

What Can Memory Do?

Lee Jeeyoung

The exhibition *How to (not) live a legacy?* takes as its starting point two events: *wolbuk* (defection to North Korea) and the Korean War. The video work of the same name, *How to (not) live a legacy?* (2023), tells the story of a *wolbukja* family, unfolding through the conversations of three generations.

Our memories are incomplete, thus they are sometimes corrected or supplemented by others. Another reason memory lacks a fixed nature is that ideology influences what we should remember and what we should forget. This dependent, restrictive relationship also dictates what we can and cannot say. In this way, ideology transforms us into social subjects who obey a certain cultural order, controlling individual memories and oblivion, speech and silence. Jane Hwang thus focuses on the nodal points where ideology intersects with the processes of remembering and forgetting among social subjects. Perceiving the memories of subjects entangled in this dynamic as having a fluid quality, she presents to us the chemical changes that occur when these liquid elements mix.

In the video, a woman learns from her mother about a family member who defected to the North long before she was born. *Wolbuk* was a politically sensitive issue at the time, as the families of defectors could not escape the system of collective punishment (*yeonjwaje*). But why was the memory related to his existence uttered at this particular moment? Hwang questions how a fact once deemed worthy of oblivion has transformed into something that can be remembered in the present. Thus, we witness the process by

which individual memories, once detained in a repository of forgetting, flow out for the first time to take the shape of a collective memory.

Furthermore, in this process of shaping collective memory, we see the cultural order's oppression of women's speech. In the video, the mother often lowers her voice when speaking of 'Mr. Yi.' This starkly reveals the constraints and fears embodied by women subjected to a patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, it was the mother who revealed Mr. Yi's existence to the woman, and this new fact creates a point of contact with the grandmother and great-aunt. This point of contact then summons memories that women of that era were even more forcefully required to suppress and forget, giving rise to a moment of first utterance.

In *How to (not) live a legacy?* (2023), Jane Hwang experiments with a narrative structure where the starting point and the goal are indistinguishable. She deliberately rejects a clear structure, opting instead for confusion and conflict. The artist, in her role as the cameraperson, understands how violently a camera lens can demarcate the territory inside and outside the frame. Consequently, she is compelled to choose a passive position as a listener rather than an active speaker, a choice that itself becomes a source of friction. The woman does not dismiss as meaningless her mother's suggestion, based on a somewhat archetypal inspiration she finds while looking at a tree, and includes it in the film. However, the mother, while interviewing the grandmother, criticizes the woman's attitude, saying, "I'm doing half of your work for you. You should add my name to the credits as an artist." When their differing views on the current social climate emerge, the mother even frames her daughter as a "commie with a cynical outlook." Though conflicts big and small arise, the woman ultimately accepts them.

The speech of the narrators in the video reveals intimacy, awkwardness, and unskillfulness without reservation. Hwang closely observes these speakers, who express such a wealth of emotion and use a language untainted by intellectualism. She follows, one by one, the contours of the detours they create through tension, conflict, and cooperation. By choosing a path with no discernible map, she seeks to grant her own

authority to that which has been easily suppressed and forgotten. In other words, Hwang relinquishes the artist's conventional power to distinguish the valuable from the worthless and to direct the course of the narrative. The subjects who are granted this authority focus on the ever-changeable processes and relationships, creating a meaning that does not have a single destination. Hwang requests that we participate in this dynamic interaction in real-time and maintain an open perspective.

In her previous work, Hwang has focused on the Gwangju Uprising and the Korean War. Because proper government-level fact-finding and identification of remains have yet to be completed for these two historical events, they continue to profoundly affect the lives of those involved. For this reason, memories tied to these events are constantly being invoked in the present tense as they are passed from past to future generations, intruding upon the daily lives of those affected. Memory mediates not only the past and present, but also the future. In this context, Hwang poses a question, by way of the following quote, as to how a generation that has not experienced a past event can interpret its memory:

*"The younger generations are left with an ethical obligation to interpret the remnant of trauma and fossilised memories they have never experienced throughout their lifetimes."*¹

The generation that possesses the remnants of trauma and fossilized memories coerces future generations into remembering certain facts with a specific meaning. They limit the space for future generations to engage in free interpretation. But in truth, fossilized memory is fluid, like the properties of glass as a "supercooled liquid." According to Pierre Nora, memory is life, born by living groups and in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive distortions, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and

¹ Crystal Mun-hye Baik, *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020), 16, quoted in Jane Hwang, *How to (not) live a legacy? An Essay Film About Intergenerational and Posthumous Dialogues*, 2023, p. 37.

periodically revived.² As such, memory, with its liquid properties, is carried to living future generations and will be continuously reconstructed by changing social contexts.

In the exhibition *How to (not) live a legacy?*, 'Mr. Yi' is akin to a fossilized memory. Only when it flows within a living body can the memory of Mr. Yi evolve, be reconstituted, and paradoxically, exist. Nora saw memory not as content, but as a framework—a shifting issue, a collection of strategies, a reality whose value lies more in its making than in its being.³ In other words, memory is a reality that is assigned value by the workings of ideology. That framework of value determines what we remember and how we interpret it. And this fact points to our status as ideological subjects, besieged by the web of dominant ideology. Jane Hwang regards this fossilized memory as an inheritance from the past and asks, "How to (not) live a legacy?" We must therefore ask ourselves in what way we will respond to the ethical obligation that ideology imposes. Ultimately, Hwang's work delves deeply into the practical question of "which memories will we carry in our bodies, and what can those memories do?"

As an artist, Lee Jeeyoung (Geum Beollae) has focused on concepts of dwelling and how humanity assigns meaning to materiality: objects, spaces, and images. In this sense, she is interested in the material culture and diverse forms of commemoration practices of the May 18th People's Uprising (that occurred in Gwangju, South Korea in 1980) and does curating and research. Geum Beollae participated in the exhibition *Strange Attractor* at Pavilhão Branco (Municipal Galleries, Lisbon) in 2021-22. In 2021, she has co-curated the exhibition *Before the Law*, about the May 18 trial and worked as a visiting researcher at the May 18 Research Institute. Also, she is one of the authors of the book *POST 5·18*.

² Pierre Nora, *Kieokui Jangso 1* (Realms of Memory 1), (Nanam, 2010), p. 34.

³ Ibid., p. 14.