

When a Personal Narration Represents the Zainichi Korean Narrative: Lee Hoesung's *The Cloth-Fulling Woman*

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Abstract This article considers the meaning of the Zainichi Korean narrative, focusing on *The Cloth-Fulling Woman*, written by Lee Hoesung. Lee won the Akutagawa prize for this novella, causing a sensation in Japanese society and abroad. The heroine, Chang Suri, is represented by the synthesis of three axes: her mother, her husband, and her son. The mother's narration of Suri recalls her active image against the background of colonial Chosun in the 1920s. The image of Suri in relation with her husband, however, shows the typical process of Koreans being driven away from their homeland to wander and suffer, reflecting the phases of the colonial period. Meanwhile, to her son, Suri as a mother remains in the realm of childhood, with constant flashbacks to that period. The narrator controls these three narrative viewpoints through the lens of postwar Japan. That is, the synthesized image of Chang Suri represents the very historicity of the lives of Zainichi Koreans. Ultimately, Chang Suri's narrative does not remain personal, but becomes representative of the common Zainichi Korean experience.

Key words Zainichi Korean narrative; Lee Hoesung; *The Cloth-Fulling Woman*; the Akutagawa prize; representation of Korean characteristics

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Introduction

Zainichi Koreans can be defined as people who have lived in Japan since the Japanese colonial era, including those who went to Japan after liberation in 1945. Zainichi Koreans began acquiring Japanese recognition in the field of literature from the late 1960s. Lee Hoesung was at the forefront in actualizing this recognition.

A second-generation Zainichi Korean, Lee debuted in the Japanese literary world in 1968. *To the Road Again*, his first novella, discusses the problems of a Zainichi Korean family. The novella was followed by several short stories and novellas. In 1971, Lee won the 66th Akutagawa prize for his novella *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* (*Kinuta o utsu onna*). Since 1935, the Akutagawa prize has honored Japanese literary works; Lee became the first foreigner to win the prize, not to mention the first Zainichi Korean. This achievement created a sensation. In the Japanese literary world, other Zainichi Korean litterateurs such as Kim Seokbum, Kim Shijong, Kim Changsaeng, Ko Samyung, Chung Kyimun, Chung Sungbak, and Yang Seogil took a strong interest in this event. In Korea, a translation of the prize-winning novella was published in 1972, becoming the first translation of a Zainichi Korean's work in the country. In 1977, *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* was translated into English and included in an anthology, drawing international attention.

Lee's early works primarily depict the longing and agony of youth and the pursuit of identity, issues germane to the second generation of Zainichi Koreans. That is, if the works of the previous generation were mainly about nationality or

ethnicity, the next generation focused on the existential problems of living in Japan.¹

Despite its similarities to Lee's earlier works, *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* conveys a slightly different mood, and contemporary critics noted the idiosyncrasies of Korean characteristics present in the prize-winning novella. In certain ways, these comments may be characteristic of Zainichi Korean literature of the period. Traditional Korean customs are represented in descriptions of Korean clothes, food, and entertainment, and through phonetic transcriptions of the Korean language. Furthermore, there is a Korean element to the image of mother and the style of narration. This inclusion of typical Korean items and narration styles were in fact Lee's intention. In his analysis of Lee Hoesung's retrospective writings, Lee Youngho determines that the award-winning author purposely utilized Korean images to win the Akutagawa prize.²

Numerous studies have extended the point of research on contemporary comments. Mizutani Akio focuses on the image of the mother and determines that Lee's work reflected features of his mother from his childhood.³ Yamazaki Masazumi views Chang Suri as a symbol of daughters and of Korean women, representing the homeland.⁴ Park Yuha discusses the image of the mother in terms of gender.⁵ In Korea, Song Hachun reviews Lee's complete literary activity and emphasizes the concepts of ethnicity and the image of the Koreans.⁶ Other studies have analyzed the image of mother or the symbolism of Korean materials of the work.

1 Takeda Seiji and Isogai Jiro also discuss the changing issues through the generations, unlike the first generation who longed for their homeland under the conflicting composition such as literature and politics or ethnicity and assimilation. See Takeda Seiji, *The grounds of Zainichi* (Tokyo:Kokubunsha, 1983); Isogai Jiro, *Transformation and succession of <Zainichi> literature* (Tokyo:Shinkansha, 2015).

2 Lee Youngho, "A Study on Formation of Literary Genre of Korean Residents in Japan in the 1970s: Focused on Receiving Akutagawa Prize of Lee Hoesung in 1971," *Hallim Japanese Studies* 27 (2015) 12.

