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Ji Won Park

Washington University in St Louis

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Contemporary Family Portraits:
The Hidden Uncomfortable Truth of Family Dynamics

Ji Won Park
BFA Painting Thesis

College of Art
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis
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Abstract

This thesis examines the hidden aspect of family dynamic and questions the idealized convention of family portraits. Based on Erving Goffman's theatrical theory of community, family as a relaxing intimate group in the backstage, the underlying tensions, conflicts, and power play are discussed. This thesis draws upon the familial issues and treatments of Leon J. Saul and Rhee Dong Shick to evaluate the family dynamic present in our domestic settings. As the lineage of family portraits from history changed reflecting the differing family values and uncomfortable truths, the idealized family portraits are re-evaluated and questioned to offer a truer description of our family.

Backstage Community: Edge of intimacy and respect

We are always surrounded by people and immersed in social relationships. Such diverse relationships between individuals and the society are necessary and interdependent but repressive. As our existence requires the presence of others, Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* describes the dichotomy of our everyday selves. As he applies theatrical language to state the different aspects of social life, he uses the term 'performance' to describe our social roles and calls society the 'front stage', where one "puts on his show 'for the benefit of other people'" (Goffman 10). In the front stage, individuals wear an appropriate manner for the audience who observes the performance on stage. Goffman discusses how playing a social role places a character and defines a person. The social roles that each of us play becomes a "collective representation" (Goffman 17).

While each of us has a defining social role that we perform on the front stage, the backstage is where the suppressed side of ourselves is released. Goffman defines backstage as “a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (Goffman 69). Because the performers may remove the given roles, their impression and characters may contradict from what is shown in public. Because no audience is allowed to intrude and observe them, the backstage allows them to relax “drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character” (Goffman 70). There are no longer given lines, roles, act, and costumes for the performers. As this particular aspect is hidden from the audience, the “backstage conduct is one which allows minor acts which might easily be taken as symbolic or intimacy and disrespect for others present and for the region, while front region conduct is one which disallows such potentially offensive behavior” (Goffman 76). Because the obligation to act in certain moral ways is removed, the performers act in the boundary of intimacy and disrespect. Within a group of those in the backstage, they “share a community of fate... The front that is maintained before others need not be maintained among themselves: relaxation becomes possible” (Goffman 102).

As we become more comfortable with the colleagues of the backstage, we segregate into a smaller community, where each group creates separate system or rule. As a result of that bond, the members of a group, the teammates “must not voluntarily betray the secrets of the team” (Goffman 135). Goffman explains that these shared secrets become a commitment to remain as part of a group. Some of the secrets

“consist of facts about a team which it knows and conceals and which are incompatible with the image of self that the team attempts to maintain before its audience” (Goffman 87). Maintaining these secrets in



Figure 1. *Behind the Curtain*, 24x36", oil on canvas, 2014

front stage for the benefit of its smaller backstage community becomes another social experience in a smaller scale.

In my studio practice, I responded to Goffman’s idea of backstage where performers relax and groups create systematic secrets. In my work *Behind the Curtain* (Figure 1), I release a group of figures acting behind a structured setting. While they are initially placed in the backstage, they are again performers in the eyes of viewers, who



Figure 2. *Sharing the Distant Moment*, 4x5', oil on canvas, 2014.

are privileged to view the backstage. Although their social identity or status becomes ambiguous, their position in the backstage states another identity. *Sharing the Distant Moment* (Figure 2) also illustrates a moment of backstage that we observe as privileged audience.

While each of the figures seems to take on a more recognizable domestic part, they are again placed within a theatrical setting. One of the smaller backstage communities includes family in different sizes. Although each of the family members is allowed to remove their social roles from front stage, family becomes a private but extended social experience in that they have certain moral obligations in maintaining the relationship.

Family Dynamics: Parent and Child

Konrad Lorenz's theory on instinctive behavior showed that newly hatched ducklings without a mother became attached to Lorenz's shoes, the first moving object. Harry Harlow's experiment on maternal separation showed that an infant monkey creates a special bond to a substitute cloth diapers figure replacing a mother. These experiments demonstrate the instinctive power of attachment between parent and child. Understanding the powerful relationship of parent and child, I found certain power dynamic and inevitable hierarchy present in domestic enclosure.

