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Mapping Inter-Asian Connections through Mother-Daughter Relationships in South Korean Films

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two contemporary Korean films—*A Letter from Kyoto* (2023) and *Moonlit Winter* (2019)—through the lens of connections: between mothers and daughters, between lovers, and ultimately between South Korea and Japan. In this paper, I ask how mother-daughter relationships can redirect Inter-Asia Cultural Studies by shifting attention from state-level reconciliation to the intimate labor of ordinary women. Bringing the field into conversation with Korean feminist film scholarship, I develop the mother-daughter bond as a method of inter-Asian reading: locating the material anchor in which a relationship to Japan has survived, identifying the institutional silence that made that relationship unspeakable, situating the daughter's generational position, and following the acts of care she undertakes. I argue that repair emerges not through state narratives or grand gestures, but through sustained acts of care—writing letters, asking questions, and making journeys together—that constitute the mother-daughter bond as a vehicle of inter-Asian connection.

KEYWORDS

Korean independent cinema, women's cinema, queer cinema, Korea-Japan relations, postcolonial memory, intergenerational solidarity

In the introduction to *Popular Culture and the Transformation of Japan-Korea Relations*, Rumi Sakamoto and Stephen Epstein (2021) suggest that “popular culture functions as an index to a nation's collective outlook, and it can also, albeit in a loose and dispersed fashion, promote or impede nationalisms, conflict or reconciliation outside state authority” (p. 7). In a similar vein, a growing body of cinema maps inter-Asian relations through intimate interpersonal encounters rather than the geopolitical confrontations that historically shape the East Asian region. These works portray colonial legacies as phenomena lived through domestic spheres, familial structures, romantic longing, and everyday gestures. Two films that exemplify this are *A Letter*

from *Kyoto* (2023) and *Moonlit Winter* (2019). Both films articulate the complexities of Korea-Japan relations through mother-daughter relationships. In each, a daughter discovers a letter that reveals her mother's past: a history linked to Japan that has been hidden. Upon discovery, the daughter becomes an agent in facilitating a belated reconnection across national borders. These narratives invite a comparative reading that situates both films within "the intersection of memories of a colonial past and contemporary relations" (Sakamoto & Epstein, 2021, p. 8).

A Letter from Kyoto tells the story of Hwaja (also called Hanako by her Japanese mother) and her three daughters: Hyejin, Hyeyoung, and Hyejoo. After experiencing a career setback in Seoul, Hyeyoung, the second daughter, returns home to Yeongdo, Busan, where she unexpectedly discovers a letter written in Japanese. Although Hwaja's memory has begun to deteriorate, the film portrays Hwaja's gradual openness to recounting the fragments of her family history: her Japanese mother, the letters they exchanged over a decade, and the silence she maintained about her Japanese identity in Korea. The daughters, each negotiating their own personal struggles, come to realize that their mother's hidden past ultimately shapes their own experiences of grappling with success and finding their place in the world. The film culminates in the family's journey to Kyoto, where they together face a history long mediated through letters.

Moonlit Winter echoes this structure but moves its central tension into the romantic realm. The film shows Yunhee, a 45-year-old divorcee living with lingering feelings for Jun, her first love, who lives in Otaru, Japan. Both Yunhee and Jun are closeted middle-aged queer women. Yunhee's teenage daughter, Saebom, finds a letter from Jun. Recognizing its significance, Saebom proposes a trip to Otaru to bring about a reunion. Jun's own experiences mirror those of Hwaja, as Jun has concealed that her mother is Korean due to fear of discrimination in Japan. The film ends

with Saebom (whose name means "new spring" in Korean) and Yunhee moving to Seoul and embracing the next chapter of their lives together.

Chen Kuan-Hsing (2010) proposes "Asia as method" to call forth "a self-reflexive movement to examine problems and issues emerging out of our experiences organizing interventions in various local spaces" (p. 213). Extending this, Tejaswini Niranjana and Ritty Lukose (2026) suggest "Asia as methodology" to reframe "Inter-Asia" as a relational process rather than simply a geographic category (p. 172). As a framework, "Inter-Asia" prioritizes intra-regional knowledge and comparisons generated through cross-border encounters (Chen, 2010; Chua, 2025). This decolonial orientation insists that Asian cultural productions be read in relation to one another rather than against a Western center (Chen, 2010; Chen & Chua, 2007). When applied to cinema, this shift redirects the analysis of Korean films from state-level negotiations toward the intimate formations of affect, memory, and colonial legacy. Consequently, *A Letter from Kyoto* and *Moonlit Winter* highlight inter-Asian connections not by dramatizing Korea-Japan relations from above, but by tracing how ordinary women navigate the uneven, enduring residues of empire from below.

