

“Transnationalism from Below” Yong Soon Min

South Korea represents a complex, multivalent site for consideration of the shifting modalities of race, nationalism, power and translation. My presentation will focus on how identities of different constituencies of foreigners are performed, constructed and appropriated in South Korea, a country that promotes a notion of homogeneity. For instance, a Bangladeshi migrant worker who has been living and working in Korea for over five years and is fluent in Korean is unquestionably considered a foreigner in Korea while a diasporic Korean American like myself who has lost the language and lives in Los Angeles or that of a North Korean who lives under the Juche system, a unique brand of paternal Socialism, in Pyongyang may claim a national affiliation. I will discuss these issues in relation to an examination of two images, one taken from the Los Angeles Times of a electronically televised reunion of families from North and South Korea and the other, a video installation that was part of an exhibition about migrant workers that I presented in Seoul in 2004.

The first set of images are from a project that resulted in a 2004 exhibition entitled XEN: Migration, Labor and Identity.

In a country where non-Koreans readily stand out, the initial catalyst for this project was a sighting in 2001 of a large group of foreign men in Dongdaemun, a popular, sprawling market in central Seoul. My question of who they were and what they were doing in Seoul was answered later that year at a lecture in Los Angeles' Koreatown at an immigrant labor advocacy organization. A labor media activist mentioned a migrant worker's union as part of a larger discussion about the history of the Korean labor movement.

Researching various activist websites and a subsequent research residency in the summer of 2003 led me to realize that these men were some of the approximately 400,000 migrant workers (I use this term to refer to those foreign workers who are not involved in the professional sector) in South Korea who come from developing countries, mostly from Asia. I conducted over thirty video interviews with laborers from countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Pakistan, Philippines, Indonesia, as well as with ethnic Koreans from China and former Soviet states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. I interviewed them in various locations of work and residence throughout Seoul's extensive subway system, including the neighboring city of Incheon, where the majority of migrant workers are based. Lesser yet significant concentrations are also found in the other major South Korean cities of Busan and Daegu. They are engaged in what South Koreans call 3D labor – work that is dirty, dangerous and demeaning—the variety of work that most Koreans readily acknowledge that they will not engage in.

My research visit coincided with the passage of a new migrant labor law commonly referred to as EPP (Employment Permit Program), which went into effect a year later in August, 2004. While this new legislation confers some necessary labor rights to migrant workers, critics of this bill note serious flaws,

the most detrimental being the maintenance of the industrial trainee system (Industrial Technical Training Program – ITTP) that is notorious for leaving generous leeway for employers and recruitment brokers to exploit workers. In the ensuing period between the passage of this bill and its implementation, government officials began the process of voluntary and at times forceful expulsions of migrant workers who had been in Korea for over four years (which included most of the migrants I interviewed). Compliance continues to be uneven and messy as controversy over this bill still rages. Many of these overstayed workers have left voluntarily, some have gone in hiding, some continue to stage protests against this bill and a few have even committed suicide.

Given the continued media attention to migrant worker issues, the exhibition held during the months of August and September, 2004 received considerable mainstream media attention along with the usual art press coverage. The exhibition, “XEN,” consisted of four distinct video installations and a performance on the evening of the opening reception. While the video interviews conducted last summer adopted a documentary, fact-finding approach to the issue, the resulting exhibition offered more open-ended visual explorations that defy a singular or conclusive ‘message.’ Rather, its operative contrapuntal interweave of information and interpretation was an attempt to suggest a contingent critique of nationalism and the politics of representation, utilizing exhibition strategies that foregrounded the medium as much as the content.

In the interest of staying within my time limit, I will focus my discussion here on three installations. The first one entitled, “Field/Work,” involved eight video cameras with footage of various interviews I conducted as well as group meetings that I attended and documented (in one such meeting, migrant workers seated in a large circle sing “We Shall Overcome” in English, Bengali and Korean). The cameras are scattered in the anthropological/social ‘field’ of the spacious gallery. Each camera is installed as part of a sculptural tableau or viewing station, suggesting some of the improvised original conditions of the interviewing process. Images are displayed on the camera’s tiny LCD monitors in part to replicate a sense of intimacy with the subject’s image in which the sound is not overpowered by the image. This installation underscores the key role that direct one-on-one dialogue played in the project. In the gallery, the viewer is positioned as the interviewer, mediating the interview through the image on the LCD monitor and the sound through the headset. The ‘object-ness’ and the primacy of the camera itself became an integral instrument not only for recording and producing a moving image but more importantly as a physical mediator between the interviewee and myself. In many respects, it was the camera (I used a bigger camera than what was donated by Samsung for the exhibition) as much as my credentials as a university professor (my identity as an artist was not useful) that conferred to me a measure of authority and trust in the eyes of the interviewee. As with most oral history projects in which testimonials are recorded, it is paradoxically the presence of the camera itself that encourages interviewees to be more open and generous, in conferring on them a sense of responsibility and purpose of going “on record.” Most of the video passages on view were real-time and unedited so as to approximate the spontaneity as well

