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THE MAD FATHER
IN THE ATTIC

Torture and the ethics of accountability in post-authoritarian Korean fiction

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Torture and Korea’s twentieth century

If, as Ariel Dorfman has written, the twentieth century enjoys the dubious distinction of having refined and rationalized pain as a “patriotic” technology of governance, then modern Korean history stands as a testament to that essence of its times. Torture as an institutionalized form of interrogation began to be practiced in modern Korea during the Japanese colonial era (1910–45), when independence fighters and thought criminals were needled, hosed, cattle prodded, and otherwise “worked over” in the cells of Sŏdaemun Prison. The practice continued after the liberation against alleged communists, political dissidents, and student and labor activists under the successive authoritarian regimes of Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŏngman, 1948–60), Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏngghŭi, 1961–79), and Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tuhwan, 1980–7). The horrors of what Dorfman described as “a century that would produce manuals on pain and how to inflict it . . . a century that handed out medals for those who had written the manuals” are embodied perfectly in life stories of torture specialists like No Tŏksul, who went from working for the colonial Japanese police to working for the postcolonial South Korean police almost without missing a beat, and Pak Ch’ŏwŏn, who received more than forty decorations during his long career in the South Korean police force as “the godfather of counter-communism investigations” (taegong susa ŭi taebu).³

Marking the point of continuity between colonial and postcolonial forms of state violence instrumentalized as necessary for national security, the practice of torture has long served as a privileged signifier of a “history gone awry” for the pro-democracy movement in South Korea. When that movement finally succeeded in bringing about a major breakthrough after years of bloody struggle, it did so precisely by indicting the dirty hands that the state had anointed as patriotic by holding them up to the more fundamental and universal standard of human decency. As is well known, the massive protests that led to the procedural democratization of Korean society in 1987 were precipitated by public outrage over the death, while in police custody, of a college student named Pak Chongch’ŏl. Despite the official statement issued by the police that Pak had keeled over after only thirty minutes of interrogation when one of the police officers merely banged his fist on the table, autopsy revealed the cause of death to be a massive lung failure resulting from repeated underwater submersions. The college student had
died not in the hospital as the police had claimed but in Room 509 of an infamous building in the Namyoung-dong area of Seoul that was home to the counter-communism unit, a room, one of the seventeen on the fifth floor of that building, that was outfitted with a tiled bath. In the aftermath of Pak Chongch’ŏl case, “We want to live in a country where there’s no torture” turned into a rallying cry of the entire protest movement. The right to live in such a world became accepted as a definition of democracy that everyone could agree on, its term absolute. After all, how could anyone insist on less?

Given this significance of torture as a shorthand for state violence, it is not surprising that fundamental questions raised by the practice should continue to plague the task of overcoming the authoritarian past in post-authoritarian South Korea. More than three decades after the formal end of military dictatorship, this task is still ongoing, as evidenced in pending legal cases concerning reparations for former victims of government-sponsored torture, as well as recent rescissions of medals of honor awarded during the authoritarian era to perpetrators of such brutality. Complicating the task has been the vagaries of power on a highly divided political terrain where democratization and development have been deployed as competing legacies along the left–right axis. The comprehensive Truth and Reconciliation Commission launched in 2005 under the progressive administration of Roh Moo-hyun (No Muhyŏn) was summarily shut down under the conservative administration of Lee Myung-bak (Yi Myŏngbak). During the years of Park Geun-hye’s (Pak Kŭnhye) presidency (2013–17), attempts by victims to seek justice and redress foundered in the courts, as Park brought back to power “old boys” like Kim Kich’ŭn, who had been a central figure during her father’s dictatorial rule. And where the punishment of the so-called dirty hands is concerned, juridical justice has proven utterly elusive. Even today, after the Candlelight Revolution and the historic impeachment of Park Geun-hye, it is not difficult to find people in legislative and judiciary branches of the government who had abetted authoritarian state violence by serving as prosecutors and judges in its courts, letting confessions coerced through brutality guide their decision to send victims of torture to prison as communists and North Korean spies.

The woeful inadequacy of law to adjudicate guilt where state violence of South Korea’s authoritarian era is concerned endows the subject of torture with particular ethical urgency when it is taken up in cultural texts. Repeatedly throwing questions of justice into crisis, these cultural texts disclose what may well be the most important ethico-political problem confronting post-authoritarian South Korean society: a hegemonic struggle over how to come to terms with the country’s authoritarian past. Examining that problem through the theme of torture, this chapter will briefly survey various representations of the motif in cultural texts from the past three decades, before moving on to a close reading of a 2011 novel by Cheon Woon-young (Ch’ŏn Unyŏng) called Ginger (Saenggang). A unique attempt to overcome authoritarian legacies by refracting them through gender politics, Ginger is a fascinating text whose importance and relevance undergo amplification when read in relation to two more recent historical contexts: the politics of apology and forgiveness as dramatized in the case of Yi Kŭnan, one of the few torture specialists in South Korea who served a significant prison term, and authoritarian nostalgia embodied by the presidency of Park Geun-hye. The chapter will conclude by ruminating on the contemporary significance of rewriting a patriarchal script of authoritarian violence as a daughter’s tale.

Representing torture: from the banality of evil to the erotics of pain

From literature and film to graphic novel and photography, a thematic fascination with torture appears in a number of important works that take up the convoluted moral calculus resulting
from South Korea’s twentieth century. I identify three major narrative modes in how torture is represented in these texts: testimonial, symptomatic, and parodic.

