

Reading Against the Grain – Presentation Transcript

My name is Susie Woo, and I was a CLIR Dissertation Fellow in 2005. And I'm so happy to be a part of this reunion and I'm incredibly grateful for the support of CLIR and the Mellon Foundation that allowed me to conduct research in the United States and South Korea that fundamentally shaped my project that would eventually turn into my first book. So thank you so much to CLIR and to the Mellon Foundation. In this presentation, I wanted to share my experiences in the first archive that I visited for this project, and that was the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. And I wanted to talk about the materials that I found there that fundamentally altered the scope of my research. So I'll begin with a little background of the project itself. My parents both lived through the Korean War, but they rarely spoke about it. And it really wasn't until I was in college and I started to ask them about the war that the story steadily unfolded. I learned that my mother lost her father and her two older sisters in the war. I also learned that my father spent a lot of time on U.S. military bases where American G.I.s would give him chewing gum and chocolate. He found weathered copies of Look and Life magazine. And it was there amidst the destruction of war that his American dream began. It was their stories that made me want to write about Koreans who had survived the war.

The Korean War took place between 1950 and 1953, and it is still technically not over as an armistice ended the fighting, but technically not the war. It claimed an estimated 34,000 American, 900,000 Chinese and over three million Korean lives, the majority of whom were civilians. While technically the United Nations fought in Korea, the U.S. made up 90 percent of all U.N. troops during the war. The U.S. dropped six hundred and thirty-five thousand tons of bombs on a peninsula, which is about the size of Minnesota. Entire cities were completely wiped off the map. These are just a few of the data points that clarify how war forever changed the lives of millions of people.

As a grad student, I began searching the stacks at Yale's Sterling Library to find anything I could about Korea that was published between 1945, which is when U.S. commanders divided the peninsula and the United States military occupied South Korea, to around the 1970s. And I found U.S. government and State Department pamphlets and booklets filled with photographs of Korean temples and Korean people that introduced American readers to Korea. I then turned to U.S. media to see how news of the war reached American audiences. And one of the things that I noticed was that so many of these stories centered around Korean children. So here's a still from

the Universal International Newsreel from April 26, 1952. And it shows two U.S. Marines dressing a Korean orphan with donated clothing from the United States. And in this newsreel, there were several scenes of the U.S. Marines donating clothes to children who are lined up outside the door of a building. And so this is an example of some of the images that appeared in American newsreels during the war. This photograph of a young Korean girl dressed in an oversized shirt appeared in McCall's, a women's magazine, in October 1953. And the caption reads, "This young girl whose entire family may have been killed clings desperately to all that. She has left the ruins of her home in Seoul." And this was an appeal to readers of McCall's magazine to donate to help Korean children on the heels of war. Here's just one more example of the kinds of images that I saw. The caption for this photograph that appeared in the May 1953 issue of National Geographic reads, "Young Cowboys just off the Korean range, relax with Roy Rogers." And the three boys are reading a Roy Rogers comic book, though it's likely that they couldn't read English. The staged image included the child in the middle who is wearing cowboy boots. And many photographs of Korean boys during and after the war depicted them dressed up as cowboys or often in U.S. military fatigues.

And immediately following the war came news of Americans adopting Korean children. This November 30th, 1953 issue of Life captured the arrival of Lee Kyung Soo, who was a four year old boy who was adopted by U.S. Navy boatswain, Vincent Paladino. In the spread, it showed Lee dressed up as a cowboy being carried by his white adoptive American father. And when I saw all of these images together, it raised questions about how it was that Korean children were being introduced to the American public; and how it was that Americans invited them into their homes in the 1950s. And this became one of the central questions of my dissertation when I first started the project: How did these interracial and international families come about amidst ongoing racial segregation in the United States and restrictive immigration laws that only recently, as of 1952, ended Asian exclusion by allowing a very limited number of visas from Asia annually?