As Hee Yeon Cho (2010) argues, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies must make "a purposeful effort" to hear "the voices of the lower classes and diverse subalterns positioned as 'constitutive outside'" (p. 260). Building on this call, I theorize the mother-daughter relationship as a method of inter-Asian reading, arguing that its recurrence in both films offers an alternative way of understanding colonial and postcolonial histories that remain excluded from public discourse. First, the method locates the material anchor in which a connection to Japan has survived, whether a letter, a recipe, or a photograph. Second, it identifies the institutional silence that made the relationship unspeakable, whether enforced by the psychiatric hospital, the coerced marriage, or the workplace. Third, it reads the daughter's generational position,

asking what her critical distance permits her to do that her mother could not. Fourth, it follows the acts of care she undertakes—reading, asking, and traveling—and what these make possible. Queerness is integral to this method, as Yunhee and Jun’s closeted desires and Jun’s concealed Korean heritage are shaped by overlapping logics of shame, silence, and institutional regulation that also sever Hwaja’s ties to Japan. Rather than representing a separate line of inquiry, these experiences reveal how intimate histories of gender, sexuality, and colonial displacement are mutually reinforcing within the films’ inter-Asian imaginaries.

Situated at the intersection of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies and Korean feminist film scholarship, this paper employs close textual analysis to examine how mother-daughter relationships illuminate regional connections through gendered experiences. Focusing on mise-en-scène, editing, and narrative structure, I argue that these ties map inter-Asian connections through everyday acts of memory and care. First, I examine the function of letters as material anchors, demonstrating how both films foreground the persistence of relationships despite colonial histories, social stigma, and personal fear. Second, I analyze gendered familial and romantic relationships to show how institutional silences are enforced within them, and how the daughters’ generational position allows these to be broken. Third, I read landscapes of travel as acts of repair, showing how the journeys to Japan are undertaken by ordinary women. Finally, I argue that *A Letter from Kyoto* and *Moonlit Winter* locate repair, however delayed or partial, in small, persistent acts: writing letters, asking questions, and making journeys together.

LETTERS AS MATERIAL ANCHORS OF TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTION

In both films, the first material anchor is a letter. In *A Letter from Kyoto*, Hwaja’s domestic space

functions as an archive of living memory (Nora, 1989). Her home in Yeongdo is crammed with objects that constitute her family’s history, from her daughters’ childhood toys to her late husband’s belongings. Each layer preserves traces of the past through material objects. When Hyeyoung pointedly asks, “Why don’t you get rid of all this stuff?” Hwaja answers, “There’s nothing left to throw away.” While her daughters view these objects as meaningless clutter, for Hwaja they are the intangible memories she most wishes to preserve. This tension becomes visible as Hwaja articulates her relationship to these objects when her memory begins to fade: “Do you know the feeling of wanting to touch something when you like it? These are like that to me. You can’t touch memory. But now that I can’t remember, I don’t need them.”

The discovery of the letters interrupts this domestic archive, transforming Hyeyoung’s role from reluctant visitor to active investigator. In numerous scenes, Hyeyoung is shown poring over her mother’s belongings—originally to clean, but later to learn more about Hwaja’s past. In this process, she discovers letters written in Japanese, tucked away among ceramic vases and keepsake boxes that Hyeyoung had initially dismissed. Unable to read the letters herself, she asks Hwaja to translate them. Hwaja refuses, claiming she has forgotten the language. This refusal is telling, reflecting not only the time passed since Hwaja moved to Korea, but also her conscious effort to suppress a Japanese-speaking self. Her refusal holds until the family’s visit to Kyoto.

The physical form of the letter materializes a relationship that official records and digital communication cannot capture. In cinema, the appearance of handwritten letters often summons a unique, intimate communication within the contemporary setting (Gallafent, 2013, p. 125). These letters function as “lieux de mémoire” (Nora, 1989), acting as physical sites where a displaced history is anchored. Nora (1989) argues that “memory is a perpetually actual

phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present” (p. 8) and that “the quest for memory is the search for one’s history” (p. 13). As such, the letters represent not only the past but a bond between Hwaja and her mother that withstands time and space. Furthermore, as cultural artifacts, they embody “traces of authentic experience” (Stewart, 1993, p. 135); their materiality ties the reader to a relationship that time and space had otherwise erased. To initiate this connection, one must actively engage with the object—taking interest in the letter, opening the envelope, unfolding the stationery, and parsing the contents.

Belén Vidal (2006) argues that letters function as a “formal device in the film text: a visual inscription of the various manifestations of an utterance ... deferred through time and space” (p. 419). In *A Letter from Kyoto*, this deferral is not merely temporal and spatial, but generational: the letters must be rediscovered and reinterpreted by those who were never their intended recipients. This generational rereading requires technological mediation; Hyeyoung and her sisters rely on image-to-text translators and Japanese handwriting recognition tools. The resulting incomplete translations underscore how digital technology cannot instantly bridge the gap between the letters’ original context and the present. This struggle highlights the labor required to minimize the distance between the mother’s past and the daughters’ present.

