

Park Younghee and Jeremy Neideck¹

A Single Drop of Water:

**Vulnerability, Invisibility, and Accountability in South Korean
Theatre's Moment of Crisis**

In early 2018, encouraged by the #MeToo movement sweeping the Western media landscape, Korean actor Park Younghee took to Facebook to write of her experiences of sexual harassment at the hands of a prominent theatre director and academic in the 1990s. While Younghee didn't publicly name her abuser, it was not long before the social media machine identified Oh Tae Suk as the man she alluded to, and his world-renowned Mokwha Repertory Company² as the site of her abuse. Days later, prolific theatre director Kim Soo-hee made allegations of violence and sexual abuse against Lee Yoon-taek, the artistic director of the juggernaut theatre company Yeonhuidan Georipae,³ setting off a firestorm in the South Korean Media that has yet to die down.

In South Korea, public performances of grief, allyship, and holding the government to account are hallmarks of democratic transformation. In the text that follows, Park Younghee tells parts of her story to longtime collaborator Jeremy Neideck, and they attempt to weave a coherent narrative out of their yearlong discussion about the social, cultural, and political histories of Korea. This article seeks to illuminate, but not necessarily explain, the environments in which men like Lee Youn-taek and Oh Tae Suk were able to perpetrate abuse.

With one of their most recent collaborations being an adaptation of Oh Tae Suk's iconic anti-establishment work *Why did Shim Cheong Plunge into the Sea Twice?*, Jeremy and Younghee also confront difficult questions regarding the effect that historical behaviour by an artist has on the currency, relevance, and ongoing life of their work. They highlight the difficulty of looking at South Korean power imbalances from a western viewpoint, at the same time as pointing toward the ways in which Younghee's experiences as an actor have equipped her to navigate this difficult terrain and transition into the role of activist and advocate.

Ordinary, Anonymous

공연이 시작되고
손님이 찾아올 때마다
또 공연이 끝날 때마다
행운 가득한 대학로의 그 갈비집
상 위에서는 핑크빛 삼겹살이 불판위에
춤을 추고

Every opening night
Our patrons join us
Every closing night too
We visit Good Luck Galbi House in Daehangno
On the table, pink pork belly in the flames
Dancing⁴

Jeremy: I am sitting with Younghée in a multistorey branch of the kind of ordinary, anonymous cafe chain that has flourished in Seoul over the last fifteen years. It is cold outside, and she is worried that I have once again come to South Korea, in the winter, without an adequate coat. I assure her that I will be fine, that my jumper and scarves will be enough for our trip across town, and she gives me one of those sceptical “you better not be lying to your big sister” looks I have come to know so well.

As we catch up on the events of the last twelve months, Younghée describes herself as an ordinary, anonymous Korean woman. She is anything but. With a decades-long career spanning traditional song and dance, contemporary drama, bilingual children’s theatre, transnational queer cabaret, and expressionist dance theatre, Younghée is fierce, tenacious, and has in some quarters of South Korean society, recently become a figure of some notoriety.

Journalists have her phone number on speed dial, politicians defer to her in public, and Oh Tae Suk—the father of modern theatre in South Korea and one of the nation’s most celebrated playwrights—has not been seen outside of his apartment in nine months, held hostage by Younghée’s poetry....

In January of 2018, when South Korean public prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun volunteered a live interview on the flagship broadcast JTBC Newsroom, the whole nation was turned upside down. Seo testified to her experiences of sexual harassment by a male colleague, and of having her career frustrated for almost a decade as a result of reporting the perpetrator to her superiors (Haynes and Chen 2018).

Younghée: It was a really tough time for me after I saw Seo Ji-hyun’s testimony on TV. I am a human being after all—and not just any human being, a Korean. I was fighting between my Confucian model of relationships and honour, my strong notions of natural and social

justice, and my struggle to forgive myself. I was just so sick of the inaction of my seniors, those with power and status. So, I sat down and wrote. My strategy was to just express myself without using the name of my perpetrator, but of course my close friends knew exactly who I was talking about.

Three days after Younghee published her post to Facebook, Kim Soo-hee, a prominent theatre director and an ex-member of Yeonhuidan, finally spoke up about that company's director Lee Yoon-tae and his physically and sexually abusive behaviour—an open secret for many years in South Korea's sprawling yet close-knit theatre community. Suddenly, the issue of sexual harassment and assault in the performing arts industry swept the national media.

The Tangled, Gendered Web of Modernity in South Korea

상 아래에서는 나와 당신의 허벅지
사타구니를 움켜잡고, 꼬집고, 주무르던
축축한 선생의 손이
바쁘게 움직였죠
소리를 지를 수도
뿌리칠 수도 없었어요
그럴 수 없었어요
그렇게 많은 사람들이 우리 앞에 있었지만
어찌된 일인지 그 순간 우리는
그들에게
투명인간 이었어요

Under the table my thighs, your thighs, our thighs
Darting, pinching, massaging
The damp, dirty hands of the master⁵
Moving so quickly
Unable to scream
Unable to refuse his hand
It's all impossible
We are in front of so many people
But in this moment
To them
We are invisible

In recent decades, participation by women in South Korean public life, politics, and industry has been steadily increasing (Kim and Park 2018, 143), with women rising to the highest offices of business and government. Although this may have the external trappings of a Western-styled women's suffrage, the increased visibility of women in the public sphere is complicated in the South Korean context, considering the nation's social fabric hangs on the hierarchical frameworks and internalised norms of Confucian patriarchy.

The civic, social, and private realities of South Korea's citizenry have altered and shifted through a rapid transition from feudal agrarianism to a highly industrialised and militarised economy fuelled by complex interactions with the imperial aspirations of Japan and the military assistance/intervention of the US. However, as Moon has outlined in *Militarised Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (2005), interpreting social change in the East Asian region merely as a product of economic development through contact with the West presupposes that modernity itself is the sole domain of the West. Similarly problematic are hyperlocal or culturalist accounts of development that stress the influence of heritage systems of thought such as Confucianism and the role of emerging authoritarian regimes, as they tend toward cultural essentialism and "overlook historical change" in national cultures (4).

