Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control


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British readers may remember the discomfort for all involved in visiting a certain butchers shop owned by Mr. Hilary Briss on the high street of the imaginary village of Royston Vasey, in the BBC TV comedy series The League of Gentlemen. Over the course of a number of series a huge number of the village’s residents paid furtive, difficult visits to Mr. Briss to procure rather tatty looking plastic bags full of what was referred to as the special stuff. Playing on a piece of vernacular common knowledge among the British that harks back to uncomfortable truths surrounding food quality and adulteration during the Second World War (both butchers and citizens at the time were famous for taking part in a black market in meat products which fell outside both the Ministry of Food’s complicated rationing system and conventional national taste and which included rat, horse and on occasion even unfortunate cats and dogs), “the special stuff” elicits a deep sense of shame amongst those who seek its fleshy pleasures. It later becomes clear that this sense of shame is rooted in one of the darkest transgressions possible for a citizen of Britain, one which is embedded...
with the prejudices and presumptions generated by unfortunate moments in its historical colonial encounters. As the 1973 dystopian science fiction film Soylent Green would have it, “the special stuff, is people.” Cannibalism and the ingesting of human flesh was of course much speculated about and, much dreaded, but rarely seen during the initial period of Dutch, Portuguese, British and French global exploration (the age of adventure), or during the later more formal and bureaucratic periods of colonisation. In reality only a very few cultures encountered across the globe practiced full blown cannibalism, and even for those that did such as in Fiji and some of the upland tribal communities of what is now called Papua New Guinea, such practices were much more to do with the ultimate triumph over one’s enemy in battle, by absorbing their soul through the ingestion of important parts of their anatomy, than it was to do with dietary need. There were in fact very few instances of cannibalistic locals eating colonists, and many more cases of unfortunate sea farers and adventurers eating each other due to becoming lost at sea and developing states of psychological distress and trauma. Regardless, the dismembering and eating of one human by another is almost universally one of the most transgressive behaviours possible, which makes Se-Woong Koo’s chapter “Flesh Eaters and Organ Thieves: Locating Transgression in Korean Cannibalism” in Juhn Young Ahn’s edited volume Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control all the more remarkable. Who might have imagined that Korean history and cultural development, so focused on social ordering and societal norms contained the occasional cannibalistic moment.

Ahn’s edited volume sets itself up from its very front cover, which is one of the graphics from the movement set up to contest and challenge the perceived structural causes of April, 2014’s “Sewol Incident.” Since the unfortunate ferry’s capsizing and the death of some 476 of its passengers, South Korean politics and social movements have been at something of a fever pitch. Korean politics is often in contemporary times extremely hot, but this last decade has seen multiple new loci and nodes of concern around which movements and groups of citizens towards both ideological poles have organised or been activated. Anyone who spends a weekend afternoon
at Gwanghwamun square these days will be assailed on all sides by a myriad of protesting voices, from the fans of the unfortunate Park Geun-hye, old fashioned anti-Americans who intersect with anti-Trumpers, the indigenous fascism of the Wolves of the East, a variety of small groups with corporate grudges to the by now well organised and with a set of high production values, commemorators of the “Sewol Incident,” now in their new semi-permanent information hut. The transformation of the terrible moment from, as Ahn suggests in the introduction, sago (accident) to injae (man-made disaster), to kwangje (state-made disaster), broke again many of the bounds of civility and social ordering on the Korean peninsula, hence the use of the incident in Ahn’s framing of the book’s ambition. Setting up a dialectic between Foucault and Bataille’s conception of transgression and the problems of limits or otherwise, the volume establishes a potential landscape for contributions within it of heat, energy and contest.

