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Obliteration and Rearticulation through Screen Narratives: Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

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【Synopsis】

Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, which deals with the issue of comfort women, is constructed by a first-person narrator, Franklin Hata, a Japanese American in his seventies. His narrative proceeds with frequent flashbacks, taking readers back and forth between his current life as a retiree who is well-known and respected for his good manners and his past filled with afflictions resulting from his ethnicity and his gesture life. Hata is a so-called unreliable narrator, but it is this unreliability that makes this novel an important text to examine in terms of the instability and vulnerability of memory, and the relationship of memory to history, especially in regard to traumatic historical events such as the Japanese army's use of comfort women during the Asia Pacific War. In examining the novel, I use the term, "screen narrative," combining Marita Sturken's concepts of camera images and Susan Brison's view of the self as a narrative. Screen narrative means the narrative, either that of an individual or society, which screens out other narratives or memories that the subject feels are too difficult to cope with. Hata experiences multiple screen narratives in his childhood in the process of self-formation, which damage his self and prompt him to lead a gesture life. The analysis of why and how Hata employs screen narratives, what is being obliterated by what, and what is being rearticulated through obliteration enables us to understand what the novel presents. This essay examines (1) the formative process and function of screen narratives in Hata's life, and his traumatic experiences and their impact upon his ongoing memory of his life, (2) the novel's key images to show how they embody a process of obliteration as well as rearticulation, and (3) the implications of real world politics in the novel and the way the novel approaches the issue of comfort women.

【Key Words】 screen narrative/memory/images/absent presence/comfort women

Korean American writer Chang-rae Lee's second novel, *A Gesture Life*, deals with the issue of

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comfort women, who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II. Lee is notable not only as “one of the twenty best American writers under forty by the *New Yorker*” (Lee, “Interview”), but also as one of the first male authors in American literary history to have approached the comfort women issue in a novel. *A Gesture Life* is narrated by a Japanese American, Franklin Hata. He is a former owner of a small medical supply store, living in a prosperous American suburb called Bedley Run. He is well-known and respected for his kindness, good manners and contribution to the community. The narrative begins with descriptions of Hata’s current life but proceeds with frequent flashbacks to his past: his birth as an ethnic Korean in Japan, his childhood and youth as a Japanese after being adopted by a Japanese family, his war experiences and the traumatic memory of a comfort woman, Kkutaeh, and his life in the U.S. including his failed relationship with his adopted daughter, Sunny, and her abortion. As Hata’s past gradually resurfaces, he seems to be telling everything he knows, but in fact, it becomes apparent that he does not reveal everything. Throughout his narrative, Hata tries to justify his life by emphasizing his efforts to become a worthy member of the community and the reputation he has achieved through such efforts. However, they merely reflect a life made up of “gestures and politeness” (95), an empty life which displays his lack of inner intensity, inability to confront complications, and avoidance of deep emotional involvement with others. At the same time, however, although readers are made aware of Hata’s manipulation of his narrative and the irony of his good reputation and social success, they still have to depend on what he says since the whole novel is constructed through his first-person point of view. Such an unreliable narrative structure makes this novel an important and interesting text to examine in terms of the instability and vulnerability of memory, and the relationship of memory to history, especially in regard to traumatic historical events such as the Japanese army’s use of comfort women during the Asia Pacific War.

If Hata’s gesture life is the representation of emptiness, in order to analyze his narrative it is useful to adopt the concepts of “screen memory” and “absent presence” developed by Marita Sturken in her studies of the relationships between camera images and cultural memory. Sturken states that memory acquires various cultural and historical meanings depending on how it is articulated when presented, and camera images provide a good example of this fluidity because while they obviously embody and create memories, they can also obliterate memories and lead people to forget particular events. That is, forgetting can be produced through the presence of images as well as through the absence of images. To illustrate this, she cites the mass murders in Cambodia under the Pol Pot regime and in Rwanda as situations where the relative absence of photographic images of these atrocities, compared to the Holocaust, resulted in a much lower level of public attention. Also, she presents the image of the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb as something which works to “screen

