Zauner transitions to a description of viewing other Korean women at H Mart. She writes, "I'll *cry* when I see a Korean grandmother eating seafood noodles in the food court" (emphasis added). The word "cry" is sentimental in its eliciting emotions of slight pity and sorrowful nostalgia if Zauner is thinking of her Korean grandmother, who has died by the time she writes of another old Korean woman. Regarding "cry" or "crying," such an outward expression of emotion can be viewed as cute in its infantile quality or link to infants, who are unable to control their emotions as well as adults and convey their needs by crying. Moreover, the word and action are gendered in that younger girls and women are thought and permitted to cry, whereas men are not.[59] Overall, given their general feelings related to tenderness, infantility, and femininity, "cry" or "crying" is cute given that these feelings are also associated with cuteness.

The word "crying" is significant as a component of the memoir's title, and Zauner could have decided to involve the act when reflecting on her nostalgic memories of and through Korean food to elicit similar sorts of feelings as cuteness. Perhaps by doing so, the reader is moved in some capacity (through feeling) while avoiding being too overwhelmed. Furthermore, unlike purely cute emotion, incorporating the act of crying and scenes tinged with sadness might provoke a sympathetic response through which the subject more strongly feels for the individual carrying out the crying. Yet, due to the sentimental nature of the act, it is possible that this

[59] Although the societal notion of men not being emotional or permitted to cry is shifting, it is still widely accepted as a norm, especially in more conservative locations within and outside of America.

affective response of sympathy still entails a superficial movement as opposed to one that would lead to the subject taking some form of deeper action. As established in a prior section, sentimentality poses a problem for Asian American women for this very reason–surface-level impact is limited in what it can do politically and structurally.

In any case, the moment of crying "when [Zauner] see[s] a Korean grandmother eating seafood noodles in the food court" appears to be one example of many in which cuteness serves to package or provide moments of relief in otherwise heavy contexts. While such cushioning is beneficial for the reader who does not wish to be overwhelmed and seeks that relief, it is not as fruitful for the purpose of more meaningful action. The ppeongtwigi scene that I have just close read is a distinct instance in which Zauner weaves cute elements into the scene and transitions to a line that involves sentimentality and a cuter elderly Korean woman consuming food.[60] Through such cuteness, some of the heavy material Zauner touches on, including the pain of memory, becomes less heavy. In other words, the "cry[ing]" sentence and Zauner's use of it as an immediate transition reduce the scene's heaviness, making it a sad but sentimental, surface-level description of an external occurrence. While I acknowledge that Zauner must have had her own reasons for involving cuteness into various scenes, given the stakes I have been outlining for Asian American women and their writing, existing in the realm of sentimentality by incorporating a sentimental, cute alleviation permits readers to progress without contemplating or even recognizing the strength underlying scenes that can better inform them of serious subjects such as Zauner's unique challenges as a (multiracial) Korean/Asian American woman. In this instance, Zauner might have used the ppeongtwigi scene to identify points of personal hurt while painting a more realistic, complete portrayal for other Korean and Asian American women who

[60] Noodles are somewhat of a cute food in that they are malleable and soft. See my previous reference to Ngai's "bloblike" notion of cuteness.

share her experiences of grief and racialized uncertainty.

I maintain that upon viewing such cute and less complete character portrayals, fellow Korean American women writers who aim to write about weighty topics may be inspired to keep their seriousness at bay using the medium of cuteness. Furthermore, by discerning Zauner's inclusion of various American/Western products, I raise the possibility of these authors being inclined to make a work familiar and digestible enough through the introduction of similar objects that would satisfy the average American/Western reader. While this is not inherently problematic, prioritizing outsider digestibility often detracts from the comprehensive portrayals that these writers deserve to represent.[61] As for non-authorial Korean American women who continue to view multiple works containing such cutified portrayals, they can continue to internalize that cuteness is tied to seriousness for them and other Asian American women and apply this thinking to their real lives, imagining that they are bound to cuteness despite wishing to exist in seriousness. Lastly, the cutified portrayals play a discernible role in denying the women an entire range of human action and emotion as a result of cuteness' superficiality and stripping of seriousness. Lacking an in-depth notion of Korean and Asian American women's movements and ability to address them with absolute seriousness, others unfamiliar with their position may go on to disregard Korean and Asian American women as whole human subjects who experience and yearn to authentically express their adversities without donning a perpetual mask of positive cuteness.[62]

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[61] See the discussion on Wong and "'food pornography.'" Among other points, prioritizing outsider digestibility can lead to excessive self-exoticization and stereotypical representations.

[62] One example illuminating this overall issue is the common outsider phrase, "You're so cute when you're angry." Due to the lack of depth and seriousness that cuteness entails, Korean and Asian American women are often thought of as cute when attempting to express the entirety of their emotions, including negative ones. While Zauner's cutified portrayals have not created this problem, they can perpetuate it. Korean and Asian American women like her experience and often wish to address their experiences fully, which they should be able to do.

3. Scene Three

As a final reflection on her excursions to H Mart, Zauner states that H Mart "reminds me of who they [Chongmi and Eunmi] were before, beautiful and full of life, wiggling Chang Gu honey-crackers on all ten of their fingers."[63] As in the previous two scenes, she nods to a sense of nostalgia through the phrase "reminds me of who they were before." By writing this nostalgic scene, Zauner enables herself to textually revisit a childhood moment with her loving mother and aunt and regress to a state of childhood to witness the women's own childish playfulness. Such playfulness is exemplified by the line "wiggling Chang Gu honey-crackers on all ten of their fingers." Chang Gu crackers, like Jolly Pong and ppeongtwigi, are small, round Korean snacks commonly eaten by children. The crackers have distinct holes that allow a child to put her or his fingers through and wear them as fingertip rings, similar to the American Bugles, Ring Pops, or Fruit Roll-Ups children place on or wrap around their fingers to eat. The act of eating with fingers and hands is considerably childlike in that children use their hands while developing fine motor and self-care skills and is cute in part due to the lack of eating standards for children, who are not expected to eat without the use of their hands and with utensils as they gain the proper skills to do so. Lastly, the ability to use a food item as something it is not; i.e., a ring, is cutely childlike in its imaginative, play-pretend quality.

In particular, the word "wiggling" is quite playful by denoting small, lively movements that small, cute children would make as they do an act like dancing. Zauner's mother and aunt are the ones who perform the act, ascribing a moment of childlike play and wonder to these adult women and essentially cutifying them into a pair of spirited children. Moreover, if certain expectations exist for adults that generally prevent them from expressing childish behavior,

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[63] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 11.

Chongmi and Eunmi "wiggling" the "Chang Gu" crackers portrays their temporary respite from adult expectations and adulthood and a return to a childlike state in which playful expression is allowed. The phrase "all ten of their fingers" points to the women fully participating in and investing their physical selves into their childlike act ("*all ten* of their *fingers*," emphasis added). Notably, this is contrasted with the fact that Zauner begins with the past-tense phrase "who they were before." That is, her description of the women's active participation of animatedly "wiggling" the Chang Gu, paired with the phrase "beautiful and full of life," imbues them with life despite the two having died by the time she writes about them (and, tragically, at young ages).

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As in the two previous scenes, childlike/childhood playfulness and Chang Gu as a cute children's snack associated with children's eating and behavior contribute to this scene's cuteness. While its digestibility is attributable to the same or similar points as for the earlier scenes, familiarity particularly arises from the fun, childlike behavior that readers would recognize in their child selves, with the "wiggling" eliciting fun, joyful emotions.[64] Moreover, the specific phrase "beautiful and full of life" emphasizes the extent to which Zauner wishes that the two women, both of whom helped her stay rooted to her Koreanness, were still in her world. The phrase grants the women a sense of life that they no longer have, pointing to how strongly Zauner misses and feels their absence. Yet as much as she attempts to imbue them with life, Zauner imbues them with cuteness as well. Similar to the transition from memory and grief to a Korean grandmother crying in H Mart (as mentioned for the ppeongtwigi scene), she illustrates

[64] On the point of digestibility, all three close reading scenes thus far involve snack items, which are arguably more digestible, lighter, and "cuter" than entire meals. While Zauner writes of non-snack Korean foods, it seems significant that such snack scenes exist and are connected to the adult women in her Korean family.

the Korean women in a cute manner upon writing the "beautiful and full of life" phrase. The childlike "wiggling" comes right after, taking the reader's attention to the next childlike, cute thing without providing some space for her or him to reflect on the pain of Zauner's memories and desires. The chapter ends in this way, without an expansion on Zauner's honest feelings regarding the women's deaths and what their absence signifies for her. The scene ends with the clause "showing me how to suck a Korean grape from its skin and spit out the seeds," and here, I raise another possibility that may have contributed to a more serious and substantial reading: Zauner could have considered expanding on her beloved mother and aunt serving as her central ties to Korea and the impact of their no longer being in her life.

