



“Casualties of War”: The Japanese Occupation of Korea and Its Impact on Mothers and Daughters in Yoko Kawashima Watkins’ *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* and Sook Nyul Choi’s *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*

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Abstract

World War II is only partially represented in American history and culture, with the Japanese occupation of Korea rarely acknowledged. An analysis of two middle-grade novels, Yoko Kawashima Watkins' *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* and Sook Nyul Choi's *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, illuminates three underrepresented issues: conflicting portrayals of the occupation of Korea in two popular children's texts, the influence of American readers on those narratives, and the ways in which the constructs of stereotypical mothers and daughters are impossible to sustain during wartime.

Keywords: mother, daughter, Japanese occupation of Korea, World War II, children's literature

Introduction

Although American children's literature boasts a substantial catalog of works about World War II, the vast majority focuses on American and European events; a quick search on Amazon.com shows over 100 available texts for the terms "children's literature about World War II," most focused on topics such as the Holocaust, D-Day, Rosie the Riveter, and the American homefront. Yet this representation of World War II is incomplete in its omission of the Pacific region, including the wide-ranging effects of Japanese invasion and occupation from Northern China to Indonesia. This is not surprising. As Stephen Walach summarizes, "The American consciousness associates World War II-era Japan with two key events: the attack on Pearl Harbor and the dropping of the atomic bomb" (17). Significantly underrepresented in America's collective narrative of World War II are the internments, occupations, and incarcerations that occurred under Japanese rule, including the final years of the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945). In this article, I examine three underrepresented topics: conflicting portrayals of the occupation of Korea in two popular children's texts, the influence of American readers on those narratives, and the ways in which the constructs of stereotypical mothers and daughters are impossible to sustain during wartime.

Two Influential Texts

Yoko Kawashima Watkins' *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* (1986) and Sook Nyul Choi's *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* (1991) portray the Japanese occupation of Korea in two popular narratives written for children. Both texts received glowing reviews; Watkins' text in particular resonated with readers. *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* was adopted for classroom use by multiple school districts during the first decade of its publication and Watkins was a popular speaker and peace activist. The novels offer shifting, often contrasting, perspectives on girlhood during wartime occupation; Watkins' protagonist, Yoko, is from a wealthy Japanese family that is in a position of power for much of the war and its immediate aftermath, while Choi's protagonist, Sookan, is a Korean girl whose family has suffered under Japanese oppression for decades. An "ideal" reading

of the texts would acknowledge both the difference in subject positions and the commonalities in the characters' experiences, yet various factors complicate such a reading. Junko Yoshida's reading, which stresses the divergence in narratives, illuminates the historical and cultural complexities at work: "Though Yoko and Sookan survive the wars as contemporaries on the Korean Peninsula, each war has a different reality for each of the protagonists" (Yoshida). Despite that important difference, however, Yoshida also notes that both novels "describe the loss of happy childhoods when the protagonists are forced to leave their homes."

These texts merit study for multiple reasons, including the ways that they illuminate a part of World War II that is often omitted from the American cultural narrative; this is important when we consider whose stories are prioritized in the creation of history – whose stories are being told – as well as who is telling and consuming those stories.¹ Studies of representation in children's literature strongly suggest that at the time of publication for both novels, mainstream publishers imagined their ideal child readers as White Americans.²

More specifically, motherhood and girlhood are constructed in these novels as dual representations, carefully crafted both to accurately reflect each writer's childhood culture and to appeal to a largely White American audience whose expectations and stereotypes might demand a specific rendering of both Asian identity and femaleness. And ultimately, the texts show that the continuation of ideal motherhood – nurturing, protective, and instructive – is impossible under occupation. Like Yoko's and Sookan's childhoods, it is a casualty of war.