as the real-time quality of the interview process including the often banal or embarrassing questions or comments on my part.

The camera also plays a key role in “3D Exit: Desperate, Disposable, Deported,” an installation that occupies a large empty room where the only other element is a handwritten note that states, in English and in Korean, “Samar Thapa was captured on February 15, 2004 and deported.” Affixed to a distant back wall the note is only legible as a telephoto image through the LCD monitor of a camera positioned in the front of the room. This arrangement alludes to the highly mediated, distant and marginalized status of migrant workers who have expressed that they often feel like shadows in Korean society. Their ‘visibility’ as such is mediated through representations in the media or via host religious, NGO or other activist support groups. Coincidentally, Samar Thapa was one of the migrants whose interview is included in the “Field/Work” installation. He rose to prominence due to his leadership role in ETU-MB (Equality Trade Union-Migrants Branch), a union representing migrant workers and therefore targeted by officials in their crackdown of over-stayers. After his well-publicized capture and deportation, he was returned to Nepal where he is reportedly continuing his work in organizing around labor issues.

In the third installation, entitled “Moving Target,” the image-making apparatus is once again center-stage, this time a projector that was rotating on a contraption situated in middle of a darkened gallery. The image spinning around the room was footage of a street demo (one of many) in the popular shopping area of Myongdong, organized by a migrant workers union against EPP. The footage begins with a fixed view of pedestrians and proceeds to an unexpected and complex interwoven image of pedestrians and the demonstrators. The voiceover throughout the five minute looped image is of a Bangladeshi worker, Kabir Uddin, a well-known migrant worker activist who was addressing the assembled in Korean. Without closer scrutiny, viewers may assume that the speaker is a native Korean rather than a foreigner fluent in the Korean language--as were many of the workers I interviewed. This piece would suggest that both the migrants and Korean nationals are moving targets in a rapidly evolving social and political context. Viewers in the room are also implicated as the projection beam cyclically “targets” them as it circles the room. The projected video image passes over collaged text of information and analysis culled from a variety of sources, including my own formulations, a variety of migration data and theories, and from Julia Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* (Columbia University Press, 1991, translated by Leon Roudiez), which offers a dimension of philosophical and cultural critique to the discussion of the figure of the foreigner.

The exhibition title, “XEN,” a phonetic pun on Zen, derived from the Greek root word for ‘xenophobia’ and its antonym ‘xenophilia,’ implies another subjectivity in relation to the migrant workers in South Korea—that of the Koreans. I interviewed many Koreans, some of whom were associated with migrant workers and their issues. Others, like the vast majority of Koreans in Seoul, had no direct contact with migrant workers, much less knowledge or interest in this issue. Among the former, for example, I interviewed Dr. Dong-Hoon Seoul, a recognized expert on immigration issues in South Korea and an advisor to the

government on the work permit system legislation (also a contributor to this catalog) as well as Hae Woo Yang (Director of Korea Migrant Workers Human Rights Center in Incheon) along with other migrant worker advocates and service providers. One unique subject, Min-Ho Lee, who was one of the producers of "Asia Asia," a popular TV program in South Korea about migrant workers, offered cogent insights on his ambivalent attitudes toward migrant workers.

Despite Korea's long history of out-migration in which according to data from Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 6 million Koreans are situated in 160 different countries, constituting the 4th largest diaspora (in terms of a comparison of those who left with those who stayed), and the many stories of hardships and successes endured by Korean immigrants in foreign lands, this legacy does not necessarily translate into increased empathy or acceptance for migrant workers in South Korea. Although the pace of social and political change in South Korea has been remarkably accelerated, perhaps it is due to the relatively recent history of in-migration (a little over a decade since the arrival of a critical mass of migrant workers), that Koreans continue to be insular in their attitudes to foreigners, especially with regards to the migrants engaged in manual labor. Official policies pertaining to migrant workers seem to dovetail with general public sentiment that migrant workers are acceptable only in so far as they satisfy the demand for temporary, compliant and cheap labor. It would appear that most Koreans support a ban on family reunions and settlements by migrant workers; thus, they have no interest in a more long-term immigration policies for foreigners and want to preserve their notion of a pure, homogeneous national state.