Rather bizarrely, Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control, with the visual language of the “Sewol” campaign on the cover and seemingly vitally important in the set up does not include a chapter or contribution which deeply and cogently explores the incident and its aftermaths, in fact beyond the introduction it doesn’t cover it at all. Instead deriving from a symposium at the Nam Center for Korean Studies at the University of Michigan before the “Sewol Incident” in October 2012 it combines a slightly unwieldly collection of contributions from across the quasi-discipline of Korean Studies, contributions which fall within the wider categories of cultural and filmic production, contemporary politics and history, loosely defined. It will not surprise the reader by now to be told that many of the transgressive or otherwise connections between the chapters of this volume are tenuous. Similar to the truly shocking tales of infanticide amongst Japanese settlers in Manchuria at the moment of Imperial collapse in 1945 (lest their children fall into the malevolent hands of the local Chinese population), in Roland Suleski’s contribution to Norman Smith’s recent edited collection Empire and Environment in the Making of Manchuria, Se-Woong Koo firstly narrates grisly tales from the Joseon dynasty in which the sacrifice of a finger, not necessarily one’s own is an
ultimate expression of filial piety. “Inyuk,” or “human meat” in 15th century Korea had somehow become known as a revivifying material which could cure the very sick and Koo includes the edifying tale of Yang Kwi-jin a young boy who in 1423 cut his own finger off, grilled it and fed it to his dying father. The prompt recovery of his father rather than admonishment led to the boy being heralded as an exemplar by King Sejong. Such one-off acts of cannibalism were apparently even codified in 1431 at the behest of the King in the text *Samgang haengsildo* (Conduct of the Three Bonds, Illustrated), which articulates how the filially concerned might give elements of their own bodies to relatives or those close to their family, without breaking the bonds of piety and desecrating or degrading the body which had been given to them by their elders. This text sounds extraordinary, as Koo recounts: “*Samgang Haengsildo* instructed the reader on proper execution of virtuous cannibalism…” (p. 93).

How can one be virtuous and a cannibal? This surely was the question the formulators of *Samgang Haengsildo* were seeking to answer. An ethical route through which this most transgressive of practices could be co-opted by the spiritual world view of Korea’s Confucian ordering, and made *untransgressive*. While this notion of an ethical cannibalism may have surprised the reader, it will not surprise them to learn that such a frame was soon broken, and in a way which echoes the later contemporary examples of human flesh eating and trafficking that Koo considers and which are famous throughout our own wider world. Koo describes that by the 16th century, court scribes were detailing the impact of developments in ideas surrounding the efficacy of using human flesh for medical purposes, namely the gall bladder, which had become renowned for a perceived ability to cure rashes of the genitals (*eumchang*), due to the beliefs of a certain physician connected to the court. Scribes recorded that the number of beggars on the streets near medical clinics rapidly decreased around 1566 as they were abducted and killed for their gallbladders. Later the scribes record that having run out of beggars, children begin to be abducted for the same purposes. By 1576 the problem at apparently become so severe that King Seonjo had to decree “Make it the official responsibility of the Ministry of
Punishment to arrest those who cut open people's stomachs and cause death” (p. 90). Ginseng even began to be thought of efficacious, according to Koo, because its root resembled that of the human body (an interesting parallel with the European mythologies of the mandrake root and its fatal scream). Such transgressive beliefs are hard to shake off, even with time, and Lillian Underwood, the wife of Horace Grant Underwood, one of the progenitors of Yonsei University was disturbed enough to remark that Koreans thought the hospital they were both connected to: “the headquarters of the bloodthirsty work [because] where medicine was manufactured and diseases treated, babies must certainly be butchered” (p. 92). Koo himself puts it another way more succinctly: “Anything so powerful as the medicine of white people must surely be made from bits of infants…” (p. 92).