Frequently based on historical fact, testimonial inscription focuses on disclosing the historical truth of what happened in a realistic style, thereby indicting the barbarism of torture. Recent films that re-examine the 1980s, such as National Security (Namyŏng-dong 1985, 2012) directed by Chung Ji Young (Chông Chiyŏng) and 1987: When the Day Comes (1987, 2017) directed by Jang Joon-hwan (Chang Chunhwan), typify this mode, but a more classical formulation can be found in Lee Chang-dong’s (Yi Ch’angdong) milestone film Peppermint Candy (Pak’a sat’ang, 1999). In literature, two novellas on the subject of torture were published in 1988, just a year after the June Democratic Uprising of 1987: Lim Chul-woo’s (Im Ch’ŏru) “The Red Room” (Pulgŭnp’ŭn) and Yang Kwija’s “The Road to Ch’ŏnma Tomb” (Ch’ŏnmach’ŏng kanŭn kil). “The Red Room” won the prestigious Yi Sang Literary Prize that year, but according to Bruce Fulton, this was a time when the subject of torture was still “so sensitive” that the screening committee were “reluctant to grant the award to ‘The Red Room’ alone.”6 Lim’s novella shared the top prize with Han Sûngwŏn’s “Wayfarer by the Sea” (Haebyon ŭi kilson). “The Red Room” alternates between the perspectives of the torturer and the tortured, and it contextualizes the former’s life story within the violence of Korea’s twentieth century that originated in the colonial era and the Korean War. Such historicization of the torturer’s life occurs also in Lee Chang-dong’s Peppermint Candy, a film that traces the life of a bad cop in reverse and locates the Kwangju Massacre as the traumatic origin of his moral ruin.7 In contrast, Yang Kwija’s “The Road to Ch’ŏnma Tomb” focuses its attention squarely on the victim and painstakingly details not only the impact of torture on the victim’s life but also the second-order victimization suffered by his family. As the victim struggles to return to normal life as husband and father, a family trip to an ancient royal tomb provides the plot device that propels the victim’s inner journey. In all of these works, the testimonial mode opens up the space of working through the trauma occasioned by individuals’ brutal encounters with state power and works toward the ultimate goal of achieving some form of reconciliation or restoration, either of the damaged psyche, a wounded sense of justice, or the torn communal fabric.

In contrast, symptomatic or allegorical inscription brings torture to light in a plot context seemingly unconnected to the authoritarian past. A proliferation of this mode can be found in the South Korean cinema of the 2000s in titles directed by some of the country’s most celebrated “auteur” filmmakers: Park Chan-wook (Pak Ch’anuk), Kim Ki-duk (Kim Kidŏk), Kim Je-woon (Kim Chiuin), and Jang Joon-hwan (Chang Chunhwan). The represented genres range from melodrama to hard gore to science fiction, and the film language tends toward hyper-stylized. What is so interesting about these representations is that scenes of torture appear not in a historical context that recapitulates with fidelity the state violence during the authoritarian era but as a point of excessive, unbearable violence that erupts in an ethical dilemma. As film scholars like Peter Paik and Steve Choe have noted, a familiar move in several of these films is to turn the victim into the torturer and to authorize private acts of vengeance as satisfying means of seeking justice. In the process, however, criminality is widely shared by both the victim and the perpetrator. The satisfaction that these films seek in pure acts of vengeance and the popular investment in relentlessly pursuing these acts to their very violent ends are then related to the failure of the South Korean political system to properly bring the authoritarian era to a close. The vigilantist desire to effect some sort of justice, however rudely, achieves its most explicit formulation in 26 Years (26-yŏn), the 2006 webcomic by Kang Full (Kang P’ul) adapted into film six years later, in which several children of the victims of the Kwangju Massacre are groomed to become a band of professional assassins. They finally
get their chance for revenge against Chun Doo Hwan, twenty-six years after the death of their parents.

The parodic mode of inscribing the authoritarian-era history of torture can be seen most clearly in “Water Torture” (*Mul komun*), a centerpiece of a 2005 exhibition by the visual artist Jo Seub (Cho Sŭp) titled “Don’t Ask” (*Mutchima*, 2005). The work is a campy photograph of a staged reenactment of a torture session, the kind that led to the death of Pak Chongch’ŏl. In the foreground, two men in white dress shirts and pants, who also wear gun holsters that indicate their “agent” status, are holding a victim’s head above a tiled bath, poised to submerge his head underwater. The victim (posed by the artist himself) also wears a dress shirt, which indicates his white-collar status. His grotesque facial expression can just as easily be interpreted as one caught while screaming in terror as laughing in hilarity. The setting of the scene is not an interrogation room outfitted with a tiled bath on the fifth floor of the Namyŏng-dong building described earlier but rather a public bathhouse. In the background, two naked men sit with their backs turned to the camera, going about the usual bathhouse routine of scrubbing each other’s back with an abrasive green buff that is iconic of South Korean bath culture. In a manner typical of black comedy, “Water Torture” thus forces the spectator into the discomfiting position of being suspended between horror and gaiety. With its hyperbolic and hybrid style, the parodic inscription of torture such as Jo Seub’s interrupts the amnesia surrounding authoritarian violence by giving it form again in contemporary contexts while materializing the unavowed vestiges of authoritarian practices and *mentalité* that survive in the present. A similar effect is achieved by the extended sequence of torture scenes in Im Sang-soo’s (Im Sangsu) controversial film *The President’s Last Bang* (*Kŭt tae kŭ saramdŏl*, 2005), presented through a trucking shot as a series of stylized, visually interesting tableaus that follow the perspective of a KCIA agent walking through one interrogation cell after another. Such parodic representations, even as they call the authoritarian past back to life from the grips of amnesia, also encode the desire to desacralize the narratives of resistance. In other words, the kind of memory that these representations authorize militates against the grain of the dominant affect of solemnity that structures the political discourse of democratization. The grotesquerie and black comedy inherent in the parodic mode unsettles both the structure of forgetting and the structure of remembering that have been established around the country’s authoritarian past.