Unlike the two earlier scenes, the Chang Gu scene also appears to infantilize the Korean women more directly. While the previous ones were of primarily the young Zauner and her cuteness, here, it is the two Korean/Asian women who perform the childlike behavior of "wiggling" the crackers on their fingers. Upon contemplating possible reasons for Zauner having done so, my claim is that she might have incorporated cuteness for the aforementioned sense of relief and the sake of increased digestibility. By cutifying those who are dead (and tragically), the scene is made a bit less sorrowful and thus more digestible for an audience desiring a relatively pleasurable family story without excessive pain. As another example, near the end of the book, Zauner mentions how her remaining Korean aunt, Nami, states the following after Zauner's mother has died: "'I think Halmoni and Eunmi and your mom is very happy…They are all in heaven together, playing hwatu and drinking soju, happy we are here together.'"[65] In this case, Nami's words paint a nice, idealized portrait, with all the now-dead women playing a game and drinking together, an image that evokes fun and friendship in an otherwise solemn context.[66]

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[65] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 238.

[66] I detail this game of *hwatu*, which is played in a childlike manner, in the following section.

Additionally, Nami's repeated use of the word "happy" contributes to a transformation of sorrowful subject matter into that of a more untroubled, lighthearted sort. By illustrating death and grief in such a manner, both instances become easier to absorb without particular complicated attachments.

Although Zauner might have understandably intended to do this for her and her reader to make sense of heavy realities, death and grief realistically entail a complexity that an Asian American woman should be allowed to convey without reservation or concern for whether something is "too" heavy or complex. While the scene in question carries the same kinds of creative implications as addressed, it is potentially more troubling in that upon reading, Korean and Asian American women writers may believe that they must implement cuteness as a means to soften and simplify those direct heavy subjects (i.e., death, grief) they are thinking about with reasonable seriousness. For Zauner and other writers who choose to introduce a solemn topic such as death into their writing, they should not have to presume that they need to lighten and/or cutify it in some way–after all, it is sensible that death would be difficult to write and read about. Similarly, ordinary Korean and Asian American women should not have to conclude that regardless of how direct and serious some experience is, it ought to be constructed and presented through a cushion of a more acceptable yet potentially less genuine cuteness (and often in consideration of others). If cutification makes a given topic less genuine, the cutification of a straightforward, serious matter may be even less authentic, extending the sugar-coated idea that Korean and Asian American women are not as capable of experiencing a complete emotional spectrum and must repress their real and complex emotions. Since Korean/Asian women are the ones overtly cutified in this scene, perhaps a woman of this group could be convinced to cutify her narrative and very being, upholding the inaccurate but common presumption of Asian

American women being cute in any situation and embodying cuteness despite legitimately hurting.

Characterizations of Korean Female Family Members

As depicted in the final snack scene, two Korean/Asian women perform the cute act of "wiggling" crackers on their fingers in a childlike state. During my initial reading of this scene and others involving Zauner's Korean family members, I failed to notice the extent to which she cutifies her Korean family and principally the women in it. In what follows, I will close read two of the cutified Korean women to examine what such cutifying entails for Korean and Asian American women's literature and lives.

1. **Zauner's Grandmother, Halmoni**

One of the first ways Zauner characterizes her grandmother, who is only referred to with the Korean word for grandmother, "Halmoni," is through a visual description: "[s]he was as hunched over as an umbrella handle and always wore plaid pajama pants and shirts with glittering…fabrics."[67] Halmoni's cute smallness is evident through the phrase "hunched over." The word "hunched" implies bending or stooping such that one becomes physically smaller; as Halmoni's hunching has to do with old age, her physical transformation of smallness is out of her control. Typically, old age is linked to a similar, out-of-one's-control state of the helplessness and harmlessness that children embody, which contributes to how the elderly are also often regarded and treated as cute. Furthermore, since umbrella handles are themselves considerably curved, Zauner's use of the simile "as an umbrella handle" advances the image of Halmoni being significantly small and old if her body-as-handle has turned so inward from aging. Apart from her bodily form, Halmoni "always wore plaid…[and] glittering…fabrics." If plaid and glitter are

[67] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 28.

associated with youth, as patterned clothing is commonly reserved for younger children and particularly girls, Halmoni's constant ("always") wearing of "plaid" and "glittering" youthful articles makes her seem childlike and reverted to a girlish state despite her older age, just as Chongmi and Eunmi are through the medium of the Korean snack.

Halmoni's garments are a source of contrast to her old age, and her highly playful actions are another source of such contrast. When Zauner would visit Halmoni as a child, Halmoni would "prod her index fingers through [Zauner's] pants, cackling and then hacking at [Zauner's] surprise and terror."[68] This act, referred to in Korean as *ddongchim*, is one Korean children pull as pranks on one another until they are expected to stop upon reaching a certain age. Interestingly, Halmoni not only performs and continues the personal act as an adult; she does it in a shameless manner. In the phrase "cackling and then hacking at [Zauner's] surprise and terror," "cackling" signals a harsh, uncontrolled laughter, while "hacking" suggests that Halmoni would laugh so hard at her act and Zauner's reaction to it to the point where she would begin coughing, or "hacking." She appears to enjoy the spectacle of Zauner's "surprise and terror," disregarding the especially negative "terror" and instead prioritizing her own feelings of joy at viewing Zauner's reaction. In this way, Halmoni is much like a child who does not care about others' reactions to her actions or does not quite understand or know how to interpret them. However, partly due to her earlier characterization of "hunched[ness]," the reader may perceive her as harmless and as non-imposing as a small umbrella handle that does not take up much space. Thus, even as the adult Halmoni performs an invasive act such as *ddongchim*, she and the act can be regarded as cute rather than injurious and cause for concern. Her overall childlike size and behavior and harmlessness mark her as a cute old lady who simply likes to

[68] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 28–29.

have a little fun.

Recounting a scene of Halmoni and other female family members' game of Korean *hwatu*, Zauner writes that "the games were loud and fast, my godmother, Jaemi, extending her arm a full three feet in the air before slapping her card down full force…the red plastic back whipping onto the face of its companion with an epic SMACK. The women would shout 'PPEOK!' and 'JOH TAH!' after every move."[69] Although this scene involves not only Halmoni, I am including it for its unexpectedly chaotic, childlike quality reminiscent of that of Halmoni's "cackling" and "hacking" scene. It is also slightly surprising that a group of presumably smaller women, including the older Halmoni, plays a masculine game and in a "loud and fast," frenzied manner. While *hwatu* is not solely played by men, given that card games (and their evocation of gambling) are associated with the masculine sphere, one may find it startling that these women, who are otherwise feminine-presenting and at times drawn to soft or feminine things, have such palpable *fun* playing a game that seems more like one a group of burly Korean men would enjoy. Returning to the notion of Halmoni's childlike, mischievous joy and ability to express herself without regard to others and their judgment, the women are described as publicizing their enjoyment without restraint, and, like children, not considering external (gender) expectations that might inform them to avoid playing a masculine game or loudness and inner expression.

In the game of *hwatu*, the player must slap their card onto a matching one already on the playing table. Many Korean players like to indicate their satisfaction at locating and being able to put down a matching card by making a loud slapping sound onto the card, and Zauner dramatizes

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[69] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 29.

the Korean women's performance of satisfaction and joy by incorporating descriptive imagery and capitalization. Jaemi, whose name in Korean literally translates to "fun" or "enjoyment," is said to be "extending her arm a full three feet in the air before slapping her card down full force." Unlike even the average *hwatu* player who slaps their card onto another, Jaemi slaps hers "full force" by bringing/"extending" her hand so high, "a full three feet in the air," that it "whip[s]" and makes an "epic SMACK" noise. Her entire action is dramatized through visual and audible representation, with "whip" and the capitalized "SMACK" denoting strong sounds produced by her forceful, almost excessively excited and thus childlike playing. In the second sentence, the entire group is said to "shout 'PPEOK!' and 'JOH TAH!' after every move." That they make these capitalized, presumably auditory exclamations and so constantly ("after every move") reveals a similar lack of restraint that Halmoni exhibits when enacting *ddongchim* on the young Zauner. If lack of restraint already makes the women seem childish and cute overall, "'JOH TAH'" especially adds to this cuteness in its definition being similar to the English word "hooray," a term used by children to express childish joy.

Through her visual cuteness and childlike behavior that does not take others into consideration, Halmoni's cuteness is made apparent in the first scene. In the second, she, along with the other Korean women, exhibits a similar behavior that does not account for others and their perceptions, resembling a kind of youthful thought process. As for familiarity, Halmoni's girlish clothing is likely reminiscent of the way various readers dressed in their childhoods, and card games are a standard activity done when one is younger (e.g., family game night). In a distinct but still digestible way, there may be a level of exoticization occurring through the vivid description of this Korean/Asian game that these Korean/Asian women play. With no direct

translation provided, Zauner incorporates Korean words such as "'PPEOK!'" and "'JOH TAH!'", which the majority of American/Western readers would not be familiar with and could view as "exotic." Such an exotic illustration is linked to palatability–readers unfamiliar with Korean and Asian culture at large may find it interesting to absorb a scene that represents the otherness of a foreign culture and incorporates a distant language and gestures. The card game scene is quite dramatized, with the vivid imagery and repeated capitalization (of foreign words) potentially contrasting with the way non-Asian Americans/Westerners play games in a family setting involving children.

