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Gender, Politics and the Household in the Short Stories of Pak Wan-sô

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Abstract

Pak Wan-sô (1931-), though little known in the West, is perhaps the most notable female author currently writing in South Korea. Her works have not only received prestigious literary awards but have topped best-seller lists and, like Yi Ch'ông-jun and Yi Mun-yôl, writers who similarly enjoy both recognition for their literary skills and a mass following, Pak has seen her fiction successfully adapted for screen productions. [1] In Pak's case, however, wide popularity (especially among a female audience), taken in combination with the author's own gender, have produced controversy in the critical reception of her work.[2] If we grant that there exists a hegemonic ideology for women in Korea, and if, with Dianne Hoffman, who writes on blurred gender roles in Korea, we take it as axiomatic that "wherever there exists a dominant ideology for women, one finds a popular culture that shapes everyday life in ways that subvert or even contradict the dominant ethos", [3] it comes as little surprise that Pak's works have at times been regarded as mildly threatening.

In this paper I have two main goals: to bring the writing of Pak Wan-sô to the attention of a larger audience; and to offer a close reading of several of her short stories from the 1970s and discuss a dominant pattern that emerges within them.

Introduction

One of the most remarkable features of Pak Wan-sô's works is their melding of domestic and political concerns and the way the latter sphere impinges on the former. For example, in 'Chippoginûn kûrôhke kkûtnattda' (Thus Ended My Days of Watching Over the House, 1978), an ominous opening encounter with the authorities raises expectations of a story of externally-directed political protest, but leads instead to an incisive examination of politics within the household itself. A similar narrative strategy is employed frequently in Pak's work: what may seem initially to be a story with public concerns then turns to centre upon family relationships or vice-versa, as personal drama suddenly takes on wider implications.

Pak's fiction is built on a series of antinomies that includes traditional structural opposites such as female/male, inside/outside, domestic/political and private/public,[4] but these various antitheses interact in such a way that the boundaries between these spheres begin to fray. And although I would argue that this feature runs throughout Pak's short stories, in this essay I restrict my focus to four texts that share several characteristics: the aforementioned 'Thus Ended My Days ...', 'Chogûman ch'ehôngi' (A Small Experience, 1976), 'Chirôngi urûmsori' (The Crying of An Earthworm, 1973) and 'P'omarûi chip' (House of Bubbles, 1976).[5] I will first set out basic story-lines and explain how each piece relates to my main thesis, then I wish to consider them as a unit and examine some significant themes that emerge. While not composed as a unit by any means, similarities in the stories encourage examination as a group: each is narrated in the first person by a woman in middle age or approaching it, all of whom are married and have children in early adolescence. Each story was published during the 1970s, and is set in contemporary Seoul. Moreover, all four texts, though centred within domestic spaces,

reach out to comment on larger social issues, but in such a way as to make the most meaningful aspect of the public sphere its impact upon private lives. The primary meaning of Pak's oeuvre, I argue, resides not in its examination of the domestic or political but in its provocative handling of the intersection of the two.

Men in Custody, Women in Consternation

'Thus Ended My Days ...' recounts the travails of a woman who finds one morning that an unusual guest has arrived at her home. Though ordinary looking, this guest, whose gentle voice is charged with a strange force that inhibits the slightest objection, is vaguely sinister and the narrator finds herself instinctually shying away from him, like a baby. The first few pages of the story are tensely drawn, and grim foreboding pervades the opening; the narrator's husband, a university professor, is soon taken into custody by this visitor from the authorities, simply because, as the guest notes, some of the professor's students are "troublemakers who have been disrupting the social order". The text, taut and mysterious, is noteworthy not simply for a dramatic narrative technique, which draws the reader in, but precisely for why it is able to remain mysterious.

As readers we inevitably rely on our narrator for information and it becomes clear that her husband moves in a realm that does not include her: "I had no idea what the two of them were getting at or how well they knew each other. I grew a little more afraid", she thinks upon hearing snippets of their conversation. The inability of the wife to interpret the words that pass between the two men suggests her alienation from the world in which her husband participates. Her fearful reaction to this intrusion is important as well: "I had no idea why this man had suddenly appeared here and was bossing us around, but it certainly seemed his primary goal was to take our happiness hostage".

The external, male-dominated public sphere has the power not only to invade and take over domestic space outright, but also to control the emotional responses of those within. Still, the pattern of opposition Pak portrays is noteworthy (and I will return to this point later): although the wife attempts objections to this eruption of politics into her home, the husband leaves meekly with the visitor, offering little resistance and little expression of love for his wife, as he tells her not to worry, to take care of his convalescing mother and to be sure to water his bonsai trees carefully.

But once the husband has left, almost exactly halfway through the story, a striking change occurs. The political plot and protest one might have been led to expect turns out to be a narrative blind alley; the text now moves in a radically different direction, and the rest of the tale focuses not on the husband and his conflict with an intrusive and oppressive government, but on how his absence effects dramatic changes within the household, most notably in the narrator's interaction with her senile mother-in-law.^[1] Pak here gives us an incisive look at domestic politics, and examines unblinkingly the dynamics of the triangulated relationship between wife, husband and husband's mother. And although there is certainly an entire article to be written on the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship in the stories of Pak Wan-sô,^[2] that is not my focus. Rather, I want to emphasise how, with the crumbling of the illusory boundary that had seemed to keep the political sphere from intruding into the household, the domestic realm itself now becomes politicised and becomes the site of power struggles that overwhelm in importance the government's intervention.