3 Mizutani Akio, "Chang Suri expressed in *The Cloth-fulfilling Woman* written by Lee Hoesung," *Japanese Literature (Kokubungaku): Interpretation and Research of the text* 25 (Gakutosha, 1980).

4 Yamazaki Masazumi, *Literary theory of Zainichi in the postwar period: the range of criticism of Asiatic argument* (Yoyosha, 2003).

5 Park Yuha, *National identity and gender: Soseki, literature, modern* (Tokyo:Kurein, 2007).

6 Song Hachun, "Wound and national awareness that history left: discussion on Lee Hoesung(1, 2)," *Research of Korean Studies* 10, 11 (1988, 1999).

It is clear that the Korean characteristics or peculiarities depicted in Lee's work have been highlighted in both Japanese and Korean literary criticism. However, the perspective from each country diverges. To a certain extent, the Japanese perspective could be said to come primarily from an exotic interest. On the other hand, the Korean commentary stems from national ethnicity. Importantly, the implication of being Zainichi Korean is not limited to either Korea or Japan, but rather emerges historically in the relation between the two countries. Although Zainichi Koreans may live in Japan physically, the meaning of their lives does not converge within Japan, necessitating a perspective of their condition that embraces two sides. Kim Gaeja, for example, discusses a view of Zainichi Koreans with an expansive spatial notion encompassing Japan and the Korean peninsula, rather than being wedged between Korea and Japan.¹

Meanwhile, outside of Asia, other approaches to views of Zainichi Koreans have emerged. Melisa Wender takes a socio-political approach in investigating the works of Zainichi Koreans such as Lee Hoesung.² Elise Foxworth emphasizes the importance of Zainichi Koreans' "little narrative" (208) by exploring identity through private Korean home life and revealing an identity not wholly constrained by the grand narrative of Japan. That is, both Wender and Foxworth conclude that the identity of Zainichi Koreans should be investigated in the light of Japanese society and ideology, despite their involvement or lack thereof in that society.

Based on above comments, the present article returns to the starting point of when Lee Hoesung won the Akutagawa prize. That moment has relevance in that *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* has been praised for constituting the very formation of the literary genre of Zainichi Korean writing. Needless to say, the relevance of the novella is not only due to its winning of the prize. The book's representativeness is not determined merely from outside appraisals but rather from its structure and contents, as the following analysis reveals.

2. The Structure of *The Cloth-Fulling Woman*

The Cloth-Fulling Woman was published in *Quarterly Arts*(18) in June, 1971. The story is about the life of Chang Suri and her family. The first-person narrator is Suri's third son of five. The narrator looks back on the past and returns to the present, repeating a pattern of reminiscing, unfolding the memories of his mother

1 Kim Gaeja, "Spatial Expressions represented in Kim Shijong's poems and the ground of 'Residing in Japan(Zainichi)'," *Dongak language and literature* (67) 2016: 5.

2 Melisa L. Wender, *Lamentation as History: Narratives by Koreans in Japan, 1965-2000* (California:Stanford University Press, 2005).

in an iterative process. Peppered throughout this retrospective narration are the narrator's father and grandmother's individual narrations recalling Suri in turns. That is, Suri is remembered by her mother, her husband, and her son, with the three vectors controlled by the narrator. However, information is presented as if the grandmother or father has spoken personally. Suri's entire image seems to be shaped through a synthesis of the narrations of three characters. It is therefore important to investigate the concrete nature of these three axes.

The novella covers three temporal and spatial points. One is Japanese-ruled colonial Chosun (present-day Korea) of the late 1920s. Another is Karafuto (present-day Sakhalin) of the 1930s and 1940s. Karafuto was the northernmost occupied territory of imperial Japan. This second period contains Suri's short visit home in 1939. The third point is Japan of the 1970s, when the narration starts. In sum, the story ranges from the 1920s until the 1970s with Chosun, Karafuto, and Japan as the backdrops.

The spatial movements presented in the story are based on Suri's real experience. Chang Suri is the real name of Lee Hoesung's mother, making *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* a kind of autobiographical work. Lee was born in Maoka, Karafuto in 1935. After Japan's defeat, the Soviet Union occupied Sakhalin in 1947, and Lee's family, disguised as Japanese, returned to Hokkaido, Japan. Receiving orders for compulsory repatriation to Korea, Lee's family was forcibly detained in the Hario camp located in Kyushu. Fortunately, a compromise with headquarters of GHQ was made. Lee's family wound up settling in Sapporo, Hokkaido, and Lee Hoesung began life as a *Zainichi* Korean.

