The Sublime Object of Adoption

On Transnational Adoption in Chang-rae Lee’s A Gesture Life

Kim-Su Rasmussen, Chonnam National University South Korea

This paper presents a reading of Chang-rae Lee’s novel A Gesture Life, which emphasizes the theme of transnational adoption from Korea as a displaced continuation of the comfort women issue. The essay seeks to draw attention to some of the ideological structures surrounding adoption. In the novel, the unreliable narrator Hata’s unresolved relation to Kkutaeh — a Korean comfort woman — is displaced and repeated in his unresolved relation to his adopted daughter, Sunny. The paper suggests that we understand the relation between Kkutaeh and Sunny in terms of Žižek’s notion of ideology. The adopted daughter (Sunny), in this perspective, is a sublime object of ideology that conceals the traumatic kernel of the symbolic order (Kkutaeh). Through an interpretation of the novel A Gesture Life, the essay seeks to draw attention to some of the specific ideologies surrounding transnational adoption from Korea.

Keywords: Chang-rae Lee, transnational adoption, ideology, migration, Slavoj Žižek.

I. Introduction

Korean American author Chang-rae Lee won the Asian American Literary Award in 2000 for the novel A Gesture Life (1999). It has since become an important reference in the relatively new but expanding field of Asian American studies, which is part of the broader political movement for a multicultural reform of academia in the U.S. It grew out of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, leading to the foundation of the Association for Asian American Studies in 1979, and informing the establishment of journals, conferences, and university departments. It is an interdisciplinary field, drawing on multiple
traditional disciplines such as history, literature, film, art, sociology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and others. One of the modern classics of Asian American studies is Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976). It tells a story of immigration to the U.S., which involves navigating multiple semiotic codes simultaneously, including mainstream American and traditional Chinese codes. It blends multiple narrative genres from both Western and Chinese traditions, which results in a text that walks a fine line between fiction and nonfiction. The book provides an important insight into the complexities of migration, including convoluted processes of cultural translation, hybrid identities, and traumatic experiences, which the book articulates in terms of intersections between race, gender, and class. Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* is rightfully a modern classic, and it fully deserves to be discussed on its own terms. However, here, I merely wish to emphasize that Kingston’s book, along with others, has served as a successful template for subsequent Asian American writers including Chang-rae Lee.

The Asian American “genre” includes, as a minimum, such features as autobiography (or prominent autobiographical elements), the ambiguities of immigration, and the intersections of gender, race, and class as signifiers of silencing, exclusion, and discrimination. Lee’s first novel *Native Speaker* from 1994 recognizably follows the template pioneered by Kingston while adding substantial new elements. The protagonist is an Asian American private investigator who gathers information on political candidates. However, rather than the hard-boiled characters from Raymond Chandler and the universe of film noir, Lee’s private eye is an invisible immigrant from Asia who remains emotionally insulated from the comings and the goings of the world around him. While Lee’s first novel adds some refreshing new elements to the already established “genre” of Asian American literature, his second novel, *A Gesture Life*, is a strikingly bold departure from the established template. It stands out as a rich, mature, and original novel. Subsequently, Chang-rae Lee has published three novels, including *Aloft* (2004), *The Surrendered* (2010), and *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), which further elaborate on the themes in the first two novels. Undoubtedly, Chang-rae Lee has established himself as a major figure in contemporary Asian American literature.
Previous interpretations of *A Gesture Life* have mostly focused on questions related to immigration and assimilation in the U.S. The critical reception of the novel thus reflects a number of important debates and issues in the field of Asian American studies. Does Hata fail in assimilating into mainstream U.S. society because of ideological residues (Y. Lee 2005)? Does he attempt to assimilate into the U.S. through abjection of the Asian American female (Carroll 2005)? Does he represent an ambiguous subjectivity that undermines the hegemonic visual paradigm of contemporary racial politics in the U.S. (Cheng 2005)? Does adoption involve a process of psychological transference as a necessary step toward social recognition of the adoptee in the U.S. (Jerng 2006)? Does Hata represent a diasporic subjectivity in a broad generic sense (Y. Lee 2009)? These and similar questions, of course, are pertinent to the novel and unlock a broad range of issues that have firmly established the novel as a modern classic of Asian American literature (see also H. Lee 2003; Chang 2005; Laverty 2005; Jeong 2007; Wang 2010).

By contrast, this paper considers *A Gesture Life* to be an important novel, not only because it adds to the already considerable literature on Asian immigration to the U.S., but because it breaks the mold of the mainstream Asian American novel and emphasizes in a provocative and original manner the issue of transnational adoption and its intersections with the issue of comfort women. The novel addresses the phenomenon of transnational adoption from Korea as an under-studied issue, which raises a broad range of questions concerning history, morality, and ideology. To be more specific, the paper presents an interpretation that emphasizes the dynamic between the three main characters: the narrator Hata, his adopted daughter Sunny, and the young comfort woman Kkutaeh.

Franklin Hata, the ambiguous protagonist and unreliable narrator of *A Gesture Life*, inhabits a seamless and materially comfortable world in U.S. suburbia. As the novel progresses, however, we learn that Hata is haunted by events dating back to World War II. Hata, who hides his Korean ethnicity in order to benefit from Japanese citizenship, collaborated with the Japanese in exploiting Korean women through enforced military prostitution. This issue is represented in the novel by the relation between Hata and Kkutaeh. The character Hata, undoubtedly, represents more than an individual person and his acts; his character problematizes the
hegemonic nationalist narrative in South Korea that casts the Japanese as perpetrator and the Koreans as victim. The acts of Korean collaborators, according to this narrative, can be explained by reference to individual dispositions, but they do not reflect the true Korean spirit of resistance against the Japanese occupation. In contrast to such a nationalist narrative, the novel portrays Hata as an allegory of widespread—but denied and repressed—Korean collaboration with the Japanese during the colonial period (1910–1945). Here, it is worth remembering that Park Chung-hee, the former dictator of South Korea, was trained as an officer in the Japanese army. This set of historical and political issues forms the first crux of Chang-rae Lee’s novel.

