

■ A Cultural Politics of *Honbyeol* in South Korea: A Study of Two Different Narratives of Mixed-blood Children*

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of *honbyeol*, or mixed blood, as one of the important interactions and convergences of different identities and cultures in South Korea in recent years. This type of mix of identities and cultures has a long history. Yet, it has often been completely marginalized and silenced, largely because it has been easily stigmatized as something impure and undesirable. Instead, purity of culture and identity has always been emphasized as something Korean people need to pursue and keep. This paper will deconstruct such discourses of purity of culture and identity, and more significantly, it will give particular attention to ways in which *honbyeol* can contribute to new forms of culture and identity. To do so, this paper will examine *honbyeol* children. Although these children often go through difficulties simply because they are mixed blood, a growing trend of the representation of such children in popular cultural media such as film, literature, and TV programs shows that there are encouraging aspects worth our attention in terms of how new forms of culture and identity can emerge. My analysis will be focused on the following two literary texts: *The Elephant* and *Wandeugi*. Historically, this trend of the noticeable emergence of children of mixed blood in South Korea goes back to the late 1980s or early 1990s in close relation to Korea's entry into the global economy and

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foreigners' movement into Korean society. In this regard, this study is my critical engagement with the growth of Korean multiculturalism. Not only will it examine cultural products reflecting the phenomenon of *honhyeol* to grasp some characteristics of such representation, it will also offer a theoretical perspective on possibilities and limits of *honhyeol* as a mode of an interaction and convergence of different identities and cultures. Analyzing those two novels of mixed-blood children from the perspective of the Bildungsroman as a genre of becoming will enable us to see how *honhyeol* children's othered bodies can serve as contact zones that can possibly contribute to the emergence of new forms of hybrid culture in South Korea.

Keywords: *honhyeol*, Bildungsroman, *The Elephant*, *Wandeugi*, Korean *damunhwa*, hybridity

Introduction

This paper considers the theme of *honhyeol*, or mixed blood, as one of the important interactions and convergences of different identities and cultures in South Korea in recent years. This type of mix of identities and cultures has a long history.¹ Yet, it has often been completely marginalized and silenced, largely because it has been easily stigmatized as something impure and undesirable so that it often needs to be marginalized, hidden, and removed. Instead, purity of culture and identity—in other words, pure blood—has always been emphasized as something Korean people need to pursue and keep. This paper will deconstruct such discourses of purity of culture and identity, and more significantly, it will give particular attention to ways in which *honhyeol* can possibly contribute to new forms of culture and identity. To do so, the paper will examine *honhyeol* children.

These children often go through unbearable difficulties mentally and physically simply because they are mixed blood and their outward appearance—their different (often darker) skin color in particular—makes them look different and become an easy target of discrimination. The dominant trend in South Korea in the past was that such mixed-blood children were completely marginalized, hidden, and even uprooted from the whole society. Yet interestingly, it has recently been a growing trend that such children are represented in popular cultural media such as film, literature, and TV programs, significantly more often than before. This growing visibility of mixed-blood children in popular cultural media suggests that there are some encouraging aspects worth our critical attention in terms of what has contributed to changing the public awareness of such children and how new forms of culture and identity can possibly emerge through the mix of different identities and cultures in such bodily forms. This study is focused on two different types of multicultural families from which *honhyeol* children are born—one from a Korean father with a disability and a foreign mother, and the other from a foreign father and a Korean Chinese mother—to question the ideological discourse of pure bloodism and explore some possibilities of changes in cultural politics of *honhyeol*.²

My analysis will be focused on literary texts published in recent years. This study will help me to examine the phenomenon of *honhyeol* to grasp some

¹ A brief survey on such history will be provided in the second section of the paper.

² Although paternal pure bloodism has long been quite influential in the discourse of pure blood in South Korea (Song), the analysis of two such different cases of mixed-blood children in this study enables me to consider a cultural geography of rather complicated situations in the formation of mixed-blood children. To some degree, my study can offer a critical perspective of paternal pure bloodism.

characteristics of such representation, particularly the representation of othered bodies as a contact zone. This study will also consider a theoretical perspective on possibilities and limits of *honhyeol* as a mode of interaction and convergence of different identities and cultures, by giving particular attention to some characteristics of Bildungsroman, the genre the two literary texts that I will analyze have in common in this paper. More specifically, the Bildungsroman as a genre of becoming—meaning open-ended and progressive—will be considered in relation to ways in which *honhyeol* children may or may not be able to contribute to the emergence of new forms of hybrid culture in South Korea. As Fiona McCulloch points out, the Bildungsroman as “a fluid spatial becoming rather than fixity of being...precisely suits the malleability of childhood and adolescence as an unfixed site of dynamic potential” (178), for the development of the two young main *honhyeol* characters in the literary texts to be examined in the paper is depicted not as linear and uniform but rather as still quite unpredictable and even turbulent depending on each one’s upbringing.³

A Brief Historical Survey of *Honhyeol* in South Korea

My historical survey on *honhyeol* in South Korea will compare the recent trend of *honhyeol* children’s representation and treatment with the representation and treatment of *honhyeol* children after the Korean War.⁴ This comparison will highlight the following two points. First, I want to show how and why *honhyeol* children in recent years in South Korea are quite different from the