The narrator finds her attempts to maintain her equilibrium after her husband's departure suddenly interrupted by an outburst from her mother-in-law, who is senile, suffers from diabetes and is chronically famished: "Hey you, bring me some food! I'm starving to death. My tummy's burning up. What are you so busy with that you haven't even thought about bringing lunch?" While the narrator previously had never found her mother-in-law's shrieks "as being out of synch with the daily rhythm of our respectable, peaceful household", she increasingly comes to question the unnatural level of peace that has long prevailed and has now been thrown into turmoil by the dramatic intrusion of public concerns into their private lives. Pak develops this notion of cultivated middle-class respectability and a filial piety kept up for appearance's sake through a sustained

metaphor involving the bonsai trees the protagonist's husband keeps as a hobby. In a key passage, the narrator makes the connection explicit for us:

In spite of all this, every morning I opened the curtains in the living room to make sure my husband's beloved bonsai trees were getting their ration of warm sunlight. I watered them the way he had showed me. I even got up in the middle of the night to make sure the charcoal stove was still burning and keeping the living room warm. I felt no love for those plants, however. My husband was enthralled with the bonsai, as though Mother Nature's essence had been distilled into them, but I had no interest in these forcibly stunted trees beyond a touch of pity.

One day, though, I received a strange jolt as I examined the pot containing my husband's most prized pine. The tree's branches spread above as gracefully as those of a lone pine standing on a cliff, but the trunk had coiled around itself like a snake. These agonised twists and turns were almost certainly the result of the tree's being forced to grow artificially. Had my husband also been grooming his family into a showpiece of calm and respectability as nothing more than a hobby?

The female narrator suddenly becomes aware how the patriarch, whose life moves in public space, treats the domestic sphere much as he would an item cultivated for the aesthetic consumption of those outside the household, with little regard to the unnatural twisting and turning it causes psychically within his family. At the same time, the narrator has been growing more and more weary of her mother-in-law's tirades and her enormous appetite: "Gradually I began to consider her an outsider ... an enemy ... What was hard to put up with now was ... the idea of harbouring an alien in our midst". Under external pressures, the household itself begins to break apart. Meanwhile, the senile mother-in-law shouts out raucous complaints for the neighbours to hear about the inadequate meals and general mistreatment she is experiencing at the hands of her daughter-in-law. Just as the public has inevitably become private, so we see a desire to make the private public. In a climactic argument the narrator gleefully reveals to her mother-in-law that her beloved son has been taken into custody, going so far as to suggest that he has been led away in handcuffs. Returning implicitly to the metaphor of the bonsai trees, the narrator describes how she gives vent to -

... stunted, horribly twisted feelings. The old hatred I had felt since I had married the only son of a widow was now allowed to strut and swagger; I trembled with this energising sense of joy ... My days, which had been empty without my husband, were now burgeoning with fulfilment.

The vacuum produced by the absence of the male is filled by a growing sense of empowerment for the wife and a willingness to allow repressed feelings to come to the surface. Meanwhile the bonsai trees have shrivelled and become unrecognisably withered; one cold morning the narrator tosses them out of the house. Every day she finds herself "peeling off another layer of the wrapping that enveloped [the family's] former peace and respectability". Eventually the husband is released from custody and returns, but it is apparent to the reader that a fundamental change has occurred within the household. The extended absence of the husband has produced an awakening in the wife, and the status quo has been irrevocably altered. Pak's 1976 story 'Chogûman ch'ehômgi' (A Small Experience) begins with a pointed question: "What do wives usually worry about when they are waiting for their husbands who do not come home even after the curfew hour?" This opening sentence succinctly puts important ideas before us: we see in the curfew a political situation that not only controls the movement of the populace, but also affects the domestic relationship between a husband and wife. In other words, the text immediately asks how what transpires in the public arena affects private lives. Implicit, too, is the gendered nature of this effect: we have a man located on the outside, unable to return to an interior space, and a wife waiting within this private setting, not venturing out. The two realms are kept separate. As in 'Thus Ended My Days ...' we soon discover that the narrator's husband (here not a professor, but a small-scale businessman) has run afoul of the authorities, and is taken in for questioning. And again, as in that story, separation of public and private and male and female results

