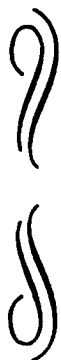


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# WESTERN FOLKLORE



VOLUME 56 • NUMBER 1

*Winter 1997*

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Published by the California Folklore Society

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Western Folklore (ISSN 0043-373X)

## Film Reviews

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*Camp Arirang*. 1995. Produced by Diana S. Lee and Grace Yoon Kyung Lee. 28 min. Video, Color. NAATA Distribution, 346 Ninth Street, Second Floor, San Francisco, CA 94103. (415) 552-9550. \$165. Rental: \$50.

The *hijichon*, or camp town, is a well-known, albeit hidden, feature of the Korean landscape. Springing up on the outskirts of American army bases, the camp towns consist of bars, nightclubs, shops vending cheap trinkets and other souvenirs, and the occasional fast food franchise. The primary economic activity in these towns, however, is prostitution and, as one learns early on in "Camp Arirang," the United States army views the camp towns and the prostitution found there to be an essential element in maintaining the morale of the soldiers. America's presence in Korea is an interesting phenomenon, as it is the last relic of Cold War politics and the fear of global Communist domination—while an armistice was signed at the end of the war on the Korean peninsula, a peace treaty has yet to be signed, and the soldiers stationed in Korea remain on a heightened level of alert. This status coupled with the difficulty of the Korean language virtually guarantees that American soldiers in Korea have little meaningful, non duty-related contact with Koreans. Indeed, many soldiers' only contact with Koreans and what they can only surmise is Korean culture comes in the camp towns. It is this problematic site of culture contact that Lee and Lee explore in their intriguing documentary focusing on the lives of Korean women who work there. Through a series of narrative vignettes of young camp town prostitutes along with a strong frame narrative focusing on the life and hardships of Yon Ja Kim, Lee and Lee present a glimpse behind the gates of the closely guarded lives of the camp town workers.

Taking their title from the well-known folk song "Arirang," Lee and Lee signal their intent to consider the implications of camp town life on the construction of identity. Since the emergence of the camp towns in Korea during the war, women who work in the camp towns have been labeled by the government as both nationalists and personal ambassadors. At the same time as these women's activities are lauded for "providing comfort" to the soldiers—thus offering a troubling link to the Japanese colonial government's practice of forcing Korean women to work as "comfort women," providing sexual services to front-line soldiers—and bringing in much needed foreign currency, the rest of society shuns these women. Indeed, Korean women seen with foreigners even today often are derided as prostitutes. Through a series of short personal experience narratives, Lee and Lee bring to the fore the nar-

rative presentation of life in and around the camp towns. These are not polished stories, and the translated voice-overs capture the anger and frustration expressed by these women who have usually been tricked into working at the euphemistically named "clubs." Lee and Lee successfully document the collusion between the American military and the Korean government in regulating and policing the prostitution that takes place in the camp towns. One expert commentator, Katherine Moon, points out the paradoxical nature of prostitution in the camp towns: prostitution in Korea is illegal, but it is regulated by the Ministry of Health.

The primary character in the documentary is Yon Ja Kim, a former club worker and madam who, in 1987, was able to pay off her debt to her club through the fortuitous intervention of a friend. Once freed from her contractual obligation, an obligation often enforced by club employed thugs, Kim established a mission dedicated to the education of the children of Korean club workers and their American GI partners. Amerasian children in Korea usually encounter prejudice—their mothers are prostitutes and they do not "look" Korean. In a country where "racial purity" is an important aspect of nationalist and ethnic sentiment, these children find themselves in a difficult situation. Kim's mission school is an unusual place—here she teaches the children English with the underlying hope not that they will be able to succeed in Korean society, but rather that they will be able to rejoin their American fathers in the United States.

"Camp Arirang" engages the problematic of the camp town on numerous levels in a concise and visually engaging manner. Through the use of archival footage, Lee and Lee situate the phenomenon historically. Using a balance of interviews with both American soldiers and camp town workers, they begin to explore attitudes concerning the towns from both perspectives. Occasional expert commentary is not heavy-handed, but rather helps elaborate the personal experience narratives that form the core of the work. Finally, Yon Ja Kim's story fascinates—her early years as a prostitute, her rise to hardboiled madam, her work on the "women's committee," and her problematic relationship with her mother all contribute to a surprisingly complex portrait despite the documentary's relatively short length.

Although the documentary is not a folkloric foray into the world of the camp towns per se, there is quite a bit of material here for the folklorist. Personal experience narratives are a significant part of the work and, read in the context of a work such as Laurel Kendall's (1988) "The Life and Hardtimes of a Korean Shaman," provide an understanding of how Korean women use storytelling as a mode for negotiating identity and experience. The documentary also provides a hard-edged glimpse of a frequently overlooked area of culture contact. One also finds here an examination of the impact of American foreign policy on the lives of common people, as well as an investigation of issues concerning ethnic identity. The camera work, sound recording and editing are all superb. Due to its brevity, the work can easily be included in lectures, and would be an informative addition to courses not only on folk-

lore, but on history, Asian American studies, women studies, sociology, political science and anthropology.

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TIMOTHY R. TANGHERLINI

*Trekking on Tradition.* 1993. Produced by Jennifer Rhodes. 45 min. 1/2" Video, Color. Distributed by University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 2000 Center St., Berkeley, CA 94704. (510) 642-0460. \$295. Rental: \$65.

*Trekking on Tradition* opens with a series of attractive still shots from the Annapurra region in central Nepal: magnificent landscapes, smiling children, Buddhist prayer wheels. But the ultimate value of such idyllic, exoticizing postcard images that entice foreign visitors is soon subjected to interrogation in this compelling study of the impact of adventure tourism upon the inhabitants of Tatopani, a village in the region's Kall Gandaki valley.

The video succinctly establishes a historical context, outlining the dramatic change in the nature of visitors to the area created by the demise of traditional trade routes through the valley and the subsequent opening of Nepal to tourism in 1950. Explanation of the basically positive attitudes held by the local people towards Westerners provides a helpful framework in which to understand ongoing cross-cultural encounters (meetings initially with motivated aid workers, then open-minded "hippie" travelers, followed now by more mainstream, but still adventurous and respectful, tourists). This favorable assessment of contact thus far from a villager ends, however, with the aporetic statement, "About the future... I don't know," and it is such uncertainty about the direction of continuing rapid change that motivates the video thematically.

At this point—predictably, perhaps—the traditional Nepalese music of the soundtrack yields to the high-energy rock and roll of Bob Seger's "Kattamandu," and we encounter images of crass commercialism (souvenir t-shirts, Rambo posters, ads for Coca-Cola), images that underscore the essential incongruity of the trekkers' presence in Tatopani and the headlong clash of cultures. Nonetheless, the video scores high marks for allowing complex issues to emerge with only occasional obtrusive editorializing, usually in the form of studied juxtapositions, often humorous or cynical, that provide a darker view of Nepal's contact with foreigners.

The tourists interviewed tend towards introspection and are largely portrayed in a sympathetic light. Had "Ugly Americans" (or their equivalent) been hunted out, it would have been easy to paint a black and white portrait of the pernicious influence of tourism, but, to its credit, the video shuns this easy tactic. We hear that many trekkers genuinely want to share of themselves and to