³ In the past, *honhyeol* children was the term dominantly used in Korean society regardless of their real ages. This shows how they were considered by society because their image of children was deeply inscribed in the minds of many Korean people and at the same time their growth as independent adults was prevented in the social imaginary of Korean people. Hence, *honhyeol* children’s Bildungsroman stories from childhood to adulthood and beyond in Korean society are worth our critical attention although how such stories may unfold still remains to be seen, for the two stories to be examined in this paper cover the main characters’ growth before their adulthood. In this context, I find the photo books representing people of *honhyeol* in South Korea quite meaningful. One is all about *honhyeol* children (Myung Duck Joo), while the other is all about old *honhyeol* people (Jaegab Lee). All pictures in these books are directly related to *honhyeol* people after the Korean War. What makes these pictures different from *honhyeol* people’s images in recent years is that those old pictures are merely a small amount of the remnants of what some photographers desperately try to preserve in a situation where the first generation of *honhyeol* people has been marginalized, hidden, uprooted, and thus vanishing away. The efforts made by a handful of photographers are indeed worthwhile in the sense that those remaining images of *honhyeol* people from the previous generation enable us to put recent *honhyeol* people into perspective.

⁴ I see a growing number of studies on such comparisons conducted by scholars in recent years largely in the context of their discussion of the growth of multicultural families in South Korea since the turn of the new century. For example, see Seol and Song.

ones after the Korean War, not only in terms of how they are represented and treated but also in terms of how they deal with the unfavorable representation and treatment they often have had to endure. Second, I want to explore some constructive aspects of cultural hybridity that *honhyeol* children in recent years can possibly generate in their way of dealing with the harsh realities they experience.⁵

First, *honhyeol* children after the Korean War. This group of mixed-blood children was largely the outcome of the living together of Korean women and U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea since Korea's liberation from the Japanese colonial rule and more significantly during and after the Korean War. The Korean government during and after the war began to realize that the number of *honhyeol* children conspicuously increased and that something drastic needed to be done to deal with that issue. Seeing people of different appearance—particularly people of different skin color—must have been quite shocking to many Koreans at that time. During a period of nation building, the Korean government wanted to solve that issue quickly. They pursued efforts to gather all the *honhyeol* children together in certain facilities to control them and make them hidden from the public. Yet, this plan did not really go well. In the end, the government decided to send them to other countries. This international adoption policy, in fact, was pursued by private agencies and became “successful” in fulfilling its goal of sending many *honhyeol* children to other countries, mainly to the United States, for the U.S. government at that time was also willing to receive many *honhyeol* children from South Korea.⁶ This was indeed a segregation policy adopted by the Korean government, but it was also considered an act of charity (Kyungtae Park 52). This reveals how all parties involved in this matter approached it at that time.

The fact that the Korean government's main policy for *honhyeol* children after the war was international adoption is quite problematic; the government is expelling them out of the country where they were born under the pretense of the legal process called adoption. This took place because of their parentage and their different appearance—particularly, skin color—from other Koreans. Nationalism of pure blood is at the root of such policy. This ideology continues to affect those who were left behind at that time. Many of mixed-blood children had an opportunity to go to the United States through adoption. There were also those who chose to remain in South Korea, but they had to keep their identity of mixed blood secret from the beginning although that was not an easy

⁵ On the origin of racism in (South) Korea, see Noja Park's two articles and Sangbok Ha.

⁶ The contents in this paragraph up to this point are mainly from Aram Kim 109-17.

task at all due to their outward difference.⁷ They chose to live in South Korea because it was the place of their birth, their home. They have been there all the time since the war, yet they were considered “invisible people” (Chunggang Kim 158). Invisibility was forced upon them, and yet, being invisible has also become their survival tactic; however, such a way of survival is not really promising but rather very gloomy and is doomed to failure.⁸ It is because revealing their identity as *honhyeol* in public would put them at great risk in a situation where the national ideology of pure blood was so dominant and oppressive.⁹ They have often been destined for non-existence. Yet I see the emergence of different possibilities in the stories of *honhyeol* children in recent years.

Second, *honhyeol* children in recent years. A growing number of discourses of *honhyeol* have recently been produced mainly due to the emergence and growth of the children of mixed blood since the 1990s. This group of mixed-blood children in South Korea is the outcome of the international marriages between foreign migrant workers and Korean people or foreign women and (largely) Korean men (Hyunmi Kim 27). Since the 1990s, Korea has needed to bring as many foreign workers, largely men, as possible to make up for Korean workers who left their jobs in businesses where their work was often characterized as dirty, difficult, and dangerous. At the turn of the new century, Korea had another serious social problem: there were a significant number of single men largely in rural areas who had a hard time finding a suitable marriage partner in South Korea. So the Korean government intervened to resolve this problem by helping establish some types of government-sponsored private agencies so that those agencies could bring as many marriage candidates, largely women, as possible to South Korea. This is how international marriages between foreigners—largely women—and Koreans—oftentimes men—were established at that time, and as a result, many children of mixed blood have been born in recent decades.

One can argue that the two policies were “successful” in general because Korea could keep its economy going on with the help of foreign migrant workers and because many single Korean men could establish families with foreign brides. Most migrant workers and women for international marriage are from other parts

⁷ According to Kyungtae Park (38), the number of this group of *honhyeol* children is quite small. It is estimated that approximately two thousand *honhyeol* people of the many more who chose to stay back after the Korean War remain alive today, seventy years later (Jaegab Lee 112).