The necessity of mediation signals that the colonial past often resists easy translation or complete recovery. As Tejaswini Niranjana (2008) argues, translation is not “simply an activity of putting what is expressed in one language into another,” but rather an “activity that has to perform self-consciously several levels of mediation” (p. 472). The film enacts this through a chain of mediators. Hyejin befriends Petro, a Russian sailor who frequents the shop where she works. Petro introduces her to his Japanese colleague. Yet even the interpretation by a fluent Japanese reader cannot provide all

the answers the sisters seek. This illustrates the impossibility of meeting the demand “simply by providing literal translations” (Niranjana, 2008, p. 472). The missing pages in the letters serve as further evidence of the structural incompleteness of colonial memory, as some truths remain permanently out of reach.

Vidal (2006) suggests that “the letter as sign of interiority provides a site for identification from where the past is reimagined in the present tense” (pp. 423–424). Among the surviving letters, a recipe for *kintsuba*—Hwaja’s favorite Japanese sweet—stands out as an important culinary inheritance. This recipe functions as intergenerational care that transcends colonial rupture, as it preserves a mother’s desire to nourish her child across distance. Culinary knowledge becomes the medium through which an affective legacy and embodied history are carried forward as Hyeyoung prepares *anko* (sweet red bean paste) with Hwaja. During this scene, Hwaja observes that they are “probably the only family who eats just the red bean paste as is.” Hyeyoung agrees, noting that she never questioned the habit, as they had eaten it that way since her childhood. Within this intimate domestic space of the kitchen, Hyeyoung finally asks if Hwaja has returned to Japan since coming to Korea, disrupting the institutional silences that had previously constrained their conversation.

The collection of letters also includes notes from Hwaja’s mother’s doctor, written in the language of medical administration: “She responded positively to the forest therapy program. While spending time at the seaside, she spoke about Hanako. We have contacted an expatriate representative to explore the possibility of Hanako visiting Japan, but we have not received a positive response.” While the state attempted to facilitate a reunion, the letter records that failure in bureaucratic language obscuring the mother’s condition. Colonial separation was thus institutionalized when the most private wound—a mother’s longing for her daughter—was administered by

a system incapable of the intimacy the situation demanded.

In *Moonlit Winter*, the discovery of the letter similarly connects three generations of women. As Eun Suk Park (2020) notes, “all ages are able to meet through this one letter,” which renders Saebom’s act of reading an intuitive engagement with her mother’s unspoken yearning (p. 73). The film’s narrative begins with Masako, Jun’s aunt, discovering Jun’s letter to Yunhee. Although Masako does not read the letter, seeing the word “Yunhee” written in English prompts her to take notice; she drops it into the mailbox on her way to work. The letter arrives in Yesan, and Saebom comes across it as she checks the mailbox on her return from school. Intrigued to see a letter addressed to her mother, she decides to read it without permission. As the narration unfolds in Korean, audiences hear Saebom reading the contents. Saebom even smells the paper in a sequence that emphasizes the multiple ways she reads the same letter: at school, again at home, and eventually alongside Yunhee’s photo albums to search for clues about this past relationship. Jun’s letter is more than merely an introduction; it is a document that materializes longing, which Saebom intuitively feels before she can fully comprehend it.

Soo-Hyang Lee (2020) explains how the letter provides the very structure of *Moonlit Winter*. First, the Korean title of the film is “Dear Yunhee.” Second, the film opens with Jun’s letter and closes with Yunhee’s response. Lastly, three voices read the letters: Saebom reads Jun’s letter in Korean, Jun rereads her own letter in Japanese, and Yunhee reads her response in Korean (S.-H. Lee, 2020, p. 107). It is also worth emphasizing that in both films, the letters are delivered through someone’s help. Jun’s narration reveals that she wrote whenever she dreamed of Yunhee, but never sent the letters because Yunhee was married; it is Masako who ultimately mails one of them.

Similarly, in *A Letter from Kyoto*, Hwaja’s best friend, Sookja, helped send letters to Kyoto during

the years Hwaja struggled to learn Korean. This demonstrates how “letters can be used to assess a film’s world in terms of intimacy; the difficulty of achieving it, or the fear of it, or the desire for it ... [including] friendship as well as passionate love” (Gallafent, 2013, p. 114). In both films, Masako and Sookja subvert the convention whereby the protagonist’s growth is facilitated by “largely male ‘Daddy Long Legs’ benevolent uncle characters” (Kwon, 2022, p. 401). It is Sookja who also encourages Hyeyoung to ask questions, noting, “Your mom doesn’t talk unless she’s asked. You know she’s from Japan, right?”

