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Nancy Chung April 10, 2016

Comfort Woman Narratives in Korean American Literature: Understanding the Korean American Identity through Han and the China Doll Stereotype

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Abstract

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In this thesis, I attempt to understand the Korean American identity by analyzing two Korean American novels: Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*. I discuss how the novels' comfort women narratives intersect with those of the Korean American women in relation to the China Doll stereotype. This examination is performed through tracing han – a form of trauma linked to Korean experiences – in each novel. I then contextualize this reading in broader terms towards an exploration of the collective Korean American identity.

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Introduction

> "The older I get, the more I feel a sense of loss at these divisions between my mother and myself, between the Korea and America that exist not on the map but within myself. I grieve that I do not know my mother's language or her history. I don't even know how to make kimchee."
>
> - Nora Okja Keller, "The Language of Stories"

What defines a Korean American identity? Who can be considered an "authentic" Korean American, and who is excluded from this group? Korean Americans have struggled to understand these questions, arriving at wide range of exclusionary and inclusionary answers. Despite no consensus, there are at least three culture components of the Korean American identity: Korean, Korean American, and American culture. These three components collide in remarkable ways throughout the 1990s, where each one is equally significant to understanding the Korean American identity.

In regards to the Korean component, the 1990s marked when the comfort woman movement gained attention on a global scale. "Comfort women" is an euphemistic term for 20,000 to 400,000 women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II.[1] The issue brought tension between South Korea and Japan leading up to the 1990s, during which the Japanese government denied the severity of the situation. On December 6, 1991, comfort woman Kim Hak-sun, along with the South Korean Association of the Pacific War Victims and Bereaved Families, sued the Japanese government for compensation (Soh 43). Kim Hak-sun's courage and emotional "shedding [of] bitter tears during a Tokyo press conference" caused a major global movement in support (43). The increased interest in comfort women is

[1] The reason for this broad range is that scholars cannot agree on an accurate estimate. The lower numbers are estimated by Japanese scholars, while Korean and Chinese scholars have guessed at the higher numbers (Soh 23). There is a general consensus that Korean women represent a majority of these numbers.

shown through Korean American writers Chang-rae Lee and Nora Okja Keller, who wrote fictionalized accounts of comfort woman experiences.

In addition to interest in comfort woman narratives, Korean American literature underwent a transformation during this decade. During the 1990s, Korean American literature became popular in the mainstream American market. For example, Chang-rae Lee becomes "the most prominent Korean American writer […] in the literary mainstream" (Fenkl 20). Because of the popularity of Asian American novels during this time, his novel *Native Speaker* was marketed as "the first Korean American novel" to attract readership (19); this marketing strategy would prove successful not only for *Native Speaker*, but for many other Korean American novels categorized as "Asian American" as well. The rise in popularity of these novels parallels the fact that Korean American works were produced at a higher rate than before. In her overview of Korean American literature, Elaine Kim postulates that "the sudden bloom of Korean American cultural activity after the 1992 Los Angeles riots can be attributed to the crisis of representation and identity many Korean Americans experienced […] when they found themselves targeted […] in print and visual media […]" ("Roots" 12).[2] Kim also points out that the increased literary activity occurred because the 1990s was "the first time a sizable generation of US-educated Korean American fluent in English [had] come of age" (11). As a consequence of these conditions, the 1990s produced very self-aware, identity-focused writers who "challenge[d] old categories and notions of who can be called a Korean American writer" (10).

[2] The 1992 Los Angeles riots occurred after white police officers attacked an African American man, Rodney King; the riots targeted the "model minority" Korean American community. Parts of the African American community perceived Korean American store owners as "foreign intruders deliberately trying to stifle African American economic development" ("Home" 3).

At the same time of this transformation in Korean American literature, the racial tensions of 1990s America were unforgiving to Korean Americans in the form of engrained cultural stereotypes directed towards Asian Americans. As the American component, the stereotype that pertains to both Korean American literature and the comfort women issue is the China Doll image: the depiction that Asian women are attractive, yet submissive and docile.[3] This stereotype first arrived in America mid-nineteenth century as "many early Asian American women came (or were brought) to the United States as prostitutes or 'picture brides'" (Wong 185). On a global scale, perhaps the most recognizable China Doll in Western culture is Cio-Cio San of Giacomo Puccini's 1904 opera, *Madama Butterfly* (Prasso). The Japanese Cio-Cio is so devoted to her American husband that when he finds an American wife, she gives up her child to the couple. Along with the popularity of the Puccini opera and its reincarnations, the China Doll stereotype would stay in America culture through various forms of media well into the 20th century to present day. Therefore, the 1990s is not particularly landmark in relation to the stereotype. However, during the time of the comfort women movement and changes in Korean American literature, this stereotype was still very relevant in relation to both components.

In trying to understand the Korean American identity, I will look at how these three components interact through the concept of han. Han is a phenomenon that occurs collectively within people of Korean ethnicity. Although han does not have an English equivalent, it can be "loosely translated" as "the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of

[3] The China Doll stereotype is also commonly referred to as the Lotus Blossom, Geisha Girl, and Shy Polynesian Beauty (Clark). However, I will primarily use the term "China Doll."

oppression" ("Home" 1). James K. Freda outlines the history of this oppression in the excerpt below:

> "[…] the long-standing civilization of pre-modern Korea, was seen as static and shamefully weak geopolitically […] Consciousness of this societal and international weakness was heightened in the context of the new standards for modernization enforced by the success of Japan, which aggressively colonized Korea from 1905. Following liberation in 1945, the Korean war was a further shock frustrating closure to the process of national identity formation, and the sundering of Korea in half necessitated a certain awareness of postcolonial imperialist power" (Freda).

Because the oppression Korea has faced is partially due to the Japanese invasion, many Koreans experience han in relation to the comfort woman issue. However, han is not simply an emotion that passes away quickly, but instead is a condition; the phenomenon can manifest itself from "bitter-sweet longing" to despair that "wracks your insides like fire" to even medical symptoms such as "dyspnea, heart palpitations, and dizziness" (Freda).

Han can also appear in a different form called postmemory han. The term "postmemory" was originally coined by Miriam Hirsch to describe how second generation Jewish children could "remember" their parents' experiences during the Holocaust (Hirsch). Inspired by this definition, Seo Young Chu identifies postmemory han as "the han that flows in the blood of Korean *Americans*" (S.Y. Chu 98). For example, a second generation Korean American woman would not be a comfort woman or lived in a time where that was a possibility, yet she could still "'remember' the pain […] caused by such experiences" (98). Her memory of an experience that is not hers is what distinguishes it as postmemory han instead of han. Because these two phenomena are closely

related to comfort women, han and postmemory han are integral concepts to understand the 1990s environment I have outlined.