There is not space here for a systematic untangling of all the "contended values" (Herren et al. 2012, 48) that have contributed to the conditions in which abuses of power have flourished in the South Korean theatre industry. Instead, we have identified certain historical and cultural contexts that appear to be connected and significant to the abuse—the plasticity of Confucian patriarchy, the militarisation of masculinity, and the politicisation of female sexuality. It is these threads which have proven rich subjects for discussion as we reflected on the abuse, the environment in which it happened, and the way that environment may have been influenced by cultural and historical factors.

The Plasticity of Confucian Patriarchy

As Cho has noted, gender inequality in South Korea cannot be explained "without tackling the fundamental question of patriarchal order" (2013, 18). Although one of the hallmarks of Confucianism's social organisation is the understanding that women are subject to "decent standards of treatment, protection, and love" (D.-K. Choi 2019, 86), the dominant norm that historically regulated physical relationships between the sexes in Korea was *naeoebeop*, the "social rule of separation of man and woman." A deeply rooted Korean way of being, *naeoebeop* demands that men and women avoid meeting unless related and, if required to interact outside of the bounds of family, that they not meet each other's gaze while talking. This was reinforced by the dual ideologies of chastity and virginity which emphasised a woman's sexual fidelity to her husband in the presence of an official system of concubinage, and in which rape was considered a "crime against the honor of the family" (Jung 2014, 46).⁶

Younghhee: *These recent problems we are facing aren't necessarily from our Confucian culture, and this is a big discussion that is happening right now in South Korea. Even in the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) when our whole society was heavily influenced by Confucianism, there was a strong notion of how to respect each gender. Yes, the woman's role was maybe not to take a big part in politics and so on, but still there was a culture of respect.*

It's heartbreaking to say but maybe at that particular point when South Korean society moved on and started to modernise after the 1950s, step-by-step, another way of having

relationships between men and women merged into our system. Our society began to look at women as objects rather than as human beings.

Choi Dai-Kwon (2019) has asserted that contemporary instances of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace have as much to do with the Confucian worldview as they do with the deterioration of traditional social and familial structures as South Korea modernised (86). As Duncan (2002) notes however, “Confucianism is complex, difficult to define, and subject to appropriation for a wide range of political and social purposes” (37), and discussions of its relationship to modernity must be tempered with an acknowledgement of its plasticity. The example at the centre of this article is limited to the culture of a single theatre company; but as demonstrated by the global #MeToo movement, incidences of institutional cultures of gender inequality are pervasive across cultures. Younghée’s experience working at Mokwha is tied to that global movement, but also grows out of the specific socio-political context of modern South Korea, and as such, demonstrates the complex ways in which Confucian ideals have been reimagined through South Korea’s modern history into social norms regulating today’s workplace cultures.

The Militarisation of Masculinity

Younghée: *After the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953), the whole concept and notion of respect for women completely shifted. Mandatory military service has also changed Korean men. Learning how to abuse another human being surely must have an effect on the way that you treat women.*

Moon’s 2005 study of the gendered nature of South Korean citizenship demonstrates that while not able to wholly explain the current state of affairs, a consideration of the nation’s militarised modernity,

illuminate[s] the peculiar combination of historical circumstances under which modernity has been pursued in South Korea: national division, the civil war and the prolonged military confrontation between the two Koreas, postcolonial ambivalence to modernity, and the extreme sense of urgency about catching up with advanced countries. (7-8)

It is this peculiar combination of historical circumstances which were among the factors used by the South Korean state to legitimise the “universal” mandatory military conscription system (*gungmingaebyeongje*), which demanded that men “fight against the selfish urge to evade military service” (Choi and Kim 2017, 519). Although the requirement of South Korean men to serve as military officers was never in practice universally applied (*ibid.*), the “militarization of masculinity” (Moon 2005, 46) was bolstered by the myriad of alternatives to active duty for those unfit or unable to serve (for more see Kwon 2001, Moon 2005, Choi and Kim 2017). This mobilisation of men of conscription age as researchers, construction workers, and workers in the manufacturing and agricultural industries has been well studied as a factor in reinforcing the traditionally gendered division of labour in

South Korea. This happened through the lowering of barriers in public and private recruitment processes for those who had undertaken military service, the enforcement of the “ideology of the male breadwinner” which determined policies enacted by government regarding access to social welfare, and industrial negotiations undertaken by labour unions which in turn has led to mass layoffs of women in moments of unrest such as the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis (Cho 2013).

The pervasiveness of conscription as a national narrative in South Korea is demonstrated by Kwon (2001) who writes that it “lies at the core of what most members of society believe being an ‘authentic’ South Korean means in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (28). The thread of militarised masculinity, and the gendered dimension of the “willingness for self-sacrifice” (28), is bound up inextricably with Confucian patriarchy, and used as a powerful tool not only for the political elite, but, as we will see, as a benchmark for the way that certain men have arranged and facilitated artistic and cultural spaces, and theatre companies in particular.⁷

The Politicisation of Female Sexuality

South Korean women have often been caught in the crossfire of efforts to use “traditional virtues such as loyalty and filial piety to induce conformity and unquestioning obedience to superior authority” (Chung 1995 86). Under the military dictatorship of General Park Chung-hee (1961-1979), *yeogong* (factory girls) were brought in from the countryside to toil in hellish conditions, living like battery hens and suffering physical and sexual abuse in the service of South Korea’s rapid and dramatic economic transformation (Louie 1995, 418). One of the most well-known national narratives of South Korea is that of the “comfort women”⁸—the women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army—an issue that is a major wellspring of anti-Japanese and nationalist sentiment in South Korea. After half a century of silence on the existence and experiences of “comfort women,” the issue started to take hold of the national consciousness in the 1980s, framed in large part by nationalist discourses that “redeploy[ed] patriarchal norms of female sexuality” (Yang 1998, 124). As Son (2018) writes:

The “comfort women” history and cause are always at risk of co-optation by other interests. It is a precarious narrative that could too easily dissolve into a nationalistic narrative of woman as nation, personal injury as national injury. The people who attend testimonial events, protests, and stage productions come for many reasons. Some harbor anti-Japanese sentiment, some advocate for women’s rights, but most come out of sympathy and support for the survivors. Nationalism also does not define the work of activists from the Korean Council and other organizations, who genuinely care for the survivors and tirelessly advocate on their behalf. (18)

As will be seen, the “comfort women” issue is inextricable from the public performances of grief, allyship, and holding the government to account which are hallmarks of South Korean democratic transformation. The powerful imagery provided by survivors and their

allies has “transform[ed] the way people think about gender-based and sexual violence” in South Korea (Son 2018, 184). Insidiously however, it is this same imagery that was wielded by Oh Tae Suk in one of his highest profile works of political theatre, *Why did Shim Cheong Plunge into the Sea Twice?*, a work in which the writer and director criticised the use of women’s bodies as political pawns in a nationalist agenda in order to remind his audiences of the “fragility of goodness in contemporary society” (PAMS 2016).