in anxiety for those who remain within the home. 'A Small Experience' focuses, then, not so much on political issues, though these are present, as on the effects upon the wife when her husband is singled out and made a scapegoat for unknowingly selling fluorescent lamps that have failed inspection. Once more, as in 'Thus Ended My Days ...', middle-class respectability is shredded and the husband's absence from the household forces an awakening in the narrator. However, while the two stories exhibit many similarities, and are profitably read as a pair, a significant difference exists between them: in 'Thus Ended My Days ...' the intrusion of politics into personal lives had led to the narrator's re-evaluation of her relationships within the private sphere and to a revolution of sorts at home; the story concentrates upon a woman who remains entirely within domestic space throughout the story. Here, on the other hand, the collapse of boundaries between political and domestic spheres forces the narrator to travel outside her home and we observe her interacting in a public setting. 'A Small Experience' portrays the narrator's reassessment of her relationship as a private citizen to the larger sociopolitical arena, a relationship she had previously regarded as less precarious. The narrator's trips to the public prosecutor's building, where her husband is being held, and her attempts to see him are extremely dispiriting. What most catches her attention, however, is the other women who are waiting to see husbands, brothers or sons who have been imprisoned. These women squat on the ground outside, "exhausted and crestfallen", seemingly desiccated by the blazing sun. As soon as a bus with prisoners passes, though, they suddenly become filled with energy, waving eagerly or crying out loudly. Despite the narrator's initial perception of a class difference with the women she meets, she feels a growing sense of solidarity with them, and her repulsion at seeing the blue clothes of the prisoners gives way to a realisation that she too is the wife of a prisoner. The portrayal vividly suggests the consequences and impact of masculine engagement within the public sphere upon women as representatives of the household. The narrator, considering the openness of these women about the potential stigma of having a family member in prison, later notes that "as no one is ashamed of her body in the bathroom, so nobody hid the offences of her husband or sons". This striking analogy demonstrates how resolutely personal 'A Small Experience' remains despite apparent political concerns: for the narrator, the manner in which the domestic troubles of these women as mothers, sisters or wives have been forced into public exposure is related to the intimate experience of bathing. The interior of the household is laid bare, as the autonomy of the female, and even the female body, is linked to the public actions and crimes of the male. Connected, however, with this exposure is an ironic reversal: the husbands have now been rendered immobile and confined to a small physical space outside the home; removal of the male from the household forces these women to interact with the political sphere and they are seen to move about not within the home, but in an external setting. As in 'Thus Ended My Days ...', exposure and the renegotiation of hierarchies of power go hand in hand, though differently. Eventually the narrator's husband is released and returns home, seemingly to allow a return to the status quo. He resumes his daily routine and the narrator soon finds herself picking quarrels with him again. "Nothing was changed", she states. Nonetheless, the name of the story fits in with Pak's pattern of slightly unusual, riddling or ironic titles: the "small experience" has had significant ramifications, and it is no longer possible for the protagonist to regard her world in the same way again; what has occurred has resulted in an important transformation within her. The narrator, herself a writer, notes that her concerns with freedom of speech have yielded to a realisation that "the freedom that really matters is that the husband can come back home from work in the evening where his wife waits, welcomes him and yaps at him from time to time". Her encounter with a government perceived as tyrannical in some sense causes her to reaffirm traditional values: once thrown into a situation where her household collapses, she comes to feel that "under every roof in the world, it is the basic pattern of living that wife and husband meet and bear children". In essence, however, the story presents a viewpoint that is both traditional and subversive at the same time, since the "basic pattern of living" represents for her the primacy of private, domestic life over political intrusions. Pak's critique here lies in portraying with devastating effect what happens to the family in a society in which an authoritarian government can send the innocent to jail as scapegoats. It is not only because the husband and wife function as a complementary unit, but also because the division of public and private and male and female is, in fact, not rigid that those on the inside necessarily are concerned with the outside. The narrator's experience in

supplanting her husband as mediator between inside and outside transforms and fully legitimises the female voice as political critic.

Breaking Away?

In the foregoing two stories, contact with the public sphere turns particularly toward its governmental guise. The next two texts that I examine, 'Chirôngi urûmsori' (Crying of an Earthworm) and 'P'omarûi chip' (House of Bubbles), focus more specifically on the outside as represented by social trends. Both stories analyse changes in a woman's position within, and attitude towards, the household as a result of various aspects of modernisation in Korea, such as alienation, consumerism, emigration and the disintegration of the family, but the mood differs considerably in each text. In the 1975 tale 'Crying of an Earthworm', Pak displays a satirical wit reminiscent of the noted colonial period author Ch'ae Man-shik who lampooned the mores of the day. The tale begins as the narrator offers a well-drawn portrait of her husband, a man who enjoys watching soap operas while gorging himself on sweets, and luxuriates in the trappings of late twentieth-century civilisation. For her husband, contemporary life is a wonderful thing. Imagining society from his perspective, she exclaims, "How convenient the modern world is! Are there any worries or problems that this world cannot take care of?" The narrator, however, cannot share his enthusiasm, and the text indicates a gendered response to social change:

He has some property that brings income regularly and has healthy children and a beautiful wife. He is, I repeat, comfortably settled and a very happy man. But I, the beautiful wife of this happy man, do not share my husband's taste in cheap shows or sweet chewy snacks.

In an ironic recapitulation of her husband's viewpoint, she soon states "how horrible it is to live in this modern world", as she contemplates such contemporary ills as "contaminated food, illegal drugs, killer gases". Nonetheless she calls herself back from these negative thoughts, exclaiming "But how can I even let myself be suspicious of being unhappy! I have a husband who comes home from work on time every day with a choice of cakes and cookies. He is healthy and is socially respected as a manager of a bank". In part these satirical jibes represent the traditional position of the wife/mother in Korea as "preserving and strengthening the society as a whole against the unwelcome incursion of the 'low morality' commonly associated with developed western societies",^[8] but they also express a challenge to normative standards of behaviour: the narrator desires to break free as a woman from the trap of a stifling middle-class respectability and an unfulfilling marital relationship. After a particularly uncultured comment from her husband about the superiority and economy of artificial over natural flowers, the narrator experiences the urge to visit the Namdaemun flower market. Here she finds that the heady scents make "you ... feel as if you could get involved in a passionate adulterous love affair without any mixed feelings whatsoever, or as if you've become twenty years younger, back to the pure and carefree days of your teens, those days of freedom without binding". Her longing to break free from the "cage" of her life, well-emphasised here, soon leads her in fact back to precisely those carefree days and the understated possibility of an affair, after she runs into her former high school teacher Mr Lee in a tea shop. This teacher, who had earned the nickname "Dirty Mouth" from his students because of his intemperate attacks on the corruption of the post-Liberation period, represents for the narrator the casting off of social constraints. She fondly remembers the verve and power of his angry outbursts, which had the ability to touch the heart of the listener, and how he "spoke of freedom and democracy as if he were a shaman revering his own guardian spirit". Pak's work again shows a surprising intersection of domestic and political, as the narrator's longing for domestic escape now resonates with the teacher's erstwhile desires for freedom and democracy. A woman's emancipation from a confining domestic situation and a people's emancipation from governmental domination are implicitly presented as analogous. But this meeting with Mr Lee proves extremely disappointing to the narrator. No longer the dashing and blasphemous young teacher, he is now simply an ageing, unsuccessful businessman. Most stunning of all is his use of Japanese slang in conversation with her; as a teacher he had strictly forbidden his students to use Japanese, dismayed at the lack of pride such