In this typology of how torture has been inscribed in post-authoritarian cultural texts, *Ginger*, Cheon Woon-young’s 2011 novel, is unique. With a cast of characters taken from Korean history and identifiable as such, the novel appears at first to belong to the genre of *p’aeksyŏn* (fact-ion), a Korean neologism that combines “fact” and “fiction” to refer to a genre that might be called the non-fiction novel in English. An, one of the two characters whose perspectives structure the novel, is modeled after Yi Kŭnan, a torture specialist whose notoriety could possibly exceed even that of No Tŏksul. The “son of a bitch” who causes An’s face to be published all over the morning news as a perpetrator of crime against humanity is Kim Kŭnt’ae, a pro-democracy activist whose experience with torture during the twenty-two days of detainment in Namyŏng-dong in 1985 became the subject of the 2012 film *National Security*. Pak, who orders An to disappear until the media frenzy over the police brutality issue has died down and hands An an envelope containing real bullets and wads of cash, is Pak Ch’ŏwŏn, the aforementioned “godfather of counter-communism investigations.”

To be sure, Yi Kŭnan’s real life is in many ways stranger than fiction. A burly police captain known by nicknames like “Manchurian Brown Bear” and “Undertaker’s Second Son,” Yi Kŭnan joined the South Korean police force in 1970 and rose quickly through its ranks, largely
on account of his storied skills in the interrogation room. His ability to work the body of his victim to plumb the mind—“joint dislocation” (kwanjŏl ppopkki) is said to have been his particular specialty—earned him sixteen commendations during his eighteen years in the police force. “Torture is patriotism and interrogation is art” (komun ŭn aeguk iyo simmun ŭn yesul), Yi Kūnan would go on to claim in a 2010 interview. When Kim Kūnt’ae was released from jail in 1988, on the heels of the June Democratic Uprising of 1987 that brought the Chun Doo Hwan dictatorship to its knees, Kim singled out Yi Kūnan as one of his torturers. Yi’s face was plastered on the newspapers as a wanted man, at which point Yi Kūnan disappeared and remained at large for the next eleven years. When he finally turned himself in to the authorities in 1999, a month after the statute of limitations had expired on the torture case involving Kim Kūnt’ae, Yi shocked the public once more by revealing that he had not been on the run at all but had hidden in the attic of his own home all along. After his arrest, Yi Kūnan was indicted on a case involving one of his less famous victims and served seven years in prison. He was released back into society in 2006.

Ginger’s basis in actual historical events and the elevated tone in which the entire narrative is cast suggest the novel’s affinity to testimonial rather than symptomatic or parodic modes. And yet for all their minute detail, the scenes of torture in Ginger are strikingly lacking in reality. As Ginger opens, An is on the verge of achieving yet another victory, “a profound and mysterious moment” (omyohan sun’gan) when the victim is ready to give him complete submission at the end of a precisely sequenced administration of pain designed to maximize fear (12). “Be gentle with it,” An commands his partner.

It’s a body primed to accept every sensation that exists in the world. A lovely little body that will shudder at the caress of the softest breath and tremble under the tenderest touch. . . . Within that body of his, the stars will rise and the sun will shine. Waves will billow and the tide surge. Flowers will bloom and birds sing. Behold the creation of heaven and earth, a miracle that this body will now experience.

Here, the novel’s stylized language draws attention to itself as it alternates between clipped imperatives about how to achieve the state of perfect beauty in torture and lush, even lyrical, descriptions of the body in pain. Throughout the first chapter, rapturous and kinetic prose establishes torture as a limit experience that destroys the self-contained ego and opens the body up to a new world accessible only through pain bordering on death. Reminiscent of Marquis de Sade in Georges Bataille’s description of the erotics of death, An guides his victim to the gates of “heaven” in bringing him to the edge of death. The intimacy with which he describes the victim’s body verges on the erotic: “I’ll show you the heaven. I’ll let you hear the angels sing. When all this is over, you will find yourself worshipping me” (11). Ginger further reinforces the erotics of pain by portraying An as a masochist and as a sadist who visits a young prostitute regularly and finds ecstasy not in the warmth of her body but on the receiving end of lashes that she delivers on his back with his own belt. “If you don’t draw blood from my body, it’ll be your body that sees blood,” An barks at the girl, “like a beast” (24).

This portrait of the torture specialist differs markedly from those in earlier literary texts. From “The Red Room” to “The Road to Ch’ŏnma Tomb,” a central feature of fictional works that approach the subject of torture in a testimonial mode is the juxtaposition of extraordinary violence with the familiar routine of the everyday. “The Red Room,” for example, was inspired by just such a moment of juxtaposition in the writer’s own life. According to Lim Chul-woo, the novella was born when he learned that the tennis court where he regularly played was next to a building where the police detained its victims for interrogation. When he imagined the victim being
subjected to “rotisserie chicken” (t’ongdak kui), “wing snapping” (nalgae kkôkki), “bone-soup nose” (k’ôngt’ang), or some other torture technique, all the while hearing the sounds of the tennis ball being hit back and forth, Lim knew that he had a novel on his hands. The juxtaposition forces readers to register the shock of encountering what Hannah Arendt famously conceptualized as “the banality of evil” as she watched the SS logistician Adolf Eichmann on trial in Jerusalem two decades after the end of World War II. On the witness stand, Eichmann displayed “indifferent equanimity” and “the untroubled complacency of the order-following bureaucrat” as he recollected how efficiently he delivered tens of thousands to their certain deaths in extermination camps. The torturers in Korean narratives closely fit the profile of men like Eichmann and Argentina’s “dirty warrior” Alfredo Astiz, law-abiding citizens with no documented inclinations toward criminal behavior either before or after their respective involvements in mass murder. Ordinary people distinguished only by their strong loyalty to their organizations, “their greatest concern,” according to Mark Osiel, “seemed to be that they might be deemed inadequate to their assigned tasks.”