Oh Tae Suk and Mokwha

어릴적에 투명 망토를 뒤집어쓰고
사람들을 골탕 먹이면 참 재미있겠다
상상하며 즐거워했던 나 자신을
오랫동안 원망했어요
모든 게 다 내 탓인 것 같아서

As a kid I wanted an invisibility cloak
I thought it would be fun to tease people
I regret those childhood fancies now
I've blamed myself for a long time
I thought everything was my fault

Younghhee: *I remember being in the theatre as a young girl watching Mokwha's By the Moonlit Baekma River. In a theatre industry caught up in reproducing Western models of playmaking and establishing a commercial industry to rival Broadway or the West End, Oh Tae Suk's work was completely different from anything I had ever seen. It bubbled with imagination and creativity, and nobody in the theatre department at my performing arts high school could explain to me why.*

Jeremy: *When I moved to South Korea as a drama school graduate, one of my first experiences seeing theatre in Seoul was watching Mokwha. For years after that I followed the work that Oh Tae Suk wrote and directed, enthralled by the way his ensemble would bound around the space with seemingly endless energy, sometimes as woodland creatures, sometimes as warring Capulets and Montagues, sometimes as rural villagers placating restless spirits under the guidance of a shaman. Having worked in and around similar ensemble theatre companies in Brisbane, I was immediately drawn to the discipline, communal practice, and the palpable fire and hunger that seemed to emanate from the actors in front of me. Until recently, one of my proudest moments was rehearsing with Mokwha for a week and performing as a foreign soldier in the Brisbane leg of their tour of Oh Tae Suk's anti-war epic My Love DMZ in commemoration of the 60-year anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War.*

Oh Tae Suk's attention to the poetic rhythm, nuance, and imagery of the Korean language is obsessive, with Patrice Pavis describing the writer and his words as “a national treasure to be handled with care, both by himself as a director and by his own actors” (2017, 75).

Oh Tae Suk's ability to distil thousands of years of mythology and history and weave it together with a modern nationalism that seeks to expose the corruption of the ruling class is widely considered masterful. His dramaturgical philosophy of "omissions and leaps" demands that actors and audience together perform gymnastic feats of time, space, and logic in order to orient themselves inside his cosmology (Kwon 2009, 52). This is a theatrical language shared by both experimentalist and revivalist directors and playwrights who drew on traditional performance and storytelling forms at a time when South Korea was solidifying its modern national identity (Creutzenberg in Singh et al. 2016, 469). Although Oh Tae Suk is part of a generation of South Korean directors and playwrights well acquainted with the western avant-garde (*ibid.*, 468), his demand that actors never occupy the "mid-height" of tables and chairs, nor maintain eye contact with each other for more than the most fleeting of moments speaks as much to his understanding of indigenous physicalities and ways of being (Oh 1999, 2; Kwon 2017, 76), as it does to his reinterpretation of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* or the vocabulary of Grotowski's poor theatre. Oh Tae Suk's characteristic staging conventions demand that actors direct all of their dialogue to each other as if through a mirror placed in the auditorium. Referred to as *nondureong* (rice paddy), this aesthetic is attributed by Oh Tae Suk as being taken from his observation of the ways in which agricultural workers would talk, sing, gossip, and flirt while never taking their eyes off of their work.

Younghée: *Mokwha's work itself was hard. Oh Tae Suk used to say that good art can only be made by a series of jumps over ever-increasing hurdles. The actor should not rest at any moment, mentally or physically. His famous metaphor is of the remikon, the concrete truck that must constantly turn, or else the concrete will solidify and get stuck. Actors should be like that—once the truck stops, your creativity and imagination dries up and gets hard. So, therefore you have to just keep running.*

In many ways it sounds like a beautiful idea, but it is also full of ego. And it is completely ignorant of the fact that actors are human beings. But we accepted it as the destiny of a theatre artist. To just accept the agony, the ordeal, and then maybe, just once we will jump and suddenly be flying, suddenly we will be an incredible artist. Maybe we could create something amazing.

Mokwha is not immune to Moon's (2005) observation that there are striking resemblances between the "daily workings and social relations" of large South Korean companies and the nation's modern military. In fact, of all Oh Tae Suk's epithets his favourite was Field Commander (*yajeonsaryeonggwan*). Although it was not uncommon for Mokwha's ensemble to work from two in the afternoon until six the next morning, Oh Tae Suk would be right there with them calling the timing on choreographic drills, strategising alternative casting, and writing and rewriting scripts as the actors rehearsed. It was not uncommon for Oh Tae Suk to pass line changes to actors mid-performance or give notes from the front row of the auditorium. His was a theatrical dictatorship that was respected by its members as much for his active participation in it as for the results that he produced.

Younghée: What I experienced as a young adult working for Oh Tae Suk, I saw even as a young girl—it is that thing that our audiences saw. The work looked real, it was thrilling and amazing and intense. But it was only like that because thirty human beings were running an impossible marathon and hoping that they will fly.

Oh Tae Suk orchestrated forces that worked together on his actors to produce performances that are persuasive, compelling, and look vital and alive. The outrageous demands that Oh Tae Suk made of his actors were always tempered by his capacity for self-sacrifice, an embodiment of an idealised, militarised, South Korean masculinity. These forces however, were never confined to the rehearsal room, or the theatre they were intended to serve.