To explore the Korean American identity through the 1990s, I will use two Korean American novels that explore han relation to comfort women, identity-focused Korean American literature, and China Dolls: Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1998) and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999). In Chapters One and Two, I offer close-readings of the two novels independent of each other. Through these close-readings, I discuss how han intersects comfort women narratives with the lives of each novels' Korean American women characters. Through these intersections, both authors create non-stereotypical images of both groups of women, ultimately refuting the China Doll image. The last chapter will discuss both novels in relation to each other and how this thesis pertains to defining the collective Korean American identity.

Chapter 1: An Analysis of Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*

Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* alternates narrators through two main characters: Akiko and her Korean American daughter Beccah. While Akiko narrates during the 1960s, around twenty years after her experiences as a comfort woman, Beccah narrates in the 1990s as a fledgling journalist. The two women tell their stories from a similar age, however, their chapters differ in their experiences, narrative tone, and connection to their respective time periods. Despite these differences, Keller weaves together the two women's narratives through their common experiences as women of Korean ethnicity. As she creates these intersections through han and postmemory han and themes of motherhood and religion, Keller creates distinctive, non-stereotypical images of Korean and Korean American women that contest the China Doll image.

Akiko's first chapter already hints at her experiencing han; her opening words are "the baby I could keep came when I was already dead" (Keller 15). She goes on to say "I was twelve when I was murdered, fourteen when I looked into the Yalu River, and finding no face looking back at me, knew that I was dead" (14).[4] These lines are powerfully depressing. Although she does not outright say she's feeling any emotion, the simplicity and frankness of her narrative voice are enough to convey her sorrow, anger, and bitterness towards her childhood. Since she reveals in this chapter that she's narrating around twenty years after her life as a comfort woman, her retrospection reveals her han. Akiko as a narrator has already experienced han, and her first few chapters show how she became this way.

[4] The Yalu River is the river between the borders of modern day North Korea and China; Akiko's time as a comfort woman occurs in a Japanese camp stationed north of the river.

Beyond the opening lines, Akiko's first narrative chapter establishes her han in relation to the female figure, creating the reoccurring theme of motherhood. Although she has three sisters, Akiko's strongest relationship among her family members is with her mother. She reminiscences about helping her mother wash clothes in the river, pretending that they "sent secret signals to one another, the rock singing out messages only [they] could understand" (Keller 17). As her mother lay dying, Akiko "stroke[d] her softly," which she continued even after her mother's death because she "wanted her to know that [Akiko] loved her" (18). After she establishes this close relationship with her mother, the motherhood theme continues to persist. When her older sister sells the twelve-year-old Akiko to the Japanese Army, Akiko reveals that she "liked caring for the [other comfort] women"; she was not sexually abused by the soldiers at this point presumably because of her young age (18).[5] Akiko assuming a motherly role foreshadows how this characteristic will pass onto to a younger generation and hints at Akiko becoming a mother herself. But before Akiko fully assumes a motherly role, she encounters a series of women who become replacement mother figures to her and transfer their han onto her. The first of these women is a comfort woman named Induk.[6]

Because there is sparse dialogue directly from Akiko's mother, we cannot determine if she experienced han. However, the passing of han from one woman to the other can be clearly seen

[5] Akiko's sister selling her into slavery mirrors Joseph in the Bible; as Akiko becomes tied to religious imagery later in the novel, this parallel could be the earliest point in which this characterization occurs ("Silenced" 152).

[6] Induk translates into "benevolence," foreshadowing the kind of relationship she and Akiko will have. Towards the end of the novel, Akiko reveals her real name is Soon Hyo, meaning "loneliness" ("Silenced" 152).

through Induk, the woman who was named Akiko before our narrator.[7] Akiko reveals her most vivid memory of the woman:

> "One night [Induk] talked loud and nonstop. In Korean and in Japanese, she denounced the soldiers, yelling at them to stop their invasion of her country and her body. Even as they mounted her, she shouted: I am Korean. I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do, I am a daughter, I am a sister" (Keller 20).

In this passage, Induk experiences han, evident through her strong sense of Korean nationalism and identity. While han does not explode, she clearly shows emotions han causes and that can explode: anger, bitterness, and hatred. More importantly, Induk illustrates how she experiences han; Induk has a understanding of the "linkage between the subjection of her body and of her nation" (Duncan 178). When the Japanese soldiers kill Induk, Akiko is forced into her spot and suffers through a "free-for-all" of frenzied men (Keller 21). "That is how [Akiko knew] Induk didn't go crazy. She was going sane. She was planning her escape" (21). Because of these events, Akiko has literally taken Induk's place – as the new Akiko, as a comfort woman, and by adopting the same han-induced realization of her horrifying situation.

Akiko's first chapter ends with her having an abortion, another signal that she is not ready to assume a mother role. During the scene, the Japanese doctor performing the operation "[pins her] to the earth with his stick and his [demeaning] words" (Keller 22).[8] This scene is significant

[7] In Keller's depiction of this camp, the Korean women were stripped of their real names and were given Japanese names. When one woman died, the next would take her Japanese name. Our narrator is the 41st Akiko, and Induk was the 40th Akiko.

[8] Mirroring Akiko's abortion, Induk was killed by being "skewered." This parallel experience further links the two women together (Keller 21).

because Induk has established that the female body represents the land of Korea. Akiko, who believes Induk is sane, purposely narrates how her own body is connected to the "earth." Through this narrative choice, Akiko continues to show that Induk's han transferred onto her. By that realization that women represent Korea, Akiko understands that this oppression is not singular to herself or the other comfort woman, but represents the raping of the entire nation. By definition, that is han – the emotions associated with years of oppression of Korea's land. From this point on, Akiko encounters more women who represent their nation and forge a relationship to Akiko that parallels Induk's. Through these other characters, Keller strengthens the connections between womanhood, the Korean nation, and han. More importantly, the more mother figures she encounters, the more Akiko becomes aware of these connections. The next few chapters show the interactions she has with the mother figures that strengthen her han.

In Akiko's next chapter, she reveals the aftermath of her abortion and the next mother figure of her narrative. While she does not explicitly say why, Akiko had "discarded" her body near a "nameless stream," perhaps to kill herself (Keller 36). However, she is "found" by Induk – "how [Akiko] knew she was Induk [she does not] know, for she looked like [Akiko's] mother, standing there next to the river with her arms outstretched" (36). This woman is not the same Induk introduced before because that woman is dead, but instead Akiko encounters a ghost that has combined features of her mother and the previous Akiko.[9] This Ghost Induk takes care of Akiko as she "stroke[s] [Akiko's] head," giving her a "freshly unearthed ginseng" that Akiko "could not stop […] from sucking at the root" (36). Akiko is being nurtured through explicit breast-feeding

[9] Although Keller does not give this Induk a new name, I will refer to her as Ghost Induk as to not confuse her with the previously introduced character.

imagery and food straight from the earth, further emphasizing motherhood and her connection to the earth. In relation to han, a ginseng root, bitter and visually phallic, represents the han that Ghost Induk experienced in relation to men.[10] Therefore, by eating ginseng, Akiko literally consumes the han given by Ghost Induk.