Because of this powerful relationship, Saul mentions that, "the personality, that is, the accustomed method of functioning, is of course shaped and colored by the emotional influences of childhood. But in some people the childhood emotional patterns do more than this—they are so powerful and fixed that they dominate the behavior" (Saul 17). The characteristic of a parent forms the core personality of the child, especially during childhood when they have the deepest physical and emotional interactions. Even further, Saul explains how most of the mental illness derives from childhood experience. As he demonstrates how emotional interaction of parent and child

causes the child to behave and identify themselves in certain ways that repeats in adulthood, children “tend to do not so much as the parents say but as they do” (Saul 12).

Family relationship and interaction become more crucial as the members of the family all mirror and resemble each other. In my work, *Near Distance* (Figure 3) illustrates a connection between the two male characters. While the father wears a suit and lies exhausted on the bed, the boy is in his casual wear holding



Figure 3. *Near Distance*, 50x50", oil on canvas, 2015.

on to a snack. However, the father figure and the standing boy resemble each other. The shared black loafer on each foot implies a connection as well as their similar look. As if the connection implies that the boy may grow up as the man or the man was the boy in the past, children copy the action of parents and learn directly from them. That relationship also applies to the correspondence of the father and son figure.

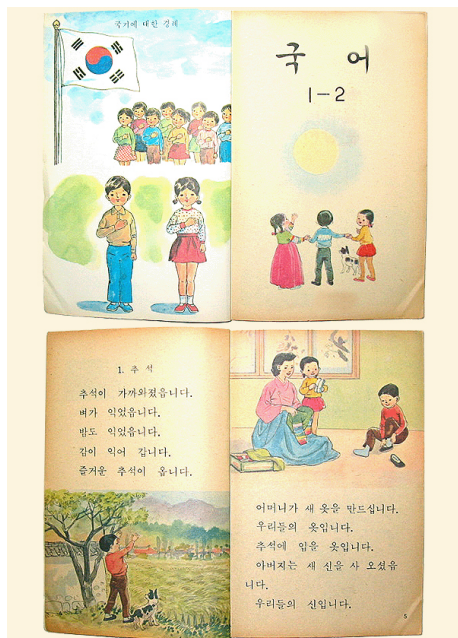
Taopsychotherapy : Adding Korean culture

When looking back at the Korean culture, based on the Confucian tradition, certain values that influence the dynamic of family are different from those of western culture. Especially, as family is the center of eastern culture, those values become crucial in understanding the family dynamic. Rhee Dong Shick, a Korean clinical

professor, introduced taopsychotherapy based on Korean personality and Tao as he found missing in the western psychotherapy. He treated patients with “the essence of the East Asian tradition is the Tao (Confucianism, Buddhism, Laotzu and Chuangtzu), in other words, purification of mind, removing complexes, pacifying the mind by accepting reality as it is, correcting cognitive distortion by removing projection.” (Rhee 508). He focused on the process of achieving perfect empathy based on the three veils, 360 degrees transformation, three profound gates, and illustration of ten cows from the Tao tradition.

He mentions that, “in Buddhism the goal of practicing Tao is to become a Buddha by liberating oneself from attachment (bondage), reaching emptiness (nonattachment)” (Rhee 498). Confucianism, Laotzu’s teaching, Chuang-tzu’s teaching, and Buddhism all focus on achieving ‘nothingness’ in different means, which is the highest mental maturity. He explains that the Chinese character for ‘sheng (聖)’, which means holiness, is also the character that denotes holy man or sage “the one who is versed in the great way, with change finds no obstacle, who can empathize with every being in the universe. This is perfect empathy” (Rhee 509). Because the character ‘sheng’ contains the sub-characters indicating ear(耳) and mouth(口), it literally means ‘no place not to be able to communicate’. The sage in Tao is the one who can perfectly communicate and empathize. As Rhee implies in the meaning of the holy sage, he states that, “one definite thing not only crucial in psychotherapy but also valuable in our lives is the ‘attitude or mind of understanding others and respecting yourself’” (Rhee 23).