The second crux is that Hata, instead of working through and settling the traumatic issue of collaboration with the Japanese regime, repeats the structure of collaboration; only this time he collaborates with the U.S., and the collaboration takes the specific form of transnational adoption. This is specifically represented in the novel in terms of the strained relation between Hata and Sunny. The novel hereby suggests that transnational adoption from Korea grows out of an unresolved trauma in Korean history, and that it is a displaced repetition of some of the moral and political ambiguities surrounding the comfort women issue. While other texts such as Heinz Insu Fenkl’s Memories of My Ghost Brother (Fenkl 1997) have linked transnational adoption from Korea to the phenomenon of militarized prostitution in so-called camp towns, Lee’s novel is unique in linking adoption with the issue of the comfort women during the Japanese occupation. Furthermore, we ought to add the older phenomenon of sending women as tribute to the overlords in China. Thus, Korea has a long history of providing women or children as human payment to a superior foreign power in exchange for military protection and economic benefits. One of the unsettling implications is that Chang-rae Lee’s novel, in fact, suggests a structural equivalence between the Japanese soldiers satisfying their sexual desire by means of militarized prostitution and Western adoptive parents satisfying their parental desire for children by means of transnational adoption. Chang-rae Lee’s novel A Gesture Life articulates a sharp critique of the ideologies that surround and serve to justify transnational adoption in both Korea and the U.S. (and the other Western countries involved).
The two cruces are linked in specific ways, which call for an interpretative framework that emphasizes the complex operations of ideology. Among numerous theoretical options, Žižek provides a compelling theoretical framework detailing the specific operations of contemporary ideology. “The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel” (Žižek 1989, 45). This particular notion of ideology helps to interpret and to connect the two cruces of the narrative. However, I do not endorse other parts of Žižek’s work, nor do I consider ideology to be a universal phenomenon. Ideology poses a limited set of problems, which constitutes the proper domain for a special hermeneutics. Ideology and the corresponding theories assume that people are under the influence of illusions; the study of these illusions belongs to a “special hermeneutics”; by contrast, in most situations average adults are acting as autonomous individuals, the study of which falls under a “general hermeneutics.” Ideology and the study of ideology belong to a special hermeneutics, which is part of a broader general hermeneutics. Employing the interpretive techniques of special hermeneutics outside its appropriate field constitutes an epistemological failure of critical self-reflection as well as moral violation of the autonomy of rational individuals. However, in the case of transnational adoption, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that we are dealing with a highly ideological field of study, which calls for the interpretive techniques of ideology critique and other forms of special hermeneutics. In other words, the novel depicts the social reality of transnational adoption as a point of escape from a deeply traumatic kernel in modern Korean history involving fratricide, civil war, and multiple layers of collaboration. It is this complex link between transnational adoption and militarized prostitution that this paper seeks to grasp in the expression “the sublime object of adoption.”

II. The always-already-read
According to Fredric Jameson, one cannot encounter texts in their raw or unmediated form. A text is a symbolic structure that is “always-already-read” through layers of previous interpretations (Jameson 1981, 9). These claims, of course, are directed against the anti-theoretical or empiricist
assumption that we can read texts without any presuppositions. More importantly, however, they prepare the claim that narrative – rather than a mere literary genre or aesthetic form – constitutes a basic epistemological category. Jameson, like the young Lukács, conceives of narrative as a basic structuring principle in our understanding of historical reality comparable, in certain respects, to a priori categories or structures of pre-understanding. Historical reality, in other words, is always-already framed by narratives, and the idea of a pre-narrative access to historical reality is an illusion. While these claims have far-reaching implications that exceed the current context, they have immediate consequences for an interpretation of Lee’s novel *A Gesture Life*. Rather than attempting to read the narrative directly, so to speak, we are invited to read it through – and to a certain extent against – its previous interpretations.

According to Young-Oak Lee, the novel is a variation of the traditional immigrant narrative (Y. Lee 2005, 146–159). Franklin Hata, the male protagonist, desires more than anything to assimilate into mainstream U.S. society. He lives a quiet life in a sleepy suburb, runs a medical supply store, and owns a large house – a prime piece of real estate – that symbolizes his cultural adjustment and social achievements. However, the protagonist is engaged in an ongoing struggle with traditional ideologies of gender, race, and nation that not only frustrate his desire to assimilate but also alienate him from his closest friends and family. Ultimately, the protagonist fails to overcome deeply ingrained prejudices, and, at the end of the novel, we find Hata reconsidering the trajectory of his life. The protagonist, Lee concludes, has been a puppet of ideology his entire life.

In many ways, Lee summarizes the main plot of the novel and discusses the moral dilemmas of the protagonist in an exemplary manner. While ideology plays a vital role in her interpretation, she never defines the notion of ideology. Instead, she employs it loosely to describe moral value systems (gender, race), justifications of a political order (colonialism), and forms of symbolic identification (nation). When Young-Oak Lee describes Hata’s failed assimilation in terms of replacing one set of ideologies with another, itself a rather fascinating observation, the conceptual vagueness deflates what might otherwise have been a formidable critical intervention. In a later article, which
might be read as a partly self-critical revision of her earlier position, Young-Oak Lee suggests that we displace *A Gesture Life* from an immigration-centered perspective and focus instead on the protagonist as a diasporic subject (Y. Lee 2009, 65–81). Hata’s diasporic subjectivity, according to Lee, “derives from his fundamental sense of insecurity as an adoptee” (p. 69). Hata’s assimilation, from such a perspective, is an invention of a particular performance of diasporic subjectivity rather than an inauthentic escape from selfhood. While the description of Hata as a diasporic subject runs the risk of ironing out important historical and political differences, Lee’s recuperation of the novel from the reductive paradigm of immigration and assimilation is most welcome.