However, the story of *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* does not stay within Lee's personal experience. Each setting of time and place presented in the story represents contemporary characteristics. Regardless of the author's intention, it is quite clear that time and space serve to embody the historicity of *Zainichi* Koreans. In this sense, the temporal and spatial aspects of the novella come to the foreground. Therefore, it could be said that the element controlling the entire story is not merely the narrative framework, but also the work's temporal and spatial settings.

In the colonial period, especially since the 1920s, the food and labor exploitation worsened. Driven away from their homeland, Koreans were forced to migrate toward Japan or its outposts in search of work. In the 1930s, on the threshold of full-scale war, compulsory conscription became stricter, and control of residents through organizations like the Consonance Association (協和會) expanded. The character of "Father" described *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* reflects these historical phases, as shown in the following text.

Mother wanted so much for Father, who seemed always to have been a wanderer, to settle down somewhere. Even though there seemed to be no way to avoid floating and drifting backwards, she had hoped to find some indication in Father's life that he cared too about holding on somewhere.

"I wonder where we'll go from here? When we had enough of Shimonoseki, we went from Honshu to Hokkaido, and then to Karafuto. Your life is also drifting along aimlessly. Why did you let them make you an official of the Consonance Association? You're too unsuspecting and so you are taken advantage of. But just because you were appointed to be an official, you don't have to go around flag-waving." (1977:129-130)¹

As seen in the above quote, the narrator recalls how his mother, Suri, wanted her husband to avoid drifting aimlessly. Suri left the Korean Peninsula for Shimonoseki, a gateway to Japan in those days, and married a coal miner. Together they moved to Honshu, in the middle of the Japanese islands. They then further moved to Hokkaido, the northern extremity of the Japan archipelago, and set temporarily in Karafuto, the northern-most outpost of imperial Japan. These continuous spatial movements show how Suri's husband lives under the control of Japanese imperialism. Suri's dying testament to her husband is, "Don't let yourself drift" (135).

Consequently, spatial movements combined with time engraved in each movement create an important motif. Adrift in her real life, Suri wishes for settlement. This desire is applicable to the people of colonial Chosun living under similar conditions. In this sense, Chang Suri is personal, but the narrated Suri, in accordance with historical time and space, has concrete representativeness. The following section explores the symbolism of Suri through *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* three-pronged narrative framework.

3. Meanings in the Representation of Chang Suri

The beginning of *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* traces back to the end of 1944 when Suri dies at the age of thirty-three during the birth of her sixth child. The narrator recalls the moment, and looks back on his childhood with his mother. The episodes the narrator relates are somewhat humorous, with a folksy tone. However, the narrator is severely scolded by his mother for any moral wrongdoings. The narrator

¹ Quotations from the text generally follow Beverly Nelson's translation (1977). In cases where correction is needed, the transcription has been altered and updated.

paints an affectionate, yet at-times stern and resolute image of his mother. Chang is also recalled as a devoted maternal figure, mending her family's worn clothes before she dies.

The narrator's memories of his mother do not follow chronological order. The story often pauses, turns backward, and remembers events fragmentarily and unexpectedly. In one example, Suri returns home for a while in 1939, accompanied by the narrator. It has been over ten years since she has been in Japan. She is wearing Japanese clothes and carrying a parasol. She is, in a sense, an unrestrained woman. The narrator describes how while crossing a bridge, he sees women in white Korean *hanbok* beating their laundry along the river's edge. He remembers the scene and recalls the sound of his mother cloth fulling in Karafuto as she piled starched clothes on a smooth stone and beat them with a wooden paddle, in image that arouses a distinctly Korean sensibility. The image of Suri depicted by the narrator is either that of a mother or a form of Korean symbol in terms of sensuous meaning.

Another episode depicts Suri's mother remembering her daughter. The narrator's grandmother relates to him a *sinse taryeong*, a traditional Korean storytelling method in which the story-tellers recites adverse events from life in a rhythm of lament. The narrator recalls:

As she became absorbed in her memories, she would begin mourning with her whole body, swaying her body and slapping her knees rhythmically, recounting stories about her daughter, crying and mourning over her dear daughter's whole life. (109-110)

The grandmother's method of recalling her daughter has an air of sorrow for a daughter who has wandered away from her homeland and died young. However, the grandmother's narration never reveals her innermost thoughts. The Korean *taryeong* is a basic rhythm and the contents the grandmother relates are mainly about Suri's maiden days in the 1920s, so the daughter is recalled as a young lady full of confidence. In fact, stories narrated through *taryeong* are traditionally satirical or humorous, so the rhythm is not buried in sorrow. The grandmother narrates while beating out a rhythm and swaying her body in time. Consequently, the mood depicted in the grandmother's recollections of her daughter is not entirely sentimental, as claimed by contemporary Japanese literary critics. To be certain, the grandmother conveys sorrow for her daughter's short life and her narrative is a mournful requiem. However, her method of remembering her daughter also carries

rather a brave tone. Hearing his grandmother's tale, the narrator comes to know how strong-willed his mother was in her maiden days.

