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Silent Anatomies and Sound of Music

My goals and aims of the project are to demystify the misconception that the majority of East Asian society continue to prefer sons over daughters. In poet Monica Ong’s words, contemporary East Asian girls can “cultivate birds from torn things” (2015). Birds symbolize hope as they fly from conventional restraints and they will be free from unreasonable societal expectations. I acknowledge that in the context of the poem Bo Suerte, East Asian society was filled with superstitions, such that people considered a shortage of sons to be a bad omen for the whole family. Yet the dark history should not become an excuse for not getting to know the contemporary East Asian social landscape. I hope to bring a brighter outlook for the general public in terms of how they view East Asian societal changes. In fact, modern East Asian women feel more and more empowered to construct a promising future for themselves.

My project incorporates contemporary East-Asian perspectives on how the “female shame” is fading away from the majority of the society through critique of feminist imagery, while acknowledging the historical context of Monica’s poem Bo Suerte. I also borrowed elements of the von Trapp dress from one of the most successful musicals Sound of Music to convey the message that there are always people who stand up for what is right, just as Captain Von Trapp opposed Nazis. My remix part is the use of the von Trapp dress to address traditional constraints on East Asian women, according to Monica’s interpretation. In the musical, however, the dress stands for free expression as Maria Rainer customized dresses for the kids outo of curtain materials.

As more and more women are interested in working in STEM or in clinical medicine, superstitions about bringing bad luck when a mother is giving birth to a girl have been discarded. Nevertheless, I empathize with what Monica described as “shame on shortage of boys” due to the establishment of patriarchal gender roles in China in the 1950s but this misrepresents East Asian society in a contemporary setting. As a poet, Monica carries multi-identities with her Chinese and Filipino background while blending in with American society. Such a multi-faceted lens is also one of the most powerful “surgical incisions” (2) in a once-silent culture, where a lot of East Asian women were expected to keep silent even if they knew that having girls instead of boys was not their choice and especially not their fault.

In my remix project, I borrow the mission of calling for gender equality from Monica’s poem without plagiarizing direct quotes from the text. Generally, remixing is often considered the opposite of originality, and the process of remodeling runs the risk of falling into plagiarism. The video “*Everything is a remix*” by Kirby initiated a discussion about the boundary between originality and plagiarism. Remixing resembles originality when we bring in new perspectives, such as a critical lens or intervening discourse, to interpret previous works of art. The remixing process allows people to borrow certain elements, while still giving proper credit to the sources from the original work. Also, after reading Susan Sontag’s essay *Against Interpretation* and her preference for form over content regarding interpretation (1966), I realize that remixing can happen in an original way if we appropriately take advantage of multimedia, which is a relatively new form of art.

In most cases, a good remixing does not simply put different elements together randomly. The remix author has to take into account the relationship between each of the elements they want to blend in. They might also omit or add certain components that help convey the main idea behind the remix project. Critique is a detailed, analytical assessment of cultural objects, especially a literary, philosophical, or political theory. Remix functions as a form of critique in the way that the author critically examines the object in question, and decides whether to introduce their own critical lens. In my project, I first closely read the poem Bo Suerte (Bo means without in Hokkien), and found the elements that misrepresent the contemporary East Asian female experience. These elements include “brows bent with humidity”, “von Trapp dress” , “no elegant stairs”, etc. The imagery “von Trapp dress” reminded me of the classic costumes in *Sound of Music*, and the contrast between sound and silence became one of the starting points of my remix project. Literally, “sound” and “silent” in the titles are opposite. More deeply, they symbolize freedom of expression and silence of women respectively. I then looked for the contemporary counterparts of these pieces of imagery, such as the professional uniforms of modern East Asian females, and made a comparison in the poster I designed. A vintage staircase connects the exemplary women and the “von Trapp dress” together. The stairs in my poster symbolize a passage of time and how East Asian women “climb” up the passage through the years.