Both the flattening of migrant identity as machines as well as the nationalist card is clearly evident in recent press coverage which has labeled some of the migrant protesters as "anti-Korean" ("Muslim Anti-Korean Activity a Real Concern, but Intelligence Lacking," *Chosun Ilbo*, October 4, 2004, and "181,000 Foreigners Overstaying in Korea," *The Korea Times*, October 4, 2004) for opposing the war in Iraq and the deployment of South Korean troops to Iraq. The articles seem to suggest that workers protesting work-related issues is comprehensible whereas those protesting a wider range of political nature is unacceptable and seen as a threat to national security. In light of Korea being on the al-Qaeda hit-list as a U.S. ally, these reports suggest the possibility of a link between a rise in criminal activity reportedly committed by illegal aliens (even as the article does acknowledge that the majority of the reported minor crimes such as burglary are attributed to Chinese nationals) and foreign terrorist groups. The perception of a high percentage of Muslims among the migrant population is easily manipulated by those with nationalist sentiment to generate fear and negative ethnic stereotypes in context of the post 9/11 heightened tensions.

My interest in migrant workers in Korea is of course inextricably linked to my own questions about my own identity in relation to Korea. In scrutinizing them and their experience, I was gaining greater insight into my own experience of Korea. In many respects, I felt a kinship with the outsider and marginalized

position of the migrants in Korea. It genuinely excited me, whereas my Korean contacts seemed on the whole indifferent, to discover within the center of Seoul, fledgling ethnic enclaves such as a few block area near Dongdaemun market that is full of store signs in Cyrillic and a Russian speaking community center, or the area on the other side of Dongdaemun dotted with a few Nepalese/Tibetan restaurants where the clientele are mostly workers from Nepal. Also, in Itaewon, a neighborhood concentrated with businesses that overtly caters to foreigners, the largest mosque in Korea is situated atop a hill and is surrounded by a few Halal markets and restaurant that caters to Moslem patrons. In my view, these and other signs of diversity have an additive not subtractive effect; that is, it makes for a more interesting and dynamic impression of a place without in any way diluting the particular characteristics of the dominant culture. Most of my Korean interviewees did not share my assumptions about the benefits of a multicultural society, at least not for the present.

In the transnational flows of migrants, this dynamic yet vulnerable group plays a significant role in the development of receiving and sending countries. Nations with neo-liberal economic policies are geared for a labor market without borders as well as a borderless capital market. Korea, like other advanced industrialized countries is confronted with an embedded structural need for migrant workers due to a range of common and specific push and pull factors. Given this reality, Korea is faced with a long-term issue of how to address a labor force that will become undocumented despite policies instituted to control and legalize this workforce. Beyond the issue of labor management, many advocates for human rights with regards to migrant laborers raise questions of whether it is in the best interest for Korea to maintain such a vested interest in the notion of homogeneity? Pressing more to the point: is it even possible for Koreans to assert its homogeneity; is homogeneity anachronistic in the current globalized context?

The potential of reunification between North and South Korea has a significant impact on the national imaginary of homogeneity. In the current climate of continued "sunshine policy" towards the North and the limited range of contact between citizen of the two countries, images such as this last image that depicts the power of filial relations in a televised reunion staged by the Korean governments in 2005, underscore the primacy of blood and kinship over national boundaries. This image contributes to the logic that the historic division of one people over time continues to engender desire, from a temporal and geographic distance. Is this a moment and an image of "subjectless multiculturalism" which as Edward Bruner has noted "The Other in our geography is a sight of disgust; the Other in their geography is a source of pleasure." ("Tourism in the Balinese Borderzone," in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, Duke Press, 1996, p. 160). By extension, I have interviewed Koreans who are well traveled in South and Southeast Asia and speak with great fascination about their experience over there and yet who show no curiosity about those same ethnic peoples living in Seoul or even visiting the aforementioned Nepalese or Pakistani restaurant within the city. How will some of the current fascination for North Koreans evolve when the countries are reunited? Will the lived-in differences then overwhelm and render the national imaginary of homogeneity

irrelevant? Or will we see productions of new and more complex regimes of homogeneity in the horizon?