linguistic indifference showed. After this disheartening encounter, which leaves the narrator feeling betrayed, she continues to seek Mr Lee out again and again, virtually chasing after him, desperate to reawaken in him the man whose passionate attacks and curse-filled denunciations aimed a dagger at the rotten fabric of society and government. "Dirty Mouth", however, proves a reluctant subject for rejuvenation. Although the text encourages the reader to perceive an unrealised sexual tension here, adulterous desire is sublimated in and overwhelmed by social malaise: "I wanted his swearing to get into my life and interfere with my 'happiness.' I wanted to slash out at the effete and degenerate contemporary society and show the clean side of it". Ostensibly the private story of a woman's attempt to assuage her personal unhappiness, her exertions nevertheless become more and more obviously bound up with issues of larger import, as the significance of the narrator's struggle moves beyond her immediate situation to offer an indictment of an increasingly materialist and alienating world. Once more, public and private are inextricably intertwined. Perhaps the bleakest of the four stories under consideration is 'House of Bubbles'. Again we find a woman cast adrift and estranged as a result of contemporary social trends, but the sense of loneliness within her far exceeds that of the other narrators. The story begins as she recollects what her son had told her upon returning from school the day before: his teacher has announced that he will denounce to the authorities the parents of any student whose *honsjik* (a form of rice mixed with other grains) is made improperly, so from now on she had better mix more barley into the rice. The remark is certainly meant to be humorous, but it is also unsettling, not simply because of even an ironic suggestion that a teacher would accuse parents for an utterly trivial offence, but because the narrator notes that these are the first words her son has said to her in an entire week. The opening, then, immediately portrays considerable strains both in public life and within the home: for the teacher's joke to have any meaning there must be a hint of truth in the fear of unjust denunciations (we should note that the story was written during the especially repressive Yushin years of the Park Chung Hee era); communication between son and mother has clearly undergone a severe breakdown. Accordingly, the narrator leaves her apartment at five thirty in the morning in search of barley to add to her son's rice but, of course, she finds no stores open at that hour. She wanders in the dim twilight among deserted streets and anonymous apartment blocks, pressing valiantly onward, though the headlights of oncoming cars seem to her like the glare of monsters that wish to attack her. The impersonal and vaguely nightmarish character of this new urban life becomes further emphasised when the narrator mistakenly goes into the wrong entryway upon returning home, and presses the doorbell to someone else's apartment before realising her error. The outside, then, is aloof and unwelcoming, but the narrator's home scarcely offers more comfort: her relationship with her son is distant in the extreme, her husband is absent, having gone off to the United States two years ago to work, and her mother-in-law is senile (cf. 'Thus Ended My Days ...'). Poignant humour indicating the characters' difficulty in adapting to a modern, impersonal lifestyle fills the text. The mother-in-law, for example, believes that the water in the "yangbyôn'gi" (lit. "western toilet") is set out for her daily by the narrator to wash up in, and she complains vociferously that it is always too cold. The black humour does more than point to the elderly woman's senility here: the mother-in-law is incapable of coping with or understanding the rapid social change and westernisation that South Korea of the 1970s is experiencing. The prefix "yang" (western) in "yangbyôn'gi" deserves notice - it is a specifically foreign device that confuses her. Life within the home has yet to adjust to external changes thrust upon it. The frustration, loneliness and abandonment that the narrator feels are exacerbated by the arrival of one of her husband's infrequent, mechanical and cold letters home. Having gone to the United States, he now wishes to relocate his family there, but can offer no compelling reason for her to move to an unfamiliar land ("natsôn ttang") other than the future well-being of their only son. The narrator expresses clear resentment: why, she asks, should she struggle to move to the US, where individualism is extreme, and where older people are treated poorly, purely for the sake of a son from whom she feels so estranged? Her feelings of distance and alienation from her husband leave her with a desire for infidelity that would be "sweet as honey and burns like fire", a striking expression, underscored by an unusual jingle in the Korean text ("kkul kat'ûn pujông, pul kat'ûn pujông"). The narrator will soon, however, have the opportunity to fulfil this desire: she describes in flashback how the previous week at an architecture exhibition she struck up conversation with an attractive student who stood beside his model home of the future, entitled the "bubble house" (p'omarûi chip) because of its round rooms.