It is compelling to note that while Asian/American women and culture are frequently regarded as quiet, the Asian women in the *hwatu* scene are anything but, performing a loud spectacle. However, Zauner may not be breaking out of existing stereotypes and providing a more comprehensive portrayal of the Korean and other Korean/Asian American women. If she cutifies the women in a stereotypical manner that affords them a less complete range of emotions elsewhere, she might be including a scene such as this for a different purpose; i.e., a level of exoticization that satisfies an American/Western palate already containing a binary view of Asian American women as too quiet or too fierce. This idea of the Asian/Asian American woman as too quiet or too fierce evokes the Asian female dichotomy of the lotus blossom/dragon lady. Whereas the lotus blossom is "'self-sacrificing'" and "'servile,'" docile and innocent, the dragon lady is "'deceitful'" and "'dangerous,'" aggressive and alluring at once.[70]

To illuminate the possibility of Halmoni and the group of women's acts being serious ones for Zauner, I will elaborate on Halmoni's playful, childlike act of *ddongchim*. *Ddongchim* can be a total invasion of one's privacy and space, especially if enacted by the "wrong"

[70] Maria Cecilia Hwang and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, "The Gendered Racialization of Asian Women as Villainous Temptresses," *Gender & Society* 35, no. 4 (July 2021): 567–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211029395.

individual. Zauner herself describes the act in certain detail: "[*Ddongchim*] involves clasping your hands in the shape of a gun, index fingers pressed together to create a needle used to penetrate an unsuspecting anus."[71] Evidently, the act is one of somebody touching another in a personal, private area. Zauner goes on to mention that "it scared the shit out of [her]" and references her "surprise and terror," which Halmoni only "cackl[ed] and hack[ed] at." From these points, Zauner seemingly did not prefer Halmoni performing *ddongchim* on her body yet cutifies Halmoni before mentioning it. As a result of her cuteness, Halmoni, regardless of whether she performs the invasive act, appears harmless, and the reader is unable to take her choice of action seriously. As mentioned, it is as though the adult Halmoni just likes to have fun of an exotic kind that readers can chuckle at before proceeding to the next exotic scene.

Similarly, for the *hwatu* scene, Halmoni and the women in it are cutified and therefore not as imposing or threatening. However, although less personally invasive than Halmoni's *ddongchim*, the women's emphatic playing might be an invasive act (spatially, if not personally), particularly from the perspective of a child. That is, their vociferous and almost wild motions could have felt serious in their spatial invasiveness to a young Zauner, who claims to have been their snack "waitress" and moved about in the same room in which they played so chaotically.[72] Given that children are sometimes less aware of circumstances, a child like Zauner could have been a little confused or frightened if a group of adults were making strong noises while playing. However, as is the case for Halmoni, Zauner's portrayed group is cute and not as disruptive or disturbing as they might have been in reality. While Zauner could have capitalized the women's words for an increased sense of exoticization and difference, perhaps she did so because it is the legitimate way she experienced their not-so-cute actions as a young girl.

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[71] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 28.
[72] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 29.

If this sort of experience had been a serious one for Zauner (the reader knows that at least *ddongchim* seems so) why does she write about them in a way that minimizes any troubling feelings? Knowing that cuteness restricts seriousness, Zauner might have cutified the women, especially Halmoni, to downplay the seriousness of their actions. On the other hand, it is possible that Zauner had a particular relation to the Korean women and her Korean grandmother such that she came to portray her as a cute figure. To expand on Halmoni's significance for Zauner as an older Korean woman who represents a "pure" tie to Korea (i.e., Halmoni is as Korean as possible, presumably never having gone to America and only speaking Korean), I will now evaluate her distinct cuteness.

As I have claimed, there is a particular cute attachment in relation to the elderly. The elderly/old people in general are cute, in part because they are physically and mentally more harmless and helpless compared to the rest of the human population. Old people are physically weaker and smaller, as well as mentally somewhat infantile in their slower movements, increased forgetfulness, and lack of awareness. In Zauner's initial illustration of the elderly Halmoni, it is interesting that she experiences *ddongchim* as uncomfortable while portraying the act and the individual who performs it as cute. One may presume that she does so because of a preexisting idea of the elderly as cute and her knowledge of Halmoni being Korean (I will elaborate on this latter point). While *ddongchim* is not viewed as significant sexual assault or harassment in Korea, with many believing it to be "a perfectly normal prank" that can be carried into adulthood, its level of humor and/or acceptability could depend on who is doing the act and what dynamic is at play.[73] Think, for example, if a middle-aged man were to perform *ddongchim* on a

[73] "Dong Chim is the bizarre South Korean game where children are allowed to poke you in the BUM," *Best of Korea,* April 16, 2020, https://bestofkorea.com/dong-chim-is-the-bizarre-south-korean-game-where-children-are-allowed-to-poke-you-in-the-bum/.

younger girl–this would appropriately not be as cute, and such a scene would shift from one of cuteness to disconcertment. However, given that culturally and socially, Korean citizens have not always regarded acts of a sexual nature as such, it can be difficult to discern the precise nature of *ddongchim* and the way in which it is interpreted, especially by an older Korean from a traditional era like Halmoni.[74] As a multiracial Korean American situated in America, Zauner might not have known exactly how to interpret the act, considering it can be unclear territory for native Koreans. At present, she may also be excusing her traditional Halmoni's act in regard to her not having known better in a kind of cutely helpless, unaware state. In any case, perhaps Zauner interpreted *ddongchim* as sexually or at least physically violating *and* cute, with the cuteness relating to her understanding of Halmoni as a Korean woman.

If Zauner has had a prevailing notion of cuteness and Korea or of Korea as cute, she could regard Halmoni as largely cute since Halmoni is the "purest," or most, Korean person she knows. Halmoni is even more Korean than Zauner's mother, who has been Americanized to an extent while living in America and married a white American man.[75] In other words, with a certain conception of Korea and cuteness, Zauner would have the persisting idea that someone who is as Korean as her Korean grandmother is cute, or possibly the cute*st*, among the Koreans she is aware of.[76] Subsequently, even as this individual takes an action that is not so cute given the circumstances, her action would be deemed cute in association with her apparent (cute)

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[74] I am not claiming that Korea as an Eastern country is somehow less progressive than the West in terms of the handling of sexual assault and/or harassment. Without comparing to the West, I am pointing to the reality that Korea is culturally distinct and has traditionally been more conservative and misogynistic, which contributes to the mishandling or disregard of such cases.

[75] Zauner's mother also intentionally Americanized herself, "tr[ying] to wring the foreignness out of her tongue by speaking only English, except for the names of Korean foods…" (47).

[76] As opposed to cutification, Zauner could be making Halmoni appear weird and exoticizing her in this way. Halmoni performs a weird, "exotic" act (*ddongchim*) which an American/Western grandmother would not. Zauner mentions Halmoni's inclination to smoke and gamble as well, which makes her seem not cute but atypical. Perhaps Zauner takes some inspiration from the concept of "weird Japan," or the idea that Japanese people and culture are strange in a contrary-to-the-West, otherworldly and exotic sense.

Koreanness. However, any action carried out in such a private area (such as *ddongchim*) is reasonably not cute, regardless of whether it is executed by a cute or cute Korean person. Therefore, the question should be raised of what happens when instead of being written to fully reflect its more serious and disturbing potential, a scene involves cuteness or cute attachments that absolve actions of their gravity and impact. In line with full emotionality and realism, a Korean American woman such as Zauner should not be compelled to detail her experiences in a cuter way that is limiting and minimizing but encompassing and remaining faithful to her experiences, including ambiguous ones. Korean and Asian American women readers should be granted the same opportunity and not feel obligated to allow for cute absolution even when experiencing acts that are less sensible to regard as cute. Since Asian and Asian American women's actions are typically the ones regarded as cute due to being performed by a "cute" individual or in a cute manner and in connection to Asia, it is necessary to break this affiliation by separating action from perceived cuteness such that these women will have certain acts be taken seriously if they rightfully wish for it.

2. Zauner's Mother, Chongmi

Even as Zauner writes about the complicated nature of her relationship with her mother, Chongmi, due to cultural, generational, and linguistic differences, the way she characterizes Chongmi in terms of appearance/the physical realm and actions is significantly cute and at odds with the difficulties they experience as mother and daughter. For instance, Chongmi's physical characterization is as follows: "[s]he'd had the same hairstyle for more than ten years, simple, straight, falling just below her shoulders. Sometimes she'd wear…a little newsboy cap in the fall."[77] The "simple, straight, falling just below her shoulders" line indicates the same kind of

[77] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 68.

hairstyle many young Asian girls have in their childhood, which can be visualized as a short bob. The fact that her hairstyle is "simple" and "straight" also points to naturalness; if adult women are usually the ones who have less "simple" and "straight" hair from product use and chemical application, Chongmi is not that woman. Furthermore, that she "had the same hairstyle for more than ten years" suggests a sense of agelessness, as if Chongmi has retained her youth this entire time and is an adult woman whose childish, feminine haircut has led her to retain the appearance of a young girl who would be categorized as cute. Along with her youthful hair and appearance, Chongmi sometimes wearing "a little newsboy cap" (also with the cuteness of/evoked by "little") further perpetuates her cute, childlike appearance, as newsboy caps are traditionally worn by cute, young boys.