In each film, the narrative fully unfolds the moment a daughter encounters a letter addressed to her mother. This discovery signals hidden truths that interrupt everyday life, prompting journeys the characters might otherwise never take. Importantly, the films do not dwell on the ethical questions regarding the daughters’ decisions to read the letters or intervene in their mothers’ pasts. While these actions might be interpreted as breaches of privacy, the films frame these interventions as deeply empathetic acts. The daughters do not exploit the information; rather, they seek to repair emotional wounds their mothers have long endured. This ethical complexity is mitigated by the daughters’ intentions: they act to facilitate healing for their mothers, a process that simultaneously signals their own growth. For Saebom, encountering Jun’s letter coincides with her transition into adulthood, providing an opportunity to offer care to her mother that transcends the typical parent-child dynamic.

MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS AS SITES OF INTER-ASIAN CONNECTION

The mother-daughter dyad is the primary vehicle through which inter-Asian connections become possible in both films. Prompted by the reading

of the letters, these relationships open into spaces where suppressed histories resurface and cross-border reconnection becomes attainable. They are fundamentally shaped by generational differences, shifting norms surrounding identity expression, and the evolving social contexts that affect how women navigate their personal and familial histories. The daughters in both films occupy a distinct generational position that affords them levels of mobility—literal and emotional—not available to their mothers, who grew up in environments directly constrained by colonial legacies. Before turning to how these relationships carry inter-Asian connections, I situate the films within the recent context of Korean women's cinema.

Both works must be read in relation to the “feminism reboot” that has reshaped Korean women's cinema since 2015 (Jun, 2017, 2020). This period introduced a “new female subject” in cinematic representation (M.-A. Park, 2023, p. 174). Specifically, recent literature and film increasingly separate “motherhood” as a social role from the “mother” as an individual with her own desires and histories (M.-A. Park, 2023, p. 177). By shedding light on the mothers' identities as women prior to motherhood, these changes symbolize significant shifts in the representations of mother-daughter relationships (M.-A. Park, 2023, p. 177). Against this backdrop, the mother-daughter dyad is no longer simply a site of generational conflict or emotional dependency, but a framework through which female experiences—including their constraints, desires, and solidarities—can be examined with unprecedented depth.

In the wake of the “feminism reboot,” South Korean daughters have gradually begun to move away from the conventional norms that required them to set their lives within the boundaries of the “normal family,” instead imagining alternative modes of existence beyond it (M.-A. Park, 2023, p. 196). By freeing themselves from prescribed familial roles and related emotional constraints,

daughters gain the critical distance necessary to fully confront their mothers' pasts (M.-A. Park, 2023, p. 196). This critical distance enables the daughters in both films to facilitate forms of repair that their mothers could not undertake alone.

In a study of the social status of female characters in Korean feature films since 2016, Jisun Yoo (2023) identifies several defining qualities of feminist or female-centered narratives: the reality of employment precarity, the erosion of patriarchy, and the centrality of mother-daughter relationships (p. 72). These characteristics drive the narratives of both works. Traditionally, Korean films have reduced women to housewives or potential housewives, whose primary occupation is defined as domestic labor (Y.-J. Lee, 2017). Consequently, any work taken on outside the home has been diminished or obscured as a mere hobby, not recognized as productive labor within the family or society (Y.-J. Lee, 2017, p. 364). Even when a woman is the sole breadwinner, both her domestic and professional labor are framed as natural “sacrifice” for the family (Y.-J. Lee, 2017, p. 365). As a result, Korean cinema has produced a bifurcated portrayal of women: those at the center represented as full-time housewives and those at the margins as sex workers (Y.-J. Lee, 2017, p. 365).

Korean independent films from the 2010s onward have consistently pushed against this binary, expressing sustained interest in low-wage, non-regular female workers (Y.-J. Lee, 2017, p. 375). Yuhee Park (2016) locates this dynamic within the broader logic of neoliberal restructuring in which precarious employment conditions compel female workers to show devotion and sacrifice grounded in patriarchal ideology, such that the core issues facing them cannot be addressed without considering the family system and the economic system together (p. 128). Both Hwaja and Yunhee embody this contradiction. Hwaja works for Sodam Dosirak, a company that supplies lunch boxes to elders; she cooks and delivers the meals herself. Yunhee

works in the kitchen of a factory cafeteria. Both characters' labor is undervalued and rendered invisible by the same patriarchal structures that define their domestic roles. These structures, however, are not the only legacies they carry.