She then invited him back to her apartment. When in the course of conversation he reveals his deepest desire to serve as gigolo to a rich widow, the narrator immediately drops hints that she might be exactly the rich widow he seeks, and soon offers him a glass of Johnny Walker whisky from her husband's supply. Her behaviour is purposefully transgressive: the narrator uses precisely this signal of affluence and Americanisation that has been brought into the home by her now absent husband to reject him symbolically. Her utter lack of fulfilment in her marriage, sexual and otherwise, is further highlighted by her musings as she kisses the youth: "I wondered how warm and fragrant a man's breath would be after a few glasses of Johnny Walker". Before, however, the intimacy proceeds too far, something startling occurs: the erotic interlude is interrupted by her son's arrival home from school. The reader is jolted anew into an awareness of how striking and deliberately provocative her action is to normative standards of behaviour for women. The narrator arranges for the young man to return the next week. Before his arrival she changes into a low-cut dress, applies lipstick conspicuously and perfumes herself, she tells us, "at all the strategic points". But this week, in mockery of her plans, everything seems to go wrong: the young man, despite her urging to take his time, rushes clumsily; nor does he exude the same sweet smell as the previous week. The narrator portrays the encounter in a tawdry light, and when the student's nervous attempts to consummate the act with her meet with failure, she mocks his impotence bitterly: "how do you expect to snag a rich widow that way?" The youth soon departs, humiliated. As she watches him leave from her apartment window, she notes that he, no less than the house he has designed, seems like a bubble that would burst. The reader is encouraged to see in this realisation the metaphorical significance of the story's name, but the narrator then experiences a sudden epiphany as she watches her would-be lover walk away. We now encounter a dramatic metamorphosis in the meaning of the word "chip" (house) in the story's title that transforms its connotations from an actual physical structure to the household in the larger sense: she realises that the model "bubble house" drawn by the student refers not to a building ("kônmul") but to the family ("kajok") of the future. The familial units of society are envisioned as being as evanescent, fragile and ephemeral as bubbles, and the bonds linking individuals no less tenuous. The story takes a turn that shows we should not read this unfortunate woman's life as an atypical case study, but as representative of alarming trends. Rampant social change outside the home has its most dramatic effects within the home. The story closes with the family eating dinner together in silence, and then retiring one by one to private bedrooms and locking their doors. At night the senile and lonely mother-in-law shrieks like a ghost ("kwishin ch'ôrôm") to be let into the rooms of her daughter-in-law and grandson. She is depicted as a demon, a wailing spirit from a bygone era that, instead of peacefully dying away, haunts the current world with unsettling reminders of the past. One cannot help but pity this elderly woman crying out unheeded, as we see the responses of the younger generations: her son is absent, having virtually fled to another continent; her daughter-in-law, addicted to sleeping pills, is anaesthetised; and her grandson, wilfully oblivious, is deaf to her. A profound pessimism infiltrates the ending of the text: not only is the household incapable of successful adjustment to social upheavals, but the state of affairs, it seems, will only continue to become worse.

Home and Away, In and Out, Women and Men

The dynamic dualism between the sociopolitical and the domestic that has been the focus of my analysis often corresponds, as we have seen, to a division of masculine and feminine, and the "pakkat yangban" and "chipsaram" (lit. "outside gentleman" and "houseperson") seemingly preside over their respective spheres. Occasionally Pak makes this distinction explicit. For example, the narrator of 'Thus Ended My Days ...' states:

My husband and I had a good relationship, but there was a line between us that was not to be crossed. He didn't care what I did for the house once he turned over his salary to me. Likewise, I pretended not to know anything about his field of sociology or what he was thinking.

A clear division of labour exists between the two, and one should note that the husband is specifically marked as a professor of sociology; his field of study, concerned with the analysis of larger social processes, makes the disjunction between the two as sharp as

possible. Similarly, he chooses not to concern himself too deeply with what occurs within the *anch'ae* (the interior, feminine sphere); as the narrator notes, her husband even makes "disparaging remarks about men who wanted to know every last detail about what their wives did at home". Pak, however, subjects this inherited, traditional dichotomy to an intense scrutiny that lays bare tensions and ambiguities in this distinction, and the eventual blurrings that occur within the text become all the more striking for the stark portrayal of antithesis here. In no case do Pak's female protagonists become passive prisoners of the home. If they remain essentially confined within the *anch'ae*, then the *anch'ae* itself becomes the site of conflict, and the site of transgression, from which the women step across boundaries.^[9] We should note that the narrator of 'Thus Ended My Days ...' never in fact leaves the home. Indeed, her one attempt to accompany her husband outside and to move beyond the confines of domestic space is explicitly stifled:

I intended to see the two of them off down the alley to the thoroughfare, but at the front gate the visitor stopped short. In a businesslike voice that seemed to belong to someone else, he said, "Please go back".

"But when my husband sets off on a trip I always see him to the end of the alley."

"Your husband is not going on a trip."

His voice was low but clear; his expression, stiff and icy. I might as well have been shoved violently aside.