If Young-Oak Lee’s interpretations displace the focus from immigration to diaspora, Hamilton Carroll insists on immigration as the central issue of the novel (Carroll 2005, 592–616). He identifies a conflict in the novel between narratives of assimilation and narratives of trauma that disrupts the smooth surface. The narratives of trauma – the first relating to Kkutaeh and the second relating to Sunny – reveal how the protagonist is a perpetrator of gender violence. Carroll links the two forms of narrative – assimilation and trauma – through the notion of abjection: the male protagonist, marginalized by mainstream society, seeks to secure his successful assimilation and new identity by abjecting a female character. His attempt to assimilate into Japan was predicated on the abjection of Kkutaeh, while the assimilation into the U.S. was conditioned by the abjection of Sunny. The protagonist, however, fails to constitute his subjectivity through abjection of the non-subject, and the traumatic narrative is precisely the symptom of this failure:

Arguably, the most important contribution *A Gesture Life* makes to the literatures of assimilation in the contemporary United States is that the abjected (non)subject formed at the site of citizenship construction returns in the form of a traumatic subject that dismantles the very national narratives its prior constitution served to inaugurate. K and Sunny bear silent witness to the violence of Hata’s failed inauguration into citizenship, both Japanese and American. (p. 612)

Carroll not only nuances the mainstream perception of trauma, he also suggests the notions of assimilation and citizenship are haunted by a traumatic kernel.
Carroll’s interpretation of *A Gesture Life* is provocative, strongly argued, and able to account convincingly for many details in the novel. It is rather peculiar, however, that Carroll – in strong and unequivocal moral terms – condemns the fictional protagonist of the novel. The reading of the novel, we might surmise, partakes in a fierce debate in Asian American studies between Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, and others over issues of race, gender, and authenticity (Chin et al. 1983; Lowe 1996, 60–83; Wong 1999, 29–53; Eng 2001, 19–28; Sohn, Lai, & Goellnicht 2010, 1–18). One of the targets of Carroll’s argument becomes evident when we understand that Franklin Hata, in his reading, is a secret code for Frank Chin. The intensity of his moral condemnation of Franklin Hata, as should be clear, is due to a process of transference between Franklin and Frank that remains implicit throughout the text. Thus, Carroll’s interpretation of *A Gesture Life* is an intervention in the ongoing debates over assimilation and authenticity in contemporary Asian America. His notion of constitutive gender abjection, however, is unable to account for the dynamics of transnational adoption.

While Carroll takes side against Frank Chin’s cultural nationalism, Anne Anlin Cheng seeks to unhinge the basic terms of the debate by deconstructing the binary oppositions between essence and performance – and a host of corollary binaries such as authenticity and inauthenticity, allegiance and betrayal, and so on – in discussions of Asian American cultural politics (Cheng 2005, 553–574). Her point of departure is Roger Caillois’s suggestion that mimicry in the animal kingdom is not merely a stratagem within a Darwinian struggle for survival; rather, mimicry – at least in some cases – becomes a self-constitutive act in which the animal, so to speak, inserts itself into the surroundings and thereby realizes one of its potentialities. Hata, according to Cheng, is precisely such a “Cailloisian subject” that problematizes unequivocal valorizations of racial visibility or invisibility. The distinctions between color-awareness and color-blindness, on such a view, are replaced by an ongoing tug-of-war between visual mastery and loss of mastery. Cheng’s previous work on racial melancholia questioned the opposition between hybridity and essentialism (Cheng 2005, 26–27; Eng 2001, 93–165). In a similar vein, Cheng attempts to incorporate the Lacanian notion of the anamorphic gaze in a theoretical analysis of
racial ideology. While Lacan in the essay on the mirror stage linked the
gaze to the subject, in Seminar XI he suggests instead that the gaze is an
object. The gaze, in this sense, is a special object – an anamorphic object –
that suspends our visual mastery. One of Lacan’s examples is
Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*, where the blob at the bottom of
the painting is an example of such a gaze as an anamorphic object

Cheng’s interpretation of *A Gesture Life* is, undoubtedly, the most
ambitious and theoretically sophisticated to date. The novel is an
immigrant novel that challenges the visual paradigm underpinning the
ongoing debates between color-blindness and color-awareness. Such a
deconstructive displacement, according to Cheng, entails a number of
related dichotomies such as authenticity and inauthenticity, essence and
performance. This theoretical claim, however, remains largely
unsubstantiated, and her argument would have been more convincing
had she confronted more directly the various proponents of essence
and performance. Nevertheless, Cheng’s reading is more sensitive to
ambiguities and less obvious details than alternative interpretations of
the novel. Her reading of Hata’s participation in the Japanese
campaign, for example, emphasizes his ambiguous status as
simultaneously a victim and a victimizer, as a voluntary and an
involuntary participant in the war. Ultimately, however, her
interpretation of the novel remains blind to the traumatic kernel of the
story. “As a Korean orphan in Japan, Hata’s ethnic origin marks the
harrowing history of Korean colonization by Japan – a history that
Hata labors to forget. His national identification with Japan serves to
erase his ethnic identification” (Cheng 2005, 559). Cheng, in an
attempt to master Hata’s narrative, misreads his background as an
“orphan.” Her interpretative framework, precisely when confronted
with this spot – we might be tempted to call it an anamorphic spot –
in the narrative, loses its status as a master narrative and becomes
instead another attempt to symbolize that which resists symbolization.
While Cheng theorizes “the objet a around which racial ideology
circles” (p. 569), I shall suggest that the novel is not merely about the
visual paradigm of racial ideology, but stages the convoluted ideology
of transnational adoption in the margins of an Asian American tale of
immigration and assimilation.
While previous interpretations of Chang-rae Lee’s novel have failed to address the issue of transnational adoption, Mark Jerng places it squarely at the center of his reading (Jerng 2006, 41–67). Drawing on Charles Taylor’s essay “The politics of recognition,” Jerng suggests that the political issues pertaining to transnational and transracial adoption are matters of recognizing a particular “minority” and its set of demands within the general framework of liberal multiculturalism (Taylor 1994, –73). Adoptee anthologies and autobiographies, according to Jerng, articulate the adoptees’ desire to become subjects rather than objects of discourse. Jerng maintains that *A Gesture Life*, in contrast to adoptee autobiographies, presents a more complicated picture of the relationship between adopter and adoptee. Adoption, according to Jerng, is a relationship that involves transference and, therefore, multiple forms of misrecognition, including what he describes as the “illegibility of past relations” (Jerng 2006, 55). It is commendable that Jerng emphasizes the issue of transracial adoption in the reading of *A Gesture Life*; however, he fails to recognize the difference between Sunny’s and Hata’s adoption, thereby conflating adoption as a general cultural trope with transnational adoption as a specific historical phenomenon.