Hwaja's story embodies the consequences of colonial rule and its aftermath for the Korea-Japan relationship at the level of a single family. A candid conversation with Hyeyoung reveals that Hwaja's father went to Japan to earn money, where he met Hwaja's mother, who was eventually shunned by her family for marrying a "Joseon man." Facing severe discrimination, Hwaja's father took Hwaja and "slipped into Korea on a smuggling boat in the dead of night." Hwaja, born in Japan and having moved to Korea in "the fourth or fifth grade," remained in contact with her mother through letters for over a decade before eventually losing touch. An old photo dated 1975 shows Hwaja's mother as a patient at Takamiya Psychiatric Hospital. The film implies a causal link between their forced separation and Hwaja's mother's institutionalization. Hwaja's biography condenses the historical forces that have shaped Korea-Japan relations: colonial-era migration, the enduring marginalization of Zainichi Koreans in postwar Japan, familial rupture, and the silences required to survive across borders.

Yunhee's history similarly involves institutionalization, but as a result of the state and family enforcing heteronormativity. Toward the end of the film, Yunhee's reply to Jun reveals that her family forcibly placed her into an institution "to cure" her sexuality and coerced her into a marriage at a young age. Since then, she has viewed her own life as a "punishment." When she visits her brother's studio to get a headshot for her résumé, he puts her down: "Do you have skills? Do you have a career? Do you want me to look for a job for you again?" In Yunhee's story, the suppression of queer desire intersects with the denial of education, economic opportunity, and selfhood. The film thus "chronicles the arduous life of a middle-aged woman who has endured a

male-centered world" (S.-H. Lee, 2020, p. 108).

Yunhee's film camera symbolizes a distinct inheritance, one that encodes both the original denial of education and the possibility of its redress. Yunhee's father sent her brother to university to study photography; her mother bought her a camera as compensation for the formal education Yunhee had been denied. Saebom, without knowledge of this history, repairs the broken camera and uses it throughout the film. The film emphasizes that Saebom takes photos only of "pretty things" and consequently does not take portraits. This constraint is overcome when she photographs Yunhee during their trip to Otaru. When Saebom learns the story behind the camera, she asks calmly, "Why are you just telling me this? Is it okay if I use it?" A daughter's photographic eye captures Yunhee's true self and functions as an intergenerational feminist practice of recovering visual agency that patriarchy had sought to control.

Hyeyoung's circumstances represent the contradictions of post-reboot womanhood, in which there is seemingly greater freedom of movement but a lack of economic security. She "made it out" of Yeongdo by getting into a private university in Seoul, where she majored in Creative Writing. She wants to succeed as a literary writer but has not had the chance to debut. To make ends meet, she takes on freelance writing jobs for educational and cultural programs at broadcasting stations that do not pay on time—a detail that underscores the precarity of her work. Her boyfriend, by contrast, has just won the 2022 Seoul Literature Grand Award. Faced with these harsh realities in Seoul, Hyeyoung returns home temporarily and reluctantly. Although the number of years she has spent away from Yeongdo is not explicitly stated, audiences can infer that it has been a long time, as she has to ring the bell to get into the house. The film hints that Hwaja embellishes her daughters' jobs when describing them to others: Hyeyoung is known as a producer at a broadcasting station and Hyejin as working

for a luxury fashion brand. This arises not from malicious intent but from societal pressures regarding what constitutes a “good,” sought-after job.

Hyejin’s refusal to leave Yeongdo shows the costs of filial duty under patriarchy. As the eldest daughter, she has never left home and works at a leather goods store called Salzburg. Her ex-boyfriend, nicknamed “The Audi Guy,” is the store manager and the second son of the owner. He had previously asked Hyejin to move to Seoul with him, an invitation she declined to remain with her family. Now she faces the consequences of that decision, most notably when he refuses to negotiate her salary in retaliation. In one scene, Petro asks Hyejin, “Your boss. He doesn’t bully you? The owner’s son.” “A little? Don’t worry. I can handle it,” she replies. “Why you live in Korea?” Petro asks. “Just. Because I was born here? I didn’t choose it,” she answers. “Of course you can choose,” he adamantly replies. “Okay. I’ll look into somewhere I can make a lot of money,” she says. The pressures Hyejin faces are economic as she is burdened with supporting her family. For example, the family keeps emergency cash in a ceramic vase. Hyejin contributes to it, while Hyeyoung and Hyejoo secretly withdraw money from it. As the youngest, Hyejoo bears the fewest of these obligations and leaves for Seoul to pursue a career as a dancer by the end of the film.

As both works progress, the mother-daughter relationships undergo a reversal in which the daughters assume responsibilities traditionally associated with maternal care. In *A Letter from Kyoto*, Hwaja’s deteriorating memory requires Hyeyoung to become the guardian of her mother. In a tense scene, Hyeyoung visits Hyejin at work to discuss their mother’s health. Hyejin matter-of-factly states that when the time comes, they will look into a nursing home for Hwaja. Hyeyoung retorts that they should hire at-home care instead. Hyejin asks Hyeyoung, “Who is going to be home to assist then?” Hyeyoung cannot answer. Hwaja’s cognitive decline allows previously repressed

memories to surface, enabling a deeper emotional exchange between her and her daughters. Using the letters as entry points for conversation, the daughters are prompted to reevaluate their understanding of Hwaja, and by extension, themselves.

