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— a feminist publication at yale —

July 9, 2021

REQUIRED READING: SONJU BY WONDRA CHANG



Content warning: This article contains discussions of sexual assault. The following resources are available to help:

[Yale SHARE Center \(https://sharecenter.yale.edu/\)](https://sharecenter.yale.edu/)

- *Hotline, open 24/7: 203-432-2000*
- *55 Lock St, Lower Level, 9am-5pm weekdays*

Survivor Support Network

- *Weekly, peer-facilitated support group open to survivors of all genders*
- *Contact ssnyale@gmail.com for more information*

Italics *mean* something in the English language. Italicized words in English put readers on high alert: they may indicate passion, tragedy, or sly deception. Italics lose command of the metaphorical room, however, when they are used for Korean words in English writing. “Read me,” the italicized word begs, but both it and the reader know the reader will suffer no

consequence for glazing across it and only reading the English explanation that follows in parentheses or a footnote. This explanation is hardly ever sufficient to convey the lush complexity encapsulated by the actual Korean word. When I come across such italics in English works written by Korean or Korean-American authors, I first feel a perverse pleasure—I am able to experience the full cultural flavor while most other readers will only get a watered-down version—but then I realize it is not a competition and become sad at how the richness of the word has become diluted in the italics.

I was pondering this when I opened *Sonju* by Wondra Chang. I was introduced to a young Korean woman named Sonju from a respectable family blooming into adulthood in 1946. The Japanese occupation of Korea has just ended but the Korean War is yet to begin. She is brimming with hope and apprehension at the thought of announcing to her parents her intention to marry a childhood best friend, Kungu. Her parents are outraged that she would consider marrying a man with no money, status, or even an intact family, thus destroying their family's honor. Sonju's declaration that she will have an equal partnership with her husband only fuels her family's anger, and she is married off to a different man within weeks.

Before I got lost in the unrelenting wave of tragedy that somehow never completely sweeps Sonju off her feet—before the scorn and unfaithfulness and death—I noticed the italics. Or rather, lack thereof. Chang is bold and deliberate with her English translations. She chooses “viewing” to describe the encounter between Sonju and the man she is to marry. She dispenses with the complicated array of terms used to refer to in-laws—her mother-in-law is simply Mother and the wives of her brothers-in-laws are her Sisters. She keeps the Korean when she deems necessary: Sonju is from the “yangban” class and she spreads the *yo* for her and her husband. It is the responsibility of the reader to coax out clues from the surrounding sentences and understand.

While I cannot claim Sonju's story as my own—after all, I am studying at an elite college in the United States, not forcibly married—I needed to read it to properly rebuke the argument of Korean patriarchy that goes, “The women from fifty years ago were the victims of sexism, not you.”

This book is not an easy one for someone who reads for comfort. For a book to feel pleasant, I must be able to open the book, plop into the mind of the main character within a few pages, and go back to the real world without hassle once the book is shut. The Korea in which Sonju lives, however, is too similar to my Korea for the seamless mental entry and exit I have come to expect. Her husband takes Sonju by force on their wedding night and then whenever he pleases because that is his right. Today, many Koreans express unmarred sympathy for men whose wives and girlfriends don't put out for them while treating women's overt sexuality with disdain. Sonju's husband's affairs are swept under the rug because he is fulfilling his duties as breadwinner. Today, “room salon culture” is so deeply rooted as a necessary business lubricant that wives are supposed to feel sorry for their husbands who “have to” pay for a private room and female escorts to appease their business partners. While I cannot claim Sonju's story as my own—after all, I am studying at an elite college in the United States, not forcibly married—I needed to read it to properly rebuke the argument of Korean patriarchy that goes, “The women from fifty years ago were the victims of sexism, not you.”

By no means is this to say that non-Korean readers can sit back and breeze through the book. Or, at least, I hope they don't. *Sonju* is extremely versatile: it will give you what you want from the book. If you are looking for star-crossed lovers or a muted but powerful denouncement of war, you will find it within its pages. But I also hope you decide to appreciate the cultural background that Chang so carefully constructs. This requires that you pay attention to the italicized and unitalicized words, the aftereffects of Japanese colonization that have seeped into Korean culture, the particular brand of social conservatism that requires so much silent sacrifice. Korea is continually viewed by the United States as a sensation—K-POP! K-BBQ! K-OTHER-STUFF! These are misleading, albeit flattering, veils that you can begin to push aside by picking up a copy of *Sonju*.

Author: Rose Bae (<https://www.broadsatyale.com/author/rosebae/>)

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WONDRA CHANG

([HTTP://WWW.WONDRACHANG.COM](http://www.wondrachang.com))

July 20, 2021 at 6:55 pm

([https://www.broadsatyale.com/sonju-](https://www.broadsatyale.com/sonju-by-wondra-chang/#comment-95)

[by-wondra-chang/#comment-95](https://www.broadsatyale.com/sonju-by-wondra-chang/#comment-95))

Hello Rose,

I am the author of *Sonju*.

What a nice surprise to find your review on Google! Since then, I shared it with my friends. Thank you so much.

I wish you much success in your enlightening endeavor.

Warmly,

Wondra Chang

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