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HISTORY, NARRATIVE, AND TRAUMA:
WRITING WAR CRIMES IN CHANG-RAE LEE'S *A GESTURE LIFE*

by

Ying-bei Wang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Master of Arts degree
in Comparative Literature
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor David Wittenberg

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Ying-bei Wang

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree
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To My Parents

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* in 1999, critical attention has been paid to issues of Asian American studies, such as the problems of searching for identity and esteem in a non-native environment, the collisions between cultures, and the diasporic experiences of Asian Americans.[1] The emergence of Asian American studies is deserved, because Lee, a second-generation Korean American, is highly acclaimed for writing immigrant experiences of this racial community. His first novel, *Native Speaker*, published in 1995, vividly depicts how a young Korean-American male —"surreptitious, B+ student of life, illegal alien, emotional alien, Yellow peril: neo-American, stranger, follower, traitor, spy […]"[2]—is unable to achieve a successful life in mainstream American society, living like an outsider in a host country. The difficulties faced by the protagonist reflect a shared experience of people of Asian American origin. *Native Speaker* won the Hemingway Foundation Award, and Lee was selected by *The New Yorker* as one of the most prominent young American writers. As a result, most reviews of *A Gesture Life* hail Lee's portrayal of the Asian American experience, instead of analyzing how the novel discloses one of the most notable Japanese war crimes—the issue of "comfort women."

In this thesis, I do not intend to focus on the Asian American context of the novel. Instead, I consider the work's exemplary exploration of war crimes. To put it differently, I situate *A Gesture Life* within the huge body of war literature, particularly literature that has revisited the experiences of the Second World War. *A Gesture Life* not only presents modern immigrant problems that often trouble Lee's characters, it also demonstrates an

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[1] A quick search in MLA International Bibliography shows 8 out of 12 publications of which *A Gesture Life* is the subject work deal with issues of ethnic and national identity concerning the novel's Asian American protagonist.

[2] *Native speaker*, p. 5 (River Book, 1995).

unfamiliar side about war crimes: how a war criminal looks at his history and how this experience influences his whole life.

During an interview, Lee indicates an unexpected encounter regarding comfort women—thousands of young girls, most of them Korean, who were forced into prostitution by the Imperial Japanese Army during the WWII—inspired him to write *A Gesture Life*: "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."[3] Learning about the history of this war crime was a stunning experience to Lee, whose concern for the women and strong desire to understand their story ultimately led him to Korea, where he interviewed several surviving comfort women. What he learned in the interview became the source of his fiction about this war crime issue.

Because the comfort women issue is a leading topic in the novel, I will explore the historical background of this issue in the next part of my thesis. My focus, however, is not to describe the harrowing experience that happened to the comfort women at this point in history; instead, I examine how the history has been revisited. I ask what kind of perspectives people held to understand the issue, how the attitudes changed with the passage of time, and how the stories have been shaped and re-shaped with power intervention. And among a large number of competing stories about this particular war crime, I explore which role Lee plays and the significance of this novelistic representation.

[3] "Adopted Voice: An Interview with Chang-rae Lee" by Dwight Garner, *The New York Times Review*, September 5, 1999.

1.1 Military Comfort Women: A Korean Tragedy?

Ever since the first Korean comfort woman was identified in 1991,[4] Korea, the government and the general public alike, has paid sufficient attention to the issue. Their efforts include founding the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, the governmental-sponsored group that started the first lawsuit against the Japanese government, collecting testimonies of surviving Korean comfort women, which helped draw international awareness to the issue. In fact, the history of comfort women has been seen as a large-scale Korean tragedy. Koreans themselves seem to consider the country as a whole the victim.

According to the existent documents, it is estimated that among the 200,000 known comfort women, 80% to 90% were Korean.[5] Such a high proportion of Korean comfort women reveals why Korea defines the issue as its national tragedy. The issue therefore is a hotspot for Korean nationalism. To seek justice for the comfort women and to denounce the crimes of the Imperial Japanese Army became the responsibility of all Korean people.

In the book, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, which is sponsored by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, an introduction to the grief-ridden Korean history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century contextualizes the 19 individual stories of the book's interviewed comfort women. The book affirms that the women suffered the misery because Korea had been under highhanded Japanese colonial rule.[6] Another similar point is made by Kim

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[4] See Dongwoo Lee Hahm, "Foreword," *Comfort Women Speak*: in 1991, then 74-year-old Kim Hak-soon was the first to step forward to publicize she had been a comfort woman.

[5] Chin Sung Chung, "Korean Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan," *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, p.11-30.

[6] Keith Howard, "A Korean Tragedy," *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*.

Il-myon, who considers the drafting of Korean comfort women as the wartime Japan's "fundamental policy to frustrate and strangle the desire of the Korean people for national independence."[7] In other words, it is the colonial oppression by the Japanese that lead to the tragedy. Therefore, the issue has been positioned in Korean national history and put much importance by the state government.

Apart from the considerably high percentage of Korean comfort women, I argue that Korea's outstanding attention to this issue is counterevidence to how the drastic change of postwar world had a huge impact on the understanding of Japanese war crimes. Among all the countries invaded by the Imperial Japanese Army, postwar Korea has been less consolidated into the Cold-War system that is still affecting China and Taiwan: China immediately fell into civil war and chaos after WWII and became a communist country; while Taiwan, which housed the defeated Chinese capitalist regime, had to fear actions from the communist China. Although similar Cold-War opposition has existed between South Korea and North Korea, the two regimes share the same colonized experience. So when facing their shared former colonizer, Japan, the two countries are largely in consensus. In addition, South Korea enjoyed a growing economic and political influence after the war, giving the country a vantage point to voice its opinions on the war crime issue.

Because the comfort women issue has been included in the canon of Korean national history and treated as a state matter, the individual stories of comfort woman are twisted and summarized into a larger frame of discourse—namely, toward the requisition of national dignity. Interviews with surviving comfort women consistently highlight the process by which they were deceived, sent to comfort stations, brutally abused, and raped again and again by numerous Japanese soldiers. Most of them died

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[7] See Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, p. 153.

under such extremely horrifying circumstances, while those who survived have had to live with the hardship they suffered. As the interviewed women state, it is Japan who is to blame for their misery:

> "I resent the Japanese. […] Even now, the Japanese appear to be kind on the surface, but I don't trust them. They have a dual personality" (47).
> "I just want to receive clear apologies and compensation from the Japanese government" (67).
> "If I were to speak to the Japanese government, there is only one question I would ask: Is it right to ignore me like this as if they did nothing to me? […] I hope the Japanese people will also join mankind's march for justice and peace" (105).[8]

In *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*, the conclusions of these interviews all lead to request for formal apologies and compensation from the Japanese people and government, which echoes the desire of the Korean government and people.

It is under the framework of nationalism that the stories of comfort women are generally known. The individual stories revealed in the testimonies seem to relate the same experiences with the same conclusions. This pattern perfectly suits the perspective of the South Korean people and the government in its collected memory about the war. The complexities of the issue have been downplayed or ignored in this pattern. When the comfort women issue is regarded as a Korean tragedy, not only by Korea but by Japan and other countries involved, one tends to dismiss the role of the individual Japanese soldiers, the participation of Korean civilians, and the feelings of each comfort woman being forced into part of this bitter history.

It is a challenge to write a war story without participating in national history. I see the Korean treatment of the comfort women issue as a typical example of this challenge.

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[8] See *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*.

Several pieces of single stories are homogenized into a collection, which plays to the historical knowledge on the subject. The historical knowledge determines only a general point of view about the issue, creating an interesting dynamic between history and memory.

1.2 History and Memory

What do you tell the dead when you lose? This is the question that has disturbed Japan since the country was defeated in WWII. As John Dower puts it, "The victors could comfort the souls of their dead, and console themselves, by reporting the outcome of the war had been great and good. Just every fighting man on the winning side became a hero, so no supreme sacrifice in the victorious struggle had been in vain."[9] Japan did not have that chance to comfort their dead. The Japanese soldiers, surviving or dead, did not become heroes. Instead, they became war crime criminals, criticized by the world for their monstrous actions. But did Japan lose the war because of the countless war crimes committed by the Imperial Japanese Army? Could the soldiers be memorized in spite of the atrocity they had been involved? Facing this depressing circumstance, Japan had adopted ways to twist war memory, and then twist history itself.

In the years that followed the end of the war, the defeated country, occupied by the MacArthur-lead U.S. military, was publicly embarrassed by the 1946 Tokyo war crime tribunal, attracting both domestic and world-wide attention for their war crimes for the first time. The responses given by some Japanese intellectuals and even everyday citizen were surprisingly candid. They considered the whole country responsible for the atrocities of its army. One critic of the Tokyo trial observed that "the majority of Japanese, having been deceived by the military leaders, must bear responsibility for having been stupid" (Dower, 505). One feminist reformer saw the mass rape and

[9] Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 486.

killings committed by Japanese soldiers as a display of traditional Japanese male psychology, for the patriarchal society held a low opinion of women and a disregard toward other people's children (506). One Marxist scholar said the barbaric behavior toward oppressed Asian peoples is originated from a "feudalistic capitalistic exclusionism and selfishness rooted at the bottom of our hearts" (507). A mother of a soldier declared that if her son had committed the crimes, she "could not accept him back home" (506). Some veterans repatriated from the Philippines publicly expressed regret for their crimes (506). Therefore, it cannot be said that Japanese people held no concern for the war crimes.

However, the self-reflections on the war crimes staggered for many reasons. First, the sadness of losing beloved ones shattered people's lives. As Haruko Cook and Theodore Cook indicate, Japan's role in the war was complicated. On one hand, the Imperial Japanese Army destroyed dozens of areas from the Pacific to Eastern and Southern Asia, slaughtering millions of local people in its path. On the other hand, the country suffered from a series of bombing attacks by the American army, including two atomic bombs, which caused huge casualties to its citizens. And there were also an enormous number of soldiers who were killed in the battlefields. Japan was an aggressor, but it was also a victim. Cook give a vivid image of this dynamic: "a man with a box containing both memories of a brother he adored and evidence of the crime of war; love and atrocities bound together and hidden from sight; a man who desires to preserve what he, indeed, what his whole family shies away from acknowledging" (6).[10] The country has the combined agony of losing family members and the unwanted guilt for causing huge pain for others. People were aware of the war crimes, but they also cried for their sons, husbands, and brothers who did not survive the battles. How could they

[10] Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook. Japan at War: and Oral History. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

focus on the atrocities of the soldiers who were killed? It was hard to disrespect the war dead who were, as a matter of fact, forced to die fighting for their country. Similarly, self-reproach was unlikely to gain widely reception in Japan as the country was so severely damaged.