In *Moonlit Winter*, Saebom encourages vulnerability by gently guiding Yunhee toward emotions she has long suppressed. In particular, Saebom embodies a generational shift in attitudes toward queerness that enables new possibilities for feminist solidarity. Lyonghee Kim (2023) describes Saebom as “a novel character reflecting the rise of [a] new generation with willingness to understand and support a queer woman and highlighting a possibility of the solidarity beyond her own sexual orientation, the familial relationship, and a generational difference” (p. 185). When Saebom asks her father about Yunhee, he responds, “Your mom is someone who makes people really lonely.” Unlike her father, Saebom recognizes the origins of Yunhee’s wounds and offers care grounded in understanding rather than judgment (E. S. Park, 2020, p. 75). The relationships between Saebom and Yunhee and between Hyeyoung and Hwaja each engage marginalized histories in ways that acknowledge their complexity rather than seeking to resolve them within existing social frameworks.

This contrast helps explain why the daughters become agents of inter-Asian connection: they possess the social and emotional capacity to seek out truths their mothers were unable or unwilling to confront. The journeys to Japan are led by the daughters, who recognize the necessity of physical travel in facilitating encounters with unresolved histories. These journeys function as acts of repair undertaken not by official institutions but by ordinary women. Through travel, the daughters create opportunities for their mothers to revisit relationships, transforming connection into solidarity. Jeenee Jun (2020) notes that recent South Korean women’s cinema “explore[s] forms of solidarity that transcend class, ethnicity,

and gender, foregrounding the lived realities women face under neoliberalism while probing the possibilities of alliance with the Other” (p. 25). Yoo (2023) makes a complementary argument specific to *Moonlit Winter*: the mother-daughter dyad functions as the foundation for self-reclamation and allyship, enabling women to move beyond social restrictions (p. 84). However, this solidarity is often hard-won. For instance, Yunhee must quit her job to travel because her female boss denies her request for leave, illustrating how patriarchal structures can undermine female solidarity even when women themselves occupy positions of authority (Yoo, 2023, p. 85).

LANDSCAPES OF TRAVEL AS ACTS OF REPAIR

Because mobility is central to the protagonists’ development, the transformation in the mothers’ appearance as they travel deserves close attention. Fashion provides the earliest visual evidence that travel produces internal change. In Japan, the mothers shed the kitchen uniforms they wore in Korea. Hwaja wears a paisley chiffon scarf and a light beige trench coat, while Yunhee dons a long, polished gray woolen coat that earns Saebom’s praise. Yunhee also sports a leather half-moon shoulder bag and, in the Otaru hotel bar scene, wears dangling blue earrings that match her silk scarf. Her makeup accentuates her pink lips. These visual shifts signal that the characters are ready for change even before any explicit reconciliation occurs.

Solidarity is also expressed through the daughters’ attentiveness to how their mothers’ habits change on the journey. For example, Yunhee’s smoking shifts from an act of self-abnegation to one of self-expression. Jong Hyun Lee (2021) suggests that smoking functions as perhaps the only escape in Yunhee’s otherwise constrained life (p. 182). When Yunhee smokes

in Korea, she quickly turns away if someone passes by, “as though burdened with guilt to live in self-erasure under the normative dictates of a patriarchal social order” (J. H. Lee, 2021, p. 182). In Otaru, however, she no longer hides her smoking in public and even smokes in front of Saebom. By photographing Yunhee as she smokes and telling her that she looks pretty, Saebom transforms an act once associated with shame into one of recognition and affirmation. J. H. Lee (2021) interprets this gesture as a form of support and encouragement that ultimately motivates Yunhee’s transformation (p. 191).

In an illuminating scene, Yunhee sits alone at a bar in the Grand Park Hotel. The bartender hands her an ashtray and remarks, “People who come alone usually smoke.” He asks Yunhee what brought her to Otaru. She responds in Japanese, “My friend lives here.” When he asks whether they met, she asks him to repeat the question. She then switches to Korean, which he cannot understand: “Ah, yes. We met and ate delicious food together. We took a walk together. I visited her house as well.” Her eyes well up as she speaks, suggesting that she is articulating what she wishes were true. A similar moment occurs in *A Letter from Kyoto*. Following Hyejin across a small bridge, Petro attempts to make conversation with her, speaking in Russian while she responds in Korean and occasionally English. Hyejin learns that Petro, like her father, is a sailor who travels around the world. Smoking a cigarette, she laments in Korean, out of Petro’s earshot: “So jealous. I’ve never been outside [of Yeongdo].” For Yunhee and Hyejin alike, articulating private desires aloud, even when others cannot fully understand, becomes its own form of self-recognition and liberation.