This sense that powerful and efficacious medicine could well rely on the power of human flesh or bodily material and that transgressive power has, it seems, resurfaced in the present alongside strands of xenophobia which run through East Asia. Koo records the huge outburst of fear in October 2012 in South Korea as rumours emerged that hordes of Chinese were coming to the peninsula for an “annual human-meat shopping spree,” and they had chosen Korea because its citizens flesh was more wholesome than those of mainland Chinese due to different levels of pollution. Koo records that SBS of Korea broadcast news items about Korean mothers who felt they could not choose Chinese or ethnically Korean Chinese (Joseonjok) as nannies, in case their babies would be harvested for their organs (p. 94). Koo however also explores the strange journeys of the “inyuk kaepsyul,” the “human meat capsules” which have begun to be discovered at South Korea’s boundaries. Essentially capsules filled with a powder made from the dried flesh of aborted foetuses they are “accompanied by a claim that they possess a power to revitalise an ageing or ailing human body” (Kim Min-ji, 2012, quoted in Koo, in Ahn, p. 95). Try as it seems Koreans and Korean popular culture might to deflect the transgressive power of such materials onto the Chinese (of course the Chinese must be the ones doing the dirty, grotesque work of obtaining, drying out and pulverising foetuses and seeking to make a profit on them—it is always astounding, as in the case of the various global
mythologies of the Falun Gong movement, how ready we are to accept the possibility that Chinese people have an inclination to engage in blood thirsty, disgusting practices), it is plain to see that at least transgressive elements of past memories of cannibalistic practices and the power of human meat remain for at least some citizens of the nation.

_Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control_ is of course not entirely focused on Cannibalism or the use of human flesh for purposes other than eating, but Koo’s chapter is certainly the most effective when it comes to conventional notions of transgression. Myung-Sahn Suh’s contribution “The Political Turn as an Act of Transgression: The Case of Left-Turned-Right Christian Activists” certainly on the face of it sounds equally transgressive. Ideological commitment, the embedding of that commitment with the networks and friendship groupings of political activists or the similarly minded is of course familiar from situations across the globe. In the reviewers’ home country the transformation of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency/Party formed in 1978 from radical Trotskyite fringe to right-wing Libertarian movement in its current guise as think tank “The Institute of Ideas” and online contrarian magazine _Spiked_ has proved disruptively transgressive amongst left wing activists. While none of the activists involved were inexplicably destined to become members of the European Parliament for the Brexit Party as has been the case from the UK example, Suh outlines a similar level of transgressive breaking of bonds of both politics and friendship in Korea. Kim Chin-hong’s emergent Evangelical Left grouping in the South Korea of the 1970s, concerned with social justice, restricting gentrification of urban space and a more equitable society in spite of President Park Chung-hee’s developmental-autocracy appeared determined to utilise the frameworks of Korean politics and social ordering to obtain its goals. Threatened with a collapse in such orders generated by the powerful _minjung_ (the public) movements focused on class struggle, Suh suggests that some religious activists decided that moving beyond class dialectics to a movement based on consumption and consumers in a socially ordered, but market driven state was the path for South Korea to take following the end of authoritarian rule. What Suh and
others term the New Christian Right including past left-wing activists such as Kim Chin-Hong and Kim Yeong-hwan would go on to adopt radical positions supporting free trade in WTO negotiations and rejecting any form of trade protectionism for Korean business and agriculture, committed to neo-liberal structural logics and attempt to follow Third Way style social democracy. They would also denounce their former colleagues and friends as “crazy bastards...who abandoned Jesus and followed Mao Zedong, Marx and Lenin instead...” (In Myeong-jin quoted in Suh, in Ahn, p. 153).

The abandonment of one’s friends and fellow travellers is transgression indeed, and Suh recounts some very cogent arguments and analysis as to the processes involved and the intellectual journeys of those former members of the Evangelical Left, and the chapter even utilises interview material and personal communications with those involved. However, what is lacking for this author is a sense of the ideological awakening, the neo-liberal lightbulb moment for the future members of the New Right, the moments of their ideological radicalisation. Occasionally in political memoire or deeper levels of political reporting the very moments in which an ideological transfer or transformation is made is revealed, the words that help cross the Rubicon between positions discussed, but not this time in Suh’s chapter unfortunately. Thus, there is an absence at the heart of the piece which would have really supported the intriguing narrative of this chapter, whose themes are so common in our current world of both religion and politics, and which can be so transgressive.