With the support of the Mellon Foundation and the Council on Library and Information Resources Fellowship, my first stop was the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, that houses the U.S. Department of State, Department of Defense Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, and U.S. Army records. Here I found correspondence that added new dimensions to the stories that I had been seeing in popular publications. In U.S. Army Chaplain Records, I saw that

visiting local orphanages to deliver donated goods and play with the children was scheduled into the daily activities of U.S. servicemen. At Christmas time, American GIs dressed up as Santa Claus and delivered toys and hot chocolate to the children. Military correspondence noted that contact with Korean children boosted the morale of soldiers and gave them a purpose in the war. The memos made it clear that the visitations were developed with the soldiers in mind. So, for example, American Christmas traditions were entirely unfamiliar with Korean children but carried great significance for the homesick soldiers. The Department of Defense hired its own cameraman to capture these tender moments on camera, images that were then relayed to the American public. Raw film footage shows that the Department of Defense even tried its hand at creating short films like this one titled "Orphanage Story." In these two stills, there is a Korean boy crouched and alone on the side of the road. In the next scene, a U.S. jeep rolls in and stops. A U.S. soldier steps out of the jeep to console the child, and the next scene shows the men bringing the boy to a local orphanage. The documents and film reels that I saw in the State Archives demonstrated that Korean children figured into regular U.S. military activities in Korea. Korean children were also central to the Department of Defense's strategy to narrate the war as one of American rescue, a storyline that helped obscure the destruction caused by U.S. bombs and military tactics, like destroying dams to flood entire villages or strafing Korean refugees to eliminate enemies hiding within.

The records revealed something else. American servicemen began going beyond the prescribed points of contact with Korean children. Men began housing Korean children or mascots, as they called them, in their barracks, and some tried to formally adopt the children. Unit officers kept monthly tabs on adoption requests, and commanders responded by ordering regular sweeps of the barracks and set up obstacles to prevent its men from adopting Korean children. Military officials noted that such measures were necessary to keep men from getting too caught up in the care of children when they should be focusing their energies on the war. The archives also showed that the tactics used to delay requests for adoptions were similar to those used to deter U.S. servicemen from marrying Korean women. Marriage applications that I found in this collection included character references from family, neighbors and local police chiefs, as well as medical examinations that included extensive STD screenings. The documents revealed the extent to which couples had to debunk assumptions that Korean women were prostitutes together. Military efforts to prevent its men from bringing home Korean children and women

revealed moments of fissure when military commanders could not control the sentiment and action of its men. When Koreans and Americans became intimately intertwined and when war abroad threatened to become an immigration issue at a time when most states upheld antimiscegenation laws, interracial families were rare, and neighborhoods across the United States remained segregated.

Post-colonial scholar Ann Laura Stoler examines the anxieties and tensions that emerge in the colonial administrative that emerge in the colonial administrative hesitant sorts of documentation and sensibilities gathered around them." Inspired by her methodology, I approached the U.S. State Archives, planning to read what was missing as much as what was included, and to see documents not solely for their intended purpose, but to read them against the grain. By doing so, the questions at the heart of my project shifted. The National Archives showed me that my project would not just be about adoptees in the United States, but also about Korean women. I saw how directly the U.S. military helped script the versions of war that appeared in U.S. media and how these narratives shielded military efforts to keep Korean children and women in Korea and also hid the increasing number of mixed-race children fathered by U.S. soldiers and cared for by Korean birth mothers. These lessons from the National Archives altered which archives I would need to travel to next in the United States and where I'd need to begin once I landed in Seoul, Korea, for the second half of my fellowship year. The records also taught me that Korean War migration to the United States - of Korean adoptees and brides - began with the US military and was intimately tied to state projects that were inherently unequal. Reading the archives against the grain in ways unintended by the original authors revealed U.S. military practices that forever changed the lives of Korean civilians. Embedded within U.S. military memorandums, applications, tallies and schedules where the Korean children and women who did not choose war but found themselves suddenly and intimately tethered to the United States. Thank you.