⁸ Kyungtae Park explains it so well in his book chapter “Disappearing *Honhyeol* People.”

⁹ Chunggang Kim explains well about the power of such a public discourse of pure blood by analyzing popular representations of mixed-blood children.

of Asia, largely from countries considered less developed than South Korea.¹⁰ This has been the main cause of how those migrant people from other Asian countries are often unfavorably treated daily and in their working places and treated unfairly in public and popular media. Not only those adults but also children of mixed blood whose parent is often from those less developed Asian countries have gone through the same difficulties although they were born in South Korea and their legal status as Koreans is immediately and fully guaranteed (Soh 252-53).¹¹ Some scholars use the terms like “hierarchical nationhood” (Seol 153) or “racial hierarchies of mixed race children” (Claire S. Lee 522) to characterize such harsh treatment and unfavorable representation of mixed-blood children. The main reason why they are treated and represented in such a manner is because they are mixed blood and their identity as Koreans is considered somehow contaminated. Again, we see how powerfully the national ideology of pure blood works here.

What is more problematic is that a certain other type of mixed-blood children has been treated and represented quite differently. Scholars argue that Koreans usually consider white mixed-blood children much more desirable than other mixed-blood children whose skin color looks darker (Ahn 938; Corks; Hyein Amber Kim; Claire S. Lee 534; Oh; Seol 155).¹² Yet things are much more complicated with the politics of skin color in South Korea. Claire Seungeun Lee characterizes the modus operandi of such a way of Koreans’ discriminative attitude toward people of darker skin color as follows: “the hierarchies of socially constructed racial order as ‘the origin-coding hierarchy’ and ‘the color-coding hierarchy’” (Claire S. Lee 525). According to Lee, “‘the origin-coding hierarchy’ is defined as how the country of origin of an immigrant parent affects a ‘mixed race’ individual’s identity and racial categorization” (531) and “‘the color-coding hierarchy’ revolves around skin color and the physical appearance of a ‘mixed race’ individual” (533). Put simply, Koreans often favor foreigners from countries seen as developed with white skin color. Interestingly, however,

¹⁰ The following two web materials provide how foreigners in South Korea are statistically distributed. See Sun-young Lee and “Becoming a Society That Respects Cultural Diversity.”

¹¹ On the precarious legal status of foreign migrant women, foreign mothers in particular, see Rami Soh.

¹² In an interview, Yiombi Thona powerfully characterizes the situation as follows: “He told me, there’s a sort of national inferiority complex in South Korea, known as the ‘America complex.’ Western foreigners—generally Caucasian—are often on the receiving end of preferential treatment. But when it comes [to] foreigners from Africa or elsewhere in Asia—the regions where most refugees in South Korea are from—the tables are turned. ‘They don’t live well,’ Thona said” (qtd. in Corks). As a prominent refugee in South Korea, he mentions it so well and powerfully. However, what he argues can also be applied widely to many people in South Korea in terms of how white skin color is considered something very desirable and the color white even becomes ideologically powerful in many aspects of Korean culture. For a full discussion on it, see Sojeong Park’s *White: A Cultural Politics of Skin Color*.

foreigners from “underdeveloped” countries with less dark or more likely white skin color are often favorably treated.¹³ With regard to the politics of skin color and racial discrimination in South Korea, Sojeong Park persuasively argues that colorism is a more appropriate concept through which to understand racism toward people of darker skin color. It is because skin color of *honhyeol* children in South Korea oftentimes cannot quickly and easily be categorized as either white or black, but rather, a broad spectrum of darker (or whiter) skin color between the two extremes of black and white exists. This characterization—a mixture and hybridity, rather than a binary opposition, of those two extremes of racial identities—seems to become a more realistic representation of the politics of skin color in South Korea (Sojeong Park 33-64).

Thus far, I have briefly explained the characteristics of mixed-blood children in modern Korean history in terms of how they are engendered, how they are treated in society, and how they are represented in popular and public media. If I add a bit more about how they are engendered, there is a considerable difference between *honhyeol* children after the Korean War and *honhyeol* children in recent years. With the former, maternal pure bloodism is emphasized because Korean women often had foreign men—usually U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea—as their partners, while with the latter, paternal pure bloodism is emphasized because Korean men usually had foreign women as their partners. This latter pattern has often been considered a typical multicultural family formation in South Korea in recent years. This is how the idea of pure blood—or pure bloodism—has served as a dominant national ideology in dealing with mixed-blood children not only before and during the several decades after the Korean War in particular, but in recent years, since the late 1990s as well. Children of mixed blood with darker skin color still have undergone difficulties and mistreatment in school and society. Koreans’ discriminatory attitude toward darker skin color does not go away easily. People’s differential racial attitude toward children of mixed blood according to their skin color after the Korean War and afterwards was not as conspicuous as in recent years. Yet what makes the re-emergence and growth of mixed-blood children in recent years in South Korea significantly different from the same phenomenon after the Korean War is that their visibility in Korean society continues to increase and any policies expelling them out of Korean society, just as happened in the past, seem impossible. Most of all, unlike *honhyeol* children in the past whose individual

¹³ In addition, the English language also plays a very significant role in this politics of skin color. Put simply, those who can speak English well and with white skin color have often been far more welcomed and even more favorably treated (Ha 529; Sangseo Lee).

and independent legal status was not easily guaranteed, *honhyeol* children's legal status at present is immediately and fully guaranteed at birth (Soh 252-53).¹⁴ Put simply, visibility and growth in numbers of *honhyeol* children at present in South Korea is something significant that cannot easily be reversed, though the reality facing them does not remain equally bright: there are still many obstacles and difficulties that they have to go through. All in all, this shifting social situation in recent years enables me to consider some aspects of new forms of cultural hybridity that mixed-blood children can possibly generate.