The Space Between Work and Leisure

어느 날
 여전히 행운 가득한 그 갈비집 상 아래로
 술에 취한 선생의 초점 없는 미소와 함께
 그 뱀 헛바닥 같은 손이 내 허벅지를 움켜쥘 때
 난 그의 손목을 낚아채며 말 했어요
 전, 선생님 딸 친구예요!
 난, 그것으로 끝을 낼 수 있으리라
 믿었어요

Another day
 We're at Good Luck Galbi House again
 The master's smile is drunk and unfocused
 Like a snake's tongue, his hand grabs my thigh
 I snatch his wrists and yell in his face
 "Master! I am your daughter's friend!"
 Just like that I thought it would end
 I really believed

In Korea, it is common for the culture of “giving reception” to guests to include drinking, serving as a “bridge that connects both working and leisure” (Ko and Sohn 2018, 53) and is tied to the concept of *jeong* (54), a complex expression of the human experience of warmth and affection that cannot be manufactured, and is the result of closely maintained interpersonal relationships (Yang 2006, 285-286). *Jeong* has its origins in Confucian thought and can be seen as a constellation of ways of being that encompass mutual obligation, relationship autonomy, and the setting of boundaries (Son 2014, 746).

In 1981, as Chun Doo-hwan cemented his place as the president of South Korea's Fifth Republic, the “world's longest-lasting curfew” was lifted (E. H. Kim 1998, 69), leading to a resurgence of *sul munhwa* (drinking culture), an “essential element for men's work and role in the public sphere” (77). S. R. Kwon (in Çakar and Kim 2015, 290) has reported that determining the drinking capacity of job applicants is a typical aspect of the South Korean

recruitment process. With the rise of sul munhwa, came the solidification of the practice of *hoesik*, or company-wide drinking sessions as an entrenched part of South Korean business culture. Ko and Sohn (2018, 54) see the interaction between *jeong* and excessive alcohol consumption as being problematic in this kind of environment where the pressure to signal generosity and show respect are felt in both directions of the Confucian hierarchy. *Hoesik* is also used in management environments to entrench abusive behaviour, where harsh feedback or unreasonable demands in the workplace will be tempered by the giving of advice and the “performance of care” under the influence of alcohol—with rejection of attention by a subordinate being perceived as an offence to generosity (Çakar and Kim 2015, 300). This perversion of the relational obligations and web of respect offered by a Confucian worldview has been identified by Younghee as contributing to creating an environment in which Oh Tae Suk perpetrated abuse.

Younghee: *There were months, years when I wouldn't see my family because I didn't have time to go home between my after-rehearsal obligations to Oh Tae Suk and my seniors, and the start of rehearsal the next day. Including hoesik, we would work from 2 p.m. until 6 a.m. or 7 a.m. the next day. And even if I had the time to ride the subway home to sleep, wash, and come back, I didn't have money for the subway fare. And so, I slept in the public bathhouse. The whole time I worked for Mokwha I never earned more than USD 2,000 per year. I remember when I first received a fee of USD 1,200 for the national tour of a show, I cried.*

As a high-school student, Younghee idolised the members of Mokwha’s ensemble, some of whom would become her colleagues, her seniors in her very first production *Love and The Fox*, the opening night of which was spent at Good Luck Galbi House well into the early morning.

Younghee: *Oh Tae Suk demanded everything from me, but for years I wasn't Younghee, I was just agaya (baby).⁹ And it was after rehearsal, when he would drink, and because of Korean custom, we would all have to join him, where his problems with women would start. That is when he would turn into a completely different monster. But he was the master, the genius, the hero. So that very first time where he put his hand on my thigh, all I could think was “what does this mean?”*

During the first year and a half of working with Mokwha, I thought “the director is touching me, but if this is the nature of my job, I just have to deal with it.” This is probably why I wasn't visibly affected by it. Once I became a senior in the company, life was easy, and the abuse didn't visibly affect my ordinary life. But once I decided to leave, I couldn't keep close contact with the company because I needed to survive, and to survive, I needed distance.

Elaine H. Kim (1998) has unpacked some of the ways in which the attitudes of men of Oh Tae Suk’s generation toward women are not “simple extensions of Confucian precepts,” but are a “reformulation of precepts for deployment in a modern state that defends and supports women as preservers of male dominance and as facilitators of men in the public

sphere" (75). It is this core thread of the manipulation of the "plasticity of Confucianism" (Duncan 2002) that runs through Younghee's experiences at Mokwha.

On revisiting an early draft of this article, Younghee was suddenly overcome with rage when reading her own account of being called agaya by Oh Tae Suk instead of being called by her name. During her time with Mokwha, the director only used the names of female company members once they had served for many years and risen to the status of *seonbae*, or senior, and even then always with the sisterly kinship term *eonni* tacked on as a suffix. Only women call each other *eonni* in Korean (a kinship term reserved for use between sisters or close female friends) and this was something Younghee had previously thought of merely as an eccentric act of self-debasement by the Field Commander of South Korean theatre.

After a few years with Mokwha, Younghee earned the nickname *osori* from Oh Tae Suk in recognition of her iconic and energetic role as the badger in *My Love DMZ*. Rather than being an endearing gesture however, Younghee is convinced that it is because he simply never took the time to learn the names of his female actors. By contrast, each male actor, no matter their place in Mokwha's hierarchy, was afforded the dignity of Oh Tae Suk using his name, with the elderly man sometimes going as far as using *hyeongnim*, the honorific form for older brother. Oh Tae Suk's company were a family—in a deeply Korean, patriarchally Confucian sense. It was a household where the division of labour was clear. The men built the sets, while the women cleaned, mended costumes, and served Oh Tae Suk his meals.

Behind Younghee's fresh rage while redrafting this article was the realisation that Oh Tae Suk's intentional misuse of Confucian kinship terms served to prop up the patriarchal working environment in which his abuse flourished. She was angry that this manipulation of the Confucian order was used to objectify and infantilise young women who bore the brunt of the domestic labour of the company—the nameless and invisible agaya and *eonni*—who rotated through the duty of sitting by his right-hand side in the Good Luck Galbi House in Daehangno. They cooked for him, poured drinks for him, gritting their teeth as his hand wandered under the table, all while he talked to the senior whose duty it was to sit on his left and engage him in political and philosophical debate.