The torturers in both “The Red Room” and “The Road to Ch’ônmu Tomb” are banal in precisely the same way, but their concern about being deemed inadequate to their assigned tasks is intensified by their fear of failing their family in the patriarchal role. In fact, it is the familial dimension that completes the banality of the torturers’ evil, as the distance between the hearth and the torture chamber that readers would like to assume and reinforce are relentlessly broken down in the fictional work.

“I can’t afford a tab. I’m afraid to show the wife what’s left after all the deductions from the paycheck. Hey, hold him tight—I’m getting splashed, for God’s sake! The tough bastard’s holding up pretty well, eh? I’m thinking more and more, fuck, why don’t I quit this job and go into business for myself? We’re supposed to get a bonus this month but what good is a bonus when you’ve got jack shit to begin with? Take out a school loan for the kids, subtract this and that, and there’s nothing left.”

In this scene from “The Red Room,” an intimation of what is really going on occurs in the interjection “I’m getting splashed, for God’s sake!” which interrupts the mundane conversation between the two interrogators about the size of their paychecks and places the conversation in the physical context of a waterboarding session. The effect is obscene, as the fact that the torturer could prattle on about the costliness of his children’s education while controlling precisely the stream of water on the gauze-covered face of his victim to cause them to experience drowning breaches the consistency of an individual’s moral being.

The juxtaposition between the good father and the water torturer is even more explicit in the following scene from “The Road to Ch’ônmu Tomb”:

Snippets of conversation between the torturers would reach his ears. My daughter got the gold medal in a piano contest. One of the men said proudly. My oldest boy is a good student but he’s so frail. He’ll be a high school senior soon and I’m worried. Ch’ông wanted to hear more of their conversation but he couldn’t keep himself from screaming out. Then his voice was gone and a burning smell, of something being scorched, bloomed in his nostrils. Beside a father worrying about his son’s frail health and another boasting about the daughter’s talent at the piano, Ch’ông shuddered. His skin broke out in goosebumps. Never would he be able to forgive these torturers talking nonchalantly about their children while watching another human being thrash about as if he’s drawing his last breath.”
The last line of the passage is especially significant because it spells out the precise nature of the torturers’ offense from the perspective of the torture victim. What Chŏng, the torture victim in Yang Kwija’s novella, cannot forgive is not necessarily the physical violence done to his body or the shame accompanying the loss of his self-possession but the introduction of casual talk about the torturers’ children into the context of torture. The torturers’ ability to engage in such talk in the first place while bringing their victim to the brink of death suggests that they have so utterly succeeded in compartmentalizing the different domains of their lives that the contradictory standards operating in each domain do not cause an existential crisis in the torturer’s moral universe as a whole. Ironically, however, it is precisely the successful compartmentalization that enables the juxtaposition of the good father and the water torturer, which in turn causes the breakdown of the moral order that had held the world together for Chŏng. For the torture victim, a staff writer for a women’s monthly magazine with a pregnant wife waiting at home, the utter familiarity of the torturer’s chatter destroys the boundaries of the space that should have remained exceptional and isolated and, therefore, at the furthest distance away from the small comforts and joys that regulate normal family life. In a world where evil is banal, the torture chamber is everywhere.

In Ginger, by contrast, the banality of evil gives way to the erotics of pain. The shift is accompanied by certain degree of aestheticization regarding the practice of torture. Consider, for example, the opening lines of the book: “It has to be beautiful. To beauty belongs victory, always. What is genuinely beautiful is the perfect technique” (7). “It” here refers of course to torture, but the passage could just as well describe Cheon’s approach to writing. “It has to be beautiful” is Cheon’s professed creed as a writer, and the perfection of “technique” (kisul) practiced on the physical body is a common and distinctive preoccupation shared by many of Cheon’s characters: a tattoo artist in “Needle” (Panŭl, 2000), a butcher in “Breath” (Sum, 2000), and circus performers in Goodbye Circus (Chal kara ssŏk’ŏs, 2005). The perfectly executed technique is a thing of beauty, Cheon seems to suggest, as much for a torture artist as a tattoo artist and indeed for an artist in general. An tears up at the “beautiful sight” of fine hairs standing up on the victim’s body because he sees in it proof that just the right dosage of electric current has been administered. He watches in ecstasy that is almost religious in its intensity the victim’s parched lips flutter open to form the words of confession that would signal a complete surrender. When An hears the news that the detainee in Room 201 has been killed, a textual detail that brings Pak Chongch’ŏl’s death to mind, An’s instinctive reaction is, above all else, contempt over a job unskillfully performed. “Those clumsy rookies,” An mutters in disgust (13).

Such eroticization and aestheticization of torture in Ginger have the strange effect of activating what I call the standard of energy as the operative criterion by which An’s actions are measured rather than the standard of morality that generally guides testimonial narratives. The result for the reader is a horrified fascination with An, whose aura is actually increased, not diminished, by the violent power that he wields over his victims. What are the implications of such a move for a text seeking to come to terms with the legacies of state violence? Neither symptomatic, parodic, nor testimonial, Ginger’s engagement with the torture motif seeks a different entry into and way out of the authoritarian era. This path, as we will explore now, winds through the perspective of the torturer’s daughter.