In addition to the intrinsic conflicts, Japan had faced the drastic change of the international political climate. Since the Tokyo tribunal came to an end, it had been the American policy to discourage recollection of Japan's atrocities. During the occupation, the Americans helped to reconstruct the economy of the imperial democracy. The U.S. military personnel, MacArthur included, had asserted that "maintenance of the emperor was absolutely essential to constructing a democratic Japan," and it would be most convenient "if the Japanese side could prove to us that the emperor is completely blameless" (Dower, 323). Apparently, they had no desire to explore the emperor's responsibility for the war crimes and the members of the emperor's circle, who had either commanded or been involved in the war crimes themselves, were spared the responsibility[11].

How the U.S. officers helped the Japanese Imperial circle to escape war crime responsibility was partly to arrange for Cold-War opposition. The United States attentively enlisted Japan's help to oppose the Cold-War enemy, the newly rising communist regime in China. They settled the corporation between Japan and the Chinese Nationalist regime in Taiwan, which was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party during the Chinese Civil War. In one case, a former war criminal, Tsuji Masanobu, who bore heavy responsibility for massacres in both Singapore and the Philippines, earned the protection from the United States and the Nationalist Chinese government because of his anticommunist background. Under this climate, the suffering of China

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[11] See "Imperial Democracy: Evading Responsibility," *Embracing Defeat*.

was downplayed, and talks of the atrocities of the Imperial Japanese Army were not welcomed.

The immediate arrival of the Cold War after WWII is the main reason that issues of war crimes were tabled. Both the Nuremberg and the Tokyo trials ended abruptly. Political interventions were omnipresent during the operation of the United War Crimes Commission (UNWCC). The British and the American governments, eager to integrate the Federal Republic of Germany into the defense system of Western Europe against the communist Eastern Europe, were obstructing any collection of evidence regarding war crimes.[12] Similarly, Japan was enlisted to defend against the extension of communism in Asia.

The emergence of the Cold War did not mean that WWII was forgotten. The war stories were commonly told had to be told in a different way. For instance, Robert Moeller pointed out that the most prominent representation of German victimhood was not the Jews, but "women, men, and children who had left or been driven out of Eastern Europe by the Red Army at the war's end, and those in uniform for whom captivity in the Soviet Union followed German surrender" (3).[13] During the decade following the war's end, German newspapers were flooded with moving stories of German soldiers who were released by the Soviet Union and finally returned home. Moeller explains: "[T]heir stories became Germany's stories. Popular representations of returning prisoners of war emphasized that they were victims of show trials, sentenced for offenses they had never committed" (89). These phenomena indicate that the threat of the newly rising communist regime in Russia had reduced the responsibility of German soldiers for the war crimes they had been involved in and changed them into the fragile, frightened, and powerless big boys. So it might be said that 1945 had become a

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[12] See "Setting up a War Crimes Commission," *Prelude to Nuremberg*, p.27-62.

[13] See Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of German*.

watershed year. Before that, Germany was still that Nazi-dominated center of evil. Suddenly, Germany was transformed into a victim of the greater, more threatening Communist Soviet Russia. During this period, memories of WWII "became divided (and distorted) according to the logic of communism, anticommunism and antifascism (Müller, 4)."[14] In the same way, stories about the atrocities of Japanese soldiers did not earn as much attention as that of the anticommunist propaganda. Suddenly, the suffering of Chinese civilians was not so worthy of concern. And Japan's image as a war victim was highlighted. I attribute the popularity of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, published in 1955, to reflect how public opinion of Japan's role in WWII changed in response to the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War, marked by the fall of Soviet Union in 1991, gave rise to a new era during which the history of WWII would be re-examined. In Jan-Werner Müller's words, memories of the war were "unfrozen" after the collapse of communism (6).[15] In East Asia, this tendency has been especially visible with the increasing power of China and South Korea. Korea no longer had to fight side by side with Japan against their communist enemy, China. Meanwhile, China did not have to focus solely on its capitalist opponents. The newer enemies from the Cold War disappeared, so it was time to face the old ones. As a result, the governments and people of these countries, once inflicted by the Imperial Japanese Army, were inclined to review their wartime past and shared memories of war crimes. The stories of the 1937 Nanking Massacre and of comfort women have been included in the national history of China and Korea and has become a state matter, bring about the state governments' enhanced involvement in the re-examination of the history of war crimes and the negotiations with Japanese government since the 1990s.

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[14] Jan-Werner Müller. *Memory & Power in Post-war Europe*.

[15] Ibid.

I previously mentioned how the South Korean government has played an active role in the comfort women issue since they "discovered" the first Korean comfort woman in 1991. However, it cannot be said that before the 1990s, the stories of the women had been forgotten. Yochiaki Yoshimi, a prominent Japanese professor whose major works cover a handful of war crimes committed by the Imperial Japanese Army, indicates that the existence of comfort women had been known in popular culture. In 1947, Tamura Tajiro, a Japanese novelist, wrote *A Prostitute's Story* to describe the issue of Korean comfort women. The novel was later adapted into a movie. But at that time the issue was not generally considered a violation against human rights.[16] In the same way, journalist reports and fictionalized accounts about comfort women were publicized in 1970s and 1980s in Korea. But these stories were censored by then Korean government. It was since the 1990s, when Cold-War system has diminished intervention in the survey of Japanese war crimes, that Korean government started to pay attention to the issue and take care of their surviving comfort women.[17]

Meanwhile, the attitude of the Japanese government remained relatively lukewarm. In response to the Korean women's groups' demand for an official apology, the Japanese government acknowledged the existence of comfort women during the wartime; however, it did not address military participation. Whether the Japanese government had direct participation in drafting comfort women is still a hot dispute.

During the Cold-War period, which lasted more than 40 years, war stories were written and re-written, creating a historical gap between the times of widespread concern for this war crime issue. As Müller states, memories are closely connected to power—" the past has not been what it used to be. The relationship between memories and the present, or so it seems, has been stronger and more immediate than at other

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[16] Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, p.33.

[17] Keith Howard, "A Korean Tragedy," *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, p.6-7.

times" (3). In other words, history is always mixed with our modern interpretation and could be changed by the intervention of those in power. Müller continues, "raw individual and memories of life during the Second World War, and of occupation and resistance in particular, were overlaid with collective national memories—or myths—which served to legitimate—and stabilize—the political order after 1945" (4). The "return" of memories about WWII after the collapse of the Cold War has been a process of "nation-building, for which collective memories have been mobilized and for which often a more distant past has been invented"(9).[18] This accurately describes how the issue of comfort women has attracted enormous attention in South Korea. It has been considered a "Korean tragedy," used to reveal the country's colonized past and consolidate patriotic sentiment.

1.3 Chang-rae Lee and the Issue of Comfort Women

With the comfort women issue becoming a political problem in recent years, it has fueled ongoing disputes between Japan and the victims' countries. Under this climate, it is very difficult to tell a story about comfort women without reprimanding the evil of the enemy. As I previously mentioned, numerous testimonies of comfort women end with not only blaming the perpetrator, but blaming the enemy— Japan.

This pattern of transforming the comfort women stories into a national issue is a popular way of writing about war crimes. War crimes seem to be foregrounded in war literature because they best portray the stereotype of the "enemy": faceless, monstrous, and inhuman. Meanwhile, the stereotype of victim— vulnerable, pitiful, and silent—is also stressed. As a result, most war crimes stories simplify the idea of war with the opposition between good and evil. In the stories that discuss comfort women, Japanese soldiers are portrayed as horrendous rapists, and Japan is a hateful enemy, while both

[18] "Introduction" written by Jan-Werner Müller, *Memory & Power in Post-war Europe.*

Korean women and their country itself are victims. The stories look simple because people tend to challenge the monstrosity of the enemy, yet few seem to challenge the cruelty of war itself.

Chang-rae Lee, a Korean-American writer, apparently notices that the stories of comfort women should not end with the simple conclusion of blaming the enemy. In fact, I consider *A Gesture Life* a breakthrough because this is a war crime story that describes how war could distort humanity in its most extreme way. Focusing on an individual experience, the novelist denies the collected memory surrounding this issue. In the novel, the enemy is not inhuman. They have faces, names, and family. They express emotion. The severe damage they cause to their victims is just like the damage they experience by the war. In this regard, Chang-rae Lee utilized the postmodern technique of deconstructing the idea of war crimes by defying knowledge of this history.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean François Lyotard announces the differences between modern and postmodern. Modern, according to Lyotard, is:

> "any science that legitimates with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end-universal peace" (xxiii-xxiv).

As a response to modernism, postmodernism is defined as:

> "incredulity toward metanarrative. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the science: but that progress in turn presupposes it. […] The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each clouds are pragmatic valencies specific to

> its kind. Each of us live at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable."[19]

In short, Lyotard questions the dependability of science that is based on a "metadiscourse" or "metanarrative." Science must be presented "by the rules of the narrative game; its influence remains considerable not only on the users of the media, but also on the scientists' sentiments." Therefore, "the recourse to narrative is inevitable," Lyotard concludes.[20] To put it in other words, "authentic" knowledge, which we learn from textbooks, distinguished publications, or prestigious academic institutions, is nothing more than the games of narrative conducted by people in a dominant position. Meanwhile, Lyotard argues that to unveil the empowerment of knowledge, all statements about knowledge and truths should be opened to debates, and these debates should continue without end.

Regarding the "knowledge" of comfort women, I argue that there have been numerous ethico-political purposes involved in distorting the truth. One tends to conclude that the victims, together with their country, are all good and virtuous; while the perpetrators— the enemy—and their country are evil. Yet, in fact, the concept of the victim and the perpetrator is defined by the way we write war history and the way war is triggered. The opposition between good and evil exists in the war ideology of every country. People have to know how despicable the enemy is, and then they feel justified in declaring war. And when a war crime happens, the evil of the enemy is further secured. Therefore, in a story of war crimes it is easy to know who the enemy is and how this enemy is vile, but it remains difficult to challenge the war itself.

Different from the popular way a comfort woman story is told, *A Gesture Life* is

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[19] "Introduction" in *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean François Lyotard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) page xxiv.

[20] Ibid, p 28.

written in first-person narrative with a retired Japanese soldier as the only narrator, who recounts for his war experience. The novel centers on his encounter with a Korean comfort woman and his postwar life in America, where he is depressed from his war memories and his relationship to his alienated daughter. Every piece written about the comfort women has to be mediated by this narrator, who plays the role of the perpetrator in the comfort women issue.