Akiko's han in relation to Korean womanhood is further explored as Ghost Induk explains that "[the root] is not myokkuk […] but the seaweed soup is mostly good for making milk anyway. [she doesn't] need that now" (Keller 36). Myokkuk is traditionally served on birthdays.[11] By apologizing that the root is not myokkuk, Ghost Induk suggests that Akiko has grown older. This scene also marks Akiko's "rebirth" in starting to transition out of childhood and entering Korean womanhood. In accepting Ghost Induk's gift, Akiko fully embraces the han of being a woman during this time.

Akiko then meets Manshin Ahjima, an "old lady of ten thousand spirits," who Ghost Induk explains guides the dead (Keller 38).[12] And Manshin Ahjima fulfills this description by guiding Akiko away from the Japanese camp to Christian missionaries in Pyongyang. However, Manshin Ahjima differs from Akiko's other motherly figures in that she brings with her Christianity and salvation from the Japanese soldiers; she tells Akiko she will help her "because that is the Christian way" (58). Because she is the woman who has saved Akiko, she is technically a savior, ironically,

[10] Ginseng is also thought to be "packed" with male energy. Akiko references this thought when saying she could not have a baby for over twenty years because she had too much "male energy" (Keller 37).

[11] Myokkuk, is the seaweed soup Ghost Induk refers to. Myok, or seaweed, is thought to be healthy for women in the same way ginseng is good for men.

[12] Manshin Ahjima can roughly translate into "middle-aged woman-shaman." Manshin refers to "shaman," however, "ahjima" is a more complicated. It implies that the woman is married or at an age to be married and already have children. Therefore, "ahjima" has more familial connotations, making "aunt" or another equivalent matronly title an appropriate translation.

instead of the Christian missionaries.[13] While this reading of Manshin Ahjima does not actively contribute to Akiko's han – as she has already adopted the han of Induk and Ghost Induk – it does reveal how mothers are established in the narrative: as religious figures that parallel the Christian God. In other words, Manshin Ahjima's contribution to Akiko is not han, but the passing on of becoming God-like. As Akiko becomes an actual mother herself, she also evolves into a female God figure.

Understanding Akiko as a female God figure is important as this relationship is how she will eventually transfer her han onto her daughter. However, that transfer of han cannot be seen through Akiko's narrative. Instead, her daughter Beccah reveals this side of Akiko through her own chapters. Beccah, who narrates the first chapter of the novel, does not think highly of her mother. While Akiko's narration makes her connection to Ghost Induk and Manshin Ahjima seem natural, Beccah reveals that her mother "turned off, checked out" when she came in contact with the dead (Keller 4). As she continues to narrate, Beccah does not portray Akiko as a good mother. Akiko often falls into trances where she contacts ghosts, making her unable to keep a stable job and provide a adequate home for Beccah.[14] Even when Akiko finds a permanent job as a noted shaman, Beccah relays her frustrations that her mother falls into trances. From these first few chapters, Akiko can be seen as otherworldly and very spiritual, connecting her to religion instead of motherhood from Beccah's perspective. As Beccah narrates more of her own chapters, Akiko

[13] She reveals later that not only was she ostracized by the other girls, but even the missionaries disliked her, one calling her "a false light luring away the faithful" (Keller 66).

[14] Although Beccah finds her mother's actions bizarre, Akiko is practicing traditional Korean shamanism rituals.

emerges even more concretely as a religious figure, explicitly as a female counterpart to the Christian God.

Because Akiko finds a steady clientele from being a shaman, she's able to move Beccah and herself from a "dirty second-floor apartment" with "boarded-up windows," to a modest house (Keller 5). Akiko is compelled to buy this particular house because of its garden, which has a specific description:

> "[…] yellow-flowered vines of wedelia swelled in waves to drown out a border of fly-specked hibiscus bushes, where the heads of overgrown red ti shook on thick stalks above the roof. Banana trees dropped their rotting fruit, which lay on top of the other, drying in layers. Pom-poms of white-and-blue 'uki 'uki lilies swayed on wiry necks above nut grass that grew as high as [Beccah's] knees" (123).

The wilderness and lushness of this garden parallels the Garden of Eden. The fact that Akiko is the new owner of this garden further builds her towards a God figure image; Akiko keeps this "unkempt" look to the garden after she purchased the house. Furthermore, the garden continues the theme of womanhood as tied to the earth; since Akiko parallels God through earthly imagery, she can specifically be seen as a God for women.

Although the religious imagery has strengthened through the garden, Akiko turning into a God figure is out of place from her previous characterization. Through Akiko's narrative, there have been motherly figures that influenced her, including the Christian figure of Manshin Ahjima. Why would Keller not characterize Akiko with a stronger mother image, especially as she has a child of her own? As I discussed earlier, Beccah does not perceive Akiko as a good mother. Because of this relationship, Beccah "distance[s] herself from the image of womanhood that her

mother conveys […]" (Schultermandl 84). As Beccah has a difficult time accepting Akiko as a mother, Akiko cannot imprint her han onto Beccah in the same way Induk or Ghost Induk did. Consequently, Akiko's interactions with Beccah do not appear as traditional mother-and-daughter, but because of the introduction of Christian imagery, working towards a female version of Father and Son; as Akiko forms a female God image, Beccah can be understood as a counterpart to the Son. Consequently, this relationship implies that Akiko will save her daughter in a similar way Manshin Ahjima led her to salvation. However, Beccah has yet to reveal what Akiko will lead her from. The answer to this question is answered as Beccah narrates her way to the end of the novel, coincidentally at the same time she realizes Akiko as a true mother.

In her first chapter, Beccah describes a reoccurring nightmare in which her father "rolled [her] into [a] sweater, binding [her] arms behind [her]," hinting that her father molested her as a child (Keller 2).[15] This abusive relationship with her father is further suggested when Beccah remembers a haunting poem she read to her high school class for Father's Day:

Father
who art dead in heaven
because Mother wished it so
hollow be thy name
Father
the black hole
eating my life

[15] Beccah's father, Rick Bradley, – a minister who meets Akiko after Manshin Ahjima leads her to the missionaries – dies when Beccah is five.

from the inside out

feasting on whatever I feed it –

a platter of grasping fingers

a snack of salty eyes

the delicacy of a tongue, still warm from calling your name

Father (131).[16]

Through the lines "eating my life/from the inside out/feasting on whatever I feed it," Beccah further suggests a sexual relationship with her father (131). These hints about her relationship with her father are the first in a series of turbulent relationships with men. Beccah's first boyfriend, Maximilian (Max) Lee, who while not abusive like her father, is clearly not good for her. "Each time [Max] pointed to something about [Beccah's body], it was as if it fell away from [her], foreign and unrecognizable […] by the end of the third week of Max's attention, [she] was in pieces, waiting for him to make [her] whole again (Keller 132). From this "male objectifying language," Beccah appears to be in pain with Max not only dissecting her body, but owning each individual body part (P. Chu 75). In present time, Beccah talks about her new boyfriend – her older married boss, Sanford. She is in a relationship with Sanford when she learns her mother "died in her sleep" (Keller 125). When Akiko dies during this present narrative, Sanford's only way to comfort Beccah is to "awkwardly pat [her] shoulder" and force her into "sleeping together" (141). As with Max, he's interested in her physical body instead of emotionally consoling her. Overall, through

[16] This poem also can be read as "blasphemous" in which Beccah is refuting the traditional, male Christian "Father" (both her religious, biological father and the Christian God), further supporting disregard for patriarchy and the theme of a female God figure. In an interview, Keller stated that she supports this reading. (Lee *Silenced* 155).

these romantic relationships, Beccah's chapters illustrate that she never had a healthy relationship with a man.