The daughter’s tale: guilt without guilt and responsibility beyond measure

With the exception of the last chapter, whose brevity and form set it apart from the rest of the novel and mark it as an epilogue of sorts, Ginger alternates between first-person narratives of An
The mad father in the attic

and his only daughter, Sŏn. Thus, in rewriting Yi Kûnan’s story as a father–daughter conflict in a narrative form that amplifies the clash of their perspectives, Cheon moves away from “fact” in her “fact-ion” by inventing a daughter that the torture specialist never had: Yi Kûnan had three sons and a daughter-in-law whom he praised as especially filial but no daughters of his own. The fictionalization of a couple of additional aspects of Yi Kûnan’s life in hiding further distills the father–daughter relationship as the novel’s essential conflict and throws it into high relief. The first modification concerns the characterization of the wife. In contrast to Yi Kûnan’s wife, who appears by all accounts to have been a model of wifely devotion, her fictional counterpart is a woman of strong appetites who does not shy away from putting her own needs ahead of her husband’s or her daughter’s. The second modification consists in the location of the attic. Whereas Yi Kûnan hid out in the attic of his own house, An hides in the attic of his wife’s beauty salon. An’s wife then commands Sŏn to move into the small room below the attic on the pretext that her own presence in the salon at night would draw undue suspicion, and the resulting living arrangement allows the daughter rather than the wife to emerge as An’s nocturnal guardian during the decade of his hiding. Sŏn draws readers’ attention to the stark symbolism of the spatial form that their cohabitation takes when she observes in the novel’s final pages, “My ceiling, which was also your floor, was low enough to touch on tiptoe” (259).

The novel’s structure sets up a double, chiasmatic transformation of the father and the daughter. For the daughter, the development that she undergoes in the novel is clearly one of growth. A doe-eyed college first year as Ginger begins, Sŏn celebrates her new status by getting her ears pierced and buying herself a pink lace bra, actions that reveal how profoundly out of touch she is with the revolutionary political mood that prevailed on South Korea campuses in the 1980s. By the end of the novel, Sŏn is a college dropout, a hardened thirty-year-old, and her own boss. She stands in front of the hair salon that now bears her own name, having taken over her mother’s shop and demolished the attic where her father had hidden as well as the small room below where she had lived as his keeper. Her narrative ends with the suggestive line, “Spring is here” (277). The line can be read as signaling Sŏn’s full emergence as a political subject, especially when we consider the specifically political valence of meaning that the metaphor of spring has had in modern Korean literature from Yi Sanghwa’s famous anticolonial poem, “Does Spring Come to Stolen Fields” (Ppaeakkin t’il edo pom ŭn onŭng’a, 1926), down to Yi Sŏngbu’s love song to democracy, “Spring” (Pom, 1974).

If the daughter’s story thus lends itself to being read as a bildungsroman, the father’s tale is one of regression, a reverse bildungsroman. As discussed earlier, the opening scene of Ginger positions An at the height of his game as a “torture artist,” flaunting his mastery over his technique, over the body and mind of his victim, and indeed over life and death. The world that had granted him such godlike powers, however, comes crashing down at the end of the first chapter, and as An goes on the run and then into hiding in subsequent chapters, he is gradually stripped of his powers until he finds “an old and tired beast” staring back at him in the mirror in his own shocked words (261). With the loss of his job, An loses his professional identity and the community of men who had guaranteed his social self. With the loss of his freedom of movement, he loses the ability to care for his basic animal needs. Even his control over his own body slips away and he finds himself subject to the very thing with which he had manipulated his victims with such consummate skill: fear. His manhood, shriveled up since the start of his confinement and unresponsive to his wife’s suggestive touch, roars back to life when an unexpected visit by the police fills him with fear and adrenaline: “My cock wasn’t responding to any will of mine. The dogs, and their barks, have begun to rule my body now” (158). An’s transformation in the space of the novel is described by both him and his daughter as a state of regression: “Father’s tear-stricken face” as he looks at her reminds Sŏn of “the fake tears of a bratty child appealing
to his mother because he doesn’t want to return the toy he has borrowed” (238). An describes himself as “a child hiding alone in a dark and clammy cave”: “To forget fear, I bite my nails. I chew on them until they bleed. Then I fall asleep with a bloody finger in my mouth, sucking on it as on a nipple” (246). In the attic, the father ages without coming of age and becomes infantilized as a result.

How can we understand the simultaneous infantilization of the father and subjectification of the daughter that the eleven years of their cohabitation achieve? The difference between the two trajectories lies in the question of accountability, and it is also this question that makes Ginger such an important text for post-authoritarian South Korea. An unwitting and innocent beneficiary of her father’s “cruel art,” Sŏn initially denies her father’s guilt and believes her mother’s claim that the charge brought against her father is some communist plot. What precipitates her transformation by degrees is the repeated and increasingly intimate encounter that she has with a nameless character referred to only as “the man” (namija), through whom she confronts her father’s guilt and comes to feel the pain that he caused his victim, physically as her own. Her first encounter with her father’s victim occurs on her way home from the first day of school, when “the man to whom the smell of water clung, sickeningly” interpellates her as a torturer’s daughter and punctures the pink haze that had protected daddy’s little girl from the truth of what her father did to provide for her every need: “Your father is An, right? . . . Where have you hidden him?” (49). As Sŏn moves beyond shock and denial to the stage of rage, she has sexual intercourse with the man as a deliberate “act of betrayal” directed at her father, a way of physically claiming the story of his brutality by letting herself become a victim of her father’s victim: “Oh father, from the attic where you are now. . . . Listen as the man you once broke crushes me. Listen to the sound of pain being inscribed on my body, the pain you’ve engraved” (184).