Although *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* and *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* have been addressed in previous scholarship, that analysis has occurred within a limited context that has overshadowed other necessary discussions of the texts. Initial critical reviews of both novels highlighted the themes of triumph over adversity and the resilience of childhood; in *School Library Journal*, Louise L. Sherman wrote, "Readers will be riveted by the events of the escape and struggle for survival, and enriched and inspired by the personalities of the family [...]. *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* should have a place among the finest of [Holocaust survival stories]" (147). Likewise, in their review for *Journal of Reading*, Utako Matsuyama and Kristi Jensen summarized the plot of Watkins' novel as "a young Japanese girl living in northeastern Korea, fleeing to Japan with her mother and older sister to avoid Communist attack [...]. The fear, hunger, courage, and love that Yoko's family shares are vividly recorded" (319). Sherman's attempt to align *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* with Holocaust narratives is problematic in and of itself, but in addition, neither review offered any context of the Japanese occupation of Korea or acknowledged Yoko's privilege as an occupier; instead, reviewers framed Yoko's experience as an isolated narrative of escape from a dangerous enemy.

Audience reception to these texts has been mixed; some Korean and Korean-American readers have accused Watkins of factual inaccuracies in her work and criticized her attempts to portray a Japanese character

sympathetically while casting Koreans – who suffered under decades of brutal Japanese oppression – as lawless and violent. The fact that Watkins’ text is frequently taught in schools – and is often the only text in the curriculum that represents either World War II or Asian identity – complicates the controversy. Wookyung Im points to Lisa Yoneyama’s revelation that “despite the large number of students of Asian descent in the U.S., curricular materials related to Asia are miniscule and, in some cases, [*So Far from the Bamboo Grove*] is the only one used in schools” (81). Carter Eckert, Lisa Kocian, Chung-a Park, and the Korean newspaper *Chosunilbo* have covered successful efforts to remove the book from classrooms in Massachusetts, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Texas.

Sung-Ae Lee asserts that Choi wrote *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* “in response to reading *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*” (89); while this claim bolsters the binary multiculturalism-versus-history argument that has framed the pairing to date, it is unreasonable to confine the discussion only to that binary. The continuing conversation around these issues is important, to be sure, but the conversation by itself is an incomplete treatment of these texts; there is much to examine in the books beyond the representation of historical fact, national identity, or workings of memory.

Reframing and Expanding the Discussion

I argue that these texts do crucial work to advance the discussion of war, childhood, and gender in at least three ways. First, although these texts focus on a specific event from WW II that often is marginalized in the broader American cultural narrative of the war, they feature Asian girls as protagonists. Given the paucity of representation for Asians and Asian Americans within American children’s literature, these portrayals matter. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center, which tracks annual numbers of children’s books that represent people of color and people from First/Native nations, lists 274 books by Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific American authors and 310 books about Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific American people or subjects for 2017 – 584 out of a total of 3700. While these numbers have increased from 2002, the first year that such data was compiled, they remain low overall, particularly given that Asian Americans are the fastest growing demographic in the United States (“Asian Americans”). Because these two texts portray a historical event that features Asian female protagonists and is rarely included in American teachings about World War II, they are restoring a representational presence on at least two fronts.

Secondly, they present the wartime experiences of women and girls, whose lives are often de-centered in war literature, through a unique perspective. Written as semi-autobiographical texts by Asian women who later emigrated to the US, these narratives present their primary intended audience – young American readers

who do not identify as Japanese or Korean -- with an unfamiliar historical event experienced by people in a country few readers could locate on a globe. But because Watkins and Choi survived these events as children and then emigrated to the US to live as adults, they offer readers a dual perspective that includes an insider perspective of the occupation of Korea and a cultural familiarity with what American readers and American children's publishing would expect of such a narrative (Low and Erlich).

What I find particularly interesting are the ways in which Watkins and Choi portray female identity and motherhood in their respective texts — as simultaneously familiar and exotic, marked by parent-child and sibling conflict recognizable to American readers but also distanced by time and placement within an East Asian culture. The fact that both works were written in English and intended for American and English-speaking readers might seem insignificant at first glance, but the intentional positioning of these narratives as American texts for American readers is critical to understanding the complicated ways in which these texts present “foreign” childhood and motherhood within the context of twentieth-century American history and culture.