A Cultural Politics of *Honhyeol* in South Korea in Recent Years: Exploring the Emergence of a New Mode of Cultural Hybridity

The comparison of the two types of *honhyeol* in South Korea in the previous section has suggested a possibility of the emergence of new forms of cultural hybridity, particularly in relation to the recent trend of the increased numbers of *honhyeol* children in South Korea. This section will further explore this trend of cultural hybridity by examining two literary texts written by Korean writers: Jae-young Kim's *The Elephant* (2005) and Ryoryung Kim's *Wandeugi* (2008).¹⁵ My investigation of these two different narratives of *honhyeol* intends not to show the progress of *honhyeol* children's lives in such a short period of time but to highlight diverse aspects of *honhyeol* children's lives as seen even in these two different representations of *honhyeol* children. This requires our careful critical attention to each case. In my analysis of those literary texts, particular attention will be given to the following two aspects: first, how *honhyeol* children begin to realize their hybrid identity; second, how they begin to deal with such identity of difference and often discrimination, not only reluctantly but also in expectation of something transformative. I do not argue that literature represents the social reality of *honhyeol* children perfectly. But I do believe that the literary representation of such social reality can become an important and valuable medium through which we can consider significant aspects of social changes and their implications; hence, I consider the novel as a form of public pedagogy that represents social reality and influences the formation of culture, particularly

¹⁴ The legal status of *honhyeol* children in the past was not immediately and fully guaranteed. Most of them existed without nationality, and only some of them entered in the family register of relatives (Chunggang Kim 178-80; Aram Kim 100-01).

¹⁵ For studies on literary texts on multiculturalism in South Korea in recent years, see, for example, Younggi Park, Sohn, and Song.

by influencing how people form their imagination and public consciousness.¹⁶ Specifically, I will explore how bodies of *honhyeol* children are othered and at the same time how their ways of dealing with such othering gazes can somehow enable them to see their othered bodies as contact zones where interactions and convergences of different identities and cultures take place. More significantly, this study intends to highlight that their bodies do not remain passive recipients of such interactions and convergences, but instead they somehow try to find ways to react actively to such transcultural processes; this whole process shows how their subjectivities can grow.

The main character Akas in *The Elephant* is a thirteen-year-old boy whose father is from Nepal and whose mother is from China. The father, whose name is Arjun, now forty years old, comes to South Korea as a migrant worker when he is twenty-six years old. Soon, he meets a Korean Chinese woman as his wife and thus Akas is born.¹⁷ Later, unfortunately, his mother runs away, so Akas and his father live together in a shabby place “which used to be a pig shed up until about ten years ago” (*The Elephant* 11).¹⁸ Although Akas is not mature enough to properly understand everything that happens around him, Kim narrates the whole story from that young boy’s perspective. The author leads us to follow the boy’s observations of the surrounding social reality—particularly foreign migrant workers’ extremely harsh working and living conditions, which provide most of the events in the novella—and his attempts to figure out what is really going on. So, the story narrates as follows:

The winding bends of my thirteen-year-old mind are riddled like the Himalayas by the range of life-styles I’ve become privy to. On the world map, the Himalayan range is only as big as your fingertip. But Father said the Himalayas could never be accurately represented on a map because the combined distance between the deep, furrowed valleys and the high, snow-laden mountain peaks would be great enough to circle the Earth more than once. Picturing the brain model I saw in the school science lab helped me understand what he meant. Since deep folds start forming in your brain when you’re exposed to a variety of experiences at a young age, my brain is most likely very old. (The Elephant 15; my emphases)

¹⁶ The influence of those two novels is quite significant because *The Elephant* is highly regarded by critics, has been widely read by the public, and also has been included in three different high school textbooks, and also because in the case of *Wandeugi*, the novel has been widely read by the public and the movie adaptation was a box-office hit.

¹⁷ The couple represents two of the three main groups of foreigners—foreign migrant workers and Korean Chinese people who came to South Korea in the 1990s after South Korea began to widely open its doors toward foreigners. Another group of foreigners are foreign brides who began to come to South Korea largely in the late 1990s.

¹⁸ Since I use the bilingual edition of Kim’s novel, all English translations are from that edition. For clarity, I shall cite Jae-Young Kim’s novel as *The Elephant*.

This describes the effects of all the complicated experiences he observes and goes through in his youth, although he does not fully understand their significance immediately; the author invites us to figure out their significance. Yet what Akas sees with his eyes and what he experiences with his body—particularly, his feelings—remain in and with him and continue to influence him. This is how Kim narrates Akas's growth, not only in terms of how Akas tries to figure out where he is but also in terms of how he tries to figure out who he is. As one Korean scholar argues, “a hybrid subject [like him] becomes split in a situation where misfortunes continue” (Sohn 95).