Beccah's relationship with men fits into a wider narrative of Asian and Asian American women: the China Doll stereotype. The China Doll stereotype enforces the idea that Asian and Asian American women are physically attractive, but also passive, empty-headed, and submissive. All three of her relationships show that men viewed her through this stereotype: someone to only use for physical pleasure. However, Beccah is not the only woman who was viewed in this way; Akiko and her fellow comfort women were sexualized by the Japanese soldiers, who did not appreciate the women as fellow human beings but as sex objects that could be abused. This stereotype has a special connection to Akiko as she reveals that in their initial meeting, her minister husband (and Beccah's father), "wanted [her] – a young girl – not for his God but for himself" as "his hands fluttered about his sides as if they wanted to fly up against [her] half-starved girl's body with its narrow hips and new breasts" (Keller 95). These women, from one generation to the next, are trapped in a cycle of being viewed and treated as a China Doll. Consequently, this China Doll image is why Keller has set up Akiko as a female God figure: Beccah and all the other women need to be saved from this cyclic image and "male objectification" (P. Chu 65). As the novel draws to an end, the loose ends of han, salvation, and motherhood tie together when Beccah goes through a personal awakening towards all three themes.

When her mother dies, Beccah finds a tape addressed to her.[17] The tape, recorded in Korean, contains Akiko's "last message, last gift to [Beccah]" (Keller 191). Through the tape, Beccah first learns about the Japanese involvement in Korean history and her mother's past as a

[17] As a shaman, Akiko would record her interactions with ghosts and spirits on tape for her clients to purchase.

comfort woman: a “chongshindae” as the Korean terminology is used for the first time in the novel (193). Her mother, showing her han, describes “women left to be picked over like fruit to be tasted, consumed […] [they] rotted under the body of orders from the Emperor of Japan” (193). While Beccah listens, she cries out “Mommy – Omoni – is this you?” because she “could not view [her] mother, whom [she] had always seen as weak and vulnerable, as one of the ‘comfort women’ […] for [she] cannot imagine [herself] surviving” (194). With this statement, Beccah shows she is experiencing postmemory han. Although she has no memory of being a comfort woman, she is overwhelmed by learning her mother was one, and that born in a different time, she could have been one too.

With this scene, Beccah’s character has evolved in several ways. For the first time in the novel, Beccah has experienced postmemory han. However, Beccah only experiences postmemory han when she realizes Akiko as a woman of Korean ethnicity and not the strange absent woman who struggled to raise her. Moreover, for the first time, Beccah calls Akiko “Omoni” – mother in Korean; Beccah use of Korean is an indicator of her actually experiencing the nationalistic phenomenon. Through this narration, Beccah shows that she is not only realizing Akiko as a Korean woman, but finally as her mother (Keller 194). Consequently, Akiko has also evolved as to fully become a mother, able to imprint her han onto Beccah. As Beccah narrates the rest of her experience, her newfound postmemory han reveals even more about the two women.

As Akiko finally becomes a mother to Beccah, she is able to affect her daughter in a profound way. However, Keller has established that Akiko is not just a mother. The rest of this scene allows her to fully transcend from motherhood to the ultimate mother image; she fully becomes a female counterpart to God. She becomes this image by bringing her daughter to

salvation: salvation from the China Doll image. As Akiko narrates in her tape, she commands Beccah to fulfill this duty:

> "*Beccah-chan, lead the parade of the dead. Lead the Ch'ulssang with the rope of your light. Clear the air with the ringing of your bell, bathe us with your song. When I can no longer perform the chesa for the spirits, we will look to you to feed us. I have tried to release you, but in the end I cannot do it and tie you to me, so that we will carry each other always. Your blood in mine*" (Keller 197).[18]

With this command, Akiko tells Beccah to lead her and all the dead women to the "light," or to justice. Beccah, becoming the female counterpart of the Christian Son, has partially fulfilled this command right before listening to this part of the tape. Before she hears her mother's command, Beccah suddenly remembers an interaction between her father and her mother, right before Rick died. In the flashback, her mother is in one of her spiritual spells, connecting with the dead, while her bewildered father begs her to stop while he recites Biblical scripture. When her mother screams that she will "strike [Rick] down, and God down too," Beccah remembers her father reacting very violently:

> "But my father was the one to strike *her* down, pushing her into the damp ground in an attempt to cover her mouth. 'Quiet! What if someone hears you speaking like this? The boys, the brothers? What if Beccah hears you? Think of how she would feel, knowing her mother was a prostitute" (Keller 196).[19]

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[18] Ch'ulssang and chesa – the carrying of the dead person's body and the ceremonial honoring of ancestors respectively – refer to funeral rites practiced in Korean shamanism.

[19] Beccah's family is staying at the Mission House for Boys in Florida, which is why Rick refers to "boys" and "brothers."

By bringing up this previously-forgotten memory, Beccah is able to tell the reader a part of Akiko's life that Akiko did not get to narrate herself: that her husband, fully aware of her traumatic time as a comfort woman, thought of her as not only a China Doll but a prostitute. Since Beccah is able to narrate Akiko's full story, she brings justice to the woman who did not survive to complete her narrative herself. In this sense, by completing Akiko's narrative, Beccah has already started to bring justice to a woman who represents an entire generation of silenced women.

After she listens to Akiko's command, Beccah also brings justice for herself, which then allows her to "lead the parade of the dead" (Keller 197). While she was listening to the tape, her boyfriend Sanford has been knocking on the door. Looking at Sanford through the door's peephole, "fitting him in the space between [her' fingers […] until he shrank," she tells Sanford, "I have to leave you [...] Goodbye, […] My mother is calling me" (198). As she notes her that her mother is calling her, Beccah further shows that her mother has imprinted han onto her, as these actions shows how much her mother's tape affected her. Beccah still experiences postmemory han in this scene as she imagines her mother calling her, much like how Akiko heard the words of Induk and Ghost Induk.[20] More importantly, by leaving Sanford through a han-driven experience, Beccah frees herself from the sexualized China Doll image, ending the novel's cycle of Korean and Korean American women being treated in the same way.