One might question: is it fair to write a story about comfort women through the voice of a perpetrator? In fact, this question once concerned Lee when he was beginning to write the story. During an interview, Lee revealed that he was originally setting to write the story with a comfort woman as the first-person narrator telling her own heartbreaking experience. However, Lee soon discovered that it was not working out the way he wanted. He explains:

> "It was too straightforward, I couldn't find the drama in it. But there was a character, just a side character in the original story, someone who came into a scene and left a scene. Then my mind followed him outside of that scene, and the more I thought about him, the ways in which his character expanded became more complicated. I imagined that he became a prosperous man living in another country, with a family, albeit not a really typical one, and the more I thought about him, the more modulated and complicated and interesting his story became. So once I got onto his voice, I immediately understood the ways in which this story could branch out and widen in scope."[21]

When Lee decided to follow the perspective of the "side character," the Korean-born Japanese medical soldier, he started a revolutionary way to examine the war crime in literature. He skips the traditional discourse of "good vs. evil," which frequently surfaces in war stories and even more often in a story about war crimes. To write the story from the perspective of the soldier, Lee has to break the myth that this perpetrator is evil. This is not at all easy to achieve for a writer originally from Korea.

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[21] See Ron Hogan interviewing Chang-rae Lee, *Beatrice Interview*.

Lee conducted interviews with several comfort women in person, experiencing the women's feelings toward the issue firsthand. In fact, several characters in the book were based on the women from the interviews. So the novel has a direct link to the true story. During these interviews some of the women told Lee: "there were men who were kind to them, men who would just come to visit and talk."[22] The kindness of the perpetrators is a dramatic topic in Lee's explored literature.

However, it cannot be said that Lee tries to justify the perpetrator's actions. The focus of the novel is not whether the narrator is good or evil, but how he lives in the aftermath of what he had done. A morally conclusive answer regarding the narrator's true character is unnecessary to understand him and his history. In this way, Lee complicates the meaning of war crimes. Therefore, I consider this novelistic representation of war crimes powerful because, without defining good and, it will ultimately challenge the concept of the war itself.

[22] See Garner, "Adopted Voice."

CHAPTER 2
A SELF-DECEIVING NARRATOR

Before having any knowledge about the historical context and the identity of the narrator, Franklin Hata, we learn a little bit about him by what he says. The very first sentence of the novel, "People know me here," calls attention to the fact he is a well-liked and well-known man, which he keeps stressing in the second paragraph that ends with: "I realized that it's not just that I'm a friendly and outgoing silver-hair, and that I genuinely enjoy meeting people, but also because I've lived here as long as any, and my name, after all, is Japanese, a fact that seems both odd and delightful to people, as well as somehow town-affirming." The narrator spares no effort to stress he is very popular and respectable in his community, even at the cost of being repetitive and boastful. Then, Hata gives a brief history about the town where he lives, Bedley Run, and explains how he feels appealed to the place: "I felt strangely drawn to the town, in part because of the peaceful pace of life that the article noted, the simple tranquility of the older, village section that made me think of the small city where I lived my youth, on the southwestern coast of Japan."

With the explanation of his name and his preference of the view of the town, Hata makes clear his Japanese origin and his immigrant background. Meanwhile, he dwells on his popularity: "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 *un*welcomed" (3). Hata realizes his immigrant identity does not hinder his association with the community; instead, enjoying "an almost Oriental veneration as an elder," he is proud of his exotic background.

Hata then discusses his vocation as a retired businessman who ran a medical and surgical supply store in town. Though he is not a doctor, Hata seems to derive pleasure

from the fact that people regard him as a doctor: “they would just make affable small talk and docilely ask my advice as they might from any doctor, their eyes wavering and expectant,” and his store “came to be regarded as an informal drop-in clinic, the kind of place where people could freely ask questions of someone who was experienced and knowledgeable as well as open and friendly, a demeanor that quite a few doctors, unfortunately, no longer feature these days” (4).

In addition to his reputation, the beautiful town in which he lives, and the ideal business he practices, Hata also has a nice house, a “the two-story Tudor revival at number 57 is one of the special properties in the area […] with its impressive flower and herb garden, and flagstone swimming pool, and leaded glass and wrought-iron conservatory” (16). The house is highly desirable, because many local real estate agents inquire if Hata is considering putting it up for sale.

Within only the first few pages of the novel, we obtain valuable information about Franklin Hata: he is Japanese and ran a medical supply store in a beautiful suburban town called Bedley Run. Now he is retired from his business, the store has been sold, and he contently lives in a grand house that is commercially valuable. He has a financially secure life. He is very friendly, very nice, and people all know him and like him. To put it shortly, everything seems to be perfect.

However, one question remains to the acute reader: Is this true? Can he prove that his self-introduction is accurate? Why does he fail to give specific examples to prove his popularity? And more importantly, is he really happy? Where are his friends? Where is his family? His loved ones?

In reality, it seems the opening pages are the only moments in which the narrator can portray himself comfortably and in a positive light; yet something wrong is already emerging. In these pages, what Hata presents is only a subjective “telling” and with no proof “shown” to the reader.

The distinction between "telling" and "showing" is useful when investigating Hata's first-person narration. In Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, he indicates that authors and critics of literary realism tend to believe "impersonal" and "objective" modes of narration are superior to other modes in which narrators make direct appearances to their readers. To make the "impersonal" and "objective" description, the narrator must do much work of "showing"—exposing extraneous details of the scenes where events have taken place—other than "telling" personal comments. For example, when describing a group of people, an objective narrator would "allow [the reader] to eavesdrop on [the narrator's] people, and sometimes they will tell the truth and sometimes they will lie, and [the reader] must determine when they are doing which."[23] In this way, the narrator "shows" the situation by giving material details and leaves any moral judgment to the reader. The narrator will never "tell" what is right and what is wrong to be "impersonal" and "objective." By the theory of realism, it is more artistic to "show" than to "tell." The boundary between the two categories is not necessarily clear because they are often overlapped. To some degree, what the narrator decides to "show" is part of his "telling." The narrator might choose to stand at a corner of a place and describe in detail the vision, which would be very different from the vision taken from the center of the same place. Therefore, even the most "objective" narration contains traces of personal opinions.

Yet in *A Gesture Life*, the distinction between "showing" and "telling" is clear enough to be recognized. Most of the time, it is Hata doing the sole "telling," giving every incident his own interpretation. Hata is, in this aspect, a very manipulative narrator, who keeps informing his explanation and seldom letting his readers "eavesdrop."

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[23] Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 8.

However, there are a few moments where evidence against what Hata tells the reader are revealed. Usually they are "shown" through dialogues. The reader might learn other characters disagree with Hata by "eavesdropping" on the dialogue. Although the dialogue is shown through Hata's vision, it is clear that something is wrong because he fails to give sufficient reasons to bolster his opinion. Moreover, he has to delude himself to compromise the disagreement.

The first disjunction between "telling" and "showing" occurs during Hata's encounter with the Hickeys, the young couple to whom he sold his store three years ago. The Hickeys are the first characters, except the narrator, introduced in the novel. Introducing the couple and explaining how he gets along with them, Hata faces many unhappy experiences with self-delusion.

> "Mrs. Hickey would always greet me warmly and immediately ask how they ought to do this thing or that, and I'd set to work right away, until before I knew it, more than half the day had passed. It was Mr. Hickey, in retrospect, who was sometimes reticent, as he would look up and nod wanly when I entered the store, and after a few weeks I'd first check to see if Mrs. Hickey was there before deciding to go inside. And so it happened quite unexpectedly one day, when Mr. Hickey asked if I might let them run the business themselves, that it was what they had paid me for and if I would finally honor that.
>
> I was confused for a moment, mostly by his tone, because it seemed I was merely there at their own wishes […]" (7).

Knowing that the Hickeys must be facing many difficulties in the business, Hata often visits the store to see if he can help the young couple. However, such a short description limps at several places. Firstly, Mrs. Hickey is cordial to Hata and seems to be delighted with Hata's presence, as her questions often keep Hata staying more than half the day. But does Mrs. Hickey really need his help? Does she really befriend him? Or, does she just pity him? How come Hata would check for Mrs. Hickey's presence before he decides to enter the store? Between Hata and Mrs. Hickey, who is in more

desperate need of another's presence? Secondly, unable to respond to being expelled by Mr. Hickey, Hata says he is "confused" and still insists he stays at the store because they want him to do so, which is apparently untrue by the reaction of Mr. Hickey.

Mr. Hickey appears to be a rather irascible man in Hata's depiction, whose hostility toward the narrator is shown through the dialogue:

> "He (Mr. Hickey) regarded me for a long, awkward moment. Then he said, 'What do you want here, old man?'
> 'James!'
> 'Hold on, Annie. I'd just like to know what he wants from us. It can't be an accident that he's come today. Your buddy Mr. Finch at the bank didn't ask you to drop by, did he?'
> It was a strange notion, and I had no reply.
> 'Well, you can tell him anyway he'll have the whole place soon. Lock, stock and barrel. We wish we could sell it, but do you know what the place is worth? I bet you have an idea.'
> 'I can't say, Mr. Hickey.'
> 'Sure you can't. You only say nice things, I guess. Should I tell you? About two-thirds what you sold it to us for. […]'" (10).

Though the dialogue might not be shown completely and objectively, it still reveals some facts that the narrator would never reveal to himself. For instance, Mr. Hickey's harsh question concerning Hata's frequent visits to their store implies that he believes this old man might have something insidious in his mind. In addition, Mr. Hickey's direct remark that Hata "only says nice things" alludes to the possibility that Hata is not always honest and sincere in his words.

I stress the confrontation between Hata and the Hickeys not only because this is the first time the narrator's perspective is contested by other characters, but also because the event would mirror Hata's numerous failed relationships with other characters, among whom Sunny and K are most crucial.

Like most first-person narrations, Franklin Hata's effort to portray his story truthfully often ends up partial and unreliable. Because a first-person narrator can only tell the story from his or her own angle, when this narrator faces voices of other

characters that are contrary to his, he tends to dismiss them. This tendency becomes more complex in the case of Hata, being involved in the dilemma of war-crime responsibility. He cannot deny the fact that people suffered and were killed in the miserable time of war—just as he sees the wretched condition of the Hickeys—but he can pretend that he does not have to be responsible for it. To be precise, the point of his narrative is not to offer an alibi, but to persuade the audience he is not to blame for the crime.

Throughout the novel, Hata distances himself from watching other people's suffering, such as the scenes of the execution of Corporal Endo and Sunny's abortion operation. The strategy might help him escape responsibility for the others' pain, but it makes Hata seem to be aloof, indifferent, and cruel. Moreover, by underplaying his involvement in causing misfortune to other people, Hata is trying to deceive not only the audience but also himself.

Hata's self-delusion regarding his relationships with other characters never dissipates. At some places, it is easier for readers to notice that Hata is speaking against the truth, though he never admits it. Most of the time, the narration is marked by obscurity and evasion, especially when his doing causes damage to other characters. Hata's true life experiences very often do not match his expectations. Things often go against his wishes. He is called "Doc Hata" though he is actually not a doctor. He thinks he is well-liked by everyone around him, but his visits are unwelcomed by his business partner. His daughter hates the grand house of which he is so proud. He supposes that he is a good father, a good lover, a sincere friend…, and all of these expectations fail as his beloved ones turn away from him. Most of all, he wants to prove he bears no responsibility for the suffering of other people. But as his narration slowly discloses, he has caused the most severe pain and misfortune to the two women he treasured most. So clearly speaking, Hata is the villainous character in this novel, who still manages to

appear as innocent as possible by clinging to the principles of self-delusion.