Another instance in which Zauner connects the word "little" to her mother is in the short sentence, "The moon was a luminescent little cuticle, my mother's favorite crescent shape."[78] Although a rather brief example, I find that it is a strong one of Zauner's specific word choices and writing style that work to cutify Chongmi. Consider, for example, if Zauner had written the same sentence as, "My mother liked a crescent moon." Such a statement can still be read as cute or cutesy on its own, yet Zauner's phrasing of "luminescent little cuticle," again with the word "little," right before she details it as her "mother's favorite crescent shape" is cuter than the sentence I have provided. This is partially attributable to the brightness hinted at by the word "luminescent" (if brightness and brighter colors are cute in their connection to childhood and youth; e.g., the bright yellow Jolly Pong), as well as the word "cuticle" implying extra smallness and hence cuteness as the tiny "crescent"-like part of a human fingernail or toenail. The miniaturization and reduction of the moon, in reality a massive object, to a mere "cuticle" and its

[78] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 85.

status as Chongmi's "favorite" lunar form suggest that Zauner's already cutely characterized mother *truly* likes ("favorite") some object that is *truly* small ("cuticle") and cute in its smallness.

Besides Chongmi's cute portrayal through her appearance and associated objects, she is characterized as acting quite childlike and playful at various moments. Her spiritedness can be seen in the scene of her "wiggling" the Chang Gu with Eunmi and in her participation in the lively *hwatu* game with other members of her family. She also shows this side of herself to Zauner as a young girl in a scene in which they sing the popular song "Tell Him":

> I remembered how we used to sing the song 'Tell Him'…When I was a kid…I was Barbra and she was Celine, the two of us adding interpretive dance and yearning facial expressions to really sell it…I'd exclaim, prancing from side to side, raising my hand to urge my voice upward…Then, together, we'd [sing,] 'Tell him! Tell him that the sun and moon rise in his eyes! Reach out to him!' And we'd ballroom dance in a circle….[79]

Beginning with "I remembered," Zauner establishes a tone of nostalgia surrounding a lighthearted moment of song she and her mother shared "[w]hen [she] was a kid." By this time, Zauner has illustrated several scenes that invite the reader to witness her and her mother as cute individuals in their childish appearance and behavior. In addition to Chongmi's characterization of maintaining a physically youthful image, she is cute in action here as well, engaging in a playful musical act that makes her seem youthful and innocent despite her adult status. Each taking on a persona and "playing pretend" ("I was Barbra and she was Celine") the way children do, they would incorporate "interpretive dance" and "yearning facial expressions to really sell it." In relation to the "playing pretend" aspect of pretending to be the real singers Barbra Streisand and Celine Dion, the "interpretive" of "interpretive dance" suggests Zauner and Chongmi

[79] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 102–3.

imagining and presenting their own version of dance for the song. Besides dancing and its connection to childlike expression and expressive physical movement, the two add "yearning facial expressions to really sell it." Combined with a look of "yearning," which implies intense longing, and the phrase "really sell it," their childlike investment in their act of play is evident; both attempt to "really" put on a show and invest themselves into giving a complete performance as they employ their imaginations to become Streisand and Dion.

"[E]xclaim," "prancing from side to side," and "raising my hand to urge my voice upward" suggest further physical investment in the act and free, unconstrained expression as in the *hwatu* game. Through its implication of joyous shouting, the word "exclaim" contributes to the scene's characterization as childlike, carefree, and cheerful. In their "prancing from side to side," which signals high, jumpy steps children showcase when using their full bodies for expression and play (as when they "play pretend" and embody an animal that prances, such as a horse), both mother and daughter are depicted as fully involved in their musical performance. That Zauner would "rais[e her] hand to urge [her] voice upward" also indicates bodily involvement through the incorporation of an entire limb, while "urg[ing her] voice upward" indicates her putting in a dedicated effort to reach a higher pitch in voice (incidentally, higher-pitched voices are widely regarded as sounding cute). Finally, Zauner and Chongmi's investment in their playful act is shown through the exclamations following each of their verses; their "ballroom danc[ing] in a circle" continues the thread of bodily engagement, "playing pretend" (if pretending to be in a "ballroom"), and playfulness as a whole.

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Like Halmoni, Chongmi is visually cute and has cute attachments in addition to exhibiting childlike behavior and expressiveness. The scenes are digestible in similar ways as to

those I have been outlining, with the "Tell Him" one being sentimental in its happy, warm depiction of Zauner spending time with her mother in a fun, feminine way through song and dance. In relation to the *hwatu* scene, there is a potential undercurrent of exoticization that conforms to existing stereotypes, as Zauner makes Chongmi, a Korean/Asian woman, so cute and girlish (one could make this argument for Halmoni). Given existing ties between Asian/American women and cuteness, Chongmi as Zauner's demanding yet particularly cute mother seems to uphold those associations, regardless of Chongmi's other qualities. Moreover, her childlike characterization and behavior might be read as infantilizing and to some extent fulfills the American/Western desire for Asian and Asian American women to exist as othered, cute and perpetually childlike beings.[80]

As I have stated at the beginning of this section, Zauner writes of her experiencing difficulties with her mother that are commonly experienced by second-generation Korean and Asian American children when interacting with immigrant parents from a dissimilar background. However, such difficulties and their seriousness are contrasted and somewhat masked by her mother's considerable cuteness. Within the "Tell Him" scene specifically, Zauner (as she did for the Chang Gu "wiggling" scene) emphasizes a cherished memory that she has of her mother who is no longer with her, pointing to the burden of grief she carries since her mother died. This scene of reminiscing follows Zauner's explanation that her mother had been undergoing her second round of chemotherapy for her cancer and comes right after the sentence, "Even with three of us there to labor, caretaking often felt like a herculean feat."[81] With the words "herculean feat," the sentence begins to encapsulate how wearying taking care of her ill mother has been for Zauner

[80] In a scene depicting Zauner and her mother eating at Halmoni's house, they eat directly and messily with their fingers. This is one example of particularly infantile behavior (27–28).
[81] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 102.

and those around her, yet she follows it up with a more lighthearted, nostalgic scene of singing and dancing to the syrupy "Tell Him." Even as I have acknowledged her potential and understandable reasons for doing so (i.e., to offer relief in scenes of distinctive weight), Zauner's moving into a scene of palatable, pleasurable cuteness detracts from the possibility of full seriousness as well as to take time to expand on her heavy feelings and find space to contemplate her and her mother's arduous experiences coping with illness and loss.

Furthermore, Chongmi is not solely characterized as cute within the memoir. Apart from experiencing difficulties with her mother that stem from her illness, Zauner faces several challenges in relation to Chongmi as a person. Although Zauner often depicts her mother in a cutesy way, appearing as a petite and girlish woman who likes cute things and has childlike mannerisms, she portrays Chongmi as capable of being cold and demanding. Her emotional coldness is seen in the advice she offers Zauner as a young girl: "[N]o matter how much you thought you loved someone, or thought they loved you, you never gave all of yourself. Save 10 percent [of yourself], always, so there was something to fall back on."[82] Although this advice has a non-cute, wise quality, it is cold and reticent (and thus not cute) in that it contains instruction to refrain from total emotional giving and receiving. Since Chongmi is the one providing such instruction, she is inferably the kind of parent and mother who is not always emotionally open and available for her child. In addition, Chongmi is tough on her daughter; Zauner writes that she "[would constantly] pick on me [about small details]," "was always trying to shape me into the most perfect version of myself," had "rules and expectations [that] were exhausting," and "needled me over my weight, the width of my eyeliner, the state of my breakouts."[83] Chongmi's

[82] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 18.
[83] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 6, 18, 20, 51.

detail-oriented and particular tendencies were a source of turmoil for Zauner, who was already encountering the hardships of adolescence and of lacking a sense of belonging. The final detail ("needled me over my weight, the width of my eyeliner, the state of my breakouts") points to another unique struggle that many Korean American daughters experience with their Korean mothers, who come from a highly appearance-driven country and can hyperfixate on their children's appearances.[84]

In this way, Zauner illustrates her mother as at once cute and demanding, an illustration that could fit in with the too quiet/too fierce or lotus blossom/dragon lady dichotomy I previously illuminated. If, when the reader observes Zauner's mother, she or he is also observing ways in which Zauner as a Korean/Asian American woman writer portrays and tropes her Asian mother, Zauner's depiction of her not-so-cute, "too fierce" mother may place Chongmi into the Asian tiger mother trope used for Asian mothers across multiple mediums. According to Su Yeong Kim et al., the Asian or Asian American tiger parent/mother is an "authoritaria[n]" and "exceedingly demanding of [her] children" in and out of the home, and is "viewed as displaying relatively less warmth and affection towards [her] children" overall.[85] Based on this definition, it would seem that the typical Asian tiger mother is similar to Chongmi, holding high standards and expectations for her children while not being too emotionally accessible for them. Hence, by illustrating Chongmi as a mother who fulfills these traits, Zauner could be portraying her as one such burdensome tiger parent.

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[84] Sanghoo Yoon and Young A. Kim, "Cosmetic Surgery and Self-esteem in South Korea: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis," *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* 44, no. 1 (February 2020): 229–38.

[85] Su Yeong Kim et al., "Does 'Tiger Parenting' Exist? Parenting Profiles of Chinese Americans and Adolescent Developmental Outcomes," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 4, no. 1 (March 2013): 7.