The final encounter that occurs on Sŏn’s birthday, however, moves both Sŏn and “the man” beyond vengeance into the realm of apology and forgiveness. The man gives her a birthday gift and reveals to her that he knows her birthday because it was the only day that An would take a break from torturing him. We thus see that the “evil torturer as a good father” trope is not completely absent in Ginger either. An had not wanted to go home to his daughter’s birthday party with “hands that had mauled a commie’s balls” (274). The man then confesses to feeling both the intense desire to get back at his torturer by destroying his cherished daughter and a contradictory sentiment of gratitude for her existence: “I hated you to madness, and I was thankful for you. No one could have been more grateful than me that you were born” (275). Sŏn’s unspoken response to the man’s confession is an apology without measure or limit and an expression of gratitude: “I am sorry. I won’t tell you that I didn’t know. I wish I had never been born that day. I am sorry. I have never been so ashamed of having been born. I realize that I could never bring myself to tell you I am sorry. But even more than that I am sorry, I want to tell you that I thank you” (275). In this scene, Sŏn is a character that materializes the ethical position that Seo Young Chae (Sŏ Yongch’ae) has conceptualized as “guilt without guilt” and “responsibility without sin”; as such, Sŏn belongs to a genealogy of characters in modern Korean literature who, according to Seo, make themselves “guilty for an offense they have not committed and who attempt to take responsibility for what they have not done.”18 Seo argues that it is precisely this “fundamental incommensurability between crime and responsibility” that constitutes “the force that drives the transformation of a human-animal into a human-subject.”19 If Seo is right, it is Sŏn’s full embrace of the position whereby she is guilty without guilt that allows her to emerge as an ethical subject proper. “What I really didn’t know,” Sŏn tells herself, “is that not knowing could be a sin” (234–5).

An’s position on the question of accountability directly contrasts his daughter’s. To the very end, An seeks no atonement, only alibi, even as he acknowledges the death of the world that he
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had served and sets forth from the attic to give himself up. By “alibi,” I refer to the operation by which a regime of morality deemed higher by the torturer dissolves the manifest illegality of his action and places that action within a discourse that privileges the ends over the means. Yi Kūn’s infamous mantra that “torture is patriotism” is a succinct statement of an alibi that offers immunity behind such words as “counterintelligence” (pangch’ŏp) and “national security” (anbo). “Elsewhere,” the original Latin meaning of the word alibi is important to consider here. Anyone who takes an action with immunity is not a full subject, since the responsibility for the action lies elsewhere. One’s actions are not one’s own if one cannot be accountable for them. An’s refusal of accountability robs him of his own agency and bars him from the position of an ethical subject, leaving him at the end of the novel, as his daughter observes with pain and contempt, as no more than just a sack of flesh.

Sŏn’s insistence that there is no “elsewhere” must be understood in this context. Sŏn scraps pieces of newspaper articles that contain information about his cases and his victims and slips them under the door into his attic, forcing him to confront the destroyed lives behind the spies he fabricated and the men he caused to disappear. Sŏn’s anguished attempt to force a confrontation culminates in a climactic scene in the penultimate chapter when the novel’s basic structure of alternating perspectives ends in a climactic enjambment.

I have done nothing wrong. It is wrong and inexcusable to beat a person. The ones I beat, they were not people. They were people. They were people who were wrong. They were people who were different. . . . I did it for justice. You did it for yourself. It was for the father. The father has thrown you away. I was trying to provide for my family. And for that other families had to disappear. All this will be over soon. It will never be over. Why are you treating me this way? Why did you treat them that way? I did what I must. You did what you mustn’t. Are you hoping that I’ll die? I’m hoping you’ll live. Give me a towel. I’ll give you a mirror. I don’t want to see. You have to see. That isn’t me. That is you. This isn’t what I have done. That is what you have done. It isn’t me. It is you.

As in poetic enjambment, where the absence of a break at the end of the line creates in the reader a feeling of being hurtled with abruptness and speed, the above scene dispenses with line breaks and quotation marks typical in rendering a dialogue in a novel. As a result, it becomes completely ambiguous whether this confrontation actually occurs as a spoken conversation or remains imagined in the mind(s) of one or both characters, but the quickened pace ratchets up the tension and dramatizes the daughter’s relentless negation of all of the father’s alibis. By the end of the scene, she has brought him to the point of a needle and forces him to look at his naked face with the simple statement, “It is you.” Even though the father does not claim guilt, the fact that the conversation forces in him a crisis of some kind is suggested by the memory of his first torture session that it triggers. An then asks his daughter to get him a pair of shoes in which he will venture out from his hiding place in the attic for the first time in a decade. In response to his request, Sŏn buys him shoes that are two sizes too big. The discomfort and awkwardness he would feel with every step he takes in these shoes would guard against the animal instincts of flight or forgetfulness: “Your steps won’t be elegant or dignified, but may they never be the steps of a cowardly fugitive. May you accept quietly all the stones hurled your way” (263). She blesses the shoes with the wish that they will lead him to a place where he can take up the question of accountability and emerge, after a decade in the attic, as an ethical subject.
The sense of quiet resolution that Ginger achieves at the end of chapter twelve is rudely undercut, however, by the ominous chapter thirteen that functions as an epilogue. This last chapter was added during the revision of the online serialization for publication as a book, and it brings back the mother who had largely disappeared from the story in the second half of the novel. She comes back from visiting An, who is now in jail, and assures Sŏn that “Father has taken care of everything and we needn’t worry about making ends meet” (278). She then ventures out again, “to change a world gone mad that collects taxpayers’ money to give it to the commies” (279). Ginger thus ends not with the torturer’s penance or atonement but with his renewed commitment to the alibis that had sustained the authoritarian order, the order he had served with unthinking loyalty and which had secured for him a “rightful” place in the world in turn. In the figure of An’s wife whose politicization and newfound sense of activism proceeds in the opposite direction as her daughter’s, the revised ending of Ginger also suggests a post-authoritarian sharpening rather than attenuation of the authoritarian-era divisions. Rather than dismiss this ending as “rushed” or “tacked on,” it is important to explore why Cheon refused the much more natural—and hopeful—ending and chose to conclude the novel instead with the beginning of a new conflict. Had Ginger ended with chapter twelve, the final line of the novel would have been, “Spring is here” (277). The novel ends instead with the daughter pleading with her mother: “Mother, please” (279). What is the contemporary significance of this revision?