Absence is a word which for this reviewer, manifests frequently through Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control. In another successful and interesting chapter, Jenifer Yun’s “Suicide, ‘New Women’ and Media Sensation in Colonial Korea,” a double suicide, an act necessitating the permanent absence of those involved, in 1931, by two women in love in front of train in Kyongsong is used to discuss multiple levels of transgression. Both the forbidden and impossible love between these two women, twenty-one-year-old Hong Ok-im of Ewha Women’s University and Kim Yeong-ju and the suicide itself broke a variety of social and cultural boundaries. Kim was betrothed to the eldest son of a family from Tongmak, her death crushed
the no doubt carefully arranged filial and familial connections. Hong even wrote her father a suicide note which acknowledged the breaking of these bonds: “Father! Please forgive the unfilial acts of this daughter who leaves before you. I can no longer bear this futile world and I am leaving in search of an eternal paradise…” (Hong quoted in Sin Yeoseong, May, 1931, in Yun, in Ahn, p. 114). Their relationship was framed by contemporary media as an example of a particular type of woman in colonial Korea, the exciting and heavily critiqued “new woman” (akin to the also heavily critiqued ‘modern girl’ in Japan, who were also very interesting to contemporary media), who with education, a more worldly outlook, a sense of self awareness and a desire to exercise personal choice would scandalise elements of chosen society. It was as if such women were a symptom of a greater disease, an unsettling of order brought by the energies and complications of modernity. It could be infectious apparently, and one of its symptoms was a pessimism from which nihilism might be born, a nihilism which would break all the bonds of traditional society, including driving these two unfortunate young, seemingly star crossed lovers to suicide. For this reviewer there is something absent here and that is a comparative aspect with contemporary Korea and perhaps even the wider East Asia in which suicide has become extremely frequent at a variety of social levels, from elderly Koreans beset by low wages and uncertain retirements to young Koreans and Japanese tortured by rising mental illness and broken by inhuman demands in a brutal, precarious, neo-liberal economy.

These absences are an unfortunate hallmark of Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control, material from which often does not go quite far enough, often leaves something behind, something unsaid. In the case of Charles La Shure’s spirited contribution “The Trickster as Transgressor in Traditional Korean Society” that is forgivable. While La Shure spends a great number of careful words recounting the complicated webs of semi-deception the tricksters he writes about, weave on their victims, this chapter also blunts its own narrative drive by insisting that in reality such characters were not actually radically transgressive, but navigated some of the interesting fractures in the Korean language and often their deceptions rely
on double entendres that would not be unfamiliar to British comedy actors.

What this reviewer finds harder to forgive are the drier contributions on film studies and cultural output which lack some of the energy of the writing in the volume on deeper political and social matters. Particularly in the writing on South Korean “anti-teenager” films such as Poetry (2010) and Park Chan-wook’s Vengeance trilogy, the volume loses its way. This is highly disappointing, because as anyone who has ever watched Park’s Oldboy (2003) will attest, there is something thrilling, transgressively, apocalyptically dark about the abandonment, lack of resolution and ultra-violence in that film. Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control ultimately does not reach is aspirational destination. It is to be recommended for Se Woong Koo’s fine piece on Korean cannibalistic moments and impulses, for Charles La Shure’s entertaining articulation of the skill and art of the traditional Trickster or huckster of the Joseon period, and even for Jennifer Yun’s careful if not entirely fulfilled exploration of the suicides of those two unfortunate 1930s women. As a volume however its aspirations to navigate through or articulate a framing of, transgression in the context of Korea is left wanting. There is of course plenty in Korea and its history that is transgressive, plenty of political moments in the 20th and 21st century in Korea where ideological eruptions have caused great ructions in the nation’s social and cultural order and structures. The aspiration of this book even begins at one of those moments, in the “Sewol Incident,” which among many misfortunes would see the downfall and imprisoning of South Korea’s first female President and daughter of its second. It is disappointing and at times unfathomable that the volume has not harnessed any of the explosive, traumatised rage that drove (and still drives), the movement for “Sewol” justice, nor in fact included a formal chapter about it, the tactics of the movement or the fractures it energised in Korean society. Most unfathomable of all has been to use the imagery of the movement on the cover of the book, when such a chapter is not included, and in fact when that movement is rooted in demands for justice, rather than transgression.
REFERENCE