Now I will examine closely Hata's relationships with the two women most crucial in his life: Sunny, his adopted daughter, and K, a Korean comfort woman Hata met during WWII.

2.1 Sunny

The description of Sunny makes up the majority of Hata's narration. Sunny's life experiences are very completely described in the story. We know the process by which she is adopted by Hata when she was still a baby. She is a docile girl and is very talented in playing the piano. She also undergoes very troubled times as she enters adolescence. Gradually she quits playing piano, fools around with men, some of them ill-famed, and thus gives her father a very hard time. At the age of 18, Sunny finds herself pregnant, and, with the help of Hata, undergoes a difficult abortion. Sunny quickly leaves her father after the abortion. And many years later, when Hata sees her again, Sunny is a mature woman and also a mother of a young boy. With such a clear life pattern of Sunny revealed to us, it seems that the narrator is an attentive father and cares about his daughter a lot.

However, the reason that Sunny is determined to distance herself from her father is never made clear in the narration. For this reason, Sunny appears to be an unapproachable character. According to Hata, he has always remained generous and caring to his daughter, offering her a materially secure life and a comfortable environment in which she is free to play and study. "My wish, as I had always explained to her," he says, "was that she study hard and practice her piano and read as many books as she could bear, and of course, when there was free time, play with her friends from school. A child's days are too short, and my sense then was that I should let her focus on activities that would most directly benefit her" (27). His fatherly kindness goes so far

that he does not even allow her to do housework: “it was clear I shouldn’t include my daughter in the mundane drudgeries” (27). In Hata’s own words, he is an ideal father and gives the best education to his daughter. This implies that Sunny is ungrateful, because she turns down her father’s kindness and becomes rebellious when she grows up.

Hata never explains the reasons for Sunny’s eccentric behavior, not to mention to reflect on his failed education. This could be a major weakness in Hata’s first-person narration: the failure to honestly portray his relationship with his daughter.

The dialogue in which Hata asks young Sunny to concentrate on playing piano gives the reader a clue that the way Hata raises his daughter may not be as ideal as he claims it to be.

> “Have you already finished practicing your Chopin?” I asked her.
> “Yes.”
> “I couldn’t hear you. What were you playing?”
> “Nocturnes,” she said, staring at my hand. “The ones you like. From Opus Nine and Thirty-two.”
> “I must have been vacuuming,” I said, wrapping a rag about my fingers.
> “Would you play some of them again?”
> “Okay. But can I help you now?”
> “No, dear,” I said to her, trying to stay the throbbing in my hand, my arm.
> “Why don’t you play some more? Your teacher wishes that you practice more than you do. You must push yourself. It may be difficult for you to see, but even great talent is easily wasted” (28).

The dialogue exposes the interaction between Hata and young. Hata’s unwillingness to tell more about his raising of Sunny suggests there must be some things he does not feel comfortable to tell. But even in this short dialogue, in which there are no visible conflicts, some problems between the father and daughter emerge. Firstly, it is Hata who is being aloof to his daughter by pushing away Sunny’s concern for his injured hand. Second, Hata imposes his wish on his daughter, expecting that she will excel in playing piano. This later proves to be contrary to Sunny’s own wish. Sunny

drops playing piano in high school, about the age she achieves some independence, and starts to stay out with friends, getting more and more distant from her father. Hata tries to persuade Sunny to resume playing piano, but it only provokes her disregard of his request. Therefore, it might be said that Sunny's resignation from playing piano is a symbol of the breakdown of the father-daughter relationship.

If Sunny had the ability to tell her own story, what would she say about her relationship with her father? How would she look at her father? The voice of Sunny is largely repressed in Hata's narration. He gives the character many negative sides, such as her ill temper, her rude behavior, and her promiscuity, which drastically depress her father. To spotlight Sunny's numerous troubles places Hata as the victim in this father-daughter relationship. However, the story could have an opposite conclusion if it is told from Sunny's perspective. It is possible that the girl is worn down by her father's lukewarm attitude, strict rules, and high expectations. She might feel Hata committed an unforgiveable crime by coaxing her into aborting the child. She might be facing many of the problems that a motherless girl may have. In other words, Sunny could be the one who is suffering in this relationship. But her voice will never be heard through Hata's mediation.

Because Hata pretends to be a good father, it is very difficult for us to get into Sunny's thoughts and to understand where her pains come. With emphasis on his fatherly kindness and the incomprehensible behavior of Sunny, Hata's description tends to dismiss the fact that Sunny is enduring many unhappy experiences in her life and Hata probably is hardly able to shun the responsibility. In this sense, Hata's self-delusion allows him to keep much cruelty from himself.

2.2 K

Hata's self-delusional narration is a more remarkable issue when he describes his

relationship with K. A comfort woman, a sexual slave of Japanese military, K also suffers from the tyranny of Hata's subjective narrative. Her pain is downplayed. Her words are twisted. Her actions are constantly watched and judged by Hata, who manipulates the image of the woman to his own wish.

In my observation, Hata wants to present K as his love interest. Thus, the passages about his interaction with K have been shaped into a love affair and colored with romantic elements. For example, K is first introduced into Hata's narration as "the only one of them who gazed directly at me" (182). The description suggests there is a special link generating between the woman and the narrator. Soon Hata notices how his commander, Captain Ono, also has a special interest in K:

> "I believe, it was not that the doctor thought her to be simply beautiful. For it is a fact well evidenced that there were many attractive, even lovely girls that one could have as a soldier of an occupying army. It was a more particular interest than that, and one I think perhaps he himself could not (and would not) describe. Like a kind of love, which need not be romantic or sexual but is a craving all the same, the way a young boy can so desire something that he loves it with the fiercest intensity, some toy or special ball, until the object becomes him, and he, it (182).

Hata compares the relationship between a comfort woman and a Japanese officer to "a kind of love" and further explains that it does not necessarily include carnal pleasure. It is closer to an emotional craving a little boy has for his toy. The description not only sounds like a fetish, but also implies that the soldiers are like young boys with a strong curiosity for the objects they want, comfort women. In other words, these soldiers' needs for comfort women is not abominable at all, because it has nothing to do with lust; it is similar to a childish wish: sincere, innocent, and not harmful.

Hata depicts every interaction between a soldier and a comfort woman as romantic as possible. For instance, Corporal Endo, a fellow soldier Hata considers unintelligent, acts surprisingly considerate to one comfort woman: "She fell weakly to her knees, and

it was Endo who raised her up with a stiff pull. She was not fighting him; in fact, her gait seemed to lighten, as if he were an old acquaintance and she was pleased to see him" (187). In his view, there is nothing oppressive about Corporal Endo when he takes the woman away. Instead, he is trying to hold her so she will not fall. He seems to act out of his sheer fondness, and the woman responds to his sentiment. So Hata believes what is likely to happen between Endo and the woman is romantic, even though Endo later kills the woman.

Hata defines his relationship with K in the same way. He is assigned by his commander to watch K closely to prevent her from committing suicide. In other words, he is practicing the military discipline over her. But Hata apparently does not want to regard their relationship as oppressive. He calls it "an initial date, like any two university students (248). He enjoys the moment when they are sitting "under the cool cast of the moonlight in the small yard behind the infirmary" (251). Listening to K talk, "there was a lightness to her voice, as if she were almost being playful with me" (251). In the scene, Hata could only see moonlight spread over the camp, with K's face glittering before the oil lamp, as they have a playful talk. But he does not acknowledge the fact K is locked in the infirmary overseen by him.

Believing they are lovers, Hata makes their sexual encounter a seemingly romantic and pleasant process: "The crown of her head was almost touching my knee where I sat beside her. She had let me do this before and she did not mind now" (258). Does K really agree to let him touch her? Does she really not mind? Or is she afraid of being punished or killed by this armed soldier so she remains silent and tolerates the harassment?

> "And it was so that I finally began to touch her. I put my hand on the point of her hop and could feel all at once the pliancy of it and the meagerness and the newness, too. I felt bewildered and innocent and strangely renewed, as

> though a surge of some great living being were coursing up my arm and spreading through my unknowing body. …And when I was done I felt the enveloping warmth of a fever, its languorous cocoon, though when I gazed at her shoulder and back there was nothing but stillness, her posture unchanged, her skin cool and colorless, and she lay as if she were the sculpture of a recumbent girl and not a real girl at all" (259-60).

The description of the sexual experience is very dehumanizing to K, with its repeated mentions of her stillness and coldness, comparing her to a sculpture. More precisely, Hata robs K of her emotions by making her an impassive, unapproachable, and even frigid woman. Contrary to K, Hata appears fully passionate and sensitive in the process. He is taking an active role in exploring his sexuality, which is shown in many sentences starting with "I feel…" Without a doubt, this is a pleasant experience to Hata. However, is it equally pleasant to K? Is she really as unemotional as Hata says? What does K really think about this sexual experience?

> "but as I gently shut the door I thought I heard a murmur. I couldn't lock it; to do so seemed at that moment too cruel. Instead I stood quietly for a moment and waited and indeed it was K, saying over and over very quietly what sounded most peculiarly like *hata-hata, hata-hata*. But as I listened more closely I realized that she was fitfully crying, though in quelled gasps, as if she were trying to hush herself" (261).

At first, Hata mishears K's cry, thinking she is murmuring his name. This could appear very narcissistic and to some degree, ironically pitiful as one man craves for love in such a way. And when he learns K is actually crying, he says she is upset because of losing her maidenhood. But Hata then explains that K actually need not be worried because he decides to marry her after the war. Again, Hata is strengthening his image as a perfect, responsible lover. Yet, at the mean time, he continues to ignore K's true feelings.

The narration shows that Hata does know K cries. But he refuses to acknowledge the fact the sexual experience is unpleasant to K. So he deludes himself, turning away

from K's response and extorting an explanation for it. At this point, his self-delusion is cold-blooded. To K, Hata is obviously not a lover, but a rapist. She acts cold and passive because she is forced to fulfill a soldier's desire. The nightmare that K undergoes in this scene is similar to the experience of other comfort women. But Hata chooses to turn away from her anxiety toward being raped, stressing his contentment instead.

This following passage could well reflect the historical context of comfort women during WWII. One battlefield diary of a Japanese soldier candidly reveals what a trip to a comfort station means to him:

> "When we arrived at the rooms where the women were quartered, the soldiers would line up with numbers in hand. They all wanted to be freed from the stress of the singular experience of having walked the line between life and death. They stood there waiting, with their pants unbuttoned, fumbling with loincloths long since turned a dingy gray and fidgeting—is it my turn yet? Is it my turn yet? …We thought there was no sense of fulfillment that burned so intensely at this" (Yoshimi, 74).[24]

To this soldier, a trip to the comfort station is an exciting and almost thrilling experience. There, the huge stress of facing death could be temporally released, and the soldiers could get really wild. As a result, these comfort stations effectively raised the morale of soldiers and helped the troops stay disciplined. However, the agonized voices of the comfort women are totally neglected.