Both authors emigrated to the US and immersed themselves in the values and anxieties of American culture. American identification and context are significant because they help American readers who may be outsiders to Japanese and Korean culture to predict and recognize these portrayals of mothering. We can expect, based on the writers' choices to emigrate to the US and present this text in English via an American publisher, that we can apply stereotypically American expectations of “traditional” mothering to these characters – mothers and children. In interviews, both writers are clear that they are writing beyond their first cultures. They are, in fact, careful to separate their authorial identities from their nationalities. In an exchange with a Korean newspaper, Watkins explains, “I never thought that I was writing the book as a Japanese. I did not write the book for any country, government or ethnic group. I simply wanted to share my story with young people so they would know what I experienced when I was young” (Park, S.) Watkins' quote suggests a careful neutrality — by claiming that her book is intentionally non-specific, she separates herself from her Japanese identity and the “foreign-ness” that might accompany that identity in the minds of American readers.

Choi, a retired teacher, emphasizes her view of herself as broadly American in a 1991 interview with *The Boston Globe*: “I would like to be known as an American, not an Asian-American.” She goes on to note that *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* “was inspired by her grandfather, and by her American students who wanted her to write a book about it when there were not enough Asian texts to refer to in a syllabus they were compiling on WW II”. Finally, Choi declares, “I wrote the book as an American educator, as an American citizen” (McCabe).

From these statements, it is reasonable to assume that Watkins and Choi envisioned American readers when they created their stories; as authors who embraced their adopted country of the United States and lived in it for decades before writing their novels, it is reasonable to assume that both women wrote their occupation narratives – stories of wartime Korea that took place in the 1940s – against the backdrop of American cultural expectations. Their crafting of female characters – Yoko and Sookan as protagonists, as well as sisters, aunts, grandmothers, and especially mothers – reflects an awareness of and appeal to American readers who will recognize familiar constructs in an unfamiliar setting.

American readers are shaped by their cultural views of motherhood; those include seeing mothers as protective, nurturing figures whose primary purpose is to care for their children. Within this cultural construct, good mothers are present, patient, and instructive; they raise children (especially daughters) who will pass on the appropriate child-rearing behaviours to their own offspring. It is true that the role of mother has shifted throughout American history depending on cultural needs, yet critics also point out the continuities; for example, Claire Buck cites feminist historian Linda Kerber’s work on motherhood in the early American republic and its influence in “set[ting] the agenda for feminism throughout the nineteenth century and arguably to the present day” (Buck 291). Cultural historian Jodi Vandenberg-Daves elaborates on the idea of motherhood as a cultural construct with historical continuity:

What we have collectively saved in our cultural memory speak[s] to powerful and life-affirming patterns of maternal resilience, resistance, and joy. Motherhood was central to the identities of the vast majority of women who lived in this and other historical eras. Then, as now, mothering children was a labor of love, a source of pride, a sense of accomplishment, and a connection to humanity. (150-1)

In her study of American motherhood, Rebecca Jo Plant claims that World War II marks an important turning point in the representations of American motherhood:

Particularly after World War II, mainstream American culture ceased to represent motherhood as an all-encompassing identity rooted in notions of self-sacrifice and infused with powerful social and political meaning. Instead, motherhood came to be conceived as a deeply fulfilling but fundamentally private experience and a single (though still central) component of a more multifaceted self. (3)

Finally, there are contemporary characteristics that we associate with mothers, according to Lawrence H. Ganong and Marilyn Coleman. When they asked graduate nursing students to list “societal beliefs” about mothers, responses included “forgiving,” “generous,” “protective,” “reliable,” “patient,” “self-sacrificing,” and “loving” (502). I believe that Watkins and Choi are uniquely positioned to observe and understand all of these pieces of American motherhood even as they imbue their novels with complimentary portrayals of motherhood from their respective Japanese and Korean cultural backgrounds.