Throughout the short story, the author shows diverse ways in which Akas is made to realize his identity of difference, not only often reluctantly but also with denial or resistance. Yet what appears outwardly—his skin color, in particular—becomes the marker of difference that never goes away. Any type of desperate resistance or denial rather looks pathetic. What follows is quite a powerful scene that describes how the white skin color is considered most desirable, while the darker skin color is considered less desirable and even something that needs to be whitened (*The Elephant* 33-37). One day a young man comes to the village where Akas lives. His name is Khun; he is twenty-six years old and is also from Nepal. He comes there to find a job, expecting to save a good sum of money and go back home in three years. Though he is from Nepal like Akas's father, Khun's skin color appears to be white, even white enough for him to be treated just like one of the white people from North America. Once he tells Akas in this way: “Don't be fooled. Koreans may say they're uncomfortable with foreigners because they're a homogenous nation, and that [sic] that's why migrant workers are treated the way they are. Shoot, they're not like that to Americans,' he sneered. 'Polite doesn't cut it. Koreans would get on their hands and knees for Americans. If your face was a bit whiter, you'd look American'” (*The Elephant* 33). Khun's words prompt Akas to whiten his dark skin by washing his face with water mixed with bleach. The novel's description goes as follows: “From that day forward, I started to add a little bit of bleach into the water I used to wash my face at night. After washing, I'd run inside to see how pale I got. In my crisp, early morning, I'd look in the mirror again and see a few dry white flakes on my face. That was exciting” (*The Elephant* 33-35).¹⁹ He adds the reason why he behaves in such a bizarre manner:

I wasn't trying to look like a completely white person. Just pale enough—no, yellow enough like a Korean person. *I needed protective coloring*; like a snake in the

¹⁹ This narcissistic moment reminds me of Lacan's mirror stage, in particular the way in which a child stands before a mirror and goes through the process of forming his/her subjectivity (Lacan 75-81).

summer forest, a moth on an autumn leaf. That way, I'd be able to blend in and live a quiet life. That way, I wouldn't be the go-to target of the boys with new BB guns or the outcast for bullies to pick on or the dark-skinned obstruction that kids push out of the way during recess. I used the bleach daily, not skipping a single day. (*The Elephant* 35; my emphases)

Akas's desperate effort to make himself into a person who does not look like himself is an impossible goal. Yet he tries and tries. The more he tries, the deeper he realizes that it is an impossible goal. His skin color—of course, some other things too, for example, his eating habit (*The Elephant* 19-21)—becomes a signifier of difference and discrimination that is not easily covered with some kind of a mask or what he describes as “protective coloring.” Washing his face with the water mixed with bleach does not have any transformative power. Fanon's argument in *Black Skin, White Masks* is helpful for me to further discuss the way Akas deals with the problem of his dark skin color. In his discussion on the moment a black man begins to realize his identity as a black man, Fanon highlights that this realization is made by the way in which he is objectified by a white man rather than that he comes to that realization on his own terms; before that moment, he does not have any sense of unease with his skin color. His black skin is a fact already there with him from the beginning. Yet such objectification of his blackness by a white man somehow prompts him to see his blackness again, more reflectively. That white man's gaze makes him othered. He experiences the split between his self as a black man as it is and his self as a black man seen by that white man. This type of self-division due to othering gazes is exactly what mixed-blood children have to continuously deal with due to their dark skin color.

Just like the black man in Fanon's book, Akas also has to deal with his divided selves, which is the painful reality that *honhyeol* children often go through. The whole story shows Akas's way of dealing with it. Akas's father also goes through similar painful experiences of his real identity being denied. Akas reveals his father's real name: “A person going by the name of Arjun—who likes malingo flowers and can sing a mean ‘Resham Phiriri,’ who has fond memories of the Annapurna range—never existed from the beginning” (*The Elephant* 23). That real identity of his father's original self is not acknowledged properly. Instead, his father and many other migrant workers are called merely as “Hey, you” or “Asshole,” etc., (*The Elephant* 23) and their individual and original identities are completely denied. Akas is treated in a similar way at school. He is not recognized as Akas as he is, i.e. as the one who looks different outwardly due to his different family background. His name Akas is not a typical Korean boy's name, and interestingly, it is only once and quickly mentioned throughout the

story. Such difference rather makes him “the go-to target of the boys with new BB guns or the outcast for bullies to pick on or the dark-skinned obstruction that kids push out of the way during recess” (*The Elephant* 35). A sense of being divided and a sense of being denied. This is what people like Akas, his father, and many others are often forced to experience and endure so as to survive.

The way in which such a situation is described toward the end of the story is quite intriguing and significant. Akas uses the word “*oue*, meaning whirlwind” in Burmese (*The Elephant* 19) to describe migrant workers’ lives. This word characterizes the living conditions of foreign migrant workers. Akas narrates that he is “only half *oue*” because his mother is Chosunjok, Korean Chinese (*The Elephant* 19). The short story ends with his neighbor Vijay’s unexpected act of stealing, and suddenly, a vision of a silver elephant falling into *oue*, a whirlwind, despite its desperate effort to get out, appears to Akas’s eyes. It is because that same day Akas also steals some items for his father’s birthday gifts in a shop. Here *oue*, whirlwind, seems to indicate their lives are doomed to despair and failure.