out” the less familiar images of the bomb’s destruction (“Absent Images” 689–90). This idea of the screening function of images is developed further in her book *Tangled Memories*, where images are related to a Freudian term, “screen memories” (22), which Freud defines as a substitute for memories that the subject finds too difficult to cope with and thus wants to suppress (Freud 316–320). While Freud conceptualized screen memories as taking place within personal memory, Sturken identifies memory with images that exist in society, asserting that “all camera images can be seen as ‘screen memories’” (22). At the same time, however, Sturken argues that what has been screened out, or forgotten, can also be evoked through an absence of images. In other words, the screening can work both ways. In her essay on the Japanese American internment, she quotes filmmaker Rea Tajiri’s statement that “the 1954 film *Bad Day at Black Rock* [. . .] perhaps most powerfully reenacts the absent presence of the Japanese American internment” (“Absent Images” 696). Sturken discusses how this film conjures up “the cultural implications of the Japanese internment and American racial conflict through its absence” (696–698). Sturken argues not only that images can act like screen memories, but that what is screened out can assert its presence as an “absent presence” and thus promote the retrieval of memories. This argument underlies *A Gesture Life*. Hata’s narrative is constructed as an accumulation of images that must be read both as screens and as absent presences. What the novel presents through Hata can only be understood through an analysis of what is being obliterated by what, and what is being rearticulated through obliteration.

In addition to the usefulness of Sturken’s concepts of “screen memory” and “absent presence” as applied to images, Susan Brison’s view of self-formation through narrative provides a way of explaining Hata’s lack of inner intensity and his attachment to a gesture life. In her study of the impact of trauma upon a self and the role of a narrative in reestablishing the disrupted self, Brison combines concepts inspired by Marx, Freud, and feminist theory with Locke’s view of the self, and defines the self as an ongoing narrative which is formed and sustained in a social context and is constituted by memories of the past and extended with each new experience (41). Brison emphasizes this point by stating: “The ability to envision a future, along with the ability to remember a past, enable a person to self-identify as the same person over time. When these abilities are lost the ability to have or to be a self is lost as well” (44). A self cannot be formed or sustained without a coherent narrative to explain one’s being. Trauma damages a self by breaking “the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future” (41). She quotes Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, who said, “we were confined to the present moment” (43), to indicate the way that trauma blocks the flow of the self’s narrative. This distinction between a normal self-narrative and a narrative disrupted by trauma is essential in analyzing the novel because it explains how and why screens and absences occur in Hata’s life and his narration of his life.

Combining the critical concepts of Sturken and Brison, I propose the term “screen narratives” to read the representation of memory in *A Gesture Life*. Applying Brison’s view of the self as a narrative to society, we can say that the narrative of a society is something that enables its people to identify the society as the same one they belong to. This narrative reflects the ideas, consciousness or behavior patterns of its people and reinforces a sense of solidarity. In *A Gesture Life*, a narrative of a society is intertwined with that of an individual within the narrator, Franklin Hata, whose past consists of three phases of identity: as a son of the Ohs, as Jiro Kurohata, and as Franklin Hata. Each time he enters upon a new phase, he establishes a new narrative as a new person, assuming a new name, and each new narrative functions as a kind of screen memory, obliterating the former narrative. At the same time, in each phase, Hata’s reconstructed narrative as an individual is screened out by the narrative of the society. These social narratives, which function the same way as Hata’s screen memories, I call “screen narratives.” As a result of experiencing multiple screen narratives in his childhood, Hata becomes unable to form a complete self, which prompts him to lead a gesture life.

The first section of this essay examines the formative process and function of screen narratives in Hata’s life, and his traumatic experiences and their impact upon his ongoing memory of his life. The second section focuses on the novel’s key images to show how they embody a process of obliteration as well as rearticulation, that is, how they operate as an absent presence. Finally, I try to expand the reading of the novel by exploring the implications of real world politics in the novel as well as by examining how the novel approaches the issue of comfort women.