Through long takes, sparse dialogue, and contemplative silences, both films adopt a deliberate cinematic pacing that invites audiences to engage with the characters’ interiorities. This formal emphasis on slow temporal rhythms aligns with the motif of the letters, which require time to be written, mailed, delivered, and once received or

found, demand patient rereading. The daughters' efforts to address these silences by learning to ask questions underscore how intergenerational dialogue can challenge the layered histories of postcolonial trauma.

Both films open with landscape scenes shot from inside a window looking out. In *A Letter from Kyoto*, audiences soon notice that this is Hyeyoung's view from her cab ride into Yeongdo as she crosses the Yeongdo Bridge. Visit Busan, the official travel guide to Busan Metropolitan City, features the bridge as a tourist attraction with historical significance. The bridge was built during the colonial period to connect Busan Port to Yeongdo Island for resource exploitation, and during the Korean War, it became a "union spot" for separated refugees (Visit Busan, n.d.). By crossing it, Hyeyoung traverses a symbol of colonial exploitation and wartime longing. Here, the bridge functions as a liminal space where the daughter's modern search for identity meets the mother's historical silence, transforming a port city landmark of separation into a gateway for emotional reconciliation.

Similarly, the pre-credit opening sequence of *Moonlit Winter* presents the view from the train Yunhee and Saebom take in Otaru. Yoo (2023) argues that the window in this sequence "metaphorically reveals the duality of Yunhee's reality, both as an outlet of hope and conversely, as a frame that confines her within the realities of her life. This position, being enclosed yet still being able to look outside, also resonates with the social status of the women" (p. 76). While this duality holds, I want to emphasize that the act of journeying together transforms the window from a symbol of individual isolation into a shared vision for the mother and daughter. In their purposeful visit to Otaru, the train's enclosure functions as an intimate vessel for repair, providing the necessary distance from societal pressures. This mobility replaces passive reflection with active engagement, turning the landscape into a space of growth.

The snowy landscape in Otaru serves as a cinematic articulation of the conditions faced by queer women like Yunhee and Jun. The constant snowfall evokes a suspended temporality, reflecting the shame, fear, and marginalization that shape their lives. Saebom, who has not experienced these same constraints, romanticizes the snow when she tells her mother, "It's winter, but we don't have any snow. Should we go abroad?" At the same time, the snow becomes a landscape of inter-Asian connection as Yunhee opens up to Saebom: "As you know, an old friend lives here." Unlike in Korea, playing in the snow with her daughter opens a space where Yunhee can articulate emotions she has long kept unspoken. This moment contrasts with the following scene, in which Jun and Masako are shown shoveling snow. "When will the snow stop?" laments Masako. "Aunt, why would you ask something so pointless? How many years have we lived here? You know it will be a while until the snow stops," Jun replies. The exchange transforms this seemingly mundane question into a metaphor for the persistent oppression that Yunhee and Jun endure.

In *A Letter from Kyoto*, Hwaja's journey is precipitated by an encounter with a different "impossibility of return," situating Korea and Japan within a broader Cold War geography. In one scene, Hwaja has a candid conversation with one of the elders to whom she delivers lunch boxes. The elder says that she is from the North and can never return home. This irresolvable displacement serves as a parallel to Hwaja's own severed connection to Japan. This encounter expands the film's framework beyond a bilateral Korea-Japan narrative. Unlike the elder, however, Hwaja can return. Recognizing that her displacement will not be resolved through waiting, Hwaja declares to her daughters, "I want to go to Kyoto."

From the train ride to Takamiya Station, to the bus ride and walk to Takamiya Psychiatric Hospital, it is a long journey for the family. At the hospital, Hyeyoung offers Hwaja an AI translator

app, but Hwaja speaks directly to the nurse in Japanese: “I am Yamamoto Hanako. My mom, Yamamoto Masako, came here after I was sent to Korea.” That Hwaja does not need the app is itself significant: her Japanese is not mediated by technology but inherited through her mother. This moment illustrates what Chua Beng Huat (2025) calls “inter-Asia referencing practice,” where shared lexicons allow identities to travel without requiring translation into a third, external language (p. 16). Hwaja and Hanako are not translations of each other but the Korean and Japanese readings of the same characters, 花子: “flower” and “child.”

Hwaja gives the nurse a letter from the hospital reporting that her mother had been found by the Takamiya police in the forest outside the grounds and had expressed a wish to be reunited with Hanako before her memory faded. Hwaja’s journey to Kyoto does not provide conventional closure, as she is unable to reunite with her mother. The hospital is also unable to provide further information because too much time has passed. On the trail outside the hospital, possibly the same forest in which her mother was found, Hwaja shouts, “Okāsan!” (a polite term for “mother” in Japanese). This moment allows Hyeyoung and her sisters to witness and share their mother’s complex history. Through the family’s journey, the film presents the mother’s past not as a burden to overcome but as a foundation for imagining the daughters’ future possibilities.