The story ends as follows: “It’s dizzying. Helpless, the elephant is sucked in. Not one sound comes out of him; his eyes remained wide open. My own world turns black” (*The Elephant* 89). Akas sees himself in the falling elephant. Although what he sees at that moment is only what is happening in his imagination, that scene depicts such a gloomy destiny that lies before him. The whole story also demonstrates that his life since birth has already been amid the whirlwind of difficulties, discrimination, and isolation due to his hybrid identity. It seems not easy to imagine a possibility of getting out of that whirlwind in such a gloomy situation and that he has already been falling into the whirlwind deeper and deeper. The characterization of his identity as half *oue*, whirlwind, or his hybrid or split identity as a mixed-blood child becomes the difficult condition of his life that rather hinders him from imagining his life path otherwise. Just as he says, “... being brave enough to steal is better than hoping for acceptance I’ll never get” (*The Elephant* 83); he commits a crime of stealing like the adult foreign migrant workers Ali and Vijay (Sohn 95). This is how he falls deeper into the whirlwind of a doomed life as a mixed-blood child. The whole story depicts how Akas learns that gloomy reality and painfully acknowledges it. This becomes the characteristic of the novella as a Bildungsroman, or as a genre of development or education. The fact that he is still physically in the process of further growing up, however, suggests that there may be another possibility in terms of his growth and acceptance into society. It remains to be seen whether his growth may bear fruit in new cultural changes.

Another *honbyeol* child, the main character in *Wandeugi*, written by

Ryoryung Kim, is a seventeen-year-old teenage boy. In general, the novel shows more mature ways of dealing with how a *honhyeol* child can grow not only physically but also mentally and socially. Compared with the main character in *The Elephant* whose life seems to be quite marginalized and isolated, the main character in *Wandeugi* seems to lead an ordinary life in the middle of society, associating well with other Koreans. This does not mean that the main character in *Wandeugi* does not have any problems with people around him. Despite neighboring others within society, he keeps himself from others. Significantly, the maturation of the main character in *Wandeugi* shows—and helps us to envision—some encouraging aspects that *honhyeol* children can generate in Korean society.

The main character's name is Do Wandeuk; his father is Korean and his mother is Vietnamese.²⁰ Interestingly, Wandeuk's identity of difference due to his birth from international marriage is not clearly recognized either by Wandeuk himself or by others until one day his teacher Dongjoo tells him that his mother is Vietnamese (*Wandeugi* 36-38).²¹ Until this moment, Wandeuk does not seem to have any clear awareness of the existence and identity of his mother. Later, his teacher even mentions that Wandeuk's eyebrows were thick when he saw him for the first time, suggesting it as a marker of his different identity and particularly in relation to his Vietnamese mother (*Wandeugi* 40-41).²² After meeting with his mother, Wandeuk has two occasions when his identity of difference is pointed out by others (*Wandeugi* 132, 158). This happens mainly because he is with his mother, who looks different; here I also see how the othering gaze works. Put simply, Wandeuk's identity of difference due to his mixed blood is something constructed by others depending on where he is situated and with whom, particularly with his Vietnamese mother, rather than something fixed and visibly marked with or on him from the beginning. As Chunggang Kim points out, skin color is not something fixed and determined to somebody but rather becomes performative and thus open to change depending on socio-cultural situations (170). Before he knows his mother as a

²⁰ Foreign brides who began to come to South Korea for international marriage on a large scale at the turn of the new century are another main source of foreigners, as well as the two other groups of foreigners mentioned earlier in this paper. The majority of them are women from Southeast Asia and Vietnamese women are the number one. In this regard, Wandeuk's family is a typical *damunhwa* (multi-culture) family in South Korea: the father is Korean and the mother is a woman usually from Southeast Asia or other parts of Asia. The movie adaptation of the novel is made under the title of *Punch*. In the movie, Wandeuk's mother is depicted as a woman from the Philippines. For details about this point, refer to Shin and Kang (260-61). The film was a box office hit at that time.

²¹ For clarity, I shall cite Ryoryung Kim's novel as *Wandeugi*.

²² The reason why the teacher points out Wandeuk's thick eyebrows is that such characteristics are often believed to belong to men from Southeast Asia.

Vietnamese woman and even after that, Wandeuk does not seem to have any problem with his friends at school due to his outward appearance. His outward appearance—skin color or anything else—does not cause any serious problem at all to him; his trouble with others at school is often caused largely because his father's disability is pointed out by them. The performativity of Wandeuk's identity as a mixed-blood child, hence, becomes not something fixed outwardly but rather open to change depending on where he is located and how he is viewed; furthermore, how he tries to see himself also becomes an important element in that situation in the process of his identity formation. In this regard, Ryoryung Kim's *Wandeugi* is quite different from other novels on *honhyeol* children, including *The Elephant*, which I have examined earlier.

There is very little description of Wandeuk's mother in the novel, and that description is not foregrounded, but rather placed in the background. Yet, his mother's presence affects Wandeuk continually. What's in the foreground throughout the novel is the description of Wandeuk's father's dwarfism along with his uncle's stammer; the novel describes how they attempt to survive despite their disabilities and how Wandeuk's father's disability affects his life. Scholars often pay attention to these elements and make their critiques on them in the novel. However, I cannot see any critique that tries to relate these two points—the father's disability and the mother's origin in Vietnam—properly and fully. I find that these two issues are not disparate but rather closely related, particularly to understand the characteristic of the novel as a narrative of a *honhyeol* child's growth.