To briefly summarize, through the earth imagery, Keller shows how women are connected to the land of Korea. Because the raping of the comfort women is symbolic of the Japanese invasion of Korea, these women were able to experience han, a nationalistic phenomenon. As

[20] Keller does not make it clear if Beccah is having a supernatural connection to her mother or not.

shown by Akiko, the experience of han was strengthened and passed down through these same women. At the same time, by denying patriarchal dominance, Akiko was able to transcend into a God-like figure, bringing han and salvation to Beccah. Consequently, when Beccah herself experiences postmemory han, the novel ends with her breaking free from the China Doll image and the implication that she will continue to lead women to salvation. In the following chapter, I will discuss how Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* intersects comfort woman narratives and Korean American womanhood through a single narrator to similarly refute the China Doll stereotype.

Chapter 2: An Analysis of Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

Although the two novels share the topic of comfort women, Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* differs from Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* in several key plot points. Unlike the strong female voices in *Comfort Woman*, Lee – as a male writer – utilizes a male narrator. The novel is entirely told by Franklin "Doc" Hata, a Japanese World War II veteran who lives in America as he narrates in present time. As he reminisces about his past life with comfort women and his current life with an adopted daughter, he experiences han in relation to the novel's female characters. To clarify, the novel's main comfort woman, Kkutaeh and Hata's Korean American daughter, Sunny, never meet or even know about each other. However, Hata struggles to hide from his past until memories of the two women force strong han-influenced reactions. Hata's experiences with different symptoms of han allow him to ultimately liberate Sunny and Kkutaeh from their China Doll images.

From early on in the novel, Hata establishes himself as an ambiguous character. He is protective about his past, which in turn reflects how he narrates his present life. The first information he reveals about his past is comparing his current hometown of Bedley Run to "the small city where [he] lived [his] youth, on the southwestern coast of Japan (C. Lee 3). Since Bedley Run is described as having a "peaceful pace of life" and "simple tranquility," Hata alludes to having a happy childhood without ever stating detailed information (3). This vague depiction of his past is further shown through his conversation with Mrs. Hickey, the new owner of his previously owned medical supplies store. Having found Hata's old pictures, she tells him, "'I noticed there's a young woman in many of them […] She's very pretty […] Is she a relative?'"

Hata replies that she "must be talking about Sunny," and after being questioned, admits that he "suppose[s]" he named the store after her. This description is how Hata handles his past for the novel's beginning chapters: emotionally removed, vague, and as the reader can deduce later on, not completely true to his life's most significant events. As Sunny starts reappearing throughout his life, his narration becomes increasingly "unstable" (Chr. Lee 102).

When looking through photos, Hata reveals who Sunny is: his adopted daughter. This revelation is strange since Mrs. Hickey guessed earlier that Sunny is a "relative" – Hata does not deny or confirm this statement, nor does he say that Sunny is not just any relative, but his daughter. This answer seems vague and non-parental, which will be a reoccurring theme throughout the novel. Narrating in present time, the reoccurrence of Sunny, forces Hata to reveal their relationship to the reader that he had been silent about before. Equally important, Hata reveals a memory that shows what kind of emotional relationship he had with Sunny. When reminiscing about the first time Sunny entered his home, he remembers "she actually began to titter and cry" (C. Lee 26). While Sunny has a normal reaction any child would have in a foreign place, Hata's reaction to her distress is not entirely paternal:

> "[he] didn't know what to do for her, as she seemed not to want [him] to touch her, and for some moments [he] stood apart from her while she wept, this shivering little girl of seven […] [he] asked her not to worry or be afraid, that [he] would do [his] best to make a pleasant home [...] She kept crying but she looked at [him] […] and [he] could do little else but bend down and hold her until she stopped" (26-27).

Hata is awkward and clumsy in this scene; while he eventually shows parental instincts, he seems bewildered about what to do. This awkwardness with Sunny becomes the defining part of their relationship as he reveals to have treated her as an adult instead of a child.

After Hata describes this initial meeting, he gives more insight into his relationship with Sunny by describing a memory after they've lived together for some time. In this memory, Hata rejects Sunny's request to help him renovating her bathroom. Instead, he reminds Sunny to "do what [they] talked about last week. About addressing [him]"; she replies with "Yes, *Poppa*" (C. Lee 28). With this memory, Hata reveals a key aspect about his relationship with Sunny. While she would be too young to be truly helpful, Hata denies her bonding time that she apparently wants and would create a relationship for her to naturally call him "Poppa."

In this same memory, Hata describes Sunny's piano-playing as having "a style and presentation much beyond her years" and that "she also seemed to have a deep understanding of a given piece of music […] playing rich with an arresting, mature feeling" (C. Lee 29). He then skips ahead to when Sunny is a rebellious teenager and she has a strained relationship with her father. Their relationship is a direct reflection of Hata not raising Sunny as a little girl but instead as an adult who does not need companionship and bonding. Therefore, this memory is significant in two ways. One, it illustrates the previously stated point of Hata treating Sunny as an adult, which will be shown again later on in the narrative. Secondly, by Hata narrating past memories of Sunny, he is more emotionally open compared to the vague information he gave earlier. Additionally, instead of brief sentences, he has described these memories with moderate detail. However, as he is forced to remember even more of his past, this relationship he has just described with Sunny turns out to be missing several important points. As a result, although these memories have given

insight in his past with Sunny, he later shows that this memory is also vague and not completely representative of his and Sunny's past. When he describes his next memory, his treatment of Sunny and the representation of memory appear again to give even more insight into Hata's life.

In present time, Hata is hospitalized after he tries burning his old photos. At the hospital, his friend Renny Banerjee brings up Hata's old girlfriend, Mary Burns, which triggers Hata's next flashback. Although the first half of his memory is centered on his romantic relationship with Mary, the second half consists of him describing her attempt to bond with Sunny. After spending time with Sunny as a sort of mother figure, Mary Burns confronts Hata saying that he "treat[s] her like a grown woman which […] is understandable because [Sunny's] very mature for her age" (C. Lee 60). By revealing what Mary Burns had said to him, Hata shows what the reader could only infer from the previous memory: he struggles to be a good father figure and he does not treat Sunny as a child.

Furthermore, as he remembers Sunny getting ready to attend a formal party with Mary Burns, he describes her in almost a sexual way:

> "Sunny finally came out of the patio doors, dressed in a resplendent swath of white […] The dress came just up to her darkly suntanned shoulders, the delicate material clinging to her torso but not so tightly as to be indecent, the handsome drape conveying only the suggestion of the young woman beneath. But the young woman was certainly there, too, the near, adultness of her […]" (C. Lee 61).

Hata admires Sunny's body in a way that nearly becomes sexual, but still maintains some fatherly persona. Nevertheless, this viewing of Sunny is not a coincidence considering that he has been

criticized for treating Sunny as an adult. Consequently, from this memory, the previous one with the piano can now be seen as a misrepresentation; his relationship with Sunny is a lot more complicated than he initially let on. The next memory leads into the reason why Hata narrates in this shifty manner in the first place.