In his records of taopsychotherapy with patients, he talks about how familial conflicts occur because we refuse to acknowledge and understand each other. In a husband and wife relationship, they tend to put each other in a perfect wife or husband role and expect them to act in that ideal way. However, when they come to acknowledge the originality of each person, problems resolve. Carl Roger's client centered therapy is the closest western resemblance to his therapy as Roger connects with the client's attitude, positive respect to the client, and accurate empathetic response. As Rhee sees the phrase 直指人心見性成佛(directly perceiving the originality of a person and completing the Buddha) as his representative formula, Rhee's taopsychotherapy is centered on listening, reflecting, empathizing, and clarifying as it is based on the Taoist ideology.



Palette of Family Idealization

As one of the key ethics of the traditional Korean education is to be a good listener, Rhee introduces taopsychotherapy based on the characteristics of Korean culture of emphasizing the attitude of listening. The key of the newly integrated psychotherapy derives from the traditional Korean education. The illustrations (Figure 4) of dated Korean

Figure 4. Illustrations from Old Korean Elementary School Textbook

elementary school textbooks from the late 20th century depict the idealized view of happy children in their well-behaved manner in public and at home. In order to become the ideal children from the textbook, they must listen and

follow orders from adults. While children are depicted as good students, sons, and daughters, mothers are depicted as traditional nurturer who is devoted to children at home.

Applying the solid bright color palette, the space and figures are flattened, and their attitudes are romanticized. Along with the black outline, the colors used are unique in its vibrancy. The minimal use of volume and shadow applied on most of the figures demonstrate an unnatural look to the illustration. Because of this particular color palette, the idealization of members of a family feels strange and uneasy. As I question the idealized convention of family portrait, the language of these illustrations employs an artificial and twisted tone. In my works, I retain and even emphasize the strong edges and outlines, vibrant colors, and ambiguous identity of each figure. In *Mother and Child* (Figure 5), an aged mother holds up a grown up son. The work is full of black outlines around the objects and figures. The bright vibrant colors are applied on the floor and couch. In addition to the strong edges and distinct colors in *Near Distance* (Figure 3), viewers are left to interpret the narrative of the scene and identify the figures. The ambiguous identities are interpreted based on our family experiences. Using the language of illustration from old Korean elementary school textbooks coupled with inconsistent light and scale, the context of my works also demonstrate a level of discomfort.



Figure 5. *Mother and Child*, 24x30", oil on canvas, 2015

Lineage of Family Portrait: Evolution of family dynamics

Family portrait remains as an active area for centuries although the context and setting have changed. Bailey states “change in the depiction of the family reflects a cultural shift in the way that families portrayed themselves. Thus family portraits capture the essence of what each era thinks is the meaning of family life”(Bailey 1). As the gender role, family value, and social system change over time, the context of family portraits follow the flow of convention.

The representation of family lineage and strong ancestors was the main focus in 16th century family portraits. Lancelot Blondeel’s *The Bruges Mantelpiece to Charles V* (Figure 6) emphasizes the genealogy with Hercules and the Holy Roman emperor Charlemagne. The symbols of legacy, allusion to Hercules, depiction of ancestors assemble to glorify his position and power. The mantelpiece shows the sculpted fireplace cover in the trial room of Charles V, one of the successors of the Holy Roman emperor. As Charles V

legitimized his position through his ancestors, he stood in “the shadow of legendary figures whose German ancestry was crucial” (Leitch 296). Replacing his presence with the wooden figure, the sculpted Charles V on the mantelpiece “functioned as



Figure 6. Lancelot Blondeel, *The Bruges Mantel piece to Charles V*, 1528-31.

‘double portraits’ – imperial analogies in which the modern descendant staked the validity of his office on a legitimate claim to kinship” (Leitch 296). The family portrait functioned as a public propaganda to succeed as the rightful ruler through his genealogy.

While the emphasis of lineage was the underlying intension of family portraits, those in the 17th and 18th century depicted the idealized features and roles of family. Although the respect of lineage in memory of ancestors was preserved, the presentation of political and social status of them was emphasized. These “portraits helped to concretize a family’s genealogy, indicating their general worthiness” (Muizelaar 65). Because these represented their genealogy and status, their features were elevated and beautified. Artists selected ideal features and improved unpleasant features of the individuals. Some of the characteristics of Dutch family in portraits were the “formal, sober depictions of men and women in dark clothing, against a neutral background. Simple in pose and setting, they communicate moderation, restraint, calm, and decorum” (Muizelaar 68), which Rembrandt portrays in the *Portrait of Cornelis Claesz. Anslo and his wife* (Figure 7). The gender role in the painting is especially significant as the darker skin tone of the husband figure implied his outside business under the sun, while the pale skin of the wife figure implied her domestic role. The composition of the couple “emphasized male activity and female passivity” (Bailey 1). In addition, gender hierarchy was present regarding the principle of dextrality as man poses on the right, which is the dominant hierarchical position.