Before Wandeuk meets his hidden mother, what affects him most is his father's disability. This is the reason for him to argue and fight with others: they ridicule his father as a dwarf (*Wandeugi* 10-11). He has no idea who his mother is since she disappeared when he was a little baby. While his mother's coming back into his life again after seventeen years of disappearance causes him trouble, this trouble, however, is not something unpleasant. Instead, some kind of expectation and excitement gradually grow deep in his heart. For a while, those two stories of his way of dealing with his father's disability and his mother's sudden appearance into his life move in parallel in the novel. Yet, those two seemingly unrelated stories gradually converge, and he tries to come to terms with both: he is the one who is situated at the center of the convergence of these two stories, and later a possibility of new stories emerges from that convergence. At first, the novel shows Wandeuk's meeting with his mother only very briefly, and toward the end, the novel depicts the gathering of father, mother, and the son together more often and more naturally. The scattered family—the mother has run away, the father does not come home

often because of his business as a travelling salesman, and the son often stays home alone—finally get together in a home.

Understanding the way in which the narrative of a mixed-blood child and the narrative of disability come together in the novel *Wandeugi* expands our perspective on the narrative of mixed-blood children. A typical narrative structure of *honhyeol* children's novels is often as follows: how signifiers of difference such as skin color often unfavorably affect *honhyeol* children and how they have to deal with their dark skin color, etc. Yet, in fact, the narrative of disability is also another important element in the narrative of mixed-blood children in South Korea that requires our critical attention.²³ It is mainly because foreign women often got married to Korean men with little knowledge in advance of their partners' physical condition; this is also the case with Wandeuk's parents (*Wandeugi* 41).²⁴ Wandeuk gradually learns how to acknowledge two facts—his mother being Vietnamese and his father being disabled—as they are and makes efforts to embrace his parents as the ones who made him, for this is how his identity of mixed blood is formed from the beginning.

Furthermore, unlike *The Elephant*, which ends quite gloomily with a slim possibility of hope, this novel depicts a quite favorable future that could be made by Wandeuk, one of the new generations of *honhyeol* children, showing his firm spirit not to hide himself; the way in which he is depicted as someone who learns boxing with an affirmative attitude also reveals his similarly affirmative spirit (*Wandeugi* 206-07). One can argue that such optimistic energy in the novel seems to be somewhat naïve because the reality that *honhyeol* children go through is still very harsh. In this regard, the description in *The Elephant* seems to be more realistic. Even so, in general, *Wandeugi* reflects the trend of *honhyeol* children's lives in recent years: dealing with what lies before them with a challenging spirit. We see more of *honhyeol* children in mass media and on a daily basis in South Korea. To make them completely marginalized or hidden from society or to send them away does not or cannot work any longer. How to deal with what lies before them may significantly affect their destiny and furthermore decide what they may contribute to the emergence of new forms of hybrid culture in South Korea.

²³ How people with disability have been treated in South Korean society historically is also quite similar to how people of *honhyeol* have been treated historically. Their existence was denied and they were marginalized and hidden or removed from society. This was the harsh reality that they often had to go through.

²⁴ Furthermore, there was often a big age gap between foreign brides and Korean men; foreign brides were quite young and Korean men were quite old. This type of international marriage was not something uncommon and often caused trouble later to their marital life.

Conclusion: The Future of *Honhyeol* Children and the Bildungsroman as Narratives of Becoming

This study has examined the two Korean literary texts to see the different ways in which the main characters in both texts try to deal with their othered bodies of *honhyeol* as contact zones. As one Korean scholar argues, these two texts show the two different ways in which *honhyeol* children realize and acknowledge the condition of being *honhyeol* in their given situation and make attempts to form hybrid subjectivities that can help to use their *honhyeol* background to energize themselves and find their own individualities so that something transformative can possibly emerge (Younggi Park 114). The depiction of the growth of the main character in *The Elephant* is still quite dark and pessimistic. Yet, *Wandeugi* shows how the main character realizes and acknowledges his hybrid identity as a *honhyeol* child and gradually learns how to associate well with others in society, overcoming self-isolation and self-division (Younggi Park 131).

I choose these two somewhat contrasting stories of *honhyeol* children's growth in South Korea not because I want to show that the either case demonstrates the destiny before them but because I want to suggest that we need to pay more attention to the ongoing progress being unfolded in between those two stories. There may be many more known or unknown stories still being made in between by *honhyeol* children. *Honhyeol* children in the past after the Korean War did not or could not have proper or full opportunities to grow up as adults in South Korea. Many of them were sent away to the United States mostly or some other "developed" countries. Not many were left behind, but they were completely hidden from society; simply, the Korean society has let them disappear.²⁵ However, *honhyeol* children in recent years are quite different. Although they still suffer a lot from prejudice in the process of their growth, a growing number of *honhyeol* children have been represented in mass media and in literature and this phenomenon reflects and acknowledges the changing and irreversible reality of their existence in Korean society during these increasingly multicultural times. How the stories of their adulthood and life afterwards may be written and how they may affect Korean society as *honhyeol* people remain to be seen since most *honhyeol* children born over the past two decades or so are still young.