### III. Transnational adoption from Korea

Transnational adoption from Korea constitutes an important, yet understudied area. It involves approximately 200,000 people over a period of 50 years. Furthermore, the institutionalized program of transnational adoption from Korea, which is the first and the longest existing of its kind, has served as a model for similar programs in China, Ethiopia, and other countries. In order to understand transnational adoption as a comprehensive historical phenomenon, which involves more than the simple transportation of children from one location to another, it is necessary to recognize that there is a lot of incorrect, incomplete, and distorted information about adoption. It is a phenomenon that is inextricably linked to ideological discourses of various kinds. First of all, the identity papers of the adoptees are often unreliable fabrications. A large majority of the adoptees who manage to reconnect with their birth parents realize that the information in their official records was false. A well-known example of this is Deann Borshay Liem’s story as narrated
in *First Person Plural* (2000), the autobiographical film describing how she arrived in America literally as a substitute for another girl.

In the West, mainstream discourses on adoption are heavily dominated by the views of Western experts and adoptive parents, many of whom are influential academics and well-educated professionals, who have a strong interest in portraying adoption as a morally defensible practice. One example is the “rescue narrative” according to which a well-meaning Westerner saves an orphaned child from a life that otherwise would have been, to quote Hobbes, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. The discourses seeking to justify transnational adoption were traditionally religious and socially conservative in nature; recently, however, we have seen the employment of post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, and other sophisticated theories to justify the ideological practice of transnational adoption. One of the recurring patterns in the recent literature on transnational adoption is the critique of the “mythology of roots,” while the adoptive family is construed as an example of a progressive postmodern family that transcends the old-fashioned idea of biological kinship (Howell 2009; see also Pertman 2000; Yngvesson 2003; Homans 2006). Another defining characteristic of the mainstream discourse on adoption in the West is the absence of any serious engagement with the social and historical issues surrounding adoption in the sending countries. It is not an exaggeration to say that the sociohistorical background for adoption in the sending countries is a blind spot in the mainstream adoption discourses in the West.

In Korea, transnational adoption is a topic that provokes opposing reactions: mainstream ethnic nationalism considers the adoptees sometimes as “one of us” and sometimes as “one of them” (Shin 2006). It varies greatly, depending on the specific situation. The Korean government has welcomed “overseas Koreans” as valuable additions to the workforce. In popular drama series, there have been several adoptee characters; but they are imaginary, speaking impeccable Korean, embodying the traditional Confucian ideal of a son or daughter, following the social decorum to perfection, and so on. In other words, there is none of the awkwardness, ambiguity, and anxiety that so often accompany the interactions between adoptees and Koreans. At other times, Christianity provides the main ideological framework, and accordingly the adoptees are seen for example in terms of the “return of
the prodigal son.” However, if the adoptees dare to criticize one or another part of Korean society, the typical reaction is not to consider the actual content of the argument but simply to exclude the speaker from the “us,” thereby rendering the argument irrelevant. Thus, membership of the tribe is conditional and precarious at best. In spite of all this ideological hot air, there is no serious engagement with transnational adoption as a chapter in modern Korean history. In that sense, transnational adoptees have been – and continue to be – excluded from the collective history of the Korean people. The return of adoptees to Korea, their reappearance in Korean society, physically as well as symbolically, is a return of the repressed.

The phenomenon of transnational adoption is heavily ideological. The reason for this is very complicated, but it involves as a minimum the intertwinement of family and immigration, each of which are heavily contested ideologically and politically. Combine them and we have an explosive ideological concoction. It means that the study of transnational adoption from Korea requires a critical component that seeks to clear the ground of ideological nonsense. In other words, any study of transnational adoption requires a critique of the ideology of adoption. This paper suggests that Žižek’s theory concerning the sublime object of ideology enables a contemporary take on such a critical project. However, Žižek’s theory is by no means the only candidate to provide the conceptual framework for a critique of adoption ideology. Furthermore, the critical angle is very prominent in Lee’s novel *A Gesture Life*; in fact, it is a rare example of a critical treatment of transnational adoption to enter a mainstream public (together with the films by Deann Borshay Liem and the books by Maja Lee Langvad). By linking transnational adoption to the broader social and political history of the sending country, the novel questions the moral foundations of transnational adoption and, thereby, seeks to lift a taboo in mainstream adoption discourses in the West.