Twenty-two years after her first opening night, as Younghee waited weeks for those same seniors to speak up about her revelation of Oh Tae Suk's abuse, it was early memories of suddenly being confronted with her vulnerability that haunted her.

Coming into Consciousness

내 앞에 앉아있던 사람들에게도
드디어 내가 보이고 들리는 기적이 일어난 듯 했어요
“니가 개 친구냐? 세상에 세월 빠르네”
그들은 너털 웃음과 함께 술잔을 비웠고

난, 또다시 투명인간이 되었어요
 기대했는데
 내가 젓먹던 힘으로 용기내어 소리쳤을 때
 누군가는 “그만 하시죠”
 한마디 쯤은 해줄거라고.

And like a miracle, someone saw, someone heard
 A senior made eye contact with me
 “You’re her friend? Oh how time flies!”
 They laughed and emptied their glasses
 I was invisible again
 I waited, expectant
 I had finally built up the courage
 I had said, “Stop. Enough.”
 I thought surely somebody would help me

Most women in South Korea have experienced sexual harassment or assault, from the lightest of physical touches, through disrespectful language, all the way to physical violence. As Haynes and Chen (2018) report in their *Time* profile of Seo Ji-hyun, almost eighty percent of South Korean men have self-reported physically or psychologically abusing a girlfriend. Sexual harassment and assault however was not fully recognised as a pervasive social problem in South Korea until the establishment of the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre (KSVRC) in the early 1990s (Jung 2014, 1), a period marked by an incident which involved a professor at the Seoul National University and his female assistant (D.-K. Choi 2019, 85). The “Professor Shin Incident”¹⁰ was a defining moment in the fledgling women’s movement in South Korea, one which led to the introduction of the term “sexual harassment” in South Korean law (Yoon and Park 2016) and the creation of a raft of formalised codes of conduct for the regulation of contact between the sexes (D.-K. Choi 2019, 87-88).

As Kim Hee-Kang (2009) writes, “most postcolonial feminisms are necessarily nationalist to some degree” (117), and the case of South Korea is no exception, and should be understood within the particularities of its social and historical context. Women’s organisations existed on a small scale since the late nineteenth century, and an increased participation by women in education and public life gradually allowed women to begin to organise on larger scales (H. Choi 2013, 196). The history of the women’s movement in South Korea is bound inextricably with the wider class liberation of the 1970s and 1980s, a movement crystallised around the central pillars of *minjok* (nationalism), *minju*, (democracy), and *minjung* (the people), a movement that “aimed to transform capitalist structures; it was a revolutionary movement to overthrow the authoritarian military regime, and to establish a democratic government” (Jung 2014, 9).

Women played a central role, and shouldered heavy burdens in this labour and anti-military movement—from female workers on the front lines fighting for worker’s rights, to

ageing “comfort women,” to students of newly minted women’s studies courses subjected to physical and sexual violence at the hands of law enforcement tasked with quelling demonstrations (Louie 1995). These women grew what Heo MinSook (2010) has described as a “progressive feminist movement based on their understanding and awareness of structural oppression associated with patriarchal capitalism, male domination, and military regimes” (227).

In the 1980s, at the same time that western feminists were working toward autonomy and equality in the workplace, South Korean women were on the frontline, fighting with their bodies for humane working conditions and the right to work and to have a fulfilling family life.

Younghée: *Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s in Seoul, my parents were very progressive, very left-wing. I never heard the words pass through their lips “you cannot do that because you are a girl.” My father owned a gym and was an amateur bodybuilder, and if I experienced violence or bullying from male cousins or boys that lived in our neighbourhood, my mother always told me to never complain, that I should just punch back. As a university student I often outperformed my male classmates. In my audition for the Bongsan talchum (traditional masked dance) club, I outlasted all other applicants and wore out four male drummers over four hours—in the end they had to beg me to stop.*

It was a huge shock for me when I realised that my gender, my body, is something that is vulnerable.¹¹ I was confronted with this at my very first opening night party; but I stayed for seven and a half years with Mokwha. And I need to be clear that sexual assault and harassment was always there, in all different kinds of forms. In the first place I thought that I could handle it, but I realised that whenever something happened, people’s reactions were to treat me as invisible, or as if I wasn’t a human being, or that it wasn’t a big deal. So, you realise that it was very difficult to find allies. At some point I thought that I should just embrace this as one of the tougher aspects of the entertainment business.

My mind didn’t change until years later, when I started to work in a completely different environment. I know that Australia is not a perfect country, but at least actors have a union, and at least there are some guidelines and protocols about harassment. My collaborators now are so focussed on making safe, brave spaces for us to work in. Through that process of building up our own working methods and values, I realised how bad I had it when I was a young actor working in my first company.

But this epiphany occurred very slowly. Every year, or every month, I realised something new. It was a long process. But in the end, when I saw the first news stories breaking about the American #MeToo movement, I finally realised it wasn’t just about me as an anonymous, poor artist, but it was also about the female actors who have a lot of money, who occupy powerful positions in the industry—they have the same issues as me.

What Do We Do with Our Heroes?

그 때 깨달았어요
 아무도 없다는것을
 나와 당신과 우리는 철저히 혼자였고
 보이지 않는 투명인간이었어요
 그 상 아래서 우리의 어린 청춘이
 우리의 연극에 대한 열정이
 선생에 대한 믿음이
 새까맣게 타들어 갈 때
 나와 당신 우리는
 그렇게 혼자였어요

In that moment I finally realised
 There is nobody here to help me
 Me, you, all of us are completely alone
 We are invisible
 Our youth
 Our passion for theatre
 Our faith in our master
 Has all been burned away
 Me, you, all of us
 We are completely alone

Jeremy: *I think a lot of people at the moment are asking the question, "What do we do when our heroes turn out to be monsters?"¹² I've been thinking about this a lot; not just because Oh Tae Suk was my hero for a long time; and of course, we have made a version of his play Why did Shim Cheong Plunge into the Sea Twice? that we can probably never stage again. The more I think about it, the more I become aware that it is actually, probably, a very male-centric question. I can only assume that a lot of women have known for a very long time that the men we look up to in the theatre and film industry are not heroes, really. They might make great art, but they make terrible decisions and they treat people very badly. Not just women, but queers, people of colour, and others from minority groups have often had to do a lot of this invisible work of keeping the peace and making sure that everyone is okay—and this has led to a lot of people looking the other way when something problematic or abusive happens. But suddenly, with the #MeToo movement, men are starting to see what women have always seen.*