**Apology and forgiveness: transitional justice and its discontents**

Taking a rather circuitous path, let me address the question from the previous paragraph by invoking an inspirational vignette from a different part of the world that also has had to grapple with a violent history of political torture: Nicaragua. Tomás Borge, one of the founders of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, visited a prison after the success of the Sandinista Revolution. Now the minister of the interior in Daniel Ortega’s administration, Borge encountered in prison a man who had once tortured him as a member of the Somocista National Guard, an organization that was responsible for the brutal killing of about 50,000 Nicaraguans. The torturer turned prisoner asked the victim turned minister, “What are you going to do to me? What is your revenge?” Borge’s answer was simply, “I forgive you. That is my revenge.”

In the South Korean version of the encounter between the former torture victim and his torturer, the torturer turned prisoner is Yi Kŭnan and the torture victim turned minister is Kim Kŭnt’ae, now the minister of health and welfare in the post-authoritarian Roh Moo-hyun administration. As the newspapers tell of the meeting, Yi Kŭnan went down on his knees to beg forgiveness, Kim Kŭnt’ae duly delivered the asked-for forgiveness, and the two men embraced in a gesture of reconciliation that moved the entirety of Korean history forward. Years later, Yi Kŭnan would recall the magnanimous words with which he was pardoned by his former victim: “How can we blame [what you did] on an individual? It was a tragedy born of the times (sidae ka naun pigũk).”

But is this really what happened? Almost immediately, revisionist accounts of the meeting began to appear, starting with one by Kim Kŭnt’ae himself. In his weekly online post as a government minister, Kim confessed to the doubt that racked his brain regarding the sincerity of the torturer’s apology. Finding himself looking for signs of dissimulation in Yi Kŭnan’s words all throughout the interview and returning home with a heart filled with dread rather than hope, Kim agonized for days over his inability to forgive and finally concluded that it was no longer up to him to decide whether the repentance of his former torturer was genuine. Forgiveness was in “God’s domain,” and all he could do was pray that he might one day find it in his heart to
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forgive and reconcile.22 That day never did come, according to Kim’s biographer, the novelist Pang Hyŏnsŏk.23

Revision came also from the other side of the encounter. In a series of interviews that he gave in 2010, Yi Kŭnan qualified his apology, in effect reneging it. He had never gotten down on his knees, he said, and had never uttered words like “seek forgiveness until my dying day” that the reporters had attributed to him. What he had said instead, with a “polite bow,” was only that he was “sorry for the past.” He followed up with a biblical verse, from Romans 3:10: “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.” Asked if he would do things differently if he could go back in time, Yi answered that he would not, since what he had done was for “the love of the country,” an answer to the call that “one could not refuse.” As if to echo Kim’s earlier conclusion that forgiveness was God’s domain, Yi repeatedly used the word “repentance” (hoegae), with its specifically religious valence of meaning, rather than “apology” (sajoe). Yi Kŭnan, in fact, began taking a correspondence course on theology while in prison. He became ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 2008, two years after his release.24

For the Sandinista minister, forgiveness required neither formal apology nor genuine repentance since forgiveness is neither merited nor even solicited. It is a unilateral act that suspends the established rules of power and, with it, the cycle of vengeful violence whose operating principle is that of exchange and equivalence. The minister’s proclamation of forgiveness rewrites the rules of the game by inserting the question of moral superiority into the calculation. The victim’s revenge consists not in extracting an eye for an eye but in foregoing the opportunity to become a perpetrator of violence in his turn, publicly sanctioned and morally justified though he may be in committing this violence. He thereby secures a plane from which the depravity of torture can be illuminated in all its naked horror. Moreover, in refusing to pay back a blood debt in kind, the former victim paradoxically creates an eternal debt, a gap that the former torturer can never hope to close. In that sense, this dynamic is not unlike the Christian concept of grace. The less repentant the torturer, the greater the gap between the sinner and the forgiver of sins. It was precisely for this reason that the encounter served as such an important parable for the Amanecida Collective, the group of Christian clerics and laypeople who visited Nicaragua in the mid-1980s and recounted the encounter between a Sandinista and a Somocista.

The contrast with the Korean encounter is striking. Both the initial, idealized representation of the scene of reconciliation between the government minister and his former torturer and the messy revisions of that scene which followed quickly on the heels suggest that the model of forgiveness at work was less divine and distinctly more human. Here apology is an absolutely essential precondition for forgiveness. This is so because both men are ultimately interested in achieving what Erving Goffman called a “remedial interchange”: the restoration of a “proper relationship between the offender, victim, and the moral rules that bind them both.”25 Forgiveness too precipitately granted runs the risk of further distorting rather than reestablishing the triangular relationship between the offender, the victim, and the moral rules that bind them, since the victim, far from emerging as the human face of godly grace, will then be victimized twice over by becoming a dupe, on top of everything else that he has already suffered. Kim Kŭnt’ae had a good reason to doubt the sincerity of the torturer’s apology. Kathleen Gill identified five elements of apology.

1 An acknowledgment that the incident in question in fact occurred
2 An acknowledgment that the incident was inappropriate in some way
3 An acknowledgment of responsibility for the act
4 The expression of an attitude of regret and a feeling of remorse
5 The expression of an intention to refrain from similar acts in the future
Of them, Yi Kūnan ended up going back on at least two (3, 5) and possibly all five.26 In horrified response, Kim Kūnt’ae’s widow reneged her husband’s forgiveness in a public announcement.

