

Besides the four disobediences

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In producing *mother may recall another* (2023), Mira Mann travelled to South Korea with their mother Hanju Yang, visiting sites from Yang's childhood in Mokpo before she immigrated to Germany in the 1980s. The conceit of this trip was to produce a contemporary version of the pansori tale *Shimcheongga*, with Mann, their cousin, sister, fellow queer artist Chang13, and a cast of German K-pop dancers standing in for the character of Cheong who is renowned for her sacrifice to her elders. In the classic version of the tale, this takes multiple forms, from wage labour, to the care of her blind father, the prostitution of her body, and finally, her martyrdom that ultimately restores her father's vision. In Mann's retelling, embodied by the various performers of differing ages, Shim Cheong appears as a queered version of Korean femininity, dressed in a costume composed of deconstructed school uniform designed by the artist and Anna R. Winder. Introduced by Christian missionaries in the late 19th century, such uniforms are emblematic of the modernisation of Korean dress, a change that was rooted in forms of standardisation, Japanese imperialism and Western influence, changes that are also mirrored in the developments of modern military uniform. These changes in the customs of dress came at a time during the abolishment of the stringent Confucian caste system of the Joseon Dynasty, signalling a transformation in how personhood was regulated by the state and enacted by individuals. While Pansori emerged as an artform rooted in folk tradition and shamanic ceremonies, by the 18th century it became a functional part of the Joseon Dynasty as an art form imparting Confucian ideology. This function became less relevant with the modernisation of society, as new art forms and media took the place of traditional arts in promoting societal narratives, gender roles, and moral principles. Even while certain aspects of Confucian ideology persist today in Korean gender hierarchies and social norms, the way in which its lessons are transmitted have changed form, inhabiting new modes of performativity, for instance, in TikTok videos or serial streaming platforms.

As a Confucian moral tale, *Shimcheongga* stresses the duty one has to one's elders; in the traditional version of the tale, the protagonist submits herself to the sea, transforming her into a lotus flower. The miraculous transformation of Shim Cheong restores the sight of her blind father and many others without sight. Transposed to a different context, we might ask, how are we to understand such a message? Mann's trans-cultural experience as someone born to a Korean mother in Western Germany suggests that a new set of meanings can be constructed out of the tension of two cultures, and the estrangement—or in Bertold Brecht's terms *Verfremdungseffekt*—that allows us to see what may only remain latent or overlooked in both the story of Shim Cheong and Yang's narrative in the film. In Mann's version, the position of the father is notionally inhabited by her mother: the control of the camera—and in effect the gaze itself—is put in the control of Yang, held by her or passed onto family members. The ocularity that is restored in the traditional tale is instead embodied by her mother's direction of an early 90s home video camera that she bought the year the artist was born.

While traditional pansori focuses on the technical feats of its singer-performer, who embodies the positions of all characters and narrator. In Mann's work, the performer remains unseen. Performed by the Berlin-based Sol-i So, her song provides the narrative framework of the pansori to scenes showing the various embodiments of Shim Cheong visiting sites in Mokpo with historical importance to Yang. For instance, they visit an imperial building in the style of Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the architect famous for redesigning Paris, which was once the site of the Japanese imperial government and later a prison during the rule of Park Chung Hee; the former highschool of Yang, where Mann performs the school's daily military style march under the direction of their mother's memory; the harbour where she used to skip school, and it's brick factory that was once operated by the Japanese occupiers; they search for the house in which Yang was born; visit supermarkets, and usedbookstores. Alongside Mokpo, we see scenes from the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Köln, a site in which the Western fetishisation of Asian femininity is displayed in objects obtained through colonial trade; and a performance by *Iridescent Wings*, a group of German K-pop dancers whose genuine engagement with the popular culture of Korea is mediated by the internet and their presence on social media.