Before describing an experience that informed her of how her mother is as a person, Zauner states, "[S]he wasn't what you would call coddling…every time I got hurt, my mom would start screaming. Not *for* me, but *at* me. I couldn't understand it. When my [white] friends got hurt, their mothers scooped them up and told them it was going to be okay…But when I got hurt, my mom was livid, as if I had maliciously damaged her property."[86] Following the above details, Zauner writes a scene in which she falls from a tree as a child and, after her mother harshly shouts at her, realizes that her mother's love is "tougher than tough love…brutal, industrial-strength. A sinewy love that never gave way to an inch of weakness. When I got hurt, she felt it so deeply, it was as though it were her own affliction."[87] Unlike her observation of her white peers' mothers, Chongmi as a Korean/Asian mother is severe in her treatment of Zauner, going so far as to yell at her even as she is injured and panicked. Beyond this scene, Chongmi's harshness plausibly extends to several realms in Zauner's life (and Zauner seems to confirm this by detailing her mother's overall harshness). As for the scene in question, while it exemplifies Chongmi being the unrelenting tiger mother, it proves her love for her daughter as well, which Zauner is better able to acknowledge at an older age. Zauner admits that part of why Chongmi would be so angered in certain moments was due to her "fe[eling Zauner's pain] so deeply…as though it were her own affliction," or maternally empathizing to an almost excessive degree.

Here lies a considerable complexity for Zauner, as she grapples with a sense of difficulty and frustration toward her "tiger"-like mother while recognizing her mother's distinct love for her and her present appreciation for that love. In general, many Asian American children share the experience of complicated and conflicting feelings toward their "tiger" parents, whom they

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[86] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 16–17.
[87] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 17–18.

perceive as exhausting and loving. Thus, with the acknowledgment that Zauner as an author is not required to act as some universally representative voice for Asian Americans, it might have been even more representative and realistic if she had elaborated on her feelings regarding her own "tiger" mother without characterizing her as so physically and behaviorally cutesy. As I have continued to suggest, the cuteness in particular is distracting (and contributes to reduced seriousness and thereby realism) and occupies valuable space that could be used to do such direct expansion. In any case, troping itself can be problematic; thus, when I claim that Zauner could expand on her feelings for her "tiger" mother Chongmi, I am not suggesting that she trope her according to that of the Asian tiger mother but to elaborate on the various ways in which her culturally and personally dissimilar mother is not easy to manage, and how the two interact as separate individuals. This, then, would result in a more realistic and relatable image that does not play into an overwhelmingly positive, cute view of Korean and Asian women.

In relation to cuteness, another existing trope for Asian mothers is the mother who is infantilized due to the cuteness that comes from not being fully fluent in American culture and the language used to express that cultural fluency. Chongmi's native language is not English; the English she speaks throughout the chapters is "broken," with the incorporation of less natural and mispronounced English words and incorrect grammar. For a few examples, Zauner mentions that her mother said phrases such as "'steamy hot'" instead of "'steaming hot,'" pronounced "pancreatic" and "MD Anderson" as "'pancry-arty'" and "'Andy Anderson,'" and "'maybe this would be nice hairstyle for you'" and "'it taste too salty.'"[88] At times, Westerners perceive "broken" English as cute since it seems like the type of language children speak as they are developing linguistic skills and unaware of what sounds the most natural and grammatical. In addition, "broken" English contains a helpless quality since its speaker is helplessly unable to

[88] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 13, 49, 61.

know how to perform something (i.e., speak "proper" English) and verbalize her or his needs. As a non-native speaker, then, Chongmi would appear similar to a cutely helpless child or being.

Notably, a difficulty Zauner might have encountered in relation to her mother's "cutely helpless" English could have been the common Asian American experience of watching one's Asian immigrant parents be infantilized and disregarded as a result of their babyish, cute lack of English skills.[89] Once Chongmi becomes ill and experiences increasingly critical symptoms, she reverts to the Korean language, which Zauner and her (white American) father do not comprehend; Chongmi's unwilling yet uncontrollable shift signifies her lack of American fluency as a whole and a magnified helplessness for her as an individual. Besides the issue of Chongmi's linguistic challenges, a discernible difficulty for Zauner is that she is not fluent in Korean, contributing to her and Chongmi's mother-daughter strain and Zauner feeling personally disconnected from Korea. Zauner points to this, stating, "I would always be excluded from the we of 'woori mal'–our language, as Koreans call Korean. Decades later…I still could not utter the words 'woori mal' to Koreans without an interrogation. Where are you from? Why don't you speak Korean well?…you are not Korean."[90] In an interesting and opposite way, Zauner may be considered cute in her own lack of fluency and linguistic helplessness from a Korean perspective, proving that much room exists for further discussion on language abilities, cuteness, and the intricacies of relationships involving cultural and linguistic disparities.

As evidenced by the points I have underscored, Chongmi could fit into the Asian tiger mother trope and the trope of the Asian mother who is cute in her linguistic lack. While I raise the possibility of Zauner categorizing her mother according to these as oversimplifying, there is

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[89] It is possible that Zauner had such an experience during her lifetime, considering she was raised in the predominantly white area of Eugene, Oregon (15).
[90] Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*, 47.

arguably a reality to these experiences of Asian mothers, which many Asian Americans know from personal experience and having conversations with other Asian Americans who understand their mothers as strict (tiger mother) or childlike (linguistically helpless, cute mother). Here, I am not suggesting that Asian mothers purely fulfill the disciplinarian tiger trope, since Asian parents and the pressures they place onto their children do not exist in a vacuum. Much of the time, Asian mothers like Chongmi act harshly and "aspire to" and "apply those metrics" of a particular model minority myth such that their children can succeed in American society.[91] However, even as immigrant parents make sacrifices for their children to do well and push them in a strong manner, their definition of success often leads to the "actual child [having to] surrender rights" and "present-day freedoms."[92] In *Crying in H Mart*, in addition to Chongmi showing strictness and a desire for her daughter to be flawless, she demands Zauner to prioritize college over music, evidencing her model minority sentiments that uphold general perfection and academic and financial achievement.[93] Adding to their relational complexities, Chongmi's self-sacrificing pressures likely originate from a well-intended love for Zauner yet places her into a box which she must mold herself to fit, regardless of her desires and aspirations. As a final thought, the category of the so-called tiger mother as well as the linguistically helpless mother do not have to exist in a binary–Asian mothers can embody both. In Zauner's case, she shows Chongmi as embodying both, which may not be her placing her mother into two different tropes but instead providing a fuller portrayal of this Korean/Asian woman by establishing that two things can be

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[91] erin Khuê Ninh, "The Model Minority: Asian American Immigrant Families and Intimate Harm," *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 169.
[92] Ninh, "The Model Minority," 172.
[93] At one point, Chongmi states, "'I'm just waiting for you to give this up…I should have never let you take guitar class…You should be thinking about college, not doing this weird thing'" (61). Zauner responds that she may not even desire to attend college, to which Chongmi replies, "'I don't care if you don't want to go to college. You have to go to college'" (62).

true at the same time, and that our Asian mothers are complex beings who are inexplicably yet undeniably multifaceted.

Overall, given that the line between troping and offering realistic portrayals is not easy to define, I do not claim to have an exact answer for what Zauner or any other Asian American woman author should or should not do to depict their Asian mothers. My primary aim has been to point to differing possibilities related to shared Asian American experiences and the extent to which Zauner encounters entanglements concerning her relationship with her mother, and how her complicated feelings and thoughts attached to her experience and representation of Chongmi could have been explored in greater depth. Considering just how much can be said about our Asian mothers and the complicated nature of mother-daughter relationships, particularly when the mother and daughter duo involved are of two separate worlds, Zauner as an author deserves to explore this major aspect of her life. However, her decision to include many of her mother's cutesy physical and behavioral descriptions hinders the potential to do such exploration. Because Chongmi's cuteness is conspicuous and external (and thus superficial), it reduces Zauner's ability to thoroughly address their difficult mother-daughter affairs, moving beyond the surface to examine and center those points hitherto mentioned and more. As a broader concluding idea, if and when Zauner elects to expand on or introduce a heavier scene highlighting the above experiences or other heavy subject matter, it may be fruitful for her to allow her and her reader to sit in that moment of seriousness rather than introduce some successive scene or description(s) of cuteness to reduce its burdensome nature and make for easier absorption. By deliberately staying on the seriousness, both author and audience will have the proper room for their necessary, productive contemplation.

Chapter Three: Cuteness in *Pucca* and *Crying in H Mart* vs. *Pucca*

Unlike the cuteness in *Crying in H Mart* that I have actively worked to uncover, the Korean character Pucca gives an initial impression of cuteness (Figures 4 and 5). With her high head to body ratio, two hair buns emulating the ears of a teddy bear, and tendency to flash a toothy grin, Pucca was another cute facet of my childhood, along with characters such as the Japanese Hello Kitty and American Powerpuff Girls. Yet once I became aware of the concept and harms of Asian caricature in America, I began to reconsider Pucca's cuteness. As a less conscious child growing up in California, I had never attached meaning to Pucca's most distinct feature–her eyes, or ironically, a lack thereof. Only after relocating from the West Coast to the South did I begin to experience the shame of having "Asian" eyes that were smaller than my peers' and which became a point that instinctively felt like one of ridicule and exclusion. As I moved through my adolescent years and gained greater exposure to Asian American issues, I came to recognize the historical and social forces behind my experiences of classmates pulling their eyes sideways and the significance of caricature more broadly.