Younghée: *Let's think about the actual meaning of what it is to be a hero. Commonly, when we think about a hero, it is somebody that risks it all to save a person's life, someone who always endeavours to help people—particularly the vulnerable. What does that mean for those heroes or masters we look up to in the performing arts? If we look at only their work—the words on the page, the work on the stage—it is inspired. But really, did their work ever save a life? Think about the superheroes of the Marvel universe—extraordinary beings who*

suffer in their support of the innocent, sometimes to the peril of their friends and family; heroes can be flawed. The point however is that these mythical heroes are personally put in a tough position. They suffer in order to do good, to save lives.

But what about our heroes, our masters whose art we love? I watched a master work for almost ten years, and as far as I could see he never showed any genuine worry or concern for his troops. And that's what we were—an army working in the harshest conditions imaginable. But if anyone walked into our rehearsal room, or into the theatre as we were working, they would never have known about Oh Tae Suk's abuse. In this way, the case of Mokwha is completely different to Yeonhuidan, where Lee Yoon-taek rotated through his female actors, often young recent graduates, who would massage and pleasure him as part of their daily company routine. It was an open secret when Yeonhuidan moved from Busan to Seoul in the early 1990s that he was physically violent toward his actors, and that there was something strange happening with the female actors. But seniors in the industry pretended they didn't know, because he quickly became a shining light.

But Oh Tae Suk? He hardly ever even walked up on to the stage. Whenever he directed his actors, he sat on his chair and yelled. He hardly ever even touched the actor's body. But his problem was that even though he was a wild genius of the theatre, he was completely naïve as a human being. We would work for ten or twelve hours a day, simply to make what he imagined to be the perfect work of theatre. This is something that we did share with Yeonhuidan, the idea that great art comes from struggle, and maybe this is connected to Korean ideas of collective suffering and overcoming adversity. We sacrificed our twenties and thirties for Oh Tae Suk's impossible dream.

My point is—do heroes hold people hostage for their dreams? Do heroes create their work on the backs of slaves? Not just physical, but mental and sexual slaves? No. That is the path of an anti-hero. And that is what these men are to me now, anti-heroes.

The Public Performance of Allyship

지금 아무 말 못해 망설이고
잠 못들고 아파하는 당신
아무것도 미안해 말아요
당신과 우리는
그동안 아픈지도 모르고 산걸요
이렇게 상처가 벌어져 있는지도 모른채
미친듯 살았는걸요
부지불식간 내 영혼을 좀먹는
그 미끄덩 거리던
더러운 손을 20년이 다 되도록
지우지 못한채 살아가고 있는걸요
당신에게 위로가 필요해요
나와 우리에게 미안해 말아요

말하지 않아도 보이고
다 아는걸요

You who are hesitant to speak
You who are suffering from sleepless nights
Don't be sorry for anything
Me, you, all of us
We didn't even know our hearts were hurting
We couldn't see our wounds
We were living in madness
Living an eternity with open, wounded hearts
We were slipping away
It's been twenty years
Unable to erase the mark of his dirty hands
You and I need comfort
So please don't say sorry to me
You don't have to say anything
I see you

The culture of consciousness raising that underpinned the activities of the minjung movement has continued into South Korea's democratic era.¹³ One of the most powerful instances of this are the *Suyo jipoe*, or Wednesday demonstrations—a weekly gathering of “comfort women” and their supporters in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul who “through their bodily presence and their actions [...] embody their visions for justice through redressive acts” (Son 2018, 19). First held in 1992 to protest a visit by the Prime Minister of Japan, these demonstrations are tied to the resurgence of cultural nationalism in the 1970s and 1980s through the regular performance of *pungmullori*, a folk form of music tradition that includes singing, dancing, and the playing of percussion and is used as a “regular part of Korean political protests to express both dissent and pride” (Son 2018, 57). This kind of gendered, embodied performance of justice was seen on a monumental scale in 2015, with mass demonstrations shutting down Seoul’s city centre in protest of the government’s response to the Sewol ferry disaster and a weekly mass “Candlelight Movement” led by women and girls and attracting half a million citizens at each gathering, leading to the bringing down of President Park Geun-hye in 2016 (E. T. Kim 2019).

Jeremy: *This willing and meticulously organised rush to show solidarity and perform allyship is pervasive in South Korea, and captures the public imagination to such a degree that at one stage in 2018 I had to stop telling taxi drivers that I worked in the theatre. There was one incident in which a driver was so enraged by the stories of Lee Yoon-tae's abuse, and my supposed complicity to it as a male theatre director that I had to ask to be let out of the car well before we arrived at my destination.*

Younghhee: *There was a time when audiences didn't know, or perhaps didn't want to know how the work that they love and respect so much was made. But now, there is no excuse*

for ignorance. Should we feel sad? Should we complain that “we can't see Oh Tae Suk's amazing work anymore?”

South Korean audiences no longer have this conflict. As far as I can tell, they are the only audiences internationally who have publicly protested in great numbers in order to support artists. Recently the Korean Theater Standards (KTS) group held an outdoor campaign where our slogan was “Yesurui abeojiyeo sudowoneuro gara!” (Fathers of the theatre, go back to your monasteries!). Audiences rallied and gave speeches for over five hours in Daehangno's theatre district and very clearly sent the message that “we are not going to watch any theatre made by perpetrators”. These men have set up their companies like dark religious cults where they could get away with anything, but now the light is shining in.

Whether it is directors, producers, actors, if there are any perpetrators involved, our audiences are refusing to watch it. It is amazing, and a great example of the way that Koreans are not afraid to show their in-built notion of community. Audiences are aware that we are all connected, and the artist's struggle is the public's struggle.