In the same way, Hata turns away from K's unwillingness, solely focusing on the pleasure he obtains from the woman's body, even thinking that the relationship is romantic. Hata's self-delusion makes it easier for him to polish his narration as he opts to pretend his actions do not harm anyone.

2.3 The Ideology that Hurts

To summarize Hata's narrative style, the title of the book is quite significant. The

[24] Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women.*

word *gesture* is defined as "a movement of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea, sentiment, or attitude."[25] To put it differently, a gesture is not a natural movement because it is meant to deliberately express a certain message. With regards to this novel, the first-person narration is like a gesture that intends to highlight only the beautiful surface of his life and personality. But underneath, there is a cruel self-deception that denies acknowledging the painful experiences of others.

The style of Hata's narrative reflects his historical background. Hata grows up in wartime Japan, when all of society was imbued with a militaristic atmosphere. Strict social codes were expected to be obeyed by the general public, especially young males who would become soldiers. A distinctive Japanese ideology was taught, and Hata was a believer.

Hata's loyalty to his Japanese identity is an important theme in the story. This loyalty is demonstrated by his constant references to his Japanese origin, whether it be his name or upbringing. But his fond words about his Japanese identity are less remarkable than his embodiment of the wartime Japanese ideology. When he is young, he fulfills the dominant opinion of a good citizen: being an obedient child, studying hard, going to medical school to be a surgeon, and whole-heartedly believing in the emperor's mandate (249). As a soldier of the Imperial Japanese Army, Hata obeys the commands of his officers. And when he is old, he is a venerable Oriental elder and still manages to maintain a highly disciplined life. Throughout his life, Franklin Hata dedicates himself to the perfection of Japanization.

I refer to Hata as *Japanized*, instead of *Japanese*, because he is not Japanese by birth. Hata was born to Korean parents and was adopted by a well-to-do childless Japanese couple in his early adolescence. He speaks very little about his childhood in the Korean family and claims the adoption as "the true beginning of my life" (72).

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[25] "Gesture," Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary., 8March 2010.

Proud of being part of a prominent Japanese family, Hata feels very grateful for his adoptive parents for they lead him to "the purposeful society" where he is determined to find a promising future (73). Since that moment, Hata considers himself Japanese—the most respectable one at that.

It is ironic that Hata, an ethnic Korean, is immeasurably loyal to his Japanese identity. On one hand, he discards his Korean background, fully embraces the new citizenship, and successfully secures a place in mainstream Japanese society. He enters the battlefield to fight for Japan and helps to colonize the Korean people. On the other hand, the effort he makes to be a good Japanese citizen even surpasses that of his fellow Japanese. Take Corporal Endo and Captain Ono for example: the reason for Hata's refusal to share Endo's collection of erotic photo cards is not that he considers them obscene. He admits the pictures arouse his interest, but they disturb him because possessing the photos will disgrace his family. He says, "I feared it would be especially shaming to mine, for as adoptive parents they might shoulder the burden of my vices even more heavily than if I had been born to them, blood of their blood, as there would be no excuse but their raising to me" (155). Hata thinks he is responsible for guarding the education he received from his adoptive family, which is imbued with wartime Japanese ideology that expects a child to be obedient and a young man to be decent. By guarding the education, Hata fully accepts the ideology and uses it as a guideline in real life. Therefore, he finds it is "a most dishonoring fashion" that Corporal Endo places the erotic photos next to the pictures of his stolid-faced grandparents (157). In a similar way, watching Captain Ono's "drawn, humorless face" hovering above K's naked body, Hata finds it disconcerting to see the doctor, who is as unimpeachable in civil life as in military life —and who has a wife and young child back in Japan—should develop interest in a comfort woman (185). To Hata, holding an unclothed girl is not what Captain Ono should do because he is a married man with high social esteem. Ono's

affection for K, just like Endo's interest in erotica, breaks the code of proper wartime Japanese behavior, which Hata fiercely defends:

> "I only wished for myself that I could bear whatever burdens might fall to me, that I might remain steadfast in my duty and uphold my responsibilities and not waver under any circumstance, and by whatever measure. For I feared, simply enough, to be marked by a failure like Corporal Endo's, which was not one of ego of self but of an obligation public and total—and one resulting in the burdening of the entire society of his peers.
> I have feared this throughout my life, from the day I was adopted by the family Kurohata to my induction into the Imperial Army to even the grand opening of sunny Medical Supply, through the initial hours of which I was nearly paralyzed with the dread of dishonoring my fellow merchants, […]" (229).

Throughout his life, Hata's primary fear is failure in achieving the social expectation, "an obligation public and total." In his eyes, Corporal Endo embodies failure because he exhibits a dirty part of human nature and a weakness in mind, which are not qualities of members of the Imperial Japanese Army. To avoid the same failure, Hata is more careful to the guideline: he must not disgrace his family. He must not disobey the emperor's mandate and officers' commands. His character has to be impeccable. His business has to be successful. He shows no sign of emotional outbreak. He constructs the image of a loving father, a friendly neighbor, an honest business partner. All of this conduct stems from his loyalty to the mainstream Japanese ideology that preaches flawlessness, purity, and proper place in society.

Exploring the mainstream ideology of wartime Japan, John Dower points out that the attitudes and policies Japanese adopted to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in Asia were constructed on the distinctive perceptions of "purity" and "proper place." Unlike in Western culture, the purity in Japan means a sophisticated ethical sensibility; it has little racial implications:

> "The Japanese declared themselves to be neither physically nor intellectually superior to others, but rather inherently more virtuous. Although this moral

> superiority was frequently expressed in set phrases extolling the supreme virtues of filial piety and loyalty as expressed under the influence of the divinely descended Japanese imperial line, these qualities themselves were meant to reflect an even more sublime virtue: purity" (Dower, 205)[26].

The Japanese believe they are "purer" than others because they are more virtuous people. Here, the standard of virtue is exclusively Japanese, carrying Japanese ancient religious connotations and complex contemporary ramifications. For example, wartime bureaucratic guide to propaganda policy repeatedly referred to the concept of "proper place," which is used to discriminate between the Self and Other. Everyone in this culture is supposed to secure themselves in a proper place. Because the Japanese considered themselves the most virtuous people, their "proper place" in the Co-Prosperity Sphere was as the "leading race," while other less virtuous Asians should follow the model of the Japanese. In this sense, the Japanese, as an exemplary ethnical group, were expected to act correctly to display their virtuous nature, that is, their "purity."

Hata, as a highly Japanized citizen, is particularly obsessed with the idea of "purity." This is not only because the term "pure" frequently appears in his narrative, but also because, throughout his life, he portrays himself as a morally perfect person. To accomplish this, he has to achieve wartime Japanese opinion of a virtuous man. The direct result is he particularly fears to break military discipline. He dares not help K: he knows all the pain and all the misery this woman will face, but he does not try to prevent it, because that is against the discipline and that would upset the officers. Hata can betray friendship, love, and conscience, but he never breaks the boundary of "purity."

Hata not only allows the concept of purity to govern his own life, he also tests it on women close to him. And the result is tragic, because his insistence of associating purity

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[26] John Dower, "The Pure Self," *War Without Mercy*.

with female sexuality causes inexorable harm to the women. For example, in his ultimate confrontation with K, Hata is tormented by the possibility that K—who, rumor says, is with child—has lost her innocence. This results in Hata forcing K to bare her body, and the novel depicts a vague, near-rape scene:

> "She did not hold me but she did not push me away. I never meant for this but I could no longer balk, or control myself, and then something inside her collapsed, snapped clean, giving way like some storm-sieged roof, and then I descended upon her, and I searched her, every lighted and darkened corner, and every room" (295).

K's tragic death does little to change Hata's obsession with pure female sexuality. In postwar America, where the social restriction of sex is relatively loose compared to that of wartime Japan, Hata's transplantation of the Japanese ideology causes Sunny grave pain. It should be noted that Hata's original preference is to adopt a Japanese girl. This could be attributed to the message he learned from wartime propaganda that Japanese is intrinsically "purer," which essentially means more virtuous than other Asians. So to get a Japanese girl he can obtain a "pure" being, even naturally "purer" than K used to be, and then he can educate her and form a perfectly "pure" life, which he failed to do to K. But when it turns out that he adopts a Korean girl, Hata manipulates Sunny's life according to his wishes. Sunny accuses her father in one scene: "You were so certain as usual how my life should be" (283). Hata wants to make Sunny "purer" by way of education, just like what he underwent during his childhood. So when Sunny did something "impure," such as becoming pregnant as a teenager, Hata's reaction is extreme. Coercing the full-term Sunny to go through with a difficult abortion, Hata is not unaware that this is a horrible experience for her. However, he says he "persist[s], with warmth and privilege accruing to me unabated, ever securing my good station here, the last place I belong" (346). The ultimate concern in his mind is to secure

his “proper place,” to keep the privilege, to remain unyieldingly honorable, and save both his and Sunny’s “purity.”

Hata’s first-person narrative is another indication of his loyalty to the Japanese ideology. This is probably the biggest irony that the novelist wants to create. Hata has a distinctive way of story-telling. He tells of all the misery of others, yet still manages to make his account elegant and make himself look like a “pure” and good man. The almost instinctual self-deception and the distance he keeps from painful experiences helps to lessen the degree of his perpetration. Through his story-telling, every ugly truth is decorated. Therefore, he can stay aloof and respectable as a good Japanese citizen. But at the same time, his narrative exposes the absurdity of his ideology. The “Purity,” in a wartime Japanese context, is hardly possible to achieve for anyone, and much less for a perpetrator of a militaristic regime. How can someone like Hata, who was involved in a war crime, still manage to tell a “pure” story? The only way is through self-deception, a trick absolutely not virtuous, not “pure.”

In conclusion, Hata’s loyalty to the Japanese ideology is a remarkable feature in the novel, and it governs his self-identity, his behavior, his relationship with other people, and his narrative itself. In his life, he performs certain movements and gestures in order to practice the ideology. However, this ideology is the underlying motive that he perpetrates. It empowers him, transforming an impoverished Korean child into a confident Japanese male, and then he adopts the ideology himself to manipulate and hurt other people. The ideology makes him self-deceiving, unaware of other people’s pain. Hata hurts people because he wants to purify them, and then he turns away from the crimes committed to keep his purity. This echoes the actions of wartime Japanese, who planned to invade all of Asia to create the Co-Prosperity Sphere, and then educate the Asian people into “purer” people. Later they denied the war crimes they had committed, insisting on maintaining the “pure” image. Whether it be Hata’s personal

experiences or Japan's war history, this ideology of "purity" is hurtful. This is how the novelist executes a perfect combination of historical context and literary representation.