It is also important to note how the grandmother's lamentation often centers on Japan. The narrator's father's work as an official for the Consonance Association for Japanese imperialism has created a rift between him and the narrator's grandparents. Lamenting her daughter's death, the grandmother says,

Is it fate? This happened, I suppose, because our country is in ruins. *Aigo*. She was promised to the spirit world. What made her come to this country of thieves? These people not only plundered our homeland, but they stole my daughter, too. It would have been better to become a fire-field farmer than to come to Japan. *Aigo*. My fate! My Suri! (111-112)

Aigo is a Korean exclamation of lament. As seen above, the grandmother accepts Suri's death as her fate. At the same time, however, she does not forget to criticize bitterly the plunder of Japanese imperialism. Referring to the Japanese as "thieves" reveals directly the grandmother's feelings of resentment.

At the suggestion of their daughter, the narrator's grandparents move to Karafuto in the late 1930s. Suri returns home to visit her parents for a little while in 1939. Only at this is it revealed that the narrator's grandmother is in fact Suri's stepmother, and that family conflict motivates Suri's move to Japan.

Suri takes her parents with her to Karafuto, where they are set up in a house described by the narrator as a "cave." They wear traditional Korean clothes, and make kimchi and fermented soybean paste, foods with a peculiar Korean aroma. From a modern viewpoint, the grandparent's lifestyle may seem typically Korean. However, from the perspective of the narrator as a child, there may have been something mysterious or eccentric to it, as this was not a lifestyle familiar to him in his daily life. The nature of Korean-ness undoubtedly changes over generations. In this sense, contemporary scholarship that simply points out Korean characteristics and sensibilities in *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* is limited in its superficial view of Zainichi Koreans.

In addition to the depictions by the grandmother and the narrator, another important facet of Suri's image is shown through her husband's remembrance of his wife. In the narrator's memory, the mother and father have occasional fights. However, Suri is in fact the unilateral victim of the father's violence. Shortly before Suri's death, her husband beats her. She packs her belongings and it seems she is about to leave her family at last. However, as she crouches listening to her sons'

crying, she abandons the idea of leaving. This scene shows Chang's resolute will to remain for her family rather than float away. In other words, she does not drift away, contrary to her husband having wandered around the Japanese archipelago. This will of Suri's sends her son a message about the meaning of the settled, sedentary life of a Zainichi Korean.

The violence of the narrator's father upon the mother is problematic. The father, of course, is Korean, but he is working as a member of an association of imperial Japan. The narrator's father also shows reluctance towards the lifestyle of Suri's parents. Japanese colonial policies barred Koreans from freely wearing traditional clothes. Working as a member of Japanese association, the father is in conflict with the narrator's grandparents, who do things like wearing Korean clothes and eating traditional foods. In the end, this conflict erupts in violence targeted at the father's wife. Suri is exposed to a double form of concatenated violence: the ordeals of colonial Chosun and patriarchy. It is no exaggeration to say that the father's violence intensifies through Japanese colonialism. The compulsory draft imposed on him and his life-long wandering have much to do with the colonial policy of Japan. That is, the character of father relates to Japanese colonialism. The route he takes is one along which Korean draftees moved during the colonial period. Consequently, the father's narration of Suri shows the life of a colonial Korean driven away from the homeland to an outpost in Japan. It is the very life of the first generation of Zainichi Koreans domiciled in Japan.

As mentioned above, Chang Suri is represented by the synthesis of three axes: the narrator, his grandmother, and his father. The grandmother's narration of her daughter recalls Suri's active image against the background of colonial Chosun in the 1920s. The image of the narrator's mother in relation to his father, however, shows the Koreans' typical process of being driven away from their homeland to wander and suffer, which reflects the phases of the colonial period. Moreover, to the narrator, the mother remains in the realm of childhood, flashed back to at any time. The narrator's story controls these three narrations overall in the position of postwar Japan. Through the medium of the narrator, the narrations by the grandmother and father recall Suri starting from her younger days. In sum, the synthetic image of Chang Suri represents the very historicity of Zainichi Koreans' lives.