Screen Narratives and the Narrative Flow

At one point in his story-telling, Hata remarks, “how critically the times and circumstances [of a person’s early years] can affect one’s character and outlook and even actions” (67). Although this is not intended to reflect his own childhood, childhood experiences were indeed crucial for Hata because they determined his way of life. Hata was born in Japan as a child of an ethnic Korean couple living in a “ghetto of hide tanners and renderers” (72). Since the narrative of the society in those days reflected the policies of aggression and imperialism of the Japanese government, Koreans experienced both racial and occupational discrimination. The government emphasized an assimilation policy, and Koreans were forced to suppress their ethnicity, including their Korean names (Kim 86–87, 120–121). Although this policy became strictly enforced in the 1930s (Kim 86, 121), more than a decade after Hata’s birth, it can easily be inferred that most Koreans even before the thirties preferred to use Japanese names in order to avoid discrimination. That is why Hata’s Korean name “was never used by anyone, including my [his] real parents” (235), why he wished to “become

wholly and thoroughly Japanese” (235), and why his parents wished this for him, too. His initial narrative as Oh was thus screened out, or rather it was prevented from forming by the imperialistic narrative of Japanese society. However, as long as he was labeled as Korean and lived in the ghetto, his narrative could never coincide with the narrative of the society. The assimilation policy only worked to deprive Koreans of their ethnicity and leave them alienated from the society. Hata was bereft of any narratives to account for his being. His self was left incomplete.

When he is adopted by a wealthy Japanese couple, however, he gains the opportunity to establish a new narrative. But if the self is an ongoing narrative flowing from the past to the present and to the future, it is impossible for Hata to make a coherent narrative when he cannot link his past as Oh to his new identity as Jiro Kurohata. The only way for him to establish a sound narrative is to assimilate his self into the social narrative, and this time, he has acquired a fundamental condition to be accepted by the society. His name has changed and his home environment has changed. He views this time as “the true beginning of ‘my life’” (72) because it is when he “first appreciated the comforts of real personhood, and [. . .] the harmonious relation between a self and his society” (72). Although he screens out his former narrative as Oh, as soon as he becomes Jiro Kurohata, this narrative gives way to the social narrative. As he states, “I knew even then as a boy of twelve how I should always give myself over to its vigilance, entrusting to its care everything I could know or ever hope for” (73). He adopts every code the society imposes upon him and acts according to its expectation, as he later recollects, “I held my own associations quite close to who I was” (68).

According to social psychologist George Herbert Mead, individuals form their complete selves only when they acquire a self both as an object and as a subject. An objective self is called “Me,” which is “the organized set of attitudes of others which one [. . .] assumes” (Mead 175), and a subjective self, the “I,” is “the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others” (Mead 175), which becomes “the principle of action and of impulse” (Morris xxv). Individuals perceive the attitudes of others toward themselves, and their own toward others or various social activities, within a certain social environment both they and others are involved in, and take these attitudes within themselves and assume their roles accordingly (Mead 138–164), and in the process of responding to the attitudes of others, a subjective self, the ego, emerges, which determines the individual’s own action (Mead 175). However, when the balance between “Me” and “I” collapses, the self becomes incomplete, and in the case of Kurohata, “Me” dominates over “I.” Filling the expectations of the society becomes the main focus of his life, and therefore, his life becomes covered with “gestures and politeness” (95). It is ironic to observe him speak of the importance of the relation between a child and the society: “[. . .] the abiding philosophy is to help a wayward child develop into a productive member of the community, or if ignored, risk allowing someone of essentially decent nature to

become an adult whose social interactions are fraught and difficult, or even pathological, criminal” (67). In Kurohata’s case, as a result of his attempt to be “a productive member of the community,” he loses “the principle of action and of impulse” which is the core of the self, and becomes in a sense “pathological.” This is the origin of his gesture life, and “the true beginning” of his life as Jiro Kurohata. After experiencing multiple incomplete narratives in the process of his self-formation, Kurohata finally acquires a seemingly sound and complete screen narrative.