Far from representing an exceptional individual case, the ethical dilemma dramatized in Kim Kūnt’ae’s encounter with Yi Kūnan attests to the pitfalls of transitional justice in post-authoritarian South Korea. As the term transition suggests, a legal framework like transitional justice posits liberal democracy as its telos and explores how limited justice can be instituted as a society transitions from conflict to democracy. In such a formulation, the movement toward democracy is always one way. The processes of truth seeking and reconciliation surrounding authoritarian era atrocities, however, have been much messier and more complicated in South Korea, marked by spectacular moments of backward slide. Separated out from the clumsy brutishness of Chun Doo Hwan, his inferior copy, the legacy of Park Chung Hee was both deified and spectralized in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The ominous ending that Cheon Woon-young added to Ginger when it was published as a book in 2011 appears prescient now in retrospect when we recall Park Geun-hye’s successful campaign in 2012 to return to her “father’s house,” South Korea’s presidential residence. The deification and spectralization of Park Chung Hee reached an obscene peak during his daughter’s presidency. Elsewhere, I have termed this phenomenon Yusin Redux.27 Rather than rewriting the patriarchal script of authoritarianism in ways that overcome South Korea’s authoritarian legacy, the daughter’s tale authored by Park Geun-hye’s presidency revived authoritarian nostalgia. It lingers on today among a substantial segment of the voting public even after Park’s impeachment, marginalized and radicalized, but not eliminated, by the Candlelight Revolution.

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Authoritarian nostalgia, as Ginger reminds us over and over again in An’s voice, is also patriarchal nostalgia. The myth of the father conspires to consolidate the myth of the king: “In order to secure my place, the father’s place had to be secure. And to protect the father’s place, the king’s place had to be intact. To buttress the king’s place, more enemies had to be eliminated, and to eliminate more enemies, even more sons had to be brought in. That year, father brought in sons and the sons of sons by the hundreds” (239). It goes without saying that a world constituted through the linear hierarchy of the father-king, sons legitimate or bastard, and dogs tamed or wild, has no place for daughters. The daughter’s tale must refuse this patrimony and reveal the patriarchal-authoritarian script to be bankrupt, judging the father not only by the standard of morality but also by the standard of energy.

“It was because of the attic that I came to write this novel,” Cheon states in her afterword to Ginger. “The attic is where everything I remember had its start” (280). The intensely private and womb-like space of the attic infantilizes the father, stripping him of all authority, reducing him to his bare biological functions, and trapping him until his naked face can be confronted without the protection of his many alibis. In this sense, the attic is the space of patricide, of confronting the fear that shrouds the specter of the mad father and the myth of the patriarchal plenitude that has sustained the developmentalist regime in modern Korea.

Notes

1 Dorfman, “The Tyranny of Terror,” 16.
2 For a comprehensive account of the history of torture in twentieth-century Korea, see Pak Wŏnsun’s Yaman sidae ıtı kirok in three volumes. Pak notes that torture continued to be practiced by the police as an interrogation technique even after the transition to procedural democracy in 1987 and details the case of the Hwasŏng serial murder investigations as a prominent example.
3 Dorfman, “The Tyranny of Terror”, 16.
4 The building now houses the Human Rights Center of Seoul Metropolitan Police. All the interrogation rooms were stripped bare and remodeled in 2000, but the room where Pak Chongč’ŏl was killed has been preserved in its original form for its historical value. For an architectural history of the Namyong-dong building and its post-democratic transformation, see Kim Myŏngsik, Kŏnch’uk, part II, chapter 1.
5 The most recent of these decisions was announced on May 7, 2019, by the Ministry of Interior and Safety. It stripped eight individuals of the Order of National Security Merit that they had received under the Park Chung Hee regime for catching North Korean spies, following the determination by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea (2005–2010) that the spy cases had been fabricated.
6 Fulton, “Trauma,” 193.
7 Kim Kyŏng’uk argues that historicization thus serves as a means of blurring the line between the victim and the perpetrator and of ultimately absolving the violent, masculinist history of the 1980s of its guilt. See Kim Kyŏng’uk, Napp’m sesang, 36–37.
8 For a detailed account of Yi Kūnan’s career as a torture specialist, see Pak Chongč’ŏl kinyŏm chaedan, “Nam’yŏng-dong.”
9 The victim was Kim Sŏng-hak, fisherman kidnapped by North Korea in 1971 and returned to South Korea a year later. More than a decade after his return, Kim was arrested and taken to Namyŏng-dong, where he was detained for seventy-two days and tortured to confess that he was a North Korean spy. Kim’s case was one of the numerous spy cases fabricated by the police, the KCIA, and the military during the dictatorships of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. For Kim’s life story, see Pak Chongju, “Yi Kūnan komun.”
10 Lim Chul-Woo, “The Kwangju Massacre After Thirty-Five Y ears.”
11 Osie1, “Mental State of Torturers,” 136.
12 Ibid., 129.
13 Im Ch’ŏru, “Red Room,” 174.
14 Yang Kwija, “Ch’onnamch’ong,” 76.
15 Cheon, interview by Ch’angbi, May 28, 2011. www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRLstyGdrWM.
16 The final chapter consists of a brief conversation between Sŏn and her mother. Cheon added this chapter when she revised the novel for publication as a book.
17 Yi Kūnan called his second daughter-in-law a hyŏbu in a recent interview. Kwŏn Chaehyŏn and Sin Sŏkho, “Yi Kūnan chasu tonggi.”
18 Seo, “The Birth of an Ethical Subject,” 264.
19 Ibid., 282.
20 Hunsinger, Beatitudes, 117.
21 Yi Suyŏng, “Komun kisulcha’ Yi Kūnan chikkyŏk t’oro 2 t’an.”
22 Kim Kŭnt’ae, “Yŏju kyodoso.”
23 Pang Hyŏnsŏk, “Kim Kŭnt’ae.”
24 A similar moral dilemma is sketched in Secret Sunshine, a 2007 Korean film directed by Lee Changdong, in which a mother decides to forgive her son’s killer, only to discover that the killer has already found peace after his conversion to Christianity, his sins forgiven by God. In 2011, Yi Kūnan was disordained on account of the controversy that his interviews and public lectures had invited.
25 Smith, Erving Goffman, 51.

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Ch’on Unyŏng. Interview with Ch’angbi, March 28, 2011. www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRLstyGdrWM


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