Figure 4. The author's childhood Pucca clock containing an image of Pucca with a camera. Personal photo.

Figure 5. A close-up view of the smaller Pucca found in the upper left side of the clock. Personal photo.

Upon revisiting the Pucca of my childhood, I realized that my impartial and even positive thoughts toward her had shifted. I now view her and several other characters' lines for eyes as something greater, as directly mirroring racist Asian caricatures of particularly the 19th century, during which "yellow peril" reached new heights and white Americans and Westerners feared "Chinese [and Asian] immigrants as potential threats to national security," "degrad[ing] workplaces and neighborhoods," and "threaten[ing] the stability of the entire social system."[94] Pucca herself is not a product of this period–she was created as an "animated online E-card service"[95] in 2000 by the South Korean company VOOZ Character System, which became the basis for her animated television series of the same name in the mid-2000s.[96] Expanding Westward, in 2004, the E-card was licensed by Jetix Europe, which acquired television rights

[94] John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats, "Yellow-Peril: 19th-Century Scapegoating," *Asian American Writers' Workshop*, March 5, 2014, https://aaww.org/yellow-peril-scapegoating/.
[95] "Pucca Power," *License Global*, April 6, 2018, https://www.licenseglobal.com/character/pucca-power.
[96] The first episode of *Pucca* aired in 2006 (*The Hollywood Reporter*, Volume 396).

and which VOOZ continued to work with to develop short episodes.[97] These episodes were featured on various American channels, and more were ordered by Jetix to be created by the Canadian Studio B Productions, which went on to lengthen episodes subsequently played on Jetix's worldwide channels.

Despite my knowledge of Pucca's caricatured nature, I and others who have known her in their girlhoods still recognize those typical elements that contribute to her cuteness. Drawing on what Leslie Bow terms the "'racist cute,'"[98] Pucca is at once a cute Korean girl/television show and a caricature illustrated in a racist manner whose program paints a caricatured portrait of Korea and Asia by amalgamating various East Asian ethnicities.[99] Apart from her caricatured eyes, Pucca appears stereotypically Chinese, with two hair buns and the color red as staple pieces of her ensemble (in Chinese culture, wearing two hair buns has been associated with tradition and youth,[100] and the color red is commonly associated with tradition[101]). Chinese influences are prominent throughout the show: *Pucca*'s storyline consists of Pucca being a Chinese-created, jajang noodle delivery girl for her three uncles, characters have (stereotypical) names such as Ring Ring and Ching, and historical influences including the likes of Beijing opera are present in short and full-length episodes. In addition to plausible *kawaii* influence, explicit Japanese elements are evident, such as Pucca's primary love interest Garu, who is Japanese given his status as a ninja and Japanese-sounding name. Thus, the "racist" in *Pucca*'s "racist cuteness" is associated with the titular character's perceivably caricatured eyes and the kind of pan-Asianism,

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[97] *License Global*, "Pucca Power."
[98] Bow, "Racist Cute," 33.
[99] Moving forward, I will refer to the individual character as Pucca, and the television show as the italicized *Pucca*.
[100] See the following source for an example: https://castleofcostamesa.com/chinese-culture/chinese-new-year/chinese-childrens-hairstyle-2-buns-on-the- sides-tutorial/.
[101] "Chinese Red," Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, September 2, 2016, https://asia.si.edu/red/.

or mixing of ethnic and cultural signifiers, within the series. (This concept of mixture may be borrowed from the Japanese one of *mukokuseki*, which I will elaborate on.)

If Korean and Asian American girls and women are often perceived as being quiet, Pucca fits into this existing racist and misogynistic trope. As an ambiguously Asian-looking girl, she does not speak, instead expressing through giggles, grunts, and other minor gestures. Furthermore, if Korean cuteness is shaped by *kawaii*, of which Hello Kitty reigns as an iconic cute character, perhaps the partially mute Pucca takes inspiration from Hello Kitty's lack of speech resulting from complete mouthlessness.[102] According to *Pucca*'s canon, the ninja Garu is also non-talking after having taken a vow of silence.[103] Given that throughout the show, Pucca's primary objective is to win the affection of and has a general infatuation with Garu, her silence is likely motivated by this male character's storyline, hence combining male-centric and Japanese influences. In addition, while potentially aspiring to a level of Japanese iconicity (e.g., the level Hello Kitty has globally reached), by establishing Pucca as yearning for the Japanese male Garu and his unwillingness to reciprocate, Pucca's creator(s) may be distributing a message of an imperial hierarchy, however subconsciously or subtly. Thus far, I have been establishing how Pucca seems to be pan-Asian or even Chinese, but considering the character's Korean origins, she could be a Korean character representing Korea at some level. If so, this Korean being/girl perpetually yearning for and aspiring to be near to a Japanese (male) character is significant given Japan-Korea's history. On the other hand, even if Pucca is not meant to embody Koreanness, one could still claim that imperial influences are at work. Japanese creators have

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[102] Hello Kitty was first created in 1974 (Kirsten Anderson). While Pucca has significant powers in the show, she lacks the power of speech. If the ability to speak and verbalize one's thoughts is a distinguishing trait of humanity, perhaps Pucca is less than human and not unlike the human girl-but-not-girl Hello Kitty. (According to her founding company Sanrio, Hello Kitty is a human girl, not a "kitty"/cat.)

[103] This is revealed in the Season One episode titled, "Romancing the Clone."

been known to apply the concept of *mukokuseki*, or erasure of national difference, to their characters and products to enable "ambiguous, and therefore neutral, racial meanings…enabl[ing] them to slide seamlessly into new cultural contexts."[104] Without a sense of national or ethnic specificity, some character or product can gain popularity and appeal on a wider, more global scale. Even as Pucca is not raceless given her various Asian (and "very Asian," caricatured) signifiers, perhaps her producers have found a way to uniquely apply this Japanese concept onto her, tailoring it such that she epitomizes a still-erasing, misconceived Western version of what Asia and its people are like.

Before transitioning to a discussion of similarities between *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca*, I would like to address a few basic points of difference. While *Crying in H Mart* is written by a multiracial Korean American woman, *Pucca* was first developed by a Korean group, with the male Boo Kyoung Kim as the head creator.[105] Thus, each text's creator's positionalities differ. Moreover, since *Pucca* is geared toward a younger demographic in general, the show's subject matter and level of depth are distinct from those of *Crying in H Mart*. Lastly, unlike a literary textual medium such as *Crying in H Mart*, *Pucca* is more explicit in the above realms of caricature, pan-Asianism, misogyny, and imperialism, attributable to its being entirely visual. Despite these differences, there are sufficient and notable similarities to delineate certain patterns among creators associated with Korea. Hence, in what follows, I will underscore points of comparison to move into a final analysis of what they indicate for the Korean and Korean American creative sphere.

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[104] Erica Kanesaka Kalnay, "Imperial Innocence: The Kawaii Afterlife of Little Black Sambo," *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 4 (Summer 2020): 571.

[105] Eun-byel Im, "[Herald Interview] Breathing value into animation character," *The Korea Herald*, May 11, 2018, https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180511000634.

Like *Crying in H Mart*, much of *Pucca*'s cuteness comes from childlikeness and food. For instance, many, if not all, of the characters have physically infantile or childlike proportions, with large heads and small bodies that move about in bouncy, expressive ways.[106] Moreover, the various food items included and consumed are round, echoing Ngai's notion of the "bloblike" cute thing.[107] In contrast to *Pucca*, *Crying in H Mart* is not as openly caricatured or pan-Asian, considering it is a non-visual text. However, by cutifying the Korean female family members, Zauner may be furthering the same or similar caricatured views of cute Korean and Korean American (and Asian American) women. Caricature is founded on exaggeration and stereotype, both of which Pucca encapsulates through her overdrawn and overdone "Asian" eyes, as one example. Similarly, the cutified Korean women in Zauner's memoir are themselves emblematic of a kind of exaggeration, fitting into an image of fairly and stereotypically cute Korean/Asian women in their childlike representations and cutesy interactions with food. Despite being "veiled by positive feeling," such a "racist cute" image is racist in its biased nature and underlying sense of superiority-inferiority between subject and Asian-woman-as-object.[108]

Apart from caricature, racist assumptions and ideologies can appear with the concept of pan-Asianism. For *Crying in H Mart*, the book's external appearance is worth noting: like *Pucca*'s general redness and incorporation of Chinese jajang noodles, the color red and noodles resembling Chinese lo mein or chow mein appear on *Crying in H Mart*'s primary cover (Figure 6).[109] Thus, initially, *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca* may contain Chinese elements that

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[106] Evidently, the Korean/Asian women in *Crying in H Mart* are not explicitly described as having such proportions. However, both works contain physical representations of Asian characters that are infantile or childlike in some form.
[107] Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," 815.
[108] Bow, "Racist Cute," 33.
[109] It is unclear how much of a say Zauner had in the book's external design. In any case, the end of the book (under Zauner's author photo and description) contains small print noting, "Jacket design and illustration by Na Kim." I was

contribute to their pan-Asian encompassing of more than their original East Asian, Korean ethnicity. Furthermore, Zauner's external appearance potentially involves Chinese culture; like Pucca, she sometimes wears her hair in two traditional-looking buns. However, it is possible that this hairstyle echoes that of *kawaii*, for which many young girls and women wear their hair in two buns to further a sense of youthfulness or animal-like cuteness. Paired with her pastel ensembles, Zauner's physical style may involve aspects of Japanese culture. Additionally, her chosen stage name being Japanese Breakfast evidences a level of Japanese influence while contributing to the pan-Asianism that, although not inherently racist, has been used to erase Asian Americans and still does so in the present. If part of East Asian diasporic people's desire for ethnic distinction originates from real historical turmoil and cultural difference, the lumping of Asians in America indicates an absence of recognition of that history and difference, as well as a lack of acknowledgment for basic individuality.