However, his carefully built narrative full of “gestures and politeness” is fatally damaged by Kkutaeh. When he encounters her while he is stationed in Burma, he falls in love with her and tries to find a way to keep her away from her “duties” with other men. But Kkutaeh comes to see, after Hata takes her in a way forcedly, that his kindness and politeness are just a gesture and his love for her a mere sexual desire. She says to him, “You are a decent man, Lieutenant, but really you are not any different from the rest” (300), and in fact, whatever he wants to do or actually does to protect her from her “duties” is based on his selfish desire. He simply “want[s] her” and cannot “bear her being with another” (261). Sensing all these, and determining to terminate her dreadful fate as a comfort woman, Kkutaeh intentionally enrages a first lieutenant to invite a brutal death, by cutting his face with a scalpel, “not too deeply, as though she were trying only to mark him” (303). By thus creating the conditions for her disappearance, she expresses her will to keep Hata away from her and denies his way of life. But Hata only comes to recognize the meaning of her act much later in his life when he sees a girl at the mall in Bedley Run, who, annoyed by her brother messing up the cloth she has folded, covers her face with a piece of black cloth: “I felt I understood what she was meaning by her peculiar act, how she could repel his insults and finally him by making herself in some measure disappear” (222). Loss of Kkutaeh is traumatic for Hata not only because she is brutally killed but also because she condemns in the most unforgettable manner Hata’s attitude to “make a whole life out of gestures and politeness” (95). Hata’s screen narrative is thus disrupted.

Yet, ironically, Kkutaeh’s death triggers the further development of Hata’s gesture life. Creating a new name, Franklin Hata, and relocating to a more favorable environment, the U.S., where “the question of my [his] status mostly faded away, to the point it is today, which is almost nothing” (4), he succeeds in screening out everything in the past. However, even though his former narrative is screened out, since he lacks “the principle of action and of impulse,” he has to depend on the narrative of the society, in this case, of Bedley Run. He tries hard to develop “an unexpected condition of transparency” (21) while achieving a reputation as a worthy member of the community, and in fact, he seems to acquire everything he wishes for except for a family life he can be proud of. Hata therefore adopts Sunny, hoping to add to his life the element essential to a respectable member of a community, a family. But contrary to his wish, she becomes a symbol of his failure. She keeps betraying

his expectations ever since he first meets her, when he realizes she is not from “a hardworking, if squarely humble, Korean family” (204) as the agency promised, but of mixed race. As Sunny herself says to Hata, “I’ve failed doubly. First myself, and then my good poppa, who’s loved and respected by all” (31); she disappoints him by failing to fit in his gesture life to the extent that he wants to forget she is his daughter. Therefore, when she comes back pregnant, asking for his help, he tries to screen out her baby, the embodiment of his failure, by insisting on her having an abortion even if it endangers Sunny’s life. However, if Sunny’s baby represents Hata’s failure, abortion works for him to obliterate the fact his screen narrative is disrupted. Nevertheless, the abortion is a traumatic experience for him because his need to terminate the baby’s life indicates his awareness of his own failure.

Sunny’s abortion thus disrupts Hata’s new screen narrative, just as Kkutaeh’s death disrupted the previous one, but Hata continues living in Bedley Run and his name remains Franklin Hata. However, Hata is in fact going through another transition to the next gesture life when he starts his narration, because Sunny has come back to his life in two ways: through a bunch of old photographs that are accidentally found by an acquaintance and given to him, and through Sunny’s second return home, not pregnant this time but with a young child. It is especially important that Sunny comes back with her son this time, because, as Sunny actually confesses to her father: “I wanted that baby more just to be against you. And [. . .] even though it was years later, [. . .] Thomas came from my spiting you” (283). In other words, Thomas’s existence clearly embodies a Kkutaeh-like denial of Hata’s gesture life. His account-making at this stage suggests his desperate attempt to make sense of his gesture life. He tries to justify his screening acts and reestablish a coherent screen narrative that will connect his “remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future” (Brison 41). In the end, Hata actually sells his house and leaves town, and wishes to go to “where Sunny wouldn’t go” (355–356). But no matter where he goes, he knows he will “circle round and arrive again” (356) at the similar place like his house in Bedley Run, which is an embodiment of his gesture life.

Obliteration and Rearticulation through Images

In the previous section, the formation and function of Hata’s screen narratives and the traumatic disruption of his narrative flow were examined. This section will focus on what is obliterated by those narratives, and examine how obliteration is illustrated by images. As Sturken says, images can produce forgetting both through their absence and presence, but they can also promote remembering and retrieving. That is, what is obliterated can assert its presence within the absent presence.