Also an immigrant to Germany, Sol-i So originally trained in Korea before feeling burdened by the traditional limitations of pansori teaching. For Mann, it's important to note that So's singing could be seen as unconventional for pansori traditionalists. At times improvisational and partly working from memory, So's delivery speaks to Yang's experience as an immigrant to Germany, but also the construction of a narrative about her emigration from Korea. This suggests a link between memory and the imaginary, a representation of Mokpo and the radical transformation of Yang's home country since the 1980s. Visiting these sites from her youth, before her immigration to Germany, this investigation into her own past asks how place, built environment, and memory are intertwined. By documenting this process of return, we get an impression of the inconsistencies of one's own recollections. For Mann, such a story occupies the same narrative space as a moral tale imparted from mother to daughter, one that concerns origins but also a set of moral lessons concerned with family, obligation, debt, and sacrifice. In watching Mann's film as a work of art, it's possible to imagine that we're placed within the narrative of Shim Cheong, as an omniscient outside character endowed with the power of aesthetic judgement. From this position, we might conclude that Mann implies that the martyrdom of Shim Cheong is analogous to a kind of sacrifice made by the artist. In other words, before Shim Cheong's objectification, she remains outside the gaze of the authority and power of the father, or in this case the viewer. Shim Cheong's sacrifice is a process similar to that of the artist: by stepping into the role of a character or producing objects themselves, Mann objectifies, and as a result, makes artistic process and thinking visible to the observant viewer.

In each of Mann's works, there is the suggestion that the artist's practice as a performer is always present in how an object is staged or the action of a video is captured. As Mann's work demonstrates—for instance in the mirror work *바리데기-D* [paridaegi-D] (2023)—there is a theatricality in the viewing of contemporary art that places the viewer in an active role, as a participant, as an actor. While this "theatricality" was something famously levelled against Western minimal art by the American critic Michael Fried, who saw it as a debasement of modernism's claim on the autonomy of the artwork—something apart from the world, self-contained, medium specific, without moral or political purpose—subsequent practices of performance art, conceptualism, and installation have made theatricality a strength in challenging such conservative assumptions. While this modernist vision of artistic practice relied on a philosophical grounding in the Western tradition that assumed a split between subject and object, from the perspective of Eastern and Western traditional arts alike, such a distinction is not naturally assumed nor sustained by medium specificity. Rather, an art such as pansori, which has both a moral purpose and is the result of various art forms working in unison, is more equivalent to strategies in contemporary art than it might first appear.

As is well known, the performer in pansori embodies multiple roles, shifts between genders, and occupies a place within the social world of the pansori and one notionally outside it, as its narrator. This is analogous to the adaptability of the women who occupied such roles among others, often from the class of Kisaeng. As Mann outlines:

"Kisaeng were courtesans, entertainers, performers, and sex workers with a complex social, political, and cultural role during the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, yet they have often been written out of the history books. Kisaeng of the court were registered as government slaves, and consequently they can be traced back to the eleventh century in Korea. They mostly held the rank of cheonmin, the lowest class, together with butchers, shoemakers, other entertainers, and slaves. Either born into the role through a kisaeng mother or sold by their families, their social status was tainted. However, in order to become intelligent and charming companions to the wealthy and influential, they underwent a strict education from an early age at specialised institutions and were trained in various fields of fine and performing arts such as dance, poetry, singing, reading, and painting, as well as medical care. Kisaeng from Jeolla-do were trained in and performed pansori. Although they were enslaved, and their lives very much determined by their position in society, they were expected to develop their own style and artistic expression, to cultivate an identity through their skills, and to express themselves through art, dance, music, and poetry. Their role as a highly educated, sexually promiscuous travelling entertainer and conversationalist with access to public events and political negotiations – outside of the strict gender roles of Confucianism that kept women confined to the domestic space – is therefore exceptional in comparison to that of all other women of the time."

We might ask, is the irreconcilable contradiction of these women, living in bondage slaves yet expected to develop their own individuality, harsh analogy for the perceived free will that individualism promotes in our own time?. The characterisations that occupy Mann's work suggest that they speak to broader themes of performativity and self-representation that function in our modern capitalist societies, as ways of representing ourselves, that are more of an obligation than a perceived choice. In the world in which we operate, socialise, work, fall in love, raise families, and march to the grave, we are surrounded by images and our own role in constructing them. The obligation to self-design, to self-characterise, to create and promote an image of ourselves through media is a habitual part of our participation in society. As Mann's work shows, how we perform this image, in our fashion, our gender expression, or social position, moral claims persist and are built into the narratives that we construct and the stories that we tell each other.