Modern South Korean protests are almost like a ritual performance. Take Ganggangsullae for example. Similar to the European maypole ceremonies, it is a harvest and fertility ritual held and performed by women, and we are told that it is thousands of years old. But in the sixteenth century, during the Japanese invasion, Admiral Yi Sun-shin ordered women to dress in military uniform and dance Ganggangsullae around a bonfire on top of Okmae Mountain so that our enemies could see the fire, and see their dancing shadows, and in that way show off the power of the people

Koreans have lived through many very harsh lessons. We survived and rebuilt after occupation by the Japanese, the Korean War, and the struggle for democracy—but we paid in blood and that history is a part of our genetic memory. What made the Sewol ferry disaster so devastating was that people didn't die by war, famine, or protest, but by pure corruption and misconduct by the government. The threat was from within, and that moved people. We are learning again that when the people are hurting, those in power won't stand with them. It has always been the people that made change throughout the history of our country. In the face of death, the Korean people know that to survive, you need your neighbours, your family and friends to work together as a community. This is why the strength of community values is a very strong central idea. It is not the same as western ideas about social justice—this survival instinct is in our cultural DNA, and it is in the physical memory of our muscles.

One thing that I have noticed working in the US, is that Americans are always talking about community values. Why is that? In Korea we don't talk about community values, because that value is always here, present with us. But in such an individual society like the United States, they need to project the value of community. So many of my friends in the US often tell me that is it extraordinary that I, an ordinary, anonymous woman, am listened to by newsmakers, reporters, politicians, and the public. When you contrast my story to that of those many courageous women speaking up in the US, you realise that in the West, unless

you are a social leader, your voice is never heard. When a whole society is oppressed by their government, people can easily sink into individuality and not truly caring for other people. This is because the moment you think about others, then your life can get very difficult and unless you have resources, you will not survive. This is the difference between developed countries and others—even though in many ways South Korea is still a developing country, we have a unique community identity.

The Act of Surviving

오늘은 아무에게도 미안해 말고
 당신의 여전히 떨리는 마음을
 상처투성이 몸을 가장 따뜻하게
 안아주세요
 고맙다고
 견뎌줘서
 살아줘서
 고맙다고

Today, don't say sorry to anyone
 Make still your trembling heart
 Warm your wounded body
 Give yourself a hug
 Say thank you
 You have survived
 You have endured
 Thank you

Before writing obliquely about her experiences on Facebook in February 2018, Younghée had never told anyone about the dark undercurrents that she navigated during her time at Mokwha. Oh Tae Suk was like a god: for her proud family, for the South Korean artistic and cultural community, and for the population at large who admired him not just for his ability to capture what it was to be a contemporary South Korean, but for his internationally successful re-imaginings of Shakespeare's classics. From 1995 to 2001 Younghée made her way up through the ranks of the thirty-strong Mokwha ensemble. She started as a nameless junior, and finally, as a senior company member, Oh Tae Suk called her by her name, addressed her as *eonni*, sister. His name however followed Younghée even when she left Mokwha—on every resume, on every CV, and in every bio in every program. In true Korean manner, the formal hierarchy of the company was inescapable, and Younghée, like other Mokwha alumni, maintained her standing in the pecking order long after her final closing night.

Jeremy: *You have trained hard as an actor for many years, you have made a lot of work, and have so many experiences moving between cultures, languages, and art forms. Now you are at a time in your life where, as you say, you are moving into a new identity as an*

activist and trying to stay grounded in your own identity as a human being. I wonder if anything about your life as an actor helps you to dance between, or navigate these different identities?

Younghée: Yes and no. Before #MeToo I had never given a public speech. I had never hung out with politicians or scholars, or professors. I never imagined myself in a big conference room talking about women's rights issues in front of hundreds of people. And to do that, yes, I put on a mask. A mask that is confident, strong. The mask of a woman who refuses to be a victim. An actor needs to be sensitive to emotions—not just in dealing with them, but we need to express them through our bodies. I have trained as an actor since I was seventeen, and sometimes even though my brain says "don't overreact, don't get drawn into this too much, these are the circumstances, but you don't have to overreact," even though my brain tries to pull me into line, my training as an actor sucks me back in. And at some point your balance breaks down. For instance, when my father passed away, I thought that I was out of my mind. But I found that I was incredibly calm watching him die over three hours—my brain started to work to observe the whole process, how his body collapsed, everything. It was a bit scary when I recognised and acknowledged that I was able to be objective and treat the process as an exercise in observation. But recently with this #MeToo movement, that kind of detachment didn't work. It was bizarre. I was actually drawn into a huge deep emotional swamp—I won't call it a pond, because you can actually swim out of a pond, but a swamp is difficult, because if you try to get out of it, you will drown. So in some way, when I have had to speak and deal with it publicly, then yes, being an actor was useful, but apart from that... it was not at all.

A Responsible Future

기억해요
이제 당신은 투명인간이 아니예요
기억해요
이제 당신은
혼자가 아니예요
당신은 우리예요

Remember
You are not invisible anymore
Remember
You are not alone
You are me
You are all of us

Younghée: I think about the way we worked at Mokwha, and about the things that Oh Tae Suk demanded of us. We worked like the remikon truck, never stopping because we feared getting stale. We spent hours in the rehearsal room never looking at each other in the eye because nondureong was our gospel. We were scared to stop moving and scared to talk to

each other. And so, when we sat in the Galbi House together, of course what happened to me and to my sisters stayed invisible.

Was our sacrifice the only way we could create good art? I don't think so. There is a new kind of movement among young theatre artists now in South Korea. There is a feeling that the new generation is willing to learn from their seniors—yes there are hardships and ordeals to endure, and amazing work comes from that. But that is not the only way, and it is not the end of the world if we try something new. This is the work that needs to be done now, to test completely different ways of being.

The global rise in awareness of problematic power dynamics and their effect on interpersonal relationships has led to a recent reconsideration of healthy and productive ways of being in the workplace. In the entertainment industries this has manifested in a rush to develop policies and procedures aimed at reducing incidences of sexual harassment and assault. A prominent example of this has been the Chicago Theatre Standards (CTS), spearheaded by Laura T. Fisher as “not a legal document,” but “a cultural document” (Fisher and Myers 2019). Arts workers and activists across the globe have taken the CTS as a de facto roadmap of best practices in this field, with Younghée herself collaborating with Fisher and Suzanna Dilber, former chair of the Actor's Association of Sweden, in a series of public fora aimed at improving the conditions of actors in South Korea and attempting to enshrine its guiding principles in law.