2.4 Hata as a Focalizer

Mieke Bal offers the concept of "focalization," which could be used to examine the issue of unreliable narration more critically. A prerequisite to understanding this concept is that every narration has its own point of view, so an objective account cannot therefore exist. As Bal says:

> "Whenever events are presented, they are always presented from within a certain 'vision.' […] This slanted, or why not say the word, subjective nature of story-telling is inevitable, […] Sure, it is possible to try and give an 'objective' picture of the facts. But what does that involve? 'Objectivity' is an attempt to present only what is seen or is perceived in some other way. All comment is shunned and implicit interpretation is also avoided" (145).[27]

This is why novels need rhetoric to form the presumably 'objective' narration and to make the point of view of the narrator sound truthful.

To construct a story as a mere sequence of events in time, there must first be the *fabula*, which is the elemental materials of a story, according to Russian Formalist theory.[28] But the story will not take shape without the elements being arranged and then told in a concrete way, which is, the *syuzhet*. The arranged way, of course, has to be decided by the vision of the story-teller. Bal refers to the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented as "focalization" (145). The subject of focalization is the focalizer, who stands by the point from which the elements are viewed (149). In other words, the focalizer stands at the vantage point of the story.

Hata adopts the Japanese ideology of purity to arrange his story-telling. If a

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[27] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*.

[28] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p. 181.

character fits the ideology, he or she will be favored by Hata and given an advantage over the other characters. For example, Liv Crawford, an earnest and successful businesswoman who seems to be honorable, is definitely closer to Hata's perception of purity than both Sunny and K. So Liv Crawford's description is much different compared to K and Sunny.

In addition, the notion of focalization might be useful to see the scenes of flashback in the novel. Bal states:

> "A special case of focalization and perhaps the best justification for the distinction I am making is memory. Memory is an act of 'vision' of the past but, as an act, situated in the present of the memory. It is often a narrative act: loose elements come to cohere into a story, so that they can be remembered and eventually told. But as is well known, memories are unreliable—in relation to the fabula—and when put into words, they are rhetorically overworked so that they can connect to an audience, for example, a therapist. Hence, the 'story' the person remembers is not identical to the one she experienced. This discrepancy becomes dramatic and, indeed, incapacitating in the case of trauma" (150).

The fact that memory can be views as a narrative act makes *A Gesture Life* very interesting because of Hata's effort in evoking of his wartime past. This once again emphasizes Hata's role as the focalizer. When discussing his memories, Hata offers his own vision of the past. This vision is objective. In addition, what is intriguing about these memories is that the focalizer tends to manipulate elements of the fabula in a way that could resonate with an audience. In Hata's case, that audience could be a jurist, or a person learning about the history of the war crime, to whom Hata desperately wants to prove his innocence. During the process, it becomes necessary for the focalizer to change the content of the memory. This process often becomes psychological, as one has to go through the past and alter it, all of which depends on the person's mental status. Yet when touching a memory that is extremely unwanted, such as trauma, the process becomes more difficult and complex.

The movement back and forth from present to past to present is the story's basic rhythm. Franklin Hata's slowly, almost reluctantly, disclosed memories of his wartime experiences alternate with his relatively peaceful life in America. These delicate alterations contribute to the story in a very meaningful way: they provide insight into the damaged mind of a traumatized person. In this way, the reader may get closer to the narrator's experiences on a psychological level.

The elements that govern Hata's narrative are not only his tyrannical sense of purity that leads to his self-delusion, but also his trauma. So the next part of my thesis will focus on how trauma intervenes into the narrative of the novel itself.

CHAPTER 3
HATA'S TRAUMA

> "If an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, then the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views will help him. If an author wants to earn the reader's confusion, then unreliable narration may help him" (Booth, 377-78).[29]

A Gesture Life is a very psychological story. Hata's narration, to a very large extent, could be seen as a text of psychoanalysis, not only because the narrator pays so much effort to stressing his internal thoughts, but also because his perspective of his present life is constantly riddled by the unhappy memory about his wartime past. One temporal scene is often mixed with another from the past. A number of incomprehensible, misfortunate events happen again and again to him. As a result, Hata is determined to explain the misfortunate events he has witnessed and to justify his testimony, and he unintentionally reveals his trauma in this process.

To explore Hata's trauma fulfills a broader outlook on the novel. I do not see *A Gesture Life* simply as a Korean, Japanese, or an Asian story, and I distance the story from its Asian American context. The reason for the complications of Hata's postwar life in America is not simply based on his immigrant background, but also his trauma. Take his relationship with Mary Burns for example, the friendly Caucasian widow, "a fine looker" (39), who wants to join in Hata's small family and keep on good terms with him. However, she gradually finds Hata is too reserved and too careful to be a companion. Years after their relationship cools down, Hata learns of her death in the newspaper. Evidently, the failure of this relationship is not caused by cultural difference between them. Hata's inability to express emotions, his reluctance to be more committed, and then his sudden termination of the intimacy—"I stopped everything then, perhaps too abruptly" (315)— all of these problems originate from his traumatic

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[29] Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 377-78.

memory about K, and greatly distress Mary Burns, pushing their relationship toward a dead end.

I put spotlight on Hata's trauma in order to prove that the story is nothing Oriental or exotic. The conflicts that happened to this protagonist are not directly related to certain culture; instead, they are consequences of his war experiences, and these experiences might more or less be shared with other soldiers of any cultural origin. As Cathy Caruth points out, "[t]he experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbered state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century" (11).These experiences of being tormented by inconceivable nightmares, originating from war or another catastrophic event, become so complex and widespread that physicians and psychiatrists gave them a special name: the effects of *post-traumatic stress disorder.* In other words, trauma is a problem of mental health. It could happen to all human beings when facing the far too violent events of war. Its occurrence surpasses any cultural or ethnical boundaries. Therefore, the theories on trauma put forth by Freud, Lacan, and Caruth are helpful to study in the narrative of Hata.

3.1 A Traumatic Beginning

The self-assured, serene, "people-know-me-here" opening of the novel is first disrupted by Hata's confrontation with the Hickeys, when subtle traces of his unhappy war memory smolder behind his refined representation. With the intention to help the young couple, Hata stops by the store he formerly runs only to find "an alarming spareness and disarray" (8) in the place. Mr. Hickey does not hide his anger toward Hata, and Mrs. Hickey, still in tears, shows him a picture of a pretty girl. Hata immediately tells a lie when Mrs. Hickey asks about the girl. The event reveals that Hata may not be as respectable as he claims to be. From this moment, Hata finds himself unable to limit

his narration to only the positive sides of his life. Hata's secure and leisurely tone becomes marred by uncertainty. His life, in fact, has never been as easy as he wants to portray.

The girl in the picture is Sunny, Hata's adopted daughter from Korea. Sunny is the key character that discloses Hata's wounds and reveals his traumatic memories. Around Sunny, we see a series of Hata's inconceivable acts. First, the decision Hata makes to adopt Sunny is out of his strong desire for a girl, a daughter. He stresses that he is "strangely unmovable on the issue" so that he has to negotiate with the adoption agency to fulfill his wish. Hata considers this decision to adopt a girl so important that he thinks of Sunny's arrival as "the recommencement of my days" (74). What is particularly strange is Hata does not even know from where his strong desire for a girl is coming. Second, Hata's parenting of Sunny is a total fiasco, which torments both the father and the daughter. Originally an obedient child, Sunny becomes rebellious as she reaches her adolescence and young adulthood, and she finally decides to run away from her father. When he is telling these memories about Sunny, inconsistencies and a lack of explanation obstruct our understanding of Sunny. Although Hata never gives up any chance to stress his generosity toward his daughter, he never blames her and never gives any reason of Sunny's changes, just like he could not explain his strong desire to adopt this girl. Also, Hata cannot even acknowledge his own faults and the failed education he gives to Sunny. In Hata's first-person narrative, he never accounts for what is wrong with himself or Sunny. This troubled father-daughter relationship could only be made clear from an outsider's point of view.

Once a love interest to Hata, Mary Burns tries to involved herself in Hata's family, yet her effort ends in a failure. Isolated first by Sunny, and then by Hata, Mary Burns, nonetheless, gains a real understanding of Hata's problems, especially regarding the treatment of his daughter. She tells Hata:

> "You treat her like a grown woman. [……] as if she's a woman you're beholden, which I can't understand. I don't see the reason. You're the one who wanted her. You adopted her. But you act almost guilty, as if she's someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you're obliged to do whatever she wishes, which is never good for anyone, much less a child" (60).

This is the first time Hata's uncommon way of raising Sunny is pointed out to him, and also the first hint that Hata sees another woman in Sunny.

It is a laboring process for Hata to look back to his wartime memories, which always trail after unhappy episodes with Sunny. For instance, the search for Sunny in the dirty and chaotic Gizzi place, where Sunny fools around with her ill-famed boyfriends, makes Hata think of the place he stayed during the war—"The heavy sweetness of the odor was reminiscent of the time I was stationed in Burma during the war, when some of my comrades would hang certain giant leaves to dry and then cut them to smoke" (100). The scene where people are dancing and having wild parties in a room seems to be "a jangle of limb" to Hata. "I began to feel that this house, these people, the party, were spinning out of control. The living room was transformed into a rank swamp of bodies" (104-105). At this moment, the bloody images of battlefields invade Hata's observation of the shocking Gizzi house. Soon afterward, a story of the comfort women he knows is uncovered when he encounters Sunny being nearly raped by two men. The dark and vile display of the scene that Hata accidentally comes across arouses his memory of the incidents of "the girls" he witnessed during the war. He is unknowingly forced to remember that the comfort women were confined, tortured, sexually abused, and ruthlessly beaten (109-112). This unhappy trip to Gizzi house, where sex and violence are explicitly displayed, pushes Hata to remember the devastating stories in his wartime past. Later on, when Hata tries to interrogate Sunny's unruly behavior, his scheme only backfires as Sunny, who is "like a grown woman, in

fact, charged and righteous" specifically incites "a long-stored memory of another woman who once spoke nearly the same words" (150). The wound of Hata's traumatic experience is finally revealed, as this "other women" represents K, the Korean comfort woman whom Hata met and fell in love with during the war.

Sunny performs a few crucial experiences that Hata had seen in K. For example, she shouts at Hata: "I don't need you […] I never need you. I don't know why, but you needed me. But it was never the other way" (96). These words strikingly resemble what K had said to Hata in despair: "I never wanted your help. Can't you heed me? Can't you leave me be?" (300). Also, Sunny had been raped (at least to Hata's knowledge). Her body had bled severely, which is similar to what K had gone through. Therefore, in Sunny there are many stunning resemblances of K, which exposes Hata's traumatic symptoms.