As a result she uses the home as a setting from which to stage a one-woman revolution against the oppressive respectability that she has lived with all her life. Revolts from the inside can take on even starker contours: although the narrator of 'House of Bubbles' first steps outside domestic space to find her lover, she then invites him into the home, which becomes the location of her intended adultery. In doing so, she issues a challenge to the sanctity of a marital partnership that is physically centred upon the *anch'ae*. Pak's female protagonists frequently express a longing to break away from the confines of the life they are leading. The narrator of 'The Crying of an Earthworm' laments that various people around her act as "fences that shut me in, in this land of 'happiness', and bind me from moving one inch from this cage". Boredom is one of the dominant features of her existence and she longs simply to "take an express bus to some unknown places". But in the end how successfully do any of these protagonists fulfil their desire to escape? She goes on excursions to assuage her sense of alienation, but somehow "always wind[s] up being disappointed when [she is] actually there". Pak's "Kyôul nadûri" (Winter Outing) presents us with a protagonist who expresses similar longings: she tells us that she "wanted to cast aside like worn-out shoes this life [she] had fashioned so perseveringly and to live free and unfettered". Nonetheless, after leaving Seoul and heading off to a resort town on her own, she finds that her "mood of unfettered freedom was no match for the alien and unwelcoming streets of the hot springs",^[10] and she soon winds up returning home. The reader can perceive these uncertain and tentative wishes to cast off constraints in the younger generation as well: the daughter in 'Thus Ended My Days ...' reveals to her mother in a heart to heart conversation that she "had long thought how wonderful it would be if she could get married three different times during the course of her life". Nonetheless, she cannot turn her back fully on social propriety and remains concerned with what others think: "Would that really be so immoral that I wouldn't be forgiven?" she asks. Likewise, her mother has stripped away the various layers of respectability that envelop the family's existence, but she notes at story's end that she might even be willing to help her husband with the task of repackaging it. Perhaps most tellingly, the adulterous desire of the protagonist in 'House of Bubbles', despite its confrontational intensity, remains unconsummated. But even if these women find themselves unable to negotiate a move from inside to outside and from a sense of constriction to a sense of freedom with complete success, no less do we encounter a series of crises involving male rule in Pak's stories.^[11] Here we meet with a significant reversal of traditional gender roles in her work. In contrast with the recalcitrant, indomitable spirit of the wives, the husbands capitulate submissively in the face of obstacles from the outside and act at times as meek, passive prisoners to external

forces. Indeed, they find their masculinity or autonomy threatened in various ways before their spouses: the narrator of 'Thus Ended My Days ...' watches as her husband degrades himself on behalf of his mother, while the narrator of 'A Small Experience' witnesses a policeman remove her husband's belt and handcuff him. An obvious spectacle of fragile masculine power also occurs in 'House of Bubbles', in which the lover is rendered impotent and subjected to the narrator's mocking gaze. The blurring of gender boundaries in this set of stories can even lead to an overt feminisation of the men, most strikingly and amusingly in 'The Crying of an Earthworm': "Ever since my husband started taking the hormone pills", the narrator worries, "I have been imagining grotesque things such as his breasts growing to be as big as ripe peaches from the side effects". But men are not simply weak in Pak's stories; they are quite frequently absent and it is precisely this absence of the male that motivates female awakening. Sol Sun Bong's translation of "Chippoginûn kûrôhke kkûnattda" ('Thus Ended My Days ...') as 'How I Kept Our House While My Husband Was Away' brings the male figure into the English title and makes of his absence a crucial presence. As we have noted, the patriarch becomes all too literally imprisoned outside the home in both 'Thus Ended My Days ...' and 'A Small Experience'. The wife in the latter story becomes temporarily a "pakkat chipsaram" (an "outside houseperson"), if I may coin the term, and she must continually negotiate trips between the domestic and public sphere, while her husband finds himself temporarily confined to a jail cell. 'House of Bubbles' also presents a missing husband: the narrator's spouse has even departed for a country that is distant both geographically and culturally. His abdication of responsibility is viewed as virtually complete, in his emigration and his indifferent treatment of his mother, and he experiences a revolt in absentia. Examples of absent men abound in Pak's works: perhaps the most striking example occurs in 'Kû salbôlhettdôn narûi halmikkot' (A Pasque Flower on that Bleak Day), which represents an entire village from which the men have vanished, for one reason or another, during the Korean War. The one male who happily remains within domestic space in Pak's stories may be deemed the exception that proves the rule: the husband in 'The Crying of an Earthworm' is portrayed as virtually a Korean Homer Simpson - a couch potato, who reclines on the sofa while snacking like a gluttonous slob. The narrator engages the reader's sympathies when she notes that "I felt sorry for myself having a fat middle-aged man as a husband who never gets tired of snacks and television soaps and takes hormone pills" The various collisions of public and domestic discussed above, given the traditional ideology of separation between these spheres, inevitably result to some extent in collisions arising from gender difference. After witnessing a vicious altercation between two women over a prisoner, the protagonist of 'A Small Experience' sighs with resignation: "All of a sudden, I felt a fateful sadness about the fact that there were men and women in this world". [12] Tensions spill over into marital interactions as well. The narrator of 'Thus Ended My Days ...' finds an "invisible barrier" in her relationship with her husband. Dismayed by his lack of attention towards her during a moment of great anxiety, she says - with a humour scarcely masking disdain - that, while helping him with his tie before he departs into custody, she "felt a sudden urge to strangle him with it until he cried out like a wounded beast ... The thought of all the time he and I had lived together turned my stomach". Not once does the narrator of 'House of Bubbles' experience any sense of love or affection on the part of her husband. She notes with resignation and anger that in his letters to her from the United States, he addresses her simply by the non-intimate teknonymic "tongsôgi ômma" ("Tongsôk's mother"), and never begins a missive with "saranghann anae" ("my darling wife") or "saranghann nyông" ("my arling ûnyông"). He too seemingly displays more concern for his mother than his wife, although the narrator remarks with bitterness that her husband can hardly be regarded as a filial son. Possibly the happiest relationship between husband and wife in any Pak short story occurs in 'Nae kajang najong chiniin kôt' (My Very Last Possession). The narrator is able to assert to her sister-in-law: "we may have married through matchmakers, you and I, but we hooked up with pretty decent husbands, didn't we?" [13] But there is a telling poignance here: both of these "pretty decent husbands" are dead. As a result of this underlying tension between men and women, it perhaps comes as little surprise that we find little suggestion of sexual fulfilment, conjugal or otherwise, in Pak's short stories. Diane Hoffman, in the article cited earlier, has written that Korean society "traditionally tends to view sexual relations between healthy men and women as relatively unproblematic". [14] 14 Be that as it may, Pak's resolutely untraditional fiction problematises these relations to a large extent. As

the narrator of 'Thus Ended My Days ...' writes when her husband is on the point of being taken into custody:

I suddenly found myself hoping he would be affectionate toward me in front of the stranger. No chance of that, though: my husband, with his proper upbringing, never ever showed me physical affection outside the bedroom. Still, I thought he really should touch me lovingly. There was no other way for us to make a combined show of resistance as a couple, against such tyranny.