The lines “cruel as hunger, heavy as stone, the fact of five daughters was the immutable kind” in the last few stanzas serve as a vivid summary of how suerte (or karma in religion) could be suffocating for females back then, especially when they did nothing wrong but had to feel guilty of themselves simply having girls. This situation is sardonic through a scientific lens, when we know that the sex assigned at birth is more of a probabilistic calculation than a superstitious idea.

I intend to convey the interplay between remixing and critique by closely reading Bo Suerte from Silent Anatomies by Monica Ong, and adding contemporary feminist elements after interpreting the ironic and thought-provoking lines of the poem. The pieces of poetic imagery that I preserved in the remix project are the von Trapp dress and the “bent” eyebrows of women. I chose a graphical medium (Canva) because poetry is, to a large extent, a visual experience. Just as Monica pushed the boundary between text and image, I employ the direct visual impact of an image to better address the message of hope. The phenomena of cultural silences depicted in Monica’s poem still exist today, but take on a different form. In the context of the poem (1950s), the East Asian Society was dominated by “female shame” (2015). Giving birth to a boy was worth celebrating, but having a girl was not something a mother should be proud of. Such social stigmas extended beyond baby girls or boys - women were expected to keep silent about their “body”. For instance, when they suffered from female diseases, they were not supposed to actively seek medical help. Now, such collective silences among females are disappearing thanks to medical advancements and enhanced social awareness of self-care. The title of the poem collection Silent Anatomies sounds counter-intuitive, because when we think about anatomies, surgical incision and the ensuing pain patients suffer from, we might hear their screams rather than silence. But a lot of the time, even screams can be silent, either out of one’s own willingness or not. As critic Rick Barot said, “Monica delves into the often-silent selves that every self carries” (1). Silence is a beautiful language when we need time to ponder. Yet, if silence becomes a norm and no one is brave enough to break the silence, it can be pathetic. Although Monica’s poem allows readers to re-examine the ancient darkness of East Asian society, the public should have more confidence in the positive changes the society has been achieving. People start to and will more often hear East Asian female perspective across disciplines.

Works Cited

1. NAZRI H. Inspirational Asian Women in Medicine [Internet]. 2024 [cited 2024 Nov 19]. Available from: https://hannah.nazri.org/inspirational-asian-women-in-medicine-a-non-exhaustive-list
2. Ong, Monica. “Bo Suerte.” Silent Anatomies, Kore Press, Tucson, Arizona, 2015, pp. 2–3.

Bo Suerte - Monica Ong

Mother, each day I look for you. Try to recognize you in soup and sepia.

As it happens in other lives, you come to me in secret.

There were no elegant stairs in your childhood home, and this young woman, the nanny.

Just the way her brows bend with humidity.

I easily identify all four of your sisters in their von Trapp dresses,

 and both brothers, sporting crisp white linens.

In your absence stands a son, slightly leaning,

toes blister from your brother’s too big shoes.

You tell me Grandfather was ashamed.

He didn’t want people shaking their heads, their tongues clicking:

Bo suerte.

Bo, which in Hokkien means without, or not enough.

It does explain the hoarding, I suppose. Dusty magazines stacked into pillars. Grandmother’s purse of purloined sporks.

The way your long locks fell like black feathers onto the kitchen floor.

Suerte, is Catholic for karma, cruel as hunger, heavy as stone.

The fact of five daughters was the immutable kind.

Payback, perhaps, for an unsavory ancestor in an imperial court?

Or something during the war that Grandfather never told us?

Hidden like your graceful arms in a brother’s long sleeves.

Your boy's face gazes at me. I place flowers at your feet, wet with pus.

For the daughter, you, but not only you.

Portrait as battle. The terror of asymmetry. This shortage of sons.

1. Sontag, Susan. “Against interpretation.” Against Interpretation,

Picador, 1966, pp. 1-10

1. “The Sound of Music.” Beverly Hills, CA, 1965.