3.2 Unwanted Repetitions

In the center of all traumatic experiences is the striking phenomenon of repetition, which can appear in many different forms. Both Freud and Caruth focus a lot on this phenomenon in their works of trauma theories. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud sets forth a few medical cases and literary stories to describe how repetitions play a significant role when people are dealing with distressful situations. For example, in a child's infancy, before he has any consciousness of his intellectual activities, a child knows to play a game of "fort-da." He habitually throws his toy away from him into a corner and expresses a loud word which sounds like the German word 'fort' (meaning 'gone'), and when he finds the toy he "hailed its appearance with a joyful 'da' ['there']" (33). The child plays this game again and again so his parents have to frequently find his toys from hidden corners. Freud interprets this act as a game of disappearance and return and concludes this is a way for the child to deal with the distressing experience of

departing from his mother's womb. Freud observes that the game usually has a pleasurable ending because the child, who throws away the object to satisfy an impulse to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him, transforms the passive situation into an active one. However, the unpleasurable nature of the game is inextricable. As Freud puts it:

> "It is clear that in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and that in doing so they abreact the strength of the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the situation. But on the other hand, it is obvious that all their play is influenced by a wish that dominated them the whole time—the wish to be grown-up and to be able to do what grown-up people do" (36).

So the game is a way for the child to learn to accept the great changes in his life, such as the absence of his mother, and also a way to find a balance between his impulse and outside forces. He has to play this game repeatedly to adjust to the unhappy real world, the world of the grown-up people.

Freud also gives a literary example of the repetitions in trauma, which comes from Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*:

> "Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again" (45).

Freud uses this literary piece to further indicate "there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat" and we should relate this compulsion to the impulse that leads the children to play, because this repetition of the same experience, which may appear in many uncanny forms, is the most striking image of traumatic neurosis (46).

Caruth further uses this literary example to illustrate the whole concept of "the

wound and the voice" in the first chapter of *Unclaimed Experience*. In addition to "the repetition at the heart of catastrophe", Tancred's story also dramatizes "the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound" (2). The voice, which Tancred hears from the tree and obviously does not understand, "bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated" (3). Here, the voice is an invisible path that leads Tancred to his unwanted memory, specifically the unfortunate moment when he kills his beloved, and then he has to believe the wound of Clorinda bleeds again because of this reminiscence. This is why Caruth points out that the destructive repetition of the trauma could be very "retraumatizing" (63). Moreover, Caruth is curious why Freud turns to literature to describe a traumatic neurosis. She suggests "it is the moving quality of this literary story"— "its striking juxtaposition of the unknowing, injurious repetition and the witness of the crying voice"— that could clearly define trauma, and "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (3). So it is only through literature that the highly complex mental disorder, trauma, could be best portrayed.

It is interesting to see how Hata's story shares many similarities with the Tancred piece. Both the traumas come from their killing of their beloved. To a very large extent, Hata has to be responsible for K's terrifying death for his lack of courage. Therefore, his memory of this woman and a strong sense of guilt for her death keep Hata's wound unhealed. This wound resurfaces when Hata is hurt by Sunny and, more often, when he hurts Sunny himself. Like Tancred's story, the image of bleeding woman is conspicuous, in particular when Hata coaxes full-term Sunny into undergoing an extremely difficult abortion. The sight of the bleeding Sunny undoubtedly is a reappearance of an injured K. Facing the two bleeding women in his life, Hata fails to describe the details in plain language. Standing aside K's dismembered body, a sight too horrifying to depict, he can only say "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." "…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 digitations of the hands" (305). Whether it is a coincidence or not, the ambiguous description of K's death eerily resembles an abortion operation, which Hata later focuses on Sunny. Likewise, the same obscure language and aloof attitude shadow his painful experience of watching Sunny's abortion procedure. This time, Hata goes further away from the physical sight of the operation. Without saying how Sunny suffers badly during the operation, Hata praises the doctor's skill and underlines Sunny's unusual calmness: "Sunny was eerily quiet while he worked, her eyes glassy and unfixed, though every so often she would gaze up at me almost searchingly, as though I were some faraway figure in her dreaming, this dimmed man in the distance, made of twilight and fog" (345). Throughout his narrative, Hata never explains why he is so determined to force Sunny to accept the abortion. He is, however, aware that the difficult operation is a repeated event in his life when he tells the doctor "I've witnesses such things. Similar things" (344). As a result, Sunny's abortion operation is nothing more than a repetition of K's terrifying death. This adopted daughter, who does not sense true paternal love from Hata, becomes the victim of his traumatic neurosis, his "compulsion to repeat."

In addition, Hata is so haunted by the death of his beloved that he is besieged by the "strange magical forest" which also distracts Tancred. The metaphor of an entrapping forest occurs in Hata's elaboration of the buildings, the landscape, and the atmosphere of every place, such as the Gizzi house and his own Tudor house. Hata's sensitivity to his surroundings reflects his insecurity of the urban forest, for each sight is likely to bear witness to the memory Hata has unwittingly repeated, making his wound bleed again and again. Consequently, Hata's story tells a similar traumatic experience to Tancred, which shows uncanny repetitions of catastrophic events. Both the protagonists

have experienced the traumatic event "too soon, to unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth, 4).

The repetitions of unwanted situations almost becomes a pattern of Hata's postwar life in America. Like the child's play game of "fort-da," these repetitions come from unstoppable compulsion, which Freud believes "must be ascribed to the unconscious repressed" (41). Hata's compulsion to repeat certain experiences obviously comes from his war-time past of being severely repressed, either by his ego or by the extremely disciplined military life in which he lived. For instance, Hata's unexplainable obsession with his adopted daughter inextricably goes along with a wish to recover that ill-fated romance with K and an attempt to atone for his sins. Therefore, when Sunny, as a rebellious adolescent girl, is nearly struck by Officer Como for her misconduct, Hata's response is much different than a common father's would be. He says:

> "I was perplexed as to what I should do. It's a strange thing, to have your daughter being publicly accosted by an officer of the law and to know inside that it's completely right and warranted, and yet on top of that having the impulse to shield her from criticism and unhappiness, and feeling, too, the purest, unbending aggression toward the officer" (87).

To feel uncomfortable for seeing one's own daughter being corrected in public by a policewoman is one thing, to feel like the aggression against her is protect her is another. Apparently, what troubles Hata at this moment has less to do with paternal protection than with his own trauma. Seeing Sunny being punished parallels an experience of watching K being ruthlessly struck and murdered. Thus, Hata's confused reaction indicates the arrival of an unwitting repetition of a catastrophic event.

Similarly, the strange experience of repetition occurs when Hata sneaks into the room "606," a number Hata recognizes appears "with inexplicable frequency" in his life

(75), to watch Patrick Hickey. The young son of the Hickey couple suffers from incurable heart disease and is, with little hope, waiting for a suitable heart. Staying beside the ailing child, a memory of war merges into Hata's mind. He recalls witnessing the outpost's doctor, Captain Ono, performing a vivisection to test a prisoner's heartbeat. With the memory vividly in his head, Hata feels an impulse to repeat the same experience: "I wondered if I could perform the same on Patrick, if something terrible were to happen and his monitors alarmed and no one else could come. If I held the knife in my hand, could I make the quick, deep cut on him, could I reach inside, handle the thing, sustain him for the necessary time?" (77) The juxtaposition of two temporal scenes, the ghastly war-crime event from the Pacific War and this one of modern American life, may seem bizarre because they are so different both temporally and spatially. However, with the novelist's delicate portrayal, Hata's present seemingly comfortable life in America could be a recurring nightmare of the past wartime experience.

3.3 A Distorted Story

In *Moses and Monotheism*, a traumatic history of the Hebrew people is introduced. According to Freud, Moses, the great liberator and father figure of the Hebrews, was not a Hebrew originally, but an Egyptian, and the strict monotheistic religion that Moses preached to his people actually derived from the Egyptians. Freud then provides a complete historical account to prove that monotheism was in fact created during Egyptian religious reforms. Moses the Egyptian adopted this monotheistic religion, made it his own Mosaic doctrine, taught it to his people, and led them out of Egypt to Canaan. However, at a strange moment, Moses, the founder of the Jewish religion, "met a violent end in a rebellion of his stubborn and refractory people. The religion he had instituted was at the same time abandoned" (43). The Egyptian Moses was killed by the

Jews in the rebellion. These people, for a time, worshipped another god and embraced another leader, who was also named Moses and eventually became more and more identical to the first Moses. But their murder of the old Moses could not be totally effaced. The Hebrews thus underwent a period of *latency*, when they were figuring out a way to face the traumatic murder of their great leader. Freud compares this latency period to a traumatic neurosis, the "incubation period," which happens to a person who just witnesses a shocking accident and usually has no consciousness of what he or she had gone through. During the latency period, the Hebrews, slowly recovering from the shock of the death of Moses, started to modify their official history and to accept the return of the Mosaic doctrine. The strict monotheism taught by Moses was once more practiced by the Jewish people. And this time, they became firmly loyal to their father figure and would unyieldingly cling to the Mosaic doctrine for thousands of years. To conclude why the monotheistic idea should make such a deep impression on the Jewish people and why they adhere to it so tenaciously, Freud suggests it is a sense of guilt attached to the murder of Moses that drives the people to practice the religion ceaselessly yet unconsciously.

The Freudian version of Hebrew history marks several traumatic experiences. First, repetitions once again play a dominant role in the traumatic history. From the return of the Mosaic doctrine to the thousands of years of strict religious practice, the Hebrew people express an amazing "compulsion to repeat," which helps the ancient religion survive numerous historical changes and disasters and still remain steadfast. Second, if Moses was an Egyptian, then his act of liberation, the Exodus from Egypt to Canaan, is not a history of return, but of departure. Moses did not lead his people to return to the Promised Land; instead, he created the Jews and led them to a new history of Jewish monotheism. At last, Freud notices that with the murder of Moses, the Jewish history inevitably includes the distorting tendencies. The historical account is full of gaps and

inconsistencies, especially in the interim between the death of Moses and the return of monotheism. Though he found traces that show modifications, it is not easy to know how many truths are repressed and whose stories are actually told.

Like the traumatic history of the Hebrews, the experience of departure and the latency period could be found in Hata's story. Born to Korean parents and adopted by a Japanese family, Hata first wants to abandon his Korean origins to be Japanese. However, the traumatic encounter with K calls back his "Koreanness." Later, he even adopts a Korean girl as a link to his Korean origin. In addition, Hata's life in America is established on the basis of departure. As Keith A. Russell comments: "Franklin's name is evocative of Benjamin Franklin, an embodiment of the American Dream; however, this association is misnomer for Franklin Hata since he is unsuccessful in his attempts to leave behind Japan and his role in the Japanese empire."[30] America is not a Promised Land for Hata. His departure from Japan to America, instead, marks his link to a traumatic past. As soon as he arrives in America and begins his new life, he starts to tell a distorted story of his life. Leaving his original country is an escape to create a new identity, a new self. Because Moses led a group of people out of Egypt to Canaan, he created the Jews and contributed to the beginning of the Jewish history. In the same way, Hata leaves Japan, immigrates to America, becomes an American citizen. Then he can stand at a terminal position, look back at his life, and tell his experience of departure. Like the story of Moses and the Hebrews, it is impossible to give an account of the traumatic past until Hata departs from his original country.