Her longing is especially significant within the context of the story, because the power of union in the conjugal bond provides a means by which the domestic sphere can stand up to external pressures. The husband is able to express affection within the most private, inner sanctum, but the slightest move into the public realm causes this intimacy to dissolve, and it is deeply resented by the narrator. When we encounter husbands and wives actually making love elsewhere, the distance between them is extreme. Consider the following passage from 'The Crying of an Earthworm':

On that Sunday morning in the bedroom, the minutes tick by as ennui sets in, and his relaxed body is overcome by lewd appetites. He takes me to his side in his habitual manner. He wants me to be his [Marilyn] Monroe. While in my husband's arms, being his Monroe, my mind is busy thinking about the groan that Mr Lee might have given out when he killed himself.

For the husband, the wife becomes another woman, an exotic fantasy image, while the wife's thoughts are elsewhere, focused on the moment of death of another man to whom she has been attracted. The narrator of 'House of Bubbles', who so eagerly takes a lover, has done so upon considered reflection of her unsatisfying relationship with her husband. She privileges her audience with frank details about her relationship with her husband, and the text suggests she views her husband's refusal to ejaculate inside her ever again after the birth of their son not simply as a precaution in the name of birth control, but as a withholding of a part of himself. The sexual metaphor is a particularly powerful one here: the husband, representative of the outside, may penetrate the interior - in multiple senses - but he is unwilling to allow himself to become truly part of it, once he has fulfilled his responsibility in ensuring the continuance of the male line.^[15] **Conclusion** The foregoing analysis of the intersection of male and female and public and private in the short stories of Pak Wan-sô corroborates Kyeong-Hee Choi's work on Mother's Stake I, in which she demonstrates that although in that novella Pak "appears to have little interest in depicting Japanese colonialism", she nonetheless "brings to light women's keen concerns about the emerging modernity and yields a guileless and therefore all the more penetrating critique of the ideology of modernisation and colonialism".^[16] Similar strategies appear in Pak's short fiction from the 1970s: although - or rather, because - she concerns herself here primarily with depicting the household and personal issues, she is able to offer a powerful analysis not only of contemporary Korean political life and authoritarianism but also a rapid economic development that incurs high social costs, for as well as any writer in Korea, Pak understands that the domestic ultimately is the social and the political. It is precisely because the main concern of Pak's stories is not to launch an attack on the political arena in its official guise by arousing anger against government policy directly, but rather to expose domestic dynamics and the way they are inevitably determined by what occurs outside the home, that she portrays the public sphere so insightfully. All the stories discussed above resist allegorisation; attempts to site them first and foremost as anti-governmental diatribes will go astray, but at the same time Pak's short fiction of the '70s remains too fully embedded in the historical moment, and too fully conscious of the historical particularities of the Korean situation for her work to be read in an ahistoricising fashion. The manner in which the political and public domains impinge on the personal and private take a particular shape because of the repressive nature of the Park Chung Hee regime and because of the rapid socioeconomic changes Korea experienced during his rule. The private cannot escape the public, and the personal is always political; every household is simply one of many. In Pak's fiction what happens within the confines of the home is never insulated from what occurs outside.

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Endnotes

1 Pak won the Korean Writers Award in 1980 for 'Kû kaûrûi sahûldong'an', the Yi Sang Literature Prize in 1981 for Ômma ûi malttuk, and the Isan Literature Prize for Mimang in 1991. Her novel Sô itnûn yôja became a highly-rated television drama, while the film version of Kû hae kyôurûn ttattûthaette starred An Sônggi, arguably South Korea's most prominent actor.

2 Cho Hae-joang, 'Pak wansô munhak-e issô pip'yôngûn muôsîn'ga' in Pak Wansôron, Kwon Youngmin (ed.) (Seoul: Saminhaeng, 1991), pp. 127-78, provides a useful overview of scholarly writings on Pak. Here Cho examines the interpretations - or, in her view, misinterpretations of male critics who, as she argues, habitually misread Pak's fiction, either because the practice of literary criticism privileges the world view of the critic over that of the writer or because Pak becomes for her critics simply the representative writer of the literature of women's liberation. In fact, she notes, these two reasons are probably inseparable from one another. Cho goes on to identify three basic categories of response to Pak Wan-sô: first, a group of critics who, after classifying Pak's work from an elitist position as "popular literature", have treated it in a manner that Cho sees as not only insincere and unbecoming of specialists ("musôngûihago pijônmunjôgûro"), but as betraying flashes of misogyny; secondly, scholars who appreciate Pak's work and attempt to elucidate its meaning, a group largely composed of older, respected male critics, but whose analysis suffers from an insufficient recognition that masculine reality is not all reality; and third, female critics themselves who, Cho argues, are constrained by the competitive exigencies of publication in Korean literary journals, and thus have had little alternative but to imitate male critics in order to survive.

3 Diane M. Hoffman, 'Blurred genders: The cultural construction of male and female in South Korea', Korean Studies 19 (1995), p. 116.