In their study of trauma, van der Kolk and van der Hart describe the difference between ordinary or narrative memory and traumatic memory. Usually all aspects of experience are categorized and

integrated into the memory system which is comprised of “ever-enlarging and flexible meaning schemes” (159), and new information assimilated into the system is constantly combined with old knowledge to form flexible mental schemas. Therefore, ordinary or narrative memory can easily become inaccurate (171). On the contrary, traumatic memory is “inflexible and invariable” (163). Traumatic memories are “fixed in the mind and are not altered by the passage of time, or the intervention of subsequent experience” (172). In the case of Hata, Kkutaeh’s death and Sunny’s abortion clog and interfere with the flow of his ongoing narrative because he is unable to assimilate them into his flexible memory system. Thus, the flow stops, and literally, Hata’s story-telling stops right after these two incidents. He does not offer any account for the period from Kkutaeh’s death to his arrival at the U.S., which is 17 years after the end of the war. Similarly, there is no information on the period after Sunny’s abortion to the point he starts his story-telling, which is about 14 years after the incident. The absent presence of these periods explains the impact of trauma on Hata, but at the same time, it shows Hata’s attempt to erase his past.

The black color as in black flag/cloth, the pool and the tack holes dominates the novel as an embodiment of concealment/obliteration. According to Hata, a black flag was “the banner a village would raise by its gate in olden times to warn of a contagion within” (224) in order to keep people away from the village. A black cloth appears in the scene at the mall where Hata observes a girl at the store cover herself with it. In either case, the black flag (or cloth) is used to isolate and screen out what is hidden underneath. Also, since a black flag is a literal translation of Kurohata (“kuro” means black, “hata” means flag), a change in his name holds the same implications. When his name is changed from Oh to Kurohata, his new name, “black flag,” covers his ethnicity and his narrative as Oh. But by shortening his name from Kurohata to Hata when coming to the U.S., Hata attempts to hide the very fact of his screening as well as his past. By presenting himself as a simple “flag,” not as a “black flag,” he intends to display himself as unblemished. Likewise, his attempts to hide in his closet the actual black flag that was used by Captain Ono as a sign to get Kkutaeh ready for him indicates his intention to conceal the memories related to it, although to bring the flag with him to the U.S. suggests that he cannot detach himself from his past. The pool also symbolizes Hata’s intention to hide his past. Hata’s pool is painted “a dark battleship gray” (22) and is unidentifiable from the sky unlike pools that are normally painted in blue. Water in his pool appears “nearly lightless” (152), but Hata “always esteemed the dark stone inlay” (151). This is the place he can be invisible and comfortable, because it is like a black hole that can absorb anything he likes to shake off. The scene with the tack holes is presented in one of Hata’s recollections of Sunny. He recalls how he clears Sunny’s room after she left home, and in the process of clearing, he especially engages himself in filling in the tack holes left on the walls, which look like a number of black spots on a white plaster:

I remember patching and repainting the ceiling and walls, making sure to fix all the mars in the plaster. There were larger pocks, into which I found it easy enough to spade the filler. But it was the smaller ones, particularly the tack holes, which seemed to number in the hundreds, that took the greatest part of my time. In the end, I found myself doing the work in half-foot squares, pressing in the paste with the tip of a finger, smoothing it out, and it wasn't until much later, as I'd drift into the room to inspect for missed holes, running my hand over the surfaces, that the whole project was quite satisfactorily done. (14-15)

These tack holes embody what Hata has to conceal. He has to cover them completely so that he could erase every little trace of his failure brought by Sunny and remake his narrative as spotless as the white plaster wall.