In order to approach the issue of transnational adoption in *A Gesture Life*, it is important to recognize that there are, in fact, several different issues at stake. On the one hand, the novel describes Sunny’s adoption from Korea to the U.S. In the following passage, for example, Hata visits an adoption agency:
I shouldn’t have made my desire for a child so paramount as to cloud my good judgment, which is what happened when I was interviewed by the woman at the agency. [...] I brought along a large donation to the agency, this beyond the regular expenses, as well as a like sum for the woman, which I explained as most proper gift in my former homeland, and which would be followed by another. This wasn’t actually proper, however, but she stopped talking and discreetly slipped the rice paper-wrapped package into her desk drawer, and on my way out she said she would see what was possible for a man in my special situation. (C. Lee 1999, 73)

The description of transnational adoption as a process that goes through an adoption agency and involves a substantial financial transaction reflects, more or less accurately, the historical realities of “proxy adoption,” which is a controversial procedure invented and institutionalized by Harry Holt in Korea (Holt 2005, 108–189; Choy 2007, 25–42; Oh 2008, 286–339). On the other hand, the novel claims that Hata, a poor but talented boy belonging to the Korean minority living in Imperial Japan, was adopted by a Japanese couple prior to World War II:

Most all of us were ethnic Koreans, though we spoke and lived as Japanese, if ones in twilight. [...] But I was fortunate to score exceptionally high on several achievement tests, and was one of a few boys of my kind to be identified and enrolled in a special school in the nearby large city.

I lived with a well-to-do childless couple, a gear factory owner and his wife, who treated me as well as a son, providing me with every material need and advantage. [...] I think of them most warmly, as I do my natural parents, but to neither would I ascribe the business of having reared me, for it seems clear that it was the purposeful society that did so, and really nothing and no one else. (C. Lee 1999, 72–73)

In later sections, we learn that his birth name was “Oh” (C. Lee 1999, 244), and that his birth parents, “a hide tanner and a rag maid” (p. 257), were poor and lived in a one-room house in Kobe (p. 259). Although Hata claims, at one point, that he and Sunny were “both orphans of a sort” (p. 336), it is worth noticing that he does not use the word adoption about himself. The closest he gets is to describe the Kurohatas “as adoptive parents” (p. 155) and as his “adoptive family” (p. 224). Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to assume that he – similar to his later appropriation of the name “Franklin” – had simply taken their name as his own. This minor detail is important, as it is questionable whether Hata, in fact, is an adoptee.
Hata’s so-called adoption is perhaps best viewed as a cultural trope with little or no historical referentiality. It is implausible that such a phenomenon as transnational adoption between Korea and Japan existed during the colonial period (1910–1945) (see, among others, Park 1994; Voyat 1996; Ryang 1997; Koshiro 1999; Shin & Robinson 1999; Harootunian 2001; E. Kim 2007; Caprio 2009; Kawashima 2009; Tansman 2009). Or, to put it differently, if such occurrences took place, it would have been an extremely rare phenomenon with little social significance. For example, there was no legal framework to regulate such a phenomenon as international adoption in Imperial Japan. One article in the Civil Code of Japan (1898) concerns intra-familial adoption, which is adoption within the extended family; only the head of a household, and on condition that the household has no male inheritors, is allowed to adopt (Voyat 1996, 137). This implies that extra-familial adoption, as in Hata’s case, is in fact illegal. On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that military dictator Park Chung-hee established the first Korean adoption law in 1961, shortly after his successful coup d’état, in order to regulate and control transnational adoption from Korea to various Western countries including the U.S., France, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, and others (Han 2008).

Hata’s so-called adoption is best viewed as a cultural trope with little to no historical referentiality. By contrast, Sunny’s adoption is a fictionalized representation of a well-documented historical reality. Transnational adoption from Korea originated during the Korean War (1950–1953). The widespread practice among American soldiers of taking local boys as their “mascots” pioneered the modern phenomenon of systematized and institutionalized adoption from Korea:

The first adoptions by U.S. service personnel were crucial to the development of Korean adoption on two levels. Practically speaking, as social workers and government agencies learned to regulate and process these early adoptions, they lay the procedural groundwork for the coming systematization of intercountry adoption from Korea. [...] At the ideological level, GI child-welfare efforts served an important political function for the U.S. military and the country it represented, which sought to justify, mitigate and project positively its role in Korea and in the new world of the Cold War. (Oh 2008, 91)

A military mascot represented a step up from a so-called houseboy who simply carried out menial tasks in return for material rewards. Mascots
were like toy-kids or pet-kids, hybrids between playthings and playmates, who relieved the soldiers of stress and anxiety. Many soldiers became emotionally attached to their mascots, and some of the soldiers adopted the children and brought them back to the U.S. at the end of their tour. In many respects, as Oh points out, there is a striking similarity between military mascots and military prostitutes: “By entering into unwritten, uncertain contracts with servicemen, and providing emotional and physical services to servicemen in exchange for material and other care, mascots operated in the same kind of economy as prostitutes” (p. 69). Similar to the phenomenon of military brides, transnational adoption is a historical by-product of the American military presence on the Korean peninsula during and after the Korean War (Moon 1997; H. S. Kim 1998; Yuh 2002; Cho 2008). The phenomenon, however, was not restricted to soldiers:

The time came when the U.S. Army decided to close down the billets and move us on base to smaller accommodations. This was hardly a problem, but a couple of problems did remain unsolved. A small Korean orphan who had been adopted by an American photographer during the war was in our hands. His father with children of his own – I believe five – lacked the funds to fly him to the United States. Murray Fromson of the AP came up with the idea of selling two slot machines left behind in the billets’ small bar to fund an airline ticket for the kid to go to his new home. As the only two foreign correspondents left in the billets, we both approved the deal. (Russell 2006, 118)

Even though international adoption from Korea originated during the Korean War, the available statistics show that the phenomenon not only continued, but also increased in volume several decades after the end of the war (Hübinnette 2005). Thus, it is not the beginning but the continuation and the expansion of the adoption programs that needs explanation. If transnational adoption began as a temporary solution to an immediate humanitarian crisis, it gradually developed into an elaborate institution. Transnational adoption, as Eleana Kim suggests, became “a permanent solution to a temporary problem” (E. Kim 2004).