4 Pak's works are also very much concerned with such dichotomies as young/old, rich/poor and Korean/non-Korean, although I do not focus on these particular antitheses in this essay. The dynamic manner in which opposite spheres are depicted as continually yielding to one another is reminiscent of the philosophies underlying the yin/yang symbol.

5 For these stories I refer to the following versions respectively: for Korean texts, from Yi sang munhaksang susangchakka taep'yo chakp'umsôn (Seoul: Munhak sasangsa, 1987) 'Chippoginûn kûrôhke kkûtnattda' (pp. 164-80) and 'P'omarûi chip' (pp. 114-29); from Kû kaûrûi sahûldong'an (Seoul: Nanam, 1985) 'Chogûman ch'ehôngi' (pp. 313-32). I had no Korean text of 'The Crying of An Earthworm' available to me in New Zealand during the writing of this paper. For English texts, see 'Thus Ended My Days My Days of Watching Over the House', tr. Stephen Epstein (forthcoming in My Very Last Possession, ed. by Kyung-Ja Chun); but the version cited here is ASI Translation Paper no. 1, 1998. 'A Small Experience', tr. Pak Hui-jin, in The Cruel City and Other Korean Short Stories, Korean National Commission for UNESCO, ed., (Seoul: Si-sa-yong-o-sa, 1983), pp. 57-70; 'The Crying of An Earthworm', tr. Kim Hwa Ja, in Chung Chong-hwa, Modern Korean Short Stories (Hong Kong: Heinemann, 1980), pp. 156-75. For 'P'omarûi chip', no English translation yet exists, and I have used my own renderings for the passages cited. An alternate translation of 'Chippoginûn kûrôhke kkûtnattda' exists as 'How I Kept Our House While My Husband Was Away' by Sol Sun-bong in Hospital Room 205 and Other Korean Short Stories, Korean National Commission for UNESCO, ed. (Seoul: Si-sa-yong-o-sa, 1983).

6 This diptych structure, frequent in Pak's stories, is a feature to watch for; the narrative focus often undergoes sudden shifts.

7 This relationship also features prominently in, for example, 'P'omarûi chip', 'Haesan pagaji', 'Kyôul nadûri' and 'Na ûi kajang najong chiniin kôt'.

8 Hoffman, p. 118.

9 Cf. the situation in Ômma ûi malttuk (Mother's Stake I), which involves further play on the trope of penetration coming from a female character. In this novella, Ômma (Mother) wishes to move from countryside to city and, in essence, to penetrate the gates of Seoul. As Kyeong-Hee Choi writes in 'Gendered but neither colonial nor national: The making of the 'New Woman' in Pak Wansô's 'Mother Stake 1' ' (unpublished manuscript), p. 26, her action "can be viewed as a feminist transgression which aims to rescue a girl from the possible imprisonment within the inner section of the house, anch'ae (the female sphere). In spatial terms it is a project geared to transform Na's female status as an insider within the private sphere into an occupant of the center of civilization". To follow Choi's perceptive line of argument, which relates Ômma's concerns with "inside the gates" of Seoul to colonialist distinctions between centre and periphery, I would note an irony in the reversal of the associations of inside and outside to correspond with male and female, respectively. It is precisely in becoming self-actualised and penetrating the inside from without that Ômma becomes masculine. As Choi later notes, "Ômma's New Woman endeavor runs the risk of suppressing the gender difference itself" (p. 29).

10 'Winter Outing' (tr. Marshall Pihl), in *Land of Exile*, Marshall Pihl and Bruce & Ju-chan Fulton (eds) (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 153.

11 Cf. Choi, pp. 19-20, whose analysis of 'Mother's Stake I' identifies a "crisis of the male order within this family" which is "symptomatic of the crisis and transformation of the traditional yangban literati system".

12 Yu Jong-ho, 'Park Wan-suh: Psychological trauma and a nonconformist's spirit' in *Koreana*, Summer 1996, p. 79, also cites this passage, but his attention is drawn rather to "Park's talent for drawing the reader into an unknown world, revealing the vicissitudes and dangers of ordinary lives", an observation that betrays a somewhat elitist bias.

13

'Na ûi kajang najong chiniin kôt' (My Very Last Possession, tr. Kyung-Ja Chun), pp. 9-10 (unpublished manuscript).

14 Hoffman, p. 128.

15 There are several other examples of unsatisfactory sexual relationships in Pak's fiction that the scope of this paper has prevented me from analysing. To cite just a few more examples, the female narrator of 'Todukmajûn kanan' (Stolen Poverty) comments explicitly on her unfulfilling lovemaking with her male partner. Su-ja in 'Kanûn pi, isûl pi' (The Passing Rain, The Drizzling Rain), experiences a disastrous honeymoon night with her husband, who suspects her of not having been a virgin, and her marriage never recovers from this sexual misunderstanding. In a different vein, the narrator of 'Haesan pagaji' (translated simply as 'Haesan Pagaji', calabash gourds used for preparing a meal for women after childbirth) has to put up with her senile mother-in-law peeping into the bedroom that she shares with her husband. Nor does sexuality fare much better in general terms: the embittered narrator of 'Kû kaûrûi sahûldong'an' (Three Days in that Autumn), a rape victim during the war and now an obstetrician who specialises in abortion, states that she believes all men capable of rape. She views sexual relationships as tawdry: in response to questions from her patients about how to avoid becoming pregnant again, she merely tells them "don't fuck", and finds in the use of obscenity a sense of release akin to that in spitting. See also the American soldiers of 'A Pasque-flower on that Bleak Day' who are portrayed as sexual marauders that are like "beasts in heat".

16 Choi, p.6.