Hata's next memory triggers when talking to a candy striper at the hospital he's staying at. In this memory, he reveals a point that illuminates his past memory more; even though he previously showed that Mary Burns bonded with Sunny, "there had been indications that Mary's ever-increasing presence was disturbing to Sunny, as she had seemed to be practicing [the piano] more fervently in the preceding weeks" (C. Lee 71). This memory forces him to remember parts of his own past. Right after describing Sunny's behavior, he confesses that he "too, had been a difficult child":

> "For me [comforts of real personhood] was readily leaving the narrow existence of my family and our ghetto [in Japan] […] Most all of us were ethnic Koreans, though we spoke and lived as Japanese […] I was fortunate to score exceptionally high on several achievement tests […] and enrolled in a special school in the nearby large city […] I lived with a well-to-do childless couple […] this prominent family Kurohata […]" (72).[21]

Even though he had earlier suggested he was Japanese, Hata is ethnically Korean, who had a difficult childhood living in poverty. As he continues to narrate, he reveals Sunny is also Korean.[22]

[21] Hata notes that he shortened Kurohata to just Hata. He later glosses that Kurohata means "black flag," suggesting that he shortened his name to cut away his dark past (C. Lee 72).

[22] Pusan (or more commonly spelled as Busan) is a city in South Korea.

This aspect of Hata is significant because his odd narrating can now be explainable. To summarize my previous points, Hata hides from his past, however, the present continues to trigger his memories, forcing him to narrate more information. Since he is Korean, Hata could be narrating in this manner because he is trying to hide from his han. As he confronts more memories – flattering or not – these memories can be seen as Hata slowly accepting his han by becoming more emotional and confessing about the injustices he had suffered. The connection between his narration and han can be further supported as Hata visits a friend's sickly son. This visit triggers his memory of being a medical assistant when he enlisted in the Japanese Army during World War II; during this era, many Koreans experienced han in relation to the war. However, the connection between Hata and han cannot be fully made at this point, as there is not enough evidence about his past and connection to Korea to assume he experiences han. Nevertheless, as he narrates his next memory of Sunny, his relationship with her becomes the key to determining the role of han in the novel.

Hata's next memory is triggered by Officer Como, a police officer who visits him in the hospital. Hata then delves into his longest memory so far, spanning two chapters, and melds together his life in America and his time as a soldier. He remembers Sunny getting into a verbal and partially physical confrontation with Officer Como. Officer Como reveals she heard "colorful things" about Sunny from Jimmy Gizzi – a local drug dealer - about "how generous [she is] to all the guys [at his house parties]. What a good sport [she] is" (C. Lee 90). After having his own confrontation with Sunny about her actions, she leaves his home, after which he does not see her for "nearly three weeks" (97). This interaction not only shows that his relationship with Sunny

was worse than he previously alluded to, but it further exemplifies how he treats her like an independent adult instead of his child.

When Hata finally decides to look for Sunny, he goes to Gizzi's house where a party is taking place. He then remembers spying at her through a window, observing the following scene:

> "[Sunny] was dancing, slowly, by herself. Her jeans and her sweater were splayed on the floor in front of her. [Hata] looked to the side and saw her audience, two men sitting on the floor at the foot of a bed. They were calling and toasting her with bottles of beer […] A hand-sized mirror lay between them on the carpet, sprays of bright white powder salting the glass" (C. Lee 114).

While he comments in horror that he always saw Sunny's body as "any good father would," his peeping tom position at the window and fixation on her sexual movements place him more in line with the two men in the room. For the remainder of the memory, he continues to describe her dancing, which ends with one of the men "[burying] his face in the dip of her legs" (116).[23] Hata ends the memory by describing his feelings at this act: "It was then that [he] wished she were just another girl or woman to [him], no longer [his] kin or [his] daughter […]" (116). This scene is the culmination of what his memories have been hiding so far: he sexualizes Sunny as a woman, even as his daughter. While previous memories showed that he treated Sunny as mature, this memory solidifies his viewing of her in a sexualized manner.

Hata's viewing of Sunny in this way becomes important when considering the other half of Hata's memories – memories of himself. As Hata was narrating the scene at Gizzi's house, he

[23] Hata later postulates that this man, Lincoln, is the father of Sunny's child, although this point is never clarified.

interjects with a memory of his past as a soldier. As he thinks back to his previous encounters with Japanese prostitutes, he remembers catching a girl trying to commit suicide, “naked” with a “faint smudge of blood staining the inside of her legs” (C. Lee 111). As she pleads for him to let her go, he replies in Korean that she “must stay in the house” (111). This interaction is significant as it shows that both people in the scene are Korean. Unlike the Japanese prostitutes, he meets a woman of the same blood as him. This woman even calls him “O-ppah,”a term that “a girl would address her older brother or older male,” showing that the two figures are bound together by their Korean background (111). As Hata thinks about this scene when he tries to find Sunny, a connection between the two women is made. Hata parallels the two women by putting these two memories side by side. He sees Sunny in a sexualized way, but he also sees her as a sort of a comfort woman in that she was taken advantage of by men. Consequently, this scene marks a shift in Hata’s narrative style and becomes the novel’s first concrete evidence that Hata experiences han.

As his memories become increasingly more descriptive, Hata has become more emotional and open to the reader, although the details of his past are still relatively ambiguous. However, towards the middle portion of the novel, Hata’s narration becomes a “constellation of overlaps, repetitions, and memories” that give more insight into his life (Chr. Lee 103). Through this narrative style, Hata can now be shown to be experiencing han, as his emotional transformation is reflective of han’s characteristics: passiveness and a gradual display of “pent-up historical and personal anguish" (S.Y. Chu 97). As a result, most flashbacks and memory scenes throughout the novel – both earlier points of the novel and from this point on – can be understood as influenced by Hata’s han and his continuing acceptance of it.

As he describes more of his past, Hata shows signs of experiencing specific symptoms of han in relation to different characters. When seeing Sunny in a literal sex position, he shows uncharacteristically strong emotions by revealing he "wished she were just another girl or woman to [him], no longer [his] kin or [his] daughter […]" (C. Lee 116). Sunny was not and will not be in a position in which the Japanese Imperial Army will enslave her. Yet, Hata sees her as paralleling a comfort woman – servicing men and being defined through sexual means. Because he views her in this way, his angry reaction can be understood as fueled by han. In another example, after his memory of Gizzi's house, in present time, he goes to the mall where Sunny works. However, before he can actually meet her, Hata has a panic attack; his chest begins to "ache" and he coughs "as though it's for the sake of [his] very life" (207). One physical symptom han can cause is "dyspnea" or trouble breathing (S.Y. Lee 98). Seeing how Hata makes frequent reference to being in good physical condition, this passage acts as supporting evidence that he experiences the harsher aspects of han. On the other hand, as Hata remembers parts of his past not involving Sunny, he shows different symptoms of han.

