

Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity: America, Korea, and Biracial Koreans

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Introduction

Since the American military occupation of the southern part of the Korean peninsula (1945-1948), and particularly since the Korean War (1950-1953), the figure of the “yanggongju” (“western princess”/ “yankee whore”) may be seen as central to a Korean national identity that is ambivalent about its relation to the U.S. The yanggongju, as the woman who sexually services American GIs stationed in Korea, is a reminder of Korea’s subordinated status to the U.S. military, and both pro-U.S. and anti-U.S. nationalist battles are waged on the yanggongju body. The yanggongju is a racialized figure for both the foreigners that partake of her services and for the local citizens for whom she bears the stigmas of foreign “contamination.” The biracial children of such unions between Korean women and American servicemen are also highly stigmatized.

The readings and film presented here can be used in Sociology, Political Science, Women’s/Gender Studies, or other courses that address race and ethnicity, gender and work, transnational feminism, international relations, social movements, and migration/immigration.

For additional related units, see “[Not Color Blind: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in East Asia.](#)”

Selected Readings and Film

For suggestions on how to use these in the classroom, see “Student Readings, Activities, and Discussion Questions” below.

Kim, Hyun Sook. “Yanggongju as an Allegory of the Nation: Images of Working-Class Women in Popular and Radical Texts.” Pp. 185-202 in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, edited by Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi. New York: Routledge, 1998.

This essay analyzes the way in which images of the yanggongju have been manipulated in service of an anti-U.S. nationalism. The yanggongju is often presented in popular literature and film as a victim of U.S. imperialism. Her victimization serves as a metaphor for a nation “raped” by the U.S.

Moon, Katharine. *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Also available as an e-book through some university libraries.

Moon looks at the ways in which the sexual labor of Korean women has been used by both the U.S. and R.O.K. governments for geopolitical purposes. Chapter 3, “U.S.-R.O.K. Security and Civil-Military Relations: The Camptown Clean-Up Campaign” is especially interesting to examine in relation to race and national identity. Moon discusses the racial tensions among black and white servicemen and the local residents and how these tensions precipitated the “clean-up campaign” in which Korean officials tried to improve the image of the camptowns. One of the major reforms involved re-socializing the women sex workers into an identity as “personal ambassadors” who were fulfilling their patriotic duty to nation by sexually servicing soldiers.

The Women Outside: Korean Women and the U.S. Military. (documentary film). Directed by J.T. TAKAGI and Hye Jung PARK. 1995. 60 minutes. VHS. Available for rental (\$75-\$85) and purchase (\$225) from Third World Newsreel

(<http://www.twn.org/catalog/pages/cpage.aspx?rec=970&card=price>) and Asian Educational Media Services (http://www.aems.illinois.edu/searchresults_detail.html?biblioId=2358) An accompanying study guide for the film is available from both Third World Newsreel and AEMS.

This film shows the history of military prostitution in Korea since the Korean war, and interviews three Korean women who are current or former military sex workers, one of whom struggles with raising her biracial child as a single mother. Another is followed by the filmmakers as she tries to negotiate the tensions of intercultural marriage.

Student Readings, Activities and Discussion Questions

The readings and film listed above could be used in anywhere from one to four class sessions.

The Prologue and Chapter One of Moon’s *Sex Among Allies* (pages 1-47) provides a good introduction to the history and current political situation of camptown prostitution in Korea. The Takagi and Park documentary is an excellent companion to this. These pieces can be used together preferably over two class sessions, but they can also be discussed in one longer class session.

Ask students to come to class with a written response to the Moon introduction in which they write about how reading the piece changed any of their preconceived notions of 1) U.S.-Korea relations, 2) prostitution, and 3) gender roles in Korea. Then show the film and ask students to discuss the film in relation to the book. A major theme in both the film and the book is that Korean military sex workers are invisible yet powerful force in U.S.-Korea relations.

Some possible discussion questions around the theme of the role of military sex workers in U.S.-Korea relations:

- What are the perspectives on military prostitution by each of the parties involved?
- What is being denied by each of the parties?
- What are some ways in which sex work is hidden?
- How do the visual portrayals of the camptown and the personal accounts of the three women in the film change your understanding of Moon?
- What role did prostitution play in the history of Korean migration to the U.S.?

Chapter Three of Moon (pp. 57-83) could be used to deepen the discussion of U.S. military prostitution, or it would work well alone for a class on U.S.-Korea relations, or on the role of women's emotional/sexual labor in geopolitics.

If instructors would like to spend another class session on this unit, the Kim essay gives a critical analysis of how the military sex worker has become a symbol of national identity in Korea, and offers a nice counterpoint to the Moon chapters. Rather than framing military prostitution as something that is hidden and unacknowledged, Kim shows how it is an organizing motif in Korean national identity. Kim's piece could also stand alone in a discussion of transnational feminism or national identity.