The government of Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) perceived transnational adoption as a measure to control the growth of the population. It was identified as a means to overcome a major obstacle for rapid modernization. Additional benefits such as political leverage vis-à-vis the U.S. and inflow of much needed currency only sweetened
the deal for the Korean government (Robinson 2002, 16). Subsequently, the government of Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988) deregulated the adoption market, which resulted in fierce competition among numerous adoption agencies in order to procure babies. The mid-1980s, shortly before the large pro-democracy protests in 1987, saw the highest number of annual adoptions out of Korea. During this period from 1961 to 1988, only a tiny fraction of the adoptees were orphans. Since then, the number has gradually decreased, and today it has stabilized at around 2,000 transnational adoptions per year (Hübnette 2005; E. Kim 2007; Oh 2008; Nelson 2009).

It is important to distinguish between international adoption as a historical reality and adoption as a cultural trope. In A Gesture Life, Sunny’s adoption is a fictionalized representation of a historical phenomenon, while Hata’s so-called adoption is best perceived as a cultural trope with little to no historical referentiality. The historical phenomenon of transnational adoption from Korea originated during the Korean War and developed within the context of rapid modernization. Adoption as a cultural trope – with little or no historical referentiality – includes, but is not limited to, such notable figures as Moses, King Oedipus, Daniel Deronda, Superman, Luke Skywalker, and Kungfu Panda (Novy 2004; Follevåg 2006; Fedosik 2009). It is important to maintain the distinction between adoption as a historical reality and adoption as a cultural trope not only for the sake of conceptual clarity, but because the mainstream adoption discourses in the West often invoke the moral lessons from the latter (adoption as a cultural trope) in order to promote and justify the first (adoption as a historical phenomenon). The cultural discourse of adoption establishes imaginary tropes and structures of feeling, which serve to justify the practice of transnational adoption from Korea.

IV. Traumatic flashbacks

In A Gesture Life, there are four extended flashbacks to events during World War II, which are among the most remarkable formal aspects of the novel (C. Lee 1999, 105–112, 153–189, 222–271, 291–305). In addition, a number of shorter flashbacks convey particularly memorable impressions. Bruce Fulton remarks that one of the characteristic features
of literary trauma is the abrupt “shifts between the here-and-now and unresolved trauma of decades earlier” (Fulton 2009, 192). The novel, as Carroll has argued, consists of two superimposed narratives: the first takes place in the U.S. during the 1970s; the other, traumatic in nature, takes place in Burma during World War II (Carroll 2005). Within such a general model of reading, I would nevertheless suggest that we pay close attention to the flashbacks and their contexts, in particular the context of the first flashback and the transition from the third to the fourth flashback.

The first and arguably the most significant flashback occurs during Hata’s attempt to find and rescue Sunny from Jimmy Gizzi’s house. The house, populated by petty criminals and social outcasts, represents the underbelly of the regulated social order of the sleepy suburb. It represents a space of uninhibited desire, which contrasts sharply with the socially and morally regulated space that governs Hata’s everyday existence. Here, in this space of transgression, Hata initially stumbles upon two men in their twenties:

Hey, Sonny, look, man, it’s like, “The Master.” […] Would you mind calling me “Grasshopper”? Will you say it? […] C’mon, say it for us. Say, “Well done, Grasshopper.” […] So I said to him, “Well done, Grasshopper.” At this they instantly broke out in laughter […]. The skinny one kept laughing but thumbed toward the front door, waving me to go in. All the while he kept saying the phrase to his friend in a choppy, halting voice, not at all as I had spoken it. My accent has never been perfect, and was less so then, but I’ve always been somewhat proud of my flowing verbiage, and that I speak in the familiar, accepted rhythms. (C. Lee 1999, 100–101)

While Hata, his pride hurt, interprets the cause of their laughter to be his imperfect accent, or imperfect imitation of the standard accent, he in fact misinterprets the cultural references that spark their laughter. The mention of “the master” and “the grasshopper” are references to the television series *Kung Fu* (1972–1975) starring David Carradine as Kwai Chang Caine, a half-Chinese, half-American Shaolin monk wandering the Wild West. The *Kung Fu* series is one of the first examples of a Chinese Western, and it employs flashbacks – not unlike the narrative technique in *A Gesture Life* – to convey a sense of Caine’s training, self-discipline, and mental toughness. The “grasshopper” refers to the first encounter between Master Po and the young Caine, but subsequently it
becomes a metonymy for the unfinished apprenticeship of the young Shaolin monk. The laughter, in a rather straightforward sense, indicates that Hata, precisely by performing “the master,” loses control of his meticulously constructed identity in a cultural context saturated with popular images and racial stereotypes. Hata, by unwittingly performing the stereotype of an elderly Asian male in U.S. popular culture, reveals his lacking mastery of the social code and becomes, ironically, the apprentice or the grasshopper.

Hata experiences a loss of control and a concomitant feeling of anxiety as he is unable to decode the unfamiliar signs and the unfamiliar norms that regulate the social space of Gizzi’s house. His desire to find Sunny is frustrated, at least temporarily, and he feels the situation “spinning out of control” (C. Lee 1999, 105). He steps outside, and it is here, while trying to regain a sense of control, that the first flashback occurs: “an image of another time suddenly appeared to me, when I began my first weeks of service in the great Pacific war” (p. 105). The flashback is introduced as an individual memory of a collective history, and it is triggered, more than anything, by Hata’s attempt to regain a sense of control. In the first flashback, Hata recounts his initial meeting with Kkutaeh:

“There’s no place to go,” I said unthinking. “You must stay in the house.”

She looked surprised at my words, staring at me as if I were someone she knew.

“She doesn’t want to go,” she said, crying even harder now. “I beg you.”

[...] 

“I beg you, O-ppah, let me go!”

[...] 

He led her back down the hall to the open door. She followed him, in limp half-steps. Before they reached the room, the girl looked back at me, the side of her face raised red from the blow. I thought she was going to say something again, maybe O-ppah, how a girl would address her older brother or other male, but she just gazed at me instead, ashen-faced, as if in wonder whether I had uttered the words to her at all. (pp. 111–112)

The initial encounter between Hata and Kkutaeh is described in terms of a disjunction between different signs; Hata’s slip of the tongue, his momentary loss of self-control, reveals an incongruity between the
discursive signs (the Korean language) and the visual signs (the Japanese uniform), which Kkutaeh, on her part, immediately recognizes and decodes. The flashback frames the dramatic tension of the scene – a Korean man passing as a Japanese soldier encounters a Korean comfort woman and falls in love with her.