McCulloch describes how Bildungsroman for children and young adults depict "a world of possibility at once exhilarating and fearful" (174). She also

²⁵ For a more detailed story about this case, refer to Kyungtae Park.

adds: “That desire for, yet terror of, the unknown is an ideal format for children’s literature and the protagonist’s progress” (175). In this regard, she emphasizes Bildungsroman as a genre of becoming (198-99). This characteristic of Bildungsroman accurately describes the ways in which the main characters grow up in *The Elephant* and *Wandeuji*. How *honhyeol* children can grow up further beyond the boundary of the teenage years and into and through the period of adulthood and even afterwards and what new forms of hybrid culture they can generate remain to be seen. But one thing seems to be quite clear: something is being made, though we need to wait and see whether that something could be transformative. I hope to see more of *honhyeol* children’s stories in and about their adulthood and life afterwards, not only stories of being represented by others but also stories written by themselves.

I keep hopeful about the hybrid cultures that *honhyeol* children can generate in South Korea mainly because that is the way in which many other countries’ long histories of multiculturalism have demonstrated the generation of hybrid cultures (Audinet; Burke). The increased cultural relevance of *honhyeol* children in recent years can contribute significantly to the generation of any new forms of hybrid culture that could be very transformative in the near future, given the transforming effects that Korean adoptees and their return to South Korea in recent years have had on Korean society, albeit slowly. For example, on December 6, 2022, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Korea finally made a historic decision to begin its investigation on suspicions of human rights violations and illegal actions made in the process of overseas adoption in the 1970s-1990s, which is indeed a significant result of ongoing global movements of Korean adoptees engaged along with activists for a long period of time (Jeong; Seah Lee). These global movements of Korean adoptees in solidarity with numerous activists have also resulted in helping Korean adoptees themselves to become subjects of their own lives but also in changing Korean people’s awareness of overseas Korean adoptees, particularly by helping Korean people to understand the complicated situations of overseas Korean adoptees’ lives more correctly; furthermore, for example, by deconstructing the stereotypes of overseas Korean adoptees often represented either as those who hold a grudge against Korea that abandoned them or as those who have led better lives with better education in developed countries (Jeong).

In a similar way, visibility and growth in numbers of *honhyeol* children in recent years can contribute to changing Korean people’s awareness of *honhyeol* people in general and also serve as a significant force of generating new hybrid forms of culture that could be more visibly materialized as time passes by. This expectation is not ungrounded given that overseas Korean adoptees also repre-

sent a type of hybrid identity—a substantial number of such people are *honhyeol* people—and that the emergence and growth of their presence in Korean society in recent years have had meaningful impacts. These two groups of people have in common the history of being marginalized, silenced, and uprooted in the society where they originated. Their emergence and growing visibility in Korean society in recent years have overlapped. This phenomenon is closely related to the general trend of recent cultural productions that can be characterized as the expansion of cultural diversity and the generation of hybrid culture as a result due to the advancement of globalization, transnationalism, and human rights. Hence, it would be plausible to anticipate what hybrid cultural forms minorities such as *honhyeol* children, along with overseas Korean adoptees, can possibly generate in the near future.

In this context, several murals of foreign-looking girls wearing hanbok (traditional Korean clothes) come to my mind. Murals of girls of black skin color or white skin color wearing hanbok are depicted on the streets of Seoul (Palmer and Park). These images enable us to imagine and expect some aspects of the hybrid culture Korean *damunhwa* (multiculture) can bring about. Albeit symbolically, I'd like to suggest that they can demonstrate how cultural hybridity, rather than cultural purity, can effectively and intriguingly serve as a way of generating new types of culture. Contamination, rather than purity, becomes a source and mode of a new cultural (re)generation (Audinet; Burke). In this process of a new cultural (re)generation, *honhyeol*, as a mix of blood or different cultures, can serve not only as the convergence of those two (or more) disparate things but also as the divergence of something quite different and unique. This characteristic of *honhyeol* can be described as “a fluid spatial becoming rather than fixity of being” that succinctly catches the characteristic of *honhyeol* as contact zones with “an unfixed site of dynamic potential” (McCulloch 178).

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南韓混血文化政治： 二種不同的混血兒童敘事研究

摘要

本文檢驗近年來南韓不同身分與文化的重要互動交匯主題之一，亦即混血 (*honbyeol*)。這種身份和文化的混合有悠久的歷史，但卻經常遭到全面的邊緣化與消音，主要是因為這種特質容易被汙名化為不純與不可取。相反地，韓國社會總是強調，文化與身分的純潔性才是必須追求與維持的特質。本文將拆解這種文化和身份純潔性的論述，進一步關注混血如何可以為新型態的文化和身份做出貢獻；為此，本文將研究混血兒童。雖然這些兒童往往僅是因為混血而遭受磨難，但是在電影、文學和電視節目等大眾文化媒體中出現這種兒童的趨勢日益增加，顯示出這種新文化與身份形式的積極面向值得我們關注。我的分析針對《大象》和《莞得》二本小說。從歷史上看，混血兒童在南韓出現的明顯趨勢可以追溯到1980年代末或1990年代初，與南韓進入全球經濟體系以及外國人移入南韓社會密切相關。此研究是我對南韓多元文化主義成長的批判性參與，我不僅會檢驗反映混血現象的文化產品，以掌握某些特徵，還將提供理論觀點，關注混血作為不同身份文化互動與交匯的可能性與限制。從成長小說的角度分析這兩部混血兒童作品，能使我們看到混血兒童的異化身體如何成為接觸地帶，可能促成南韓新型態混雜文化的出現。

關鍵字：混血、成長小說、《大象》、《莞得》、韓國多元文化、混雜性