As we begin to step back from Younghée’s personal experiences, we see that the threads of the plasticity of Confucian patriarchy, the militarisation of masculinity, and the politicisation of female sexuality having wider ranging impacts on the South Korean theatre industry. As of 2018, South Korea has the widest gendered wage gap in the OECD at 36.7 percent (OECD 2018), and “has among the lowest women representations in senior roles, boards, and executive committees both in Asia and in the world” (Cho 2018). There has long been a paucity of women in the leadership of South Korea’s theatre companies, performing arts organisations, and international festivals, with the notable exception being the local chapter of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ), which Younghée speculates has more to do with the maintenance of patriarchal divisions of labour and notions of childrearing and caregiving, than it has to do with any great drive for increased female representation. If the industry is to move past outrage and protest, changes being instigated at the grassroots needs to be reflected in the structure of South Korea’s artistic and cultural leadership.

Son (2018) has detailed the ways in which South Korea’s “comfort women” have long lived and worked in ways in which the category of survivor is just one layer in a complex web of experiences and identities that they use “to hold perpetrators accountable and to draw attention to sexual violence worldwide” (17). This is an impulse, a drive that Younghée shares.

Younghée: *One of the reasons I wanted to write this article was that I don't want my voice, and the voices of other survivors to be buried, either by perpetrators and their supporters,*

or by the government. There is a saying that maybe you cannot bring down a huge chunk of stone with a hammer, but single drops of water over millions of years will do the job. Even though I am no longer anonymous, my voice is just one drop of water. I don't expect to be a hammer that will bring miraculous change to society, but through this public record, my drop of water is joining all those that came before and will help the ones to come after.

Sometimes for survivors, we feel we are the most vulnerable—but we are not. This has been an epiphany to me. Yes, I was vulnerable as a young woman at the hands of my director, but as soon as I named those experiences, as soon as I spoke out, people gave me power. Power so that whenever I open up my mouth, people will shut their mouths and listen. Maybe there is a cultural difference in the ways that people treat survivors, but this is the temperature of the movement in South Korea now.

I feel great responsibility now as a survivor to help others, but also at the same time I am fully aware of my new power which is given to me by the people. If I get it wrong, or speak in the wrong way, or make accusations without thinking, I can hurt innocent people. My words can affect other victims who haven't spoken up yet. So ironically, I have started to become more aware of myself. I am not a vulnerable person anymore. I have power from the people, and I have started to think about how I can use this power for the good. This is my homework for the future.

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Notes

1. Corresponding author (jeremy.neideck@qut.edu.au).
2. Mokwha Repertory Company, referred to throughout as Mokwha.
3. Yonhuidan Street Theatre Troupe, referred to throughout as Yonhuidan.
4. Epigraphs throughout this article are from Younghee's post to Facebook in 2018. English translations by the authors.
5. Although the most widely accepted translation of *seonsaeng* is "teacher," in this context the term "master" is closer in character to Younghee's intention. It is common in the South Korean theatre industry to refer to certain senior directors as *seonsaengnim*, rather than the more correct *yeonchullim*, which plays into Oh Tae Suk's public persona as the "maestro of Korean theatre" (*Hanguk yeongeukgyeui geojang*).

6. Although it was common for a man who wandered into a village and indecently propositioned a woman to be “roughed up” by the young men of the community (D.-K. Choi 2019, 86), often the only restitution was for a survivor of sexual violence to end her own life (Jung 2014, 46). Until the 1990s in fact, the act of rape was only ever euphemistically referred to as a “violation of chastity,” with the perpetrator described as committing a destructive act against “the home,” and discussions of the female body shrouded in metaphors involving “glassware” or “ripe fruit” (ibid., 50).

7. Of course, the “militarisation of masculinity” has a profound effect on realms of cultural production outside of the theatre too. As Kim (2014) has outlined, the South Korean dance industry is indelibly marked by the universal male conscription system, as special exemptions exist for the winners of major national and international dance competitions. A complex cottage industry of specialist coaching has developed, with young male dancers almost single-mindedly focused on competition from the time that they enter university. In this climate of extreme protectionism, power rests in the control of a select few men. Recently, several high-profile cases of the abuse of this power have recently come to light, and the Dance Hope Solidarity group (*Muyonghuimanginyeondae-orot*) have been instrumental in organising consciousness-raising activities and supporting survivors to seek legal reparations against perpetrators who have found shelter in this system (Yoon 2019).

8. In this article, the authors follow the lead of Elizabeth W. Son, who, in her book *Embodyed Reckonings: “Comfort Women,” Performance, and Transpacific Redress* (2018) maintains consistent use of quotation marks to contain the term “comfort women” in order to highlight the inadequacy of this euphemism for enforced sex slave which, although it is perhaps the “most legible [term for] an international audience” (17), is widely contested and denounced by survivors and activists.

9. A diminutive term without the romantic connotations that the name “baby” holds in English.

10. Anti-sexual-assault activists and organisations have campaigned since the late 1990s to rename this particular case, which is popularly referred to in connection to the victim, in order to hold the perpetrator accountable and to de-sensationalise the case to protect the victim’s privacy and anonymity.

11. Louie (1995) has documented similar accounts of women participating in the early minjung movement; that they “came to consciousness” in regard to feminism through being confronted with the struggles women face in the workplace (419).

12. See Dereder (2017), Pratt (2017), Endacott (2017), Solnit (2017), and Grady (2018).

13. With the 1979 collapse of the Yusin constitution and in the wake of the Gwangju massacre in 1980, industrial disputes and student-led protests became chief mobilising forces in the South’s long revolutionary march to democracy (M. Park 2005, 264-265). This catalyst served to strengthen the moral discourses of the intellectual class who were at the forefront of the *uisikhwa* (consciousness raising) movement (ibid., 267), and who wielded tools such as letter writing campaigns, the posting of *daejabo* (wall newspapers), illegal street demonstrations, situational plays, and other forms of disruption both violent and non-violent.

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