Motherhood is seen as an essential part of women’s lives, yet that crucial work often goes unrecognized; according to Grace Yoo, “The importance of mothers during wartime is often invisible in the records of history, yet they play a significant role in protecting and nurturing children during wartime” (170). *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* and *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* complicate Yoo’s claim; these novels argue that while the importance of mothering does not diminish, the circumstances that allow “normal,” nurturing motherhood are severely constrained and finally disappear. Under occupation, then, what most contemporary American readers would consider a mother’s duties – including those culturally prescribed roles as guides and protectors – are compromised and eventually rendered impossible. Furthermore, when wartime experiences are addressed in children’s literature, our current cultural anxieties often necessitate our removing ourselves from those experiences (we tell ourselves that war is something that happens in other places to other people) and we need to construct these childhood – and mothering – experiences as exceptional rather than as the common occurrences that they are. Yoo invokes feminist social theorist Sara Ruddick’s claim that “violence threatens all women’s work – sheltering, nursing, feeding, kin work, teaching of the very young, and tending the frail elderly” (170).

While the historical and factual possibilities of motherhood are critical to this discussion, also important is the didactic role of children’s literature, particularly how it constructs gender roles and shapes the expectations of both child and adult readers. Lois Rauch Gibson remarks that “books are also an important way for a culture to transmit its varied social values to children [...]. [N]ot surprisingly, a group frequently represented in children’s literature are mothers” (177). In her analysis of the models of motherhood in E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, Lucy Rollin asserts that that the text “raises important questions about gender and mothering in our culture and about the influence of a work of literature – especially a work of children’s literature – on our attitudes toward them” (43). Rollins’ analysis can be extrapolated more generally to the kind of cultural work that children’s texts both demand and perform; indeed, she links White’s novel to broader cultural constructs of motherhood when she addresses the “phenomenal popularity” of *Charlotte’s Web*: “Such widespread popularity indicates that the depiction of motherhood in this book corresponds to the desires and fantasies of a large and varied population, who find in it much that is comforting” (50).

The two texts under discussion here reflect some of these same desires and fantasies; the publication of Watkins' and Choi's stories – or of virtually any children's book in America – depends on their narratives reinforcing both the cultural values (constructs of ideal childhood, girlhood, motherhood) and cultural anxieties (war, death of parent, abandonment) of American readers.

Both Watkins and Choi portray girlhood and motherhood as identities with collectively understood rules/limits that operate within a reciprocal power dynamic; mothers act in accordance with a “template of mothering,” a set of expectations that dictates their behavior and sets up expectations not only for their actions but for those of their children. The qualities of nurture, protection, sacrifice, and instruction all are part of that traditional template of mothering. However, both novels show that traditional motherhood is impossible to sustain under occupation; if any part of the template of mothering remains as the characters endure hunger, cold, and loss, it occurs from child to child.

One of the central things to interrogate in these texts is how girlhood and motherhood are constructed, represented, and transformed. In both novels, the “normal” roles of mothers are forcibly changed through the occupation experience. While tracing the respective protagonists' stories, the novels also reveal how the template of mothering is reshaped under occupation; although there are occasional acts of resistance, for the most part traditional aspects of mothering are sacrificed.

The portrayals of Yoko's and Sookan's mothers reflect the influences of Japanese and Korean cultures, respectively; K.H. Kim notes the complexities of Japanese national identity, including the “inherently ambiguous nature of motherhood in the wartime period. Mothers were expected to be ‘stay-at-home’ and be passive,” yet Yoko's mother also oversees the running of the household in her husband's absence and actively prepares the family for their eventual escape (91). During the Japanese occupation, Korean nationalists “call(ed) upon all Koreans – and especially women – to devote themselves to maintaining Korean culture and identity in the face of Japanese oppression. For women, this meant a return to the emphasis on selfless motherhood, this time in the service of the nation” (Shin 248). By the 1930s, “good mothers were those who dreamed of their children's beautiful future, wove the clothes of hope for their children, and endured the endless pain of sacrificing everything they had for their children” (249). Each of these popular occupation texts offers a view of idealized motherhood and childhood – what both should be – as well as realistic motherhood from pre-occupation to post-liberation.