It is here, I believe, that the real significance of Hata’s so-called adoption becomes apparent. Peter Brooks, while discussing the term “device” in the Russian formalists, provides an important clue for our interpretation of Hata’s so-called adoption: “Typical is Boris Tomachevsky’s well-known illustration of the technical sense of ‘motivation’: if a character in a play hammers a nail into the wall in Act I, then he or another character will have to hang himself from it in Act III” (Brooks 1984, 14). Similarly, Hata’s so-called adoption is a literary device that finds its narrative resolution in the encounter between the protagonist and Kkutaeh. Hata’s so-called adoption is a narratological event, without any reference to a historical reality, which prepares the ground for the subsequent encounter between Hata and Kkutaeh.

V. The spectral space
The first flashback is rather straightforward. It is framed by Hata’s visit to Gizzi’s house, and it is triggered by his attempt to recover from a momentary loss of control. Initially, the reader gets the impression that Hata only rarely loses control of himself; yet, later in the novel, the flashbacks become increasingly hallucinatory, blurring the lines between the present and the past, between reality and imagination. In particular, after Hata is knocked unconscious by Captain Ono (C. Lee 1999, 271), we find 20 pages describing Hata in the U.S. of the 1970s suffering from “a certain waking nightmare” (p. 272) and a loss of memory (p. 285), only to regain consciousness, thus continuing the World War II narrative (p. 291). These 20 pages constitute a peculiar flash-forward inserted in the World War II narrative. This flash-forward within the flashback, I argue, is crucial for the symbolic fabric of the entire novel. It is here, precisely during this temporally convoluted passage, that the novel describes Kkutaeh’s haunting return as a ghost:
Now and then, I sometimes forget who I really am. [...] Then I might get up in the middle of the night and dress and walk all the way to town, to try to figure once again the notices, the character, the sorts of actions of a man like me, what things or set of things define him in the most simple and ordinary way. But I forget the usuals, who his friends might be, his associates; I forget even that has a tenuous and fragile hold of family, this the only idea that dully rings of remembrance in his heart. He walks at night in the center of town and it is too dark to see even a reflection in the glass of his old store. He's stopped by a patrol car and asked what he's doing and he says nothing, I'm not really walking, I'm not really here, and he turns for home with the cruiser slowly trailing him, unintentionally lighting his way. (pp. 285–286)

This surreal passage, shifting from first person to third person, is immediately followed by descriptions of Kkutaeh’s haunting return as a ghostly figure:

When I reach the house and close the front door it’s then I think K has finally come back for me. It is the moment I think I feel at home. I am sure I was regarding her last night, her figure naked and pale, loosely enrobed in a black silken flag. The sight of her shook me. I saw her more clearly than I ever had before, as I was not dreaming or conjuring but simply reacquainting myself with her, as I might any friend of my youth. And so she visited me. Last night she lightly pattered up and down the hallway in her bare feet, pausing outside my bedroom door. I knew it was she. I sat up and told her to come in and she stepped to the foot of my lone twin bed. Though she sat down I couldn’t feel any press of her weight, and once again, for a moment, I was almost sure she was a spectral body or ghost. (p. 286)

This is the only scene describing Kkutaeh’s return as a ghost, although the reader gets the impression that this is something that occurs frequently, “today and yesterday and all the days before that, in a strange and backward perpetuity” (p. 288). Interestingly, Kkutaeh articulates her desire, which seems to upset the protagonist:

“Will we be going away soon, Lieutenant?”

Her question was brand-new to me, but somehow I felt vaguely annoyed by it anyway. Even angry. I said to her, the hairs tingling on the back of my neck, “Where would we be going to, K?”

“I had hoped we would finally travel to all the places we have spoken of. To Shanghai, and Kyoto, and perhaps even Seoul. Or some other place.” (p. 287)
The list of possible destinations (Shanghai, Kyoto, Seoul) seems to emphasize “even Seoul” as a place of special significance. However, it is immediately displaced by some unspecified “other place,” thereby postponing an unequivocal answer. What is important is not merely the appearance of the ghost and the ambiguous articulation of her desire; equally important is the surreal, the spectral space in between present and past, between reality and illusion. Instead of a simple dichotomy consisting of an immigrant narrative interrupted by a trauma narrative, we have a third narrative interrupting the World War II narrative, thereby constituting a spectral space.

The spectral figure of Kkutaeh is arguably the central enigma of the entire narrative. Our general understanding of Hata as well as his unresolved relations to Kkutaeh and Sunny hinges in large part on the details of our interpretation of the spectral figure. Perhaps, as Žižek suggests, the ghost represents a coded articulation of a repressed or ideologically distorted social conflict in *A Gesture Life*: “What the spectre conceals is not reality but its ‘primordially repressed’, the irrepressable X on whose ‘repression’ reality itself is founded” (Žižek 1994, 21). The ghost of Kkutaeh appears in the text precisely in order to conceal the traumatic kernel of the narrative. But what exactly does the ghost conceal? If the ghost is the haunting return of the repressed, to employ a standard Freudian formula, what is it precisely that has been repressed? What is the insupportable social conflict that the spectre might be said to represent albeit in distorted form?