Between his wartime past and his departure for America lies the latency period. Hata never explains anything about this period in the novel. When did the war end? How did he leave the battlefield? Why did he choose to immigrate to America instead of

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[30] Keith Russell, "Colonial Naming and Renaming in *A Gesture Life* by Chang-rae Lee."

fulfilling his previous goal, to be a doctor in Japan? Apparently, after witnessing the shocking death of K, Hata loses the strength to remember the aftermath, which Freud describes as the "incubation period." Only by leaving and entering a new environment, a new future, could he manage to terminate this latency period, and then regain awareness of what he had done.

In addition to the psychological effect of the "incubation period," the historical context can also explain the missing period of Hata's life. Previously, I enumerate a few examples of how war memory had been twisted by international political climate. During the Cold War, war crimes of Japan were not welcomed to be talked about. Not only did the Japanese people want to forget the embarrassing history and look forward to the future life, but the Americans helped to censored words that remind people of the war crimes. In consequence, memory about the war crimes had been deliberately repressed until the Cold War coming to an end.

Finally, when Hata recovers the strength to remember his experiences and write story, it is important to question the impact of the "incubation period." The memory had been repressed and now it is unfrozen. Can it still be true to the reality? How many distorting tendencies Hata's narrative includes? How many truths does he repress and how many modifications does he make? How far does he get into the real?

To answer these questions about the reliability of Hata's narrative, it is necessary to go over another parable analyzed by Freud and Lacan: the story of the burning child. A father, exhausted for spending days and nights looking after his dying son, went into the next room to sleep after the son dies. An old man, in place of the father, watched the son's body, which was surrounded by tall candles. "After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?'* "' The father woke up, rushed to the son's room, only to find that the old man had irresponsibly dozed off

and “the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child’s dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them” (Caruth, 93). Freud surmises that, in this case, the dream reflects not only inner desires but a “direct relation to a catastrophic reality outside” (94). The dream delays the father’s response to the ongoing tragedy, for the father does not wake up immediately; instead, he keeps sleeping. The dream unwittingly fulfills the father’s wish to see the child alive again, and thus “tells the story of a father’s grief as the very relation of the psyche to reality: the dream, as a delay, reveals the ineradicable gap between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it except in the fiction of a dream” (95). Therefore, it is only in a prolonged dream, which functions like fiction, in which the father can encounter his dead son and hear his voice again.

While Freud focuses on the function of the dream, Lacan is more interested in the act of awakening and the words of the dead child. According to Lacan, the father’s awakening is the site of the *tuché,* translated as the encounter with the real. But this traumatic awakening is paradoxical, for “it is not only the reality, the shock, the knocking, a noise made to recall him to the real, but this expresses, in his dream, the quasi-identity of what is happening, the very reality of an overturned candle setting light to the bed in which his child lies” (Lacan, 57). So Lacan asks: “Is is not, *in* the dream, another reality?” (58) The reality that the father encounters after he wakes up is nothing more than a repeated event of what the father had dreamed, which appears *by means of* reality. If a reality could exist in a dream, or in fiction, what about another reality we perceive when we are conscious? Which reality is closer to the real?

Lacan’s explanation of the burning child story is inspiring to examine the nature of memory. We often tend to search for the real in memory. Sometimes, the desire for the real is so strong that it becomes a dream about that memory. But when we wake up, the dream is over, and the real is gone. Thus, in Lacan’s words, the nature of our searching

for the past, the real, is an "encountered, forever missed" (59). Nevertheless, the unconscious, the other real, does exist. It appears in the shape of, in this case, a dream, which tells the father his child's body is burning. The power of this real is equally intense as the father's wish to memorize that his child is alive, urging the father to wake up to find the shocking reality. Therefore, it is impossible to encounter what had really happened in the past through memory; but it is unlikely not to memorize the past because the memory contains the repressed desire to see our wish may come true.

Caruth further argues that "to awaken is thus to bear the imperative to survive." The father has to awaken, or to survive, because he is commanded by his child to "*wake up, leave me, survive; survive to tell the story of my burning*" (105). Thus, the father, as a survivor, bears the imperative to tell the child's story. However, since it is only in the father's dream, which, Freud suggests, is a wish-fulfillment of the father, that the voice of the child is heard. Then, there are always some concerns in this story: who utters the voice? Whose wish is fulfilled? Which reality is revealed? Which reality is missed? And whose story gets told— the father's, or the dead son's?

From all the stories of trauma listed, we may draw a conclusion: trauma often results in distortion. When a survivor tries to recount a terrible death that he witnessed, he inevitably has to speak for the dead. In this way he is also a mediator, telling a story that is not his own. However, this trauma-stricken speaker usually misses some reality and then ends up with a new story, a story of only his side. Like the Freudian version of the Hebrew story, the whole historical account is altered by the people who are so frightened and so guilty for the murder of their liberator. Or like the Tancred piece and the story of the burning child, in which the voices of the victims, Clorinda and the child, startles Tancred and awakens the father. But whose stories are told in literary pieces? Are they the stories of the victims? Or the stories of the survivors? Likewise, we may ask how many realities about comfort women or about the war-crime victims are

revealed in *A Gesture Life*. How many voices of K are written? How many distortions does Hata make and how many truths does he save? Could a trauma-stricken person honestly tell what really happened?

The authenticity of survivor accounts has attracted much attention recently since more and more Holocaust survivors' testimonies have been revealed. In these testimonies, trauma usually makes it hard for survivors to tell a factual and convincing story. As Dori Laub notices: "The traumatic experience has normally long been submerged and has become distorted in its submersion" (62). So when listening to testimonies of Holocaust survivors, Laub finds "the opposite to be equally true. The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive." So there is, in each survivor, a need to tell their story. However, the telling can never be fully successful because "no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought*, *memory*, and *speech*" (63). Consequently, each survivor, because of their traumatic experiences, is barely able to give a complete, coherent, and trustworthy description of what they had witnessed.

As one of the survivors who had witnessed a devastating event, Hata is a very special narrator. On one hand, he himself is a war-crime perpetrator. He participates in the management of comfort women and even is indirectly responsible for the terrible death of K. Whether he is willing to admit his participation in the hideous crime remains an important issue. In this regard, Hata is similar to the Hebrew people in Freud's account—both of them kill a figure of great importance, and then spend the rest of their days repeating certain acts to cover the deeds. On the other hand, Hata's traumatic neurosis blurs his access to a precise description. It is in a complex relation between

knowing and not knowing that Hata manages to tell his story. There are phenomena unknown to him so he cannot tell, and there are also more unbearable facts that he knows but fails to address. As a result, his narrative is composed of obscure language and elusive tendencies. He is, evidently, not a loving man, not a dedicated father, not a reliable narrator, not every figure he wants to portray himself. In a life full of deliberate gestures and movements, Hata is particularly unable to acknowledge his dark sides. He does not clarify the fact that he cheats the Hickeys out of a lot of money. He does not accept that he is actually a rapist of K, not her lover. He does not explain the troubled father-daughter relationship with Sunny, nor does he take full responsibility for their problems. And he does not make clear every lie he tells to his family, friends, and his readers. In addition, the largest problem for Hata is in explaining his own trauma.

Trauma is a distinct phenomenon in Hata's life and he desperately wants to negate its existence. To some degree, the whole novel displays Hata's effort to prove that he is normal and dignified, that he lives comfortably without any dismay, and that nothing unpleasant could or did happen to him. However, the memories of the devastating events that occurred to him have an unstoppable force to disturb his narrative. As a result, trauma not only troubles his life, but also governs his language. His life is filled with the repetitions of catastrophic events, while his language reveals considerable distorting tendencies.

At last, it is important to recognize Caruth's comparison of literature and traumatic experiences. In fiction, the line between reality and fantasy, between knowing and not knowing, between truths and lies, is impossible to be specified. The domain of trauma shares the same features. So bearing his trauma, Hata's narrative lingers between knowing and not knowing, where the boundaries between the truths and the lies are changeable. So I believe that with the vivid portrayal of Hata's trauma, Chang-rae Lee offers a different way to look at the war crime story. We can deconstruct this war crime

perpetrator, to question the authenticity of his account, to investigate his mental status. And most of all, we, as readers, can always discover more possibilities from what he says and what he does not say.

CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION: DEFAMILIARIZING A WAR CRIME

> "Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. […] And art exist that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."[31]

The issue of comfort women can be learned through historical texts, which attempt to explain why the Japanese military needed comfort women, how the women were drafted, what kind of dreadful condition they were forced to live, what the soldiers did to the women, how the Japanese government responded to the issue. These are the familiar aspects of the history of comfort women. One could claim to know the entire history of the issue when one has these ideas in mind, and this knowledge makes it easy to give a moral conclusion of the issue.

The significance of Lee's complication of the war crime is *A Gesture Life* defamiliarizes this knowledge of the comfort women issue. Written from the point of view of a perpetrator, the novel first reminds that this perpetrator is not a demon. He has a family. He expresses feelings. He mulls over his actions. He has the weaknesses that most human beings have, such as being selfish and cowardly. Behind his brutal actions, he is fighting against his inward fears. Underneath the atrocities of the perpetrator, there is only a full-blooded person. He could be a son, a brother, or a husband of a normal family. He could be anyone among us.

The defamiliarization of the war crime story is indeed controversial. If the most extreme type of perpetration could be deconstructed, how could we say to the victims, the women like K who was abused and killed? Why did they suffer? Who should be

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[31] Victor Shklovkey, "Art as Technique," *Russian Formalist Criticism*, p. 12.

responsible for their misery? These are the questions the novel could not directly answer. I believe no one can answer them, not even the historians.

However, fictional representation of this issue from Lee is still significant because it breaks the habitualized story of war crimes, and its ultimate purpose is to clarify the cruelty of war, instead of the enemy. It can be surmised that one joins war to fight against the enemy because the enemy is accountable for committing crimes against to them. The evilness of the enemy is the common theme of war rhetoric and the most habitualized concept of war. But the meaning of enemy is not solid. The familiarly demonic image of the enemy is actually constructed in war, as the evil of the war criminal is only developed when one is at war.

At last, to defamiliarize of a war criminal is to question war itself. *A Gesture Life* discloses the result of how war reflects the cultural level of a nation in every respect, how war ideology brainwashes a person's mind in its extreme, how war teaches a person to live with the effects of war, and how war eliminates humanity.

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