In addition to establishing ideal motherhood, both texts also reveal a construct of ideal childhood and its connections to ideal parenting, as well as the specific and lasting ways in which occupation inevitably and permanently changes both. Early in *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, narrator Yoko informs readers, “Even with the war upon us, my parents insisted that I continue with all my special lessons, not only calligraphy but

The Way of Tea – an art of serving and receiving tea – flower arrangement, poetry writing and reading, and Japanese classic dance lessons” (7). This is followed by an account of Yoko and other local children performing for injured soldiers (9-14), an event which prompts a lasting friendship with one of the officers. Yoko’s childhood includes activities that function as training for the adulthood her parents envision for her; the emphasis for girls of Yoko’s socioeconomic status is largely in fine arts/culture. There is still an allowance for play, however, even amidst the adult expectations that Yoko will mature and actually use those lessons in the future.

We see a similar template of mothering in *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, when Sookan reports:

Mother asked Kisa and Aunt Tiger to get out the big brown earthen kimchee –jar hidden in the kitchen. Inchun and I offered to help, but Mother said, ‘No, from now on, no more grown-up chores and worries for my children. You are going to play and read and enjoy the carefree days of childhood. Leave everything to the grown-ups.’ (89)

This quote reflects childhood as it should be – a time of play that is free from worry, when children focus on play and adults shield them from the realities of the world. Sookan’s mother emphasizes this at other points in the story as well, such as when she tells Sookan “You are a little girl, and there is nothing for you to worry about. Just do as you are told. Soon all will be well. God is watching over us” (32).

The effects of the Japanese occupation, however, warp this template of mothering. As a result, the responsibilities of maternal caretaking shift from adult characters to child characters who must care for one another in the absence of an adult. That shift is inevitable – perhaps irreversible – during and after the episodes where the protagonists are separated from their mothers, either by death (Yoko) or detention (Sookan). In the moments while her mother is dying, Yoko comments on her unexpected maturation:

Suddenly I felt grown-up. Suddenly I knew I must protect Mother. I wiggled out of my overcoat and covered her slender shoulders... ‘Hang on – hang on to the – wrapping cloth. Hang on...’ Mother’s head slipped to one side, and her right arm dropped and she was still. (121-122)

Though Yoko is unable to prevent her mother’s death, she briefly exchanges roles with her mother to become the caretaker, the “parent” responsible for trying to make a sick patient more comfortable.

Separation in *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* occurs via detention rather than death, but it is no less devastating:

When I finally turned to look for Mother, expecting her to be close behind us, I saw that she was still standing at the guardhouse [...]. I saw them pull Mother out of line [...]. ‘Mommy, Mommy, Mommy,’ Inchun sobbed. At this, I suddenly came to, told him to hush, and pulled him by the arm, hoping no one had heard. (133)

In the aftermath of separation from their mothers, Yoko and Sookan must learn to survive without the maternal advice, protection, and love that have shaped their childhoods while they undertake journeys through a hostile, violent landscape where the “enemy” is often unclear. Even as they eat out of garbage cans, sleep in barns, slip across borders, and worry about possible capture and torture, they must reconfigure their lives so that the siblings share the responsibilities formerly borne by mothers. Yoko and Sookan are reminded repeatedly that they have nothing – that they dwell within a landscape of personal and cultural loss – and yet they both take on some of the nurturing, protective behaviors that are no longer available from their mothers.