Finally, the meeting between Yunhee and Jun in *Moonlit Winter* demonstrates reconnection as a process rather than a spectacle. There is no physical intimacy between them, not even a handshake or embrace during their reunion. The film resists a sentimental or romantic resolution, instead emphasizing the acknowledgment of unresolved emotions. As L. Kim (2023) notes, the absence of explicit sexuality enhances the story’s realism within the context of “Queer Korea” (p. 184), a framework attentive to the specific

conditions of queer identities in South Korea and wider Asia. The full moon after their meeting suggests that “Yunhee and Jun are able to start new lives” (Lim et al., 2020, p. 305), as a long-frozen past thaws into a new spring of possibility for those historically marginalized.

CONCLUSION

In the ending sequences of *A Letter from Kyoto*, Hwaja attends a singing class for seniors while her daughters’ lives have shifted: Hyejin returns from a trip abroad, Hyeyoung has settled in Yeongdo while working as a broadcast writer, and Hyejoo has moved to Seoul. In a full-circle moment, Hwaja prepares food for her husband’s *jesa* (memorial ceremony), as she was doing when she was first introduced. Sticky notes are now visibly placed around the house as reminders for her, and a photograph of her mother stands in front of her husband’s memorial portrait. As Hyeyoung tastes the food, they receive a video message from Hyejoo competing in a dance battle. As they watch, Hwaja’s smartphone displays the family photo taken in Kyoto. Hwaja asks, “Where did we take this photo?” Hyeyoung, visibly saddened by her mother’s fading memory, composes herself before answering, “Mom, you missed grandma, so we went to see her. We bought snacks [*kintsuba*] on the train.”

In the ending scenes of *Moonlit Winter*, audiences finally hear Yunhee’s reply to Jun. After saying farewell to her brother, Yunhee moves to Seoul with Saebom and is seen writing a résumé. The camera focuses on Yunhee’s hands as she pens “High School Graduate” in the education section. Yunhee’s letter records her hopes of opening a small restaurant and supporting Saebom’s education. The sequence continues with the mother and daughter finding the restaurant where Yunhee will submit her résumé. “Maybe one day I can tell my daughter about you. I want to find the courage. I know I can find the courage,”

the voiceover continues. As they enter an alley, Saebom holds up her camera and asks, “Mom. Is that the restaurant? Are you nervous?” After taking a breath, Yunhee turns around to face her daughter. She nods and smiles. This moment is captured through Saebom’s camera before the scene quickly fades to black. Yunhee’s voice continues as she says, “P.S.: I dream about you too.” The letter thus allows Yunhee to imagine a future in which her past can be acknowledged rather than erased.

I highlight these endings to reveal how mother-daughter relationships illustrate the profound emotional labor undertaken by women across generations. This labor operates outside formal institutions, manifesting instead through affective family practices often overlooked in public discourse. These acts of care collectively challenge patriarchal narratives that marginalize women’s experiences, modeling change rooted in empathy. This is evident when Saebom, noticing Yunhee rubbing her wrists, says, “You didn’t know? You are always massaging it. Make sure you go to the hospital when we return to Korea.” Ultimately, the mothers’ endurance, the daughters’ attention, and their shared journeys constitute a form of feminist resistance, demonstrating how resilient mother-daughter bonds can navigate personal and historical trauma to forge new pathways for intergenerational connection.

This paper contributes to Inter-Asia Cultural Studies and Korean feminist film scholarship by developing the mother-daughter relationship as a method of inter-Asian reading. It argues that colonial and postcolonial histories are negotiated through embodied familial forms of connection. What this method makes visible is repair without conventional closure. For Korean feminist film scholarship, this demonstrates how the mother-daughter dyad serves as a site of intergenerational solidarity. It also extends scholarship on Korean cinema by showing how gender, sexuality, and colonial memory are reworked together through intimate cinematic forms.

Several directions remain open for future research. The analysis developed here could be extended through deeper engagement with transnational feminist scholarship on motherhood. For example, Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000) theorization of how Black mothers cultivate creativity in their children offers a useful framework for examining the films’ scenes of creative inheritance (e.g., the daughters’ photography, writing, and dancing), while Audre Lorde’s (1984) work provides an analytical lens for exploring silence, survival, and intergenerational knowledge that resonates with both works. Situating these frameworks alongside Korean feminist scholarship would further expand the paper’s contribution. Additionally, the figure of the North Korean elder in *A Letter from Kyoto* already extends beyond the Korea-Japan bilateral frame, as do films that address North Korean displacement, Zainichi Korean experiences, and Korean communities in China and Central Asia. Whether material anchors, institutional silences, and generational subjectivities function similarly across these contexts remains an important question for further research. Exploring this would situate both works within a broader landscape of diasporic formations shaped by Cold War divisions.

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