4. Successive *Zainichi* Korean Narratives

The narrator mediates and connects the three stories of Suri. The narration that controls all three viewpoints from the perspective of the present differs from the concrete individual recollections the narrator has of his mother. The narrator

controls each narrative, including his own, and responds to his grandmother's *sinse taryeong*:

I almost think that Grandmother, without ever saying so explicitly, was trying to teach me as she repeated her crazed lament, her *sinse taryeong*. I think she was trying to train me as her successor to carry on the tradition, to relate my mother's story. It was as if Grandmother, who knew she would die soon herself, was commanding me to transmit this story of my mother, as she had literally to sing my mother's praises.

Actually, I had already begun to praise my mother openly. However, my *sinse taryeong*, of course, wasn't rhythmic and full of elegance like my grandmother's. Mine was just very commonplace talking. (119-120)

Through the *sinse taryeong* method of narration, the grandmother passes down her remembrances of Suri to the narrator in a traditional Korean style. The narrator receives it and writes it down. The narration, in other words, is in the writing. This style differs from the grandmother's style of narration, which is accompanied by oral rhythmical melody and physical beats. As he points, the narrator's style of story-telling is commonplace in comparison with that of his grandmother. However, it is necessary to notice that his narration connects with that of his grandmother and successively transmits his mother's story. In this sense, the narrator is the successor to his grandmother.

This succession of narrating sheds light on Lee Hoesung's reasons for writing this novella. Before Lee wrote *The Cloth-Fulling Woman*, four of his works had been nominated for the Akutagawa prize. However, in each instance Lee was excluded from the shortlist. Therefore, Lee utilized the image of Korea purposely to appeal to Japanese readers. The strategy succeeded, and at last he won the Akutagawa prize. It has been said that the moment a literary work leaves the author's hand, the work walks on its own. Regardless of the author's intention, interpretations of the work are another matter, in the realm of readers.

Modern scholarship on *The Cloth-Fulling Woman* has emphasized the image of the Korean mother or the typical Korean elements depicted in the story. Despite their adherence to a standard pattern, these analyses serve to address the general atmosphere of Lee's text. However, they fail to notice the concerns and function of the narrator.

In sum, the narrator mediates and connects three concrete narrations — his own, his grandmother's, and his father's-- to represent the life of a woman during

the Japanese occupation. His narration goes back and forth in time, and varies in place. Accordingly, memories surrounding his mother are at times mixed and presented fragmentarily. What is important, however, is that his narration continues, generating a new meaning. In this narration, the images of mother unknown to the narrator are bridged through the previous generation's remembrances. When the narrator reminisces about his mother, he writes down his thoughts. In this way, the narration does not progress in an orderly manner. He hears his grandmother and father's narrations and continues narrating in his own way. Thus, the narration presents a symbol of successive Zainichi Koreans' narratives.

5. Conclusion

In his award acceptance speech for the Akutagawa prize, Lee Hoesung mentioned Kim Saryang. Kim burst upon the Japanese literary world during the colonial period, and although his critically acclaimed work *Into the Light* (1939) was nominated to the Akutagawa prize, it did not win. Lee expressed regret for this, and appreciated the meaning of the award, declaring himself a long-time stand-in for Kim Saryang. It is noteworthy that Lee does not forget the literary activities of Koreans during the colonial period.

Zainichi Korean literature did not begin after 1945, but rather was rooted in the colonial period. Korean and Japanese literature blended on the Korean peninsula in the 1920s. Entering the 1930s, starting with Chang Hyukju and Kim Saryang, an increasing number of writers moved forward to Japan, forming the early history of Zainichi Korean literature. It is probable that Lee recognizes his literary activity as an extension and succession of this history. Moreover, Lee's winning of the Akutagawa prize marked a new era in the history of Zainichi Korean literature.

Lee's awareness of this new era can be inferred from the narrative style in *The Cloth-Fulling Woman*. In postwar Japan, the narrator recalls the memories of a mother who lived during the colonial period. Chang Suri's image is represented through the three axes of her mother, husband, and her son. The narrator mediates and connects the three stories, criss-crossing Japan and Korea from the 1920s until the 1970s. Compared with grandmother's narration of her daughter, the narrator's stories of his mother differ in their style and content. Nevertheless, the meaning of a consistent narration from a present-day viewpoint bears noting. It is clear that the narration of Chang Suri goes beyond the personal to become representative of the Zainichi Korean narrative.

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