Towards the end of *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, when both Yoko and Ko have found enough stability to enroll in school, Ko is making clothes and toys from scraps and selling them. She mothers Yoko, telling her, “You can have that money. Buy yourself a pair of shoes” (138). Ko’s sacrifices for her younger sister do not end there; Yoko accidentally discovers Ko shining shoes in order to pay for a modest New Year celebration: “Suddenly I saw Ko. She sat on the cold ground polishing a man’s shoes. I froze” (144). In the absence of their mother, Ko takes on maternal responsibilities and sacrifices for her younger sister. Yoko reveals,

When I told Ko about the increase in tuition she said this was an absolute necessity and the time had come to use Mother’s wrapping cloth money. She took out a hundred yen, changed it into smaller bills at the bank, and gave me what I needed. I asked if her university tuition had gone up. It would go up in April, she said, and she would take a break from school and work somewhere until I left school. But until April she was going to enjoy every moment of her school days. (150)

Readers see Ko’s willingness to sacrifice her own education – which she values highly – so that her younger sister can finish school. In the absence of their mother, Ko has taken on the protective and sacrificial aspects of motherhood.

As the older sibling, Sookan is painfully aware of her responsibilities in *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*; she also doubts her ability to fulfill them. At first she is overwhelmed, and Inchun tells her, “Nuna, you can’t cry like this. Big sisters don’t cry. You are my nuna. I’ll always obey you because you are my nuna” (138). By the time Sookan decides to return to the guardhouse where her mother was detained, she has accepted her role as caregiver: “As a nuna I had to make the decisions and do all the talking. I looked at Inchun, who quietly stared down at his feet, waiting for his big sister to decide what to do next” (144). Shortly after this scene, Sookan is trying to conserve their meager food while Inchun cries that he is hungry: “It was hard to be a nuna. I wished someone older than I were around. I didn’t like being the older one, though I loved Inchun and I wanted to take care of him. I was tired and I cried as I caressed his dirty hair, stiff from the mud and rain” (154). In the absence of their mother, Sookan steps into the role of caregiver and protector of her younger brother; the responsibility of keeping both of them safe overwhelms her at times, but she endeavors to provide some maternal duties in the absence of their mother.

In some children’s literature – folklore, for example – some child characters become caretakers and surrogate parents and the basic template of mothering remains; a single family might break that template, but in the larger culture, the traditional construct of motherhood still presides (Bates). Watkins and Choi, however, argue that traditional mothering becomes impossible under occupation. War disrupts traditional cultural norms and necessarily changes the model of traditional motherhood; if any template of mothering survives, it does so on an individual basis and occurs child-to-child.

Despite their wishes to remain part of an intact family, both Yoko and Sookan must learn to survive in the absence of most of family members, including their mothers. The presence of a sibling (Yoko’s older sister, Sookan’s younger brother) allows for a kind of transference of mothering – while it is no longer possible for their actual mothers to care for them or for “normal” mothering to survive, these characters attempt to reconstruct and practice that model of behavior.

Conclusion

So Far from the Bamboo Grove and *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* are complicated texts that do important work in the representation of a fuller story of World War II and of Asian/Asian American culture and history in children’s literature. In addition, both texts deserve attention for their perspectives on girlhood and motherhood during wartime occupation and the ways that reader expectations might shape both narratives; specifically, readers see that though Yoko’s experiences are not identical to Sookan’s, there is a similar set of expectations of mothering in both texts that reflects both past and present, “foreign” and familiar constructs of

women and girls. As possibilities for traditional motherhood disappears, these child characters must take on adult responsibilities of caretaking as part of their own survival; this behavior mitigates reader discomfort with the disappearance of mothers from the narratives and reinforces American cultural values and anxieties.

Notes

¹ When I use the term “American readers” in the essay, I refer primarily to readers who do not share Watkins’ or Choi’s cultural/historical heritage or an understanding of the Japanese occupation of Korea. I recognize that this term is imprecise.

² Nancy Larrick analyzed this bias in 1965; more recently, Rudine Sims Bishop commented on its continuity in 1990 and in 2014, both Walter Dean and Christopher Myers revisited it in op-eds for the New York Times.

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