The scenes of the two traumatic events themselves are powerfully presented through images which not only express the process of screening but also assert what is concealed underneath the absence. When Kkutaeh is murdered, the importance of her act of disappearance is emphasized all the more through her literally invisible body. Hata does not witness her end, and there is no description of killing. We do not know exactly what has happened to her. Moreover, we are unable to view her body because she is dismembered by a group of Japanese soldiers. Hata merely depicts the behavior of the soldiers coming back from the killing and his own reaction at the clearing where she has been killed:

The air was cooler there, the treetops shading the falling sun. Mostly it was like any other place I had ever been. Yet I could not smell or hear or see as I did my medic's work. I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor could I feel the weight of such remains. And I could not sense that other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the figured legs and feet, the utter, blessed digitation of the hands. Nor could I see the face, the perfected cheek and brow. Its pristine sleep still unbroken, undisturbed. And I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part. (305)

Yet, what is important here is that Hata discovers the "tiny, elfin form [. . .] miraculously whole" in this scene filled with images of absence. While Hata narrates that all his senses are numbed and he does not "remember any part," he depicts the image of the embryo in detail. This ambivalence can be interpreted as Hata's attempt to suppress the memory of Kkutaeh's death. If the absence of Kkutaeh embodies her will to repel Hata and her rejection of his gesture life, the presence of the image of something intact represents Hata's denial of Kkutaeh's disappearance, and thus, helps him

preserve the identity that Kkutaeh is repudiating. By stressing the presence of the embryo in his narrative, Hata justifies his act and his life, burying the traumatic memory in oblivion.

By contrast, Hata does not offer any description of Sunny's aborted baby, although he witnesses the whole procedure of abortion. Yet, his purpose is the same as in the former case, to conceal his traumatic memory, only this time, through the absence of images. When Sunny comes back pregnant, he feels his narrative is threatened more than ever: "I might have realized how frightening all this was to her, how overwhelming and awful, but I sensed instead only the imminent disgrace and embarrassment that would hang about the house like banners of our mutual failure" (340). The presence of the baby, says Hata, obvious in Sunny's "broad, curving shape" as she is "quite near full-term" (339), is "a most sickening vision to me, being the clearest picture of my defeats, familial and otherwise" (341); Sunny's pregnancy mocks his effort to maintain a decent life. That is why he has to obliterate the baby both in reality and in his narrative. He persuades the doctor, who opposes the abortion both technically and morally at this very late stage of pregnancy, to perform the operation, and even participates in the "killing" by volunteering to help him as a substitute for his nurse, who the doctor believes would not assist such an operation. Yet, Hata does not offer any description of the scene of the operation or of the baby itself, not only because it is an unspeakable sight, but also because he intentionally obliterates this event from his memories as well as from his narrative. However, the absent presence of the baby claims its presence and reveals Hata's narrative screening.

The Implications of Real World Politics in *A Gesture Life*

In *Tangled Memories*, Sturken defines "cultural memory" as memory which is distinguished both from personal memory and official historical discourse, yet is entangled with these two other realms (3). Personal possessions become a part of cultural memory when they are placed, for example, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and they acquire both aesthetic and historical meaning when they are placed in a government archive (Sturken 3). Analogously, we can say that Hata's personal memory acquires cultural meaning when it is presented in the form of a novel by Lee, and when Hata's narrative is shared by the readers and becomes cultural memory, the meaning of his screening act broadens. That Oh's narrative is screened out by Kurohata's narrative implies that the issue of discrimination against ethnic Koreans living in Japan is obliterated by Japanese society. That Kurohata's narrative is suppressed by Hata's narrative indicates that Japan's aggression in Asia during the war and the issue of comfort women are screened out both from historical and cultural memories of Japan. At the same time, the fact that Hata, a Japanese immigrant, leads a successful life in the U.S. as an American citizen works to obliterate the sufferings of Japanese Americans in the past, es-

pecially during the war. Hata says:

It was 1963, and from what I'd seen during my brief travels in this country, everyone for the most part lived together, except, I suppose, for certain groups, such as the blacks, or the Chinese in the cities, who for one reason or another seemed to live apart. Still, I had assumed that once I settled someplace, I would be treated as those people were treated, and in fact I was fully prepared for it. But wherever I went – and in particular, here in Bedley Run – it seemed people took an odd interest in telling me that I wasn't unwelcome. (3)

Lee emphasizes that Hata encounters almost no discrimination, but instead he is even welcomed, respected and valued by the society. Hata is able to blend in with the community to the extent that the realtor, Liv, says that “Doc Hata *is* Bedley Run” (136). The immediate effect of such descriptions is of course to present the ironic meaning of Hata's effort to blend in. But at the same time, they function to screen out the discrimination against Japanese Americans and their hardship, just as the discourse of “model minority” identity — which developed after the publication in 1966 of an influential article by William Pettersen that praised Japanese Americans for their work ethic and success in contrast to other so-called “problem” minorities like African Americans, despite what was done to them during the war — has enabled American society to conveniently obliterate both past and ongoing problems Japanese Americans have faced.