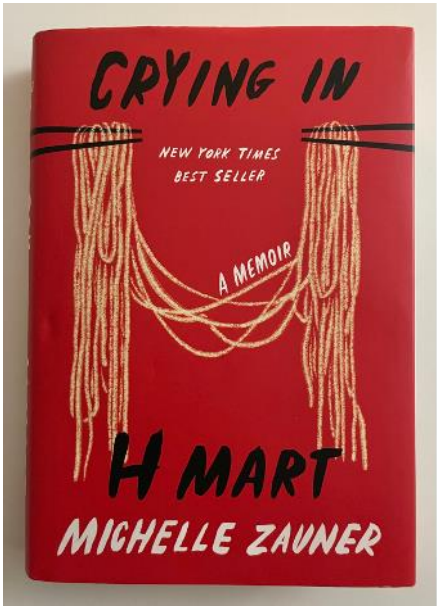

Figure 6. The cover of *Crying in H Mart.*

unable to discover whether Kim is Korean or Korean American but find it interesting that, based on the name, a presumably Korean or Korean American creator designed the cover.

Personal photo.

A relevant example conveying this desire surrounds the reception *Crying in H Mart* first received in Korea. One emergent controversy was that Zauner had not stayed in significant touch with her Korean roots, even calling herself *Japanese* Breakfast as a musician prior to becoming an author and was suddenly "jumping on the bandwagon" of an ever-popular Korea.[110] Some Koreans wondered why she had not previously attached herself to Korea and if she was capitalizing on her Korean identity once Korea was gaining wide appeal. More specifically, for those native Koreans who are familiar with Zauner's book and have questioned her artist name, a point of contention seems to relate to their views regarding Japanese imperial history and critiques of ongoing empire. Perhaps these individuals wondered, why not *Korean* Breakfast? Given the tumultuous history between the two nations, it is understandable that Korean citizens were uncertain or opposed to Zauner's choice of Japanese Breakfast. I posit that compared to these native Koreans, whose view on Zauner's name is focused on imperialism and imperial history, a Korean American view could center the issue of pan-Asianism and the harms that come with a Korean/Asian American advancing an image grouping people of the Asian diaspora. Based on Korean and Asian Americans' experiences with other Americans/Westerners not knowing or desiring to know Asia's heterogeneity and forming stereotypical misconceptions, pan-Asianism carries a particular resonance for Korean and Asian Americans. In any case, for native Koreans and Korean Americans, at least part of their inclination for ethnic separation from other Asian countries/Japan is connected to historical circumstances and lingering memories of a difficult past.

[110] I will address that these are views I have heard about from conversations with native Koreans. While I experienced some difficulty finding an online source(s) that verbalizes these exact feelings, the comments evidence Korean questioning of Zauner's naming choices and why she had not aligned herself with Korea until recently.

As I have outlined for *Crying in H Mart*, Japanese/imperial influences are internally present in Zauner's *kawaii*-inspired sense of cuteness and externally in her outward appearance and stage name. For *Pucca*, these influences are most prominent in the program's also *kawaii*-inspired cuteness and inclusion of the Japanese Garu as Pucca's object of affection and desire. To reiterate my introductory sentiments, even for Korean American women who feel removed from the forces of imperialism, they can experience ambivalence toward the two texts and their displaying of Japanese features. With some awareness of imperial history and *kawaii* playing an important role in Japan's soft power project (which can be said to allow Japan to maintain a softer imperialism), Korean American women may hold ambiguous positions on a Korean-affiliated creation that seemingly enables Japan to continue in its soft power efforts.

Interestingly, the misogynistic aspect of *Pucca* and *Crying in H Mart* are related to this soft Japanese influence in that 1) the two may involve an appeal to men and 2) the youthful, cute concept of *kawaii* is sometimes about an appeal to men. In the modern period, "the male gaze remains a central feature of the Japanese mediascape, exemplified by the revolving door of seemingly interchangeable female[s, including] cute [or *kawaii*] idols."[111] The male gaze, which implies the representation of what the (heterosexual) male wishes to view, informs the way Japanese women and depictions of them cater to men to sustain female desirability and value. Whereas *Pucca*'s misogyny arises from its protagonist performing a similar act of aiming to gain Garu's favor, *Crying in H Mart*'s may be attributable to the way in which it furthers certain portrayals of cute Korean/Asian women, who are expected to embody a pleasing, feminine cuteness that serves the male gaze. Although Zauner likely did not present the Korean women as cute solely for this gaze (in fact, her book seems most popular among Asian American women

[111] Alexandra Hambleton, "Male Gaze," *Japanese Media and Popular Culture*, April 3, 2020, https://jmpc-utokyo.com/keyword/male-gaze/.

readers), her portrayals can play into male-oriented and Western male fetishistic fantasies of Asian women and Asian women as cute. Overall, if *Pucca* and *Crying in H Mart*'s elements do relate to a kind of misogynistic appeal, it could be influenced by *kawaii*'s interpretation of male-centered cuteness given that the creators' sense of cuteness is plausibly inspired by *kawaii*.

It is unlikely a coincidence that all the aforementioned similarities exist between *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca*. For this project, I opted to include *Pucca* as a visual Korean female-centered television program to help me further understand what *Crying in H Mart* is doing as a literary work. If *Crying in H Mart* has raised questions surrounding self-cutification and expectation, *Pucca* illuminates similarities that point to important patterns among Korean and Korean American creators. *Pucca*'s elements of cuteness, caricature, pan-Asianism, misogyny, and imperialism, as well as *Crying in H Mart* and its involving these very features, evidence expectations that Korean and Korean American creators feel they should fulfill to have their works be generally seen by more people and perhaps uniquely favored by Western audiences.[112] While *Pucca* was established near the beginning of the 21st century, *Crying in H Mart* was written around two decades later. Although dissimilar in specific ways, their commonalities indicate the presence of persisting patterns; if patterns are what form meaning, such patterns must carry some meaning for the creators forwarding them. In line with distinctions between the two, I will address that given modern progress and sensitivity in areas such as racial equality (in contrast to the early 21st century, when *Pucca* was developed), Zauner must have taken greater care not to promote explicitly problematic portrayals in her book. However, my claim is that despite subtlety, as evidenced by the similarities I have delineated between an early 21st-century work and this more modern one, Zauner is contributing to ongoing representations of Korean and

[112] I expand on Western significance in the following paragraph.

Asian American women that are questionable in their own right.

Thus far, I have argued that through their Japanese and *kawaii*-inspired cute facets, *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca* perpetuate an imperialistic, cute packaging of Korean/Asian women in their cute, childlike characterizations and food imagery. Cuteness especially permits increased digestibility by being a bite-size, consumable component of a given work, and *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca*'s cuteness allows for a high digestibility for American/Western audiences with expectations of Asian cuteness and desires for cute patterns to be fulfilled by Asian creators. In turn, Asian and Asian American creators aware of global American/Western standards and control of production are pressured to make their works as cute and digestible as possible for them to be produced and seen. Considering that *Pucca* eventually became involved with Western production, it is less of a surprise that its episodes are digestible in their cuteness and catering to American/Western viewers through aspects such as caricature and ethnic erasure.

By reflecting on this notion of digestibility and catering, we can also recognize how and why *Crying in H Mart* involves, for instance, so many scenes of cuteness and elaborately illustrated food. Regarding the book's target audience, one might think about it in such a manner: if a Korean American woman likely knows (through firsthand experience) of at least some of the numerous Korean foods Zauner illustrates, Zauner's including "so many" scenes could point to her writing for those who have had less exposure to Korean food and Korean/American experiences overall; i.e., non-Asian American/Western readers. In a 2017 interview, a pre-author Zauner stated that she had decided on her stage name as Japanese Breakfast because she could combine the "really American" term "Breakfast" with "something…American people just associate with something *exotic or foreign*" (emphasis added), settling on this something as

"Japanese."[113] Perhaps Zauner went on to apply such a line of thinking to her authorship, contemplating whether and ultimately opting to write for those hoping to have an "exotic or foreign" experience through her lyrics and now prose.