The traumatic kernel of the narrative, if we can use such a term, is not merely the fact that Korean women were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military; nor is it that Hata was a passive bystander who witnessed atrocious war crimes without interfering; rather, the traumatic kernel, the irresolvable social conflict at the heart of the novel, is that Hata – who hides his Korean ethnicity in order to benefit from Japanese citizenship – collaborated with the Japanese in victimizing Korean women. Hata, in this respect, is not merely an individual character but becomes an allegorical representation of a collective trauma (see also Hicks 1994, 45–65; Yang 1998, 123–139; Soh 2007, 17–35). The Japanese colonization of Korea created a social and political situation that was, effectively, a subdued civil war between collaborators and resisters. The novel portrays Hata as a symbolic representation of the fact that Korean collaboration
with the Japanese regime was widespread, and that it often took the form of exploiting other Koreans. Thus, the novel problematizes the “resistencialist myth” that all true Koreans fought bravely against Japanese colonization promoted by the hegemonic nationalist narrative in post-liberation South Korea (Ceuster 2001, 215–218). It is no wonder, then, that Hata is haunted by the ghost of Kkutaeh.

The novel suggests that one of the tragedies of modern Korean history is that the collective trauma dating back to the colonial period has never been resolved. The collective trauma – Koreans pitted against Koreans – has been compounded by the unresolved civil war (1950–1953) and the subsequent period of militarized modernization (1961–1988). In the novel, Hata is never brought to justice and, as a result, he never has to confront and work through the traumatic past (see also Dower 1999; Hanley, Choi, & Mendoza 2001; Hwang 2005; Tsutsui 2009). As a matter of fact, Hata is allowed to continue and in certain respects repeat the traumatizing social structure by participating in transnational adoption. The practice of transnational adoption, according to the novel, is an ideological project “with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (Jameson 1981, 79). The novel portrays the practice of transnational adoption (Hata’s adoption of Sunny) as an imaginary solution to the real contradictions of an unresolved trauma dating back to World War II (the haunting ghost of Kkutaeh).

Here, in order to determine the precise relation between Kkutaeh and Sunny, it might be pertinent to introduce Slavoj Žižek’s notion of ideology. Žižek proposes to recast the problem of ideology in terms of the late Lacan where the notion of the real becomes increasingly important (Lacan 1981, 86–89; McGowan 2003, 27–47). The Lacanian notion of the real, as Bruce Fink writes, indicates something that is non-symbolized: “The real is perhaps best understood as that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization; and it may perfectly well exist ‘alongside’ and in spite of a speaker’s considerable linguistic capabilities” (Fink 1995, 25). The real, in other words, is a form of lack in the social order, a traumatic black hole that resists comprehension, and therefore is a source of social anxiety. Drawing on this notion, Žižek proposes to understand ideology
as a collective fantasy that attempts to cover up or in other ways remove the real from the symbolic order:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our “reality” itself: an “illusion” which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel [...]. The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel. (Žižek 1989, 45)

Ideology, according to Žižek, is the symbolic order without the real. It is a seamless world where everything is comprehensible and nothing generates anxiety. Ideology, in this sense, conceals a fundamental lack of the symbolic order. It attempts to remove the real from the social order by fabricating a substitute, a sublime object, which conceals and occupies its place. Instead of a lack in the symbolic order, instead of social order haunted by a traumatic kernel, ideology fabricates a seamless and perfect world centered on a sublime object that promises to fulfill our most cherished desires. This theoretical model allows us to grasp the significance of Sunny in very precise terms: the transnational adoptee is a sublime object of ideology that conceals the traumatic kernel of the symbolic order. The novel depicts transnational adoption as an ideological practice that conceals the traumatic kernel of the symbolic order; it fabricates the adoptee as a sublime object of ideology – without history, without attachment, without loss – that promises to fulfill the most cherished desires of adoptive parents in the West.

VI. Conclusion
This paper presents an interpretation of Chang-rae Lee’s novel *A Gesture Life* that emphasizes transnational adoption from Korea as an ideological formation. The novel is an extraordinary text that not only enriches Asian American literature but also deepens our understanding of transnational adoption as an under-studied topic that cuts across multiple disciplines and fields. The ambivalent protagonist and unreliable narrator, Franklin Hata, is an emphatic contradiction of the hegemonic nationalist discourse in Korea that portrays the true nation as unequivocal resistance to colonialism. The novel, in this sense,
problematizes the hegemonic resistencialist myth in Korea. In addition, the novel problematizes the ideological discourses in the West that portray transnational adoption as an innocent and benevolent practice. It questions the moral and political rationality that has enabled transnational adoption to become a permanent solution to a temporary social problem. While most modern readers condemn the Japanese system of enforced prostitution, few are able to appreciate the novel’s portrayal of transnational adoption as an ideological formation. One important feature of contemporary adoption ideology is to conflate the modern historical reality of transnational adoption dating back to the second half of the twentieth century with a premodern and mostly imaginary discourse of adoption dating back to antiquity; the conflation of the two allows emotional and moral arguments from the latter to justify the former.

Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* portrays transnational adoption from Korea as a morally questionable practice. In the novel, the unreliable narrator Hata’s unresolved relation to Kkutaeh — a Korean comfort woman — is displaced and repeated in his unresolved relation to his adopted daughter, Sunny. The paper suggests that we understand the relation between Kkutaeh and Sunny in terms of Žižek’s notion of ideology. The adopted daughter (Sunny), in this perspective, is a sublime object of ideology that conceals the traumatic kernel of the symbolic order (Kkutaeh). Thus, the novel raises the question whether transnational adoption as a historical reality is a phenomenon that properly belongs to and grows out of the context of militarized prostitution, either in the form of comfort women or in the so-called camp towns surrounding military bases. The novel is an example of contemporary realism insofar as it reveals the dirty truth, it exposes the hypocrisies of ideology, rather than repeating the tropes of some idealized semi-mythological narrative.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Kim-Su Rasmussen (seokilseung@gmail.com) is an associate professor at the Department of Philosophy, Chonnam National University, South Korea. He specializes in modern philosophical hermeneutics, including epistemological issues related to the human sciences and ethical issues related to understanding across boundaries. Areas of concentration include aesthetic modernism, reflexive judgments, and critique of prejudice. His work has appeared in Theory, Culture & Society, Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies, and various other journals.