Moreover, if Hata is able to forget his life in Japan and his traumatic experience during the war and succeed in establishing a prosperous life as a respectable member of American society, it makes the following reading possible: Japan is rescued by the United States. Yoshikuni Igarashi argues in his study of Japan's postwar cultural memory of World War II that Japan and the U.S. established a “foundational narrative” for their postwar relationship. According to this foundational narrative, “[t]hrough the bomb, the United States [. . .] rescued and converted Japan [. . .]” (20). Igarashi explains that this narrative contributed to erasing the potential postwar conflict between Japan, which needed aid from the former enemy, the U.S., in order to recover its function as a country and survive internationally, and the U.S., which wanted to downplay the destructive power of the atomic bomb because of its desire to win Japan's cooperation in waging the Cold War (19–21). Japan is rescued by the U.S. in the sense that the U.S. (the atomic bomb) ended the war and prevented further casualties and further damage to the country, and that Japan achieved rapid economic growth in the postwar era through America's aid. Yet, this narrative has and continues to screen out the imperialism of the U.S. and various problems Japan has been facing because of American military empowerment in Japan.

It was almost half century after the end of World War II when the issue of comfort women began to catch public attention. In the late 1980s, feminist groups in Korea became the driving force to raise the issue (Hicks 167), and in 1991, three former comfort women filed the first lawsuit against the Japanese government, seeking an apology and redress (Hicks 5–6). Since then, the issue has been actively discussed and presented, and it had a tremendous impact world-wide especially on Japanese and those who are the same nationality or the same ethnic group as the former comfort women. They were shocked not only because of the horrible nature of the issue but also because of the fact they did not know about it even though they are of the same race or nation. Among them was Chang-rae Lee. He had not heard about it until “the late 80’s or early 90’s” (Lee, “Reading”). He recalls his discovery as follows:

I was doing some reading about Korea, and I found out about what happened to these women, and I was just blown away. I remember being on a bus after reading what was otherwise a pretty dry academic article on the subject, and I had to get off and walk home just to think about what had happened. (Lee, “Adopted Voice”)

After interviewing some of the survivors in Korea, Lee started to write a novel about comfort women from their point of view, but he noticed, “what I had written didn’t quite come up to the measure of what I had experienced” (Lee, “Adopted Voice”), and finally set a person who was originally a minor character as the narrator. This is Franklin Hata. Lee says in his interview with Hogan that he wanted to write “the aftereffects, what happens in the act’s wake. And, most interestingly, how people live in that wake.” However, Hata is a so-called unreliable narrator. Seemingly he narrates everything he knows: what he has experienced including the traumatic events, his reactions to them, and objective observation and interpretation of those reactions and so on. But in fact, he does not tell everything. Or rather, he does not intend to tell because he does not want anyone to know everything. Nor does he expect any solutions through his account-making, as Lee himself states, “he was going to just let you know what happened and let it sit there” (Lee, “Interview”). But it is these very characteristics of Hata, who is unable to tell, unwilling to tell, and unenthusiastic about seeking solutions, that point out the problems the comfort women issue has been confronting. This issue remained obliterated for almost 50 years after the end of the war partly because most of the victims were unable and unwilling to tell. They felt ashamed of or even blamed themselves for what had happened and/or they faced social prejudice from their own families and societies. But it is especially because of the attitude of the Japanese government, which was unwilling to tell and was willing to “let it sit there” if possible even when the issue resurfaced. Just as Hata employs screen narratives

to establish and sustain his self, the Japanese government persists in its screen narratives in order to protect its “sound” historical discourse. Yet, by observing what kind of narratives a country emphasizes in offering its citizens a history, and by understanding the nature of these narratives, we will be able to see through what is concealed beneath such screen narratives.

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