This notion of self-cutification and self-orientalization permits us to return to the initial conversation surrounding the excessive digestibility and pandering of Asian American women's literature, a conversation that relates to Pucca as a female character and *Pucca* as a televisual text. Since many Korean American girls are commonly introduced to Pucca/*Pucca* at a young age, continuously witnessing and absorbing its simple, palatable digestibility leaves a lasting impression on these young individuals. Constant exposure can result in the girls growing up to believe that creatively, they too must produce a digestible character such as Pucca and/or more concerningly *be* like Pucca to some degree. In the way Japanese and Japanese American girls and women have become associated with and are expected to be Hello Kitties, perhaps with a new wave of Korean traction, Korean and Korean American girls and women will encounter the same situation and feel as though they should be Puccas, simplistic little girls who embody tropes that prevent a move toward fuller, more humanized depictions of Korean and Asian American women.

To restate, there are likely shared reasons for the way Zauner and *Pucca*'s original Korean creator decided to portray their characters as such–they have noted who and what have become the most visible and accordingly produced works that fit into existing desirable categories. To date, *Crying in H Mart* is one of the most well-known and well-read Asian American memoirs, having received critical acclaim and debuted at number two on *The New*

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[113] Sandra Song, "Japanese Breakfast Is the Korean-American Songwriter Empowering Everyone to Overcome," *Teen Vogue*, July 14, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/japanese-breakfast-songwriter-empowering-everyone-overcome.

York Times bestseller list for combined print and e-book nonfiction and hardcover nonfiction, and spending 50 weeks and 60 weeks on the combined list and hardcover list, respectively.[114] After having become a larger media franchise, *Pucca* has experienced considerable popularity; in the "2020 Overseas Korean Wave Survey," Pucca was deemed a global character who has maintained the top preferential spot for Korean animation characters for five continuous years.[115] Upon consuming each text and witnessing its popularity, it is probable that impressionable readers and viewers of *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca* would be influenced in the realms of creation and behavior. Again, I maintain that the creators of these two texts are not the ones who have set standards and expectations of cuteness and relative digestibility. However, they should be aware that they carry genuine potential to inspire upcoming generations of creators, who may observe a book like *Crying in H Mart* or show like *Pucca* and their popularity among American/Western audiences and reach certain conclusions about future directions to take.

Beyond the creative sphere, works such as *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca* carry implications for Korean and Asian American women's lived embodiment. As I have claimed for *Crying in H Mart*, the cute, more explicitly troubling yet apparently favored portrayals within *Pucca* can lead to Korean and Asian American female viewers being conditioned to embody a Pucca-like persona, even if doing so entails negative repercussions for their treatment. Apart from these women holding such a view of and for themselves, other viewers who easily absorb

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[114] "Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2021/05/09/combined-print-and-e-book-nonfiction/; "Hardcover Nonfiction," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2021/05/09/hardcover-nonfiction/; "Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2022/09/25/combined-print-and-e-book-nonfiction/; "Hardcover Nonfiction," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2022/09/25/hardcover-nonfiction/.

[115] 김민규, "CJ ENM, 모바일 게임 '요리해 뿌까' 14일 글로벌 동시 출시," 스포츠서울, April 1, 2021, http://www.sportsseoul.com/news/read/1028896.

the content could be conditioned to presume Korean and Asian American girls and women as always cute, always digestible people to be viewed and handled in a way that disregards them as legitimate beings when the exact opposite is true.

Conclusion

By embarking on this project and pursuing a new direction of cuteness, I have come to better comprehend the meanings of cuteness for Korean and Asian American women and the ways in which textual forms reinforce longstanding associations between this population and being cute. While I had not believed that a literary text could carry such an attachment, I was surprised by how many scenes of cuteness I uncovered in *Crying in H Mart* and their unexpected ties to the Korean/Asian women in it. Given the above associations, I have claimed that there are significant implications for Zauner cutifying the women in her memoir. Combined with the serious nature of its textual themes, I have further argued that her authorial choices can contribute to the establishment of limited narratives as well as limited movement and treatment for women in the real world. In addition, if cutification enables greater digestibility, *Crying in H Mart* and Zauner sustain conversations on digestibility and pandering for Asian American women's writing.

Here, I would like to (re)address several important points that I have not delved into. Firstly, the above point of digestibility and pandering is difficult to separate from the misogynistic notion of Asian American women "betraying" Asian American solidarity and/or attempting to appeal to predominantly white men and a white general public.[116] Much of this criticism surrounding the perpetuation of orientalist stories has come from Asian American male scholars such as Frank Chin and might be read as misogynistic in their blatant disapproval of female writers who are aiming to contribute to the Asian American literary sphere. In my analysis of *Crying in H Mart*, I do not wish to verge into this male-centric discourse, especially given that I have hoped to highlight misogyny. As a Korean American female creative, I am also inclined to extend my support to a fellow female creator who has told a shared Korean

[116] Szmańko, "Between Solid America and Fragile Chinatown," 56.

American story. Nonetheless, to prevent further misogyny for Korean and Asian American women, one must consider and critique portrayals that can entail negative political consequences for the group. She or he can do so by being critical of an Asian American woman's work without condemning her personhood and while acknowledging her contribution to Korean and Asian American representation.

More generally, although I have evidently critiqued the cuteness of her work, I will state that Zauner is allowed to tell her story as an author, even if that storytelling involves cute elements or if cuteness has been a way for her to make sense of and remember her valuable experiences. Another person's narrative may understandably be personal; a memoir is bound to be. In any case, it is always a worthy endeavor to consider a given text from multiple angles such that one comes to hold nuanced views. Thus, rather than plainly critique *Crying in H Mart*, my goal has been to assess the book from a different angle than anticipated and examine what Zauner's personal choices signify for women like her who are impacted by them on a wider, more politicized scale. In doing so, I am (and hope that others are) now able to regard *Crying in H Mart* with an increased sense of balance, acknowledging its positive and potentially harmful facets in a dualistic manner.

Lastly, as I have delineated through my comparison and contrast of *Crying in H Mart* and *Pucca*, the representations found within both offer a kind of contentious pan-Asian appeal through cuteness and food. However, pan-Asianism is not solely harmful and has a crucial connection to the idea of Asian America as a political category, since it has historically been a statement of solidarity to resist related and intersecting forms of oppression that Asian Americans of distinct ethnicities face as a collective.[117] Yet when pan-Asianism is employed not

[117] The idea of solidarity and difference from this paragraph is in reference to Lowe; see the section titled "Japanese Soft Power, Cute/*Kawaii*, and Korean American Women."

as a means to connect through difference but perhaps cater to an audience outside of the community to be seen, questions of objective, authenticity, and accuracy should be raised.[118] Moreover, my centering a Korean American perspective and underscoring ambivalence toward Japanese *kawaii* is not to establish some internal Asian/American divide when we can recognize the genuine value of pan-Asian solidarity. Instead, by tracing a less frequently discussed history and exploring ambiguity, I have addressed existing differences to offer a more comprehensive view of Asian America and the unique complexities its members encounter. By admitting difference, we can move away from a generalized, erasing notion of Asian America and find strength in inclusivity and commonalities that will allow us to achieve greater understanding and unity as a diverse group.

For another text/object that would emphasize possible *Westernized* pan-Asianism and Korean American ambivalence, I included Pucca and her television series to draw a parallel between its creator(s) and that of *Crying in H Mart*. After having examined the two, my claim is that their creators are fulfilling similar sets of expectations revolving around cuteness and digestibility, as well as furthering certain patterns that carry precarious attachments for Korean and Asian American women. Even as we discern the enduring production and popularity of these texts, however, we must recognize that creators and ordinary individuals have significant power–they can actively choose not to contribute to the portrayals I have hitherto described. As established, the kinds of cute, digestible portrayals I have recounted and continuing patterns of perpetuating them entail negative consequences for Korean and Asian American women of various backgrounds. Despite their presence, the future of Korean and Asian American women's works is not bleak. The first step toward the cessation of any damaging portrayals and breaking

[118] See the discussion on Wong and "'food pornography.'"

of patterns is to recognize them to begin with. Following recognition, this population can collectively approach and access different representations that will afford them the full humanity they deserve. The aim of this project has been to do just that; i.e., to recognize those patterns for the promise of our experiencing increased depth and truth. (By affording full humanity, I mean allowing Korean and Asian American women to write of themselves *and* be perceived in a realistic and complete manner, as individuals who have a rich range of experiences and emotions that are not superficial and/or positively cute.)

These fuller representations do not imply that creatively, Korean and Asian American women must only produce serious and heavy content as opposed to that of a lighthearted kind. Such an implication, after all, would be another form of limitation. In addition, since on the opposite end of the expectation spectrum, Asian American women are demanded to produce serious and heavy content (consider the concept of trauma porn and the pressure for minority female creators to produce narratives showcasing their trauma), we should not place Asian American women in an impossible binary or be overly prescriptive in terms of what to put forth. Throughout this project, my specific claim has been that given the less serious nature of the cute and persisting associations between Asian American women and cuteness, the cutification of Asian women in a notably solemn work holds significant implications for Asian and Asian American women's present and future reality. If these women wish to provide serious narratives and move about with seriousness, they should have that option without feeling like they must involve cuteness into either, or both, creative and worldly realms. On the other hand, if cuteness may be favorable in certain contexts in which an appropriate lightheartedness would add to more balanced, positive representation for Asian American and other marginalized communities (and even exist as an alternative to trauma porn), perhaps various creators can incorporate cuteness into their works and lives for topics that are less serious in nature overall. Ideally with a sense of

responsibility and conscientiousness, how they do so will be a matter of individual discretion and choice.

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