In one memory a little before his panic attack, Hata remembers talking with Sunny before she decides to run away. When she asks about his past as a soldier, having found his mementos, he "[snaps] at her, annoyed by the picture of her going through [his] things" (C. Lee 147). At that point in his life, his soldier past appears to be a sensitive topic and one he is unwilling to talk about. As he is forced to remember his past as it collides with his present, he shows even more signs of han. While his memories are often triggered by thinking about or eventually meeting Sunny, these war-related memories show Hata experiencing han directly connected to his own past before

moving to America and adopting Sunny. The first of these displays occurs when he talks about Kkutaeh, the novel's central comfort woman figure.[24]

Hata's first several memories about Kkutaeh reveal no particular relationship between the two. Throughout these first memories, he narrates about her having a defiant personality, her sister being killed by another soldier, and how Captain Ono, Hata's superior, wants to save Kkutaeh for himself. However, after he meets with Sunny in present time, his memories of Kkutaeh show more signs of emotion. Before diving into one of his more emotional memories, he clarifies that he calls Kkutaeh, "simply K," which is how he refers to her for the remainder of the novel. (C. Lee 222). As Hata himself glossed in a previous scene, Kkutaeh can translate into "the bottom" or "the end."[25] Hata not wanting to call Kkutaeh by her demeaning name is his first display of han in connection to her, as it illustrates extreme sorrow and "bitter-sweet longing" (S.Y. Lee 98). In the actual memory, Hata "insists on relating to Kkutaeh as a Korean male" (Sato 28).[26] Because Hata has shown that he speaks and understands Korean, she tells him, "You are a Korean" (234). When he denies that fact, she states "I think you are" (234). This exchange is significant as she affirms his Korean identity, the defining aspect of being able to experience han. More importantly, he remembers this scene with "the language of romance" and the same bitter-sweet longing as before (Rhee 95). For example he describes her voice as "pleasing" during their conversation as well as

[24] Kkutaeh has no relation to the other comfort woman Hata previous mentioned that tried to commit suicide. That earlier woman is not mentioned again in the novel.

[25] Kkutaeh is not a particularly common name in Korean tradition. However, Kkutaeh reveals she is a fourth daughter; since Korean families historically have preferred male babies, daughters were occasionally named in demeaning fashions.

[26] Hata acts as a medical assistant during this time, thus has many one-on-one interactions with the comfort women.

describing "the lingering air of [her] musky perfume" (235-36). Therefore, at this point of the novel, Hata has shown a wide spectrum of the han phenomenon. From softer responses to the intense reactions he experienced with Sunny, Hata embodies almost all aspects of han. With Hata so closely associated with han, this character aspect becomes crucial when his memories become more violent and directly interacts with the China Doll stereotype.

Under the psychological pressure of han, Hata is eventually forced to remember three memories that drastically change how his character, Sunny, and Kkutaeh are depicted. The first of these memories occurs after he's spent a significant time with Kkutaeh, having decided that he's fallen in love with her.[27] In this memory, emotions are tense as Captain Ono decides he will sleep with Kkutaeh for the first time. When Kkutaeh becomes shocked at the news, Hata takes advantage of the situation:

> "[Kkutaeh] was sleeping, or pretending to sleep, or somehow forcing herself to, and she did not work or speak or make anything but the shallowest of breaths even as [Hata] was casting [himself] upon her. [He] kissed as much of her body as was bared […] Then it was all quite swift and natural, as chaste as it could ever be" (C. Lee 260).

With this scene, Hata has revealed a major secret about himself. Although Hata has been kind to Kkutaeh up to this point, he takes advantage of her. Besides his sexualizing of Sunny, this moment is the first instance in which Hata appears as a villain, showing that his experiences of han have

[27] At this point of the novel, Hata has still not switched back to his present life, but has narrated about his soldier past since changing Kkutaeh to K.

brought him to fully confess all aspects of his past – criminal and unflattering. This confession continues onto his next memory involving Kkutaeh.

Hata's memory goes on to the moment in which Captain Ono decides to have Kkutaeh. Hata, plans to kill him with a scalpel, however, Kkutaeh kills Ono herself. Although she begs Hata to shoot her, he frames Ono's death as a suicide instead.[28] Consequently, the other soldiers, not ever having access to Kkutaeh before, hungrily attack her. Hata describes the aftermath in this passage:

> "Twenty-five of them, thirty of them […] Some were half-dressed, shirtless, trouserless, half-hopping to pull on boots. They were flecked with blood, and muddy dirt, some more than others. One with his hands and forearms as if dipped in crimson. Another's face smudged with it, the color strange in his hair. They could have been returning from a volleyball match thoroughly enervated, sobered by a near glory" (C. Lee 305).

Although Hata does not describe what precisely happened to Kkutaeh, the soldiers appear to have committed a sort of gang rape. Because Hata could have prevented this pain by shooting her earlier, Hata shows strong signs of guilt. After finding her body, he performed his "medic's work" on her "tiny, elfin form […] miraculously whole" (305). Hata's guilt from her death can be understood as the major contributor of his han and a traumatic memory he tried to hide. Connecting to his present life, this memory fully illustrates why he had adopted Sunny and treated her like an adult during her childhood. Hata did not adopt Sunny because he wanted to be a parent. Instead,

[28] Kkutaeh wanted Hata to frame Ono's death as her fault so that Hata killing her would be justified in the eyes of the other soldiers.

feeling so strongly over Kkutaeh's death, Hata adopted Sunny in an attempt to keep her replacement safe and as a result, he viewed her as a second Kkutaeh. As his final memory shows, Hata fails in that aspect as well.

After Hata narrates Kkutaeh's death, he also attempts to mend his relationship with Sunny in present time. He tells Sunny in one conversation that there is "one thing" about their shared history that he's "been wishing […] never happened" (C. Lee 337). Alluded to before in previous parts of the novel, Hata refers to Sunny's abortion – the subject of his final memory. He narrates that when she was eighteen, she came to him, pregnant and "scared" (339). Even though she is "past an acceptable point" for an abortion, Hata pushes for his unethically-sound doctor to operate on her (342). Hata then volunteers to "stand in" as the assistant nurse, witnessing and assisting a dangerous act being committed on his daughter. Although Hata attempts to fix Sunny's situation, he has performed an act that could have had caused physical harm to Sunny in addition to the emotional scar she holds for going through with the operation. In this sense, he fails to protect Sunny, just as he failed to protect Kkutaeh. As a result, Hata's han related to Sunny can also be fully understood. Even if Hata believed that Sunny's abortion was saving her in the way he could not save Kkutaeh, witnessing his daughter lying on the operating table – the same positions he saw comfort women he treated in addition to Kkutaeh's bloody corpse – would have cemented her parallel to the women in his mind. Consequently, with this final memory, Hata has solidified Kkutaeh's and Sunny's images as victims. Prior to this scene, both women were "muted" and trapped in sexualized images enforced not only by Hata but all the men surrounding them; Kkutaeh's life at the camp was defined by her sex, while Sunny's companions at the Gizzi house

were only interested in her body (Hamilton). In other words, both women were viewed as China Dolls: physically attractive and submitting to male desires. But by revealing the extent to which both women suffered through his forms of han, Hata shows that they are not simply China Dolls, but victims of abuse. Parallel to these images, Hata himself has undergone a character transformation that enforces this reading.

With all his memories finally revealed, Hata's experiences of han are now explainable; he has seen and experienced so many horrific events overlapping in his life that would cause these reactions. While he had stifled his han at the beginning of the novel, his present and past collided so that he was more emotionally open than ever presented before. However, these last three memories are especially dark and shocking. In revealing these final memories, Hata has transformed into a more tragic version of his earlier presented self. Not only has he caused pain towards the women, but he shows how the pain psychologically affected him as well. In this sense, Hata appears as both villainous and sympathetic. On one hand, he has committed morally unsound and unsympathetic acts, including raping Kkutaeh, assisting in the abortion on Sunny, and sexualizing both women throughout the novel. On the other hand, as he shows through his han, he tried very hard to protect Kkutaeh and Sunny. Not only does he fail to save the women, but he experiences severe trauma himself. Ultimately, through these complexities, Hata emerges as the only character that can liberate Sunny and Kkutaeh from their male-enforced sexualized images. Being the sole character with so many perspectives, Hata is the only one who would have the knowledge to complete this novel in the liberating manner it ends in.

Although Hata is an ambiguous character for most of the novel, his perspective and changing narrative styles are what makes *A Gesture Life* especially distinctive. Understanding Hata's psychological state through han is crucial in reading the appearances of Sunny and Kkutaeh. Only through understanding his perspective can the novel refute the stereotypical sexualized image of Asian women. Through crafting the novel in this manner, Chang-rae Lee offers the same liberation present in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*. In the next part of this essay, I will analyze the two novels in conversation with each other and the significance of comparing these two novels in relation to the collective Korean American identity.

Conclusion

Despite being critically acclaimed, both *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* are not free from negative criticism. Sarah Soh points out that both novels have several factual mistakes, ranging from misunderstandings of the Korean language to incorrect portrayals of history. In one instance, she criticizes Keller for using an anachronistic Japanese term for comfort women – "*Jungun Ianfu*" (Soh 53). More harshly, Soh claims "some of Keller's descriptions […] are so unbelievably lacking in any understanding of the history and cultural context of the period that they can only belong to the realm of fantasy […]" (53). As for *A Gesture Life*, Soh states that "[Lee's novel] unquestioningly endorses the South Korean nationalist discourse of the comfort women as abused *chongsindae*," suggesting that Lee's depiction is more slanted than factual (55).[29] While Soh's analyses of the two novels are factually correct, her arguments falter in that she purely looks at *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* in a Korean context, as opposed to a Korean American perspective.

On the other side of the spectrum, Kandice Chuh notes that *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* have been accused of being "Asian Americanist objectification of 'comfort women'" (Chuh 8). However, she goes onto explain that placing comfort women in Asian American contexts, not only critiques the "intersecting modernities of Japan, Korean and the United States," but moves towards justice as well (10). What Soh's criticism and Chuh's note illustrate are that these novels should not be considered as true accounts of history or accurate portrayals of Korea. Instead of searching for facts in the novels, *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* should be considered in

[29] Soh's book, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, explores comfort women beyond their image as victims to Japan. Her stance on "nationalistic" portrayals of comfort women is where she finds *A Gesture Life* lacking.

purely Korean American terms. Seen only through a Korean American lens, both novels then intersect to comment on the Korean American identity.

At first glance, *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* can easily be separated through the genders of each author. In *Comfort Woman,* Keller enforces a strong line of female voices, typical of best-selling Asian American novels during this time. Like Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* or Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,* Keller uses a mother-daughter relationship to develop her plot. The emphasis on the female gender, strengthened by Keller's own female identity, makes the novel seemingly about the female Korean American identity. On the other hand, Lee shows how the same feminine themes present in *Comfort Woman* permeate and affect the male Korean American identity. Even though he identifies as Japanese, Hata's lack of healthy relationships "heightens the trope of isolation in white-dominant society" characteristic of Asian American narratives ("Ethnicity"). Hata can be understood as a male Korean American figure as his narrative is not only typically Asian American, but his Korean past intersects with his American life. Similarly, Lee as a male Korean American author, also embodies a male Korean American perspective in presenting these themes to an American audience. However, the relationship between *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* is more complicated than the gender differences that divide them.

To contextualize the Korean American identity as a whole, han must be understood as the key factor. Han – and by extension, postmemory han – have no absolute connection to gender; any person of Korean ethnicity can experience han, regardless of gender. Because of this fact, the gendered differences between Lee's narrative and Keller's become less important. Although they come from two different perspectives, both Keller and Lee write about collective experiences of han. The collectiveness of han in turn allows both writers to comment on the broader Korean

American identity. *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* end when the comfort women and the Korean American women are released from the China Doll stereotype. The release from the China Doll image is performed through han in both instances: Beccah experiencing postmemory han through her mother's tape and Hata's memories forcing him to confront his han. The collectiveness of han shows that these releases are not exclusive to each narrator's gender or personal identity, but are representative of the Korean American community as a whole.

By understanding the novels through the collective Korean American identity, a didactic message begins to emerge, in which each part of the endings – comfort women, Korean American womanhood, and the China Doll stereotype – can be placed in a broader context. The fact that all three parts are linked by the female gender does not make these novels empowering only to women. In the framework of collectiveness, these parts can translate more broadly into Korean history, Korean American experience, and racial stereotypes. In this broader sense, the journey Beccah and Hata go through can also translate into a collective didactic meaning. The Korean American identity is always linked to Korea and America, however, there needs to be a balance of these influences. Korean Americans should not forget their cultural and historical link to Korea, in addition to not letting these links and their identity become corrupted by Western stereotypes. In delivering this message through depictions of han, Keller and Lee have created an effective way to affect Korean American readers. The tragedies and narratives present in *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* have especial potential to invoke experiences of han across Korean American readers, making this didactic message much more impactful.

Analyzing the intersections of comfort women, Korean American literature, and the China Doll stereotype through means of han has been my personal attempt at understanding the Korean American identity. As a Korean American myself, I believe writing this essay illustrates the

effectiveness of Keller's and Lee's didactic message, where their messages were able to affect and motivate a younger member of the community. Keller and Lee lead current and future generations to explore the same components present in their novels that constitute the Korean American identity. By leading these generations through han, the two writers attempt to unite the Korean American community in a manner that is needed for Korean American scholarship to expand. While the Korean American experience continues to evolve over time, the message left by *Comfort Woman* and *A Gesture Life* should ultimately be understood as an important base for discussing questions about identity.

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