Through the 18th to 19th century, portraits of parents and children replaced the patriarchal portraits. Bailey states that, “mothers had long been shown in devotional form, influenced by the conventions of the Madonna and Child, but the sentimental form idealized motherhood still further.



Figure 7. Rembrandt, *Portrait of Cornelis Claesz. Anslo and his wife*, 1641.

Though new, relaxed forms of maternity were on display” (Bailey 1). As these portraits of parent and children dominated, maternity brought more attention to the artists depicting family. Although never married or raised a child, Mary Cassatt depicted



Figure 8. *The Weight of Family*, 40x48”, oil on canvas, 2014.

several scenes of mother and child. While motherhood was romanticized and idealized, she was “a careful observer of children’s natural behavior, catching their random gestures and unpredictable expressions with great authenticity” (Mancoff 80) that her works displayed careful description of motherhood.

While Mary Cassatt finds motherhood as the nurturer of all, in *The Weight of Family* (Figure 8), a woman bears the weight of family as the

center of domestic activity. As the central woman is obliged to take care of all the figures, the duty to act as the idealized mother, wife, and daughter seems almost unbearable as they pose for a family portrait. As people promoted the ideal motherhood, “devoted, nurturing, and wise” (Mancoff 77) values of motherhood was emphasized. However, the different expectations on a woman to become the idealized mother and wife divided the figure into broken pieces.

Although family status and certain values were idealized in the past eras, contemporary artists seek to reveal power play, conflicts, and authority in a family environment. Paula Rego depicts these qualities in the female point of view through mysterious narrative images. Rosengarten describes home depicted in Paula Rego’s works that, “concealment and disclosure, sanction and reward, coercion and betrayal: these are plotted in the home, and their intertwinement and articulation map the subject’s relation to its primary caretakers, and via them, more broadly and abstractly to both love and authority” (Rosengarten, *Love* 3). Her home conveys patriarchy, male authority, and implicit representation of power over female figure. Her images of home is “a hierarchically constructed space and a site of intimate violence, is the stage upon

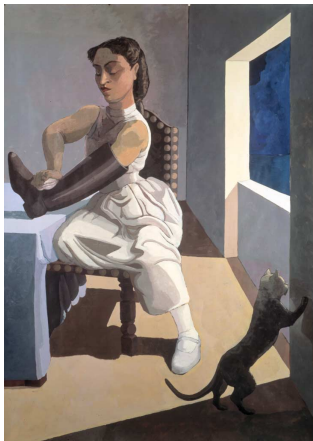


Figure 9. Paula Rego, *The Policeman's Daughter*, 1987.



Figure 10. Paula Rego, *The Family*, 1988.



Figure 11. Paula Rego, *Two Girls and a Dog*, 1987.

which history is performed” (Rosengarten, *Love* 68). Rego’s *The Policeman’s Daughter* (Figure 9) presents an obedient daughter figure cleaning her father’s boots. The image of the daughter under the authority of a policeman father creates a certain tension that “it is as if the left hand violently opposed what the right hand was doing, but both knew they were doing the right thing” (Rosengarten, *Love* 100). On the other hand, the patriarchal power subverts in *The Family* (Figure 10), where male authority is weakened by the “the triangular configuration where the two females pinion the helpless man and hold him hostage” (Rosengarten, “Home Truths” 75). The tension between family members and the empowerment of the nursing ones continues to exist in her other works. *The Girl and Dog* (Figure 11) series depicts the position of nursing and taking care of someone, in this case the dog. The dog acts as the victim of nursing and its position provokes shame and anger as “nursing or grooming have frequently been imbued with a suggestion of such empowerment, this power has seldom been so baldly state” (Rosengarten, “Home Truths” 75). In the domestic imprisonment, such relationship also becomes a power play and reveals a certain power hierarchy. Her depiction of the uncanny images implicitly indicating family examines the conflicted state of domestic relationships.

As family portraits functioned as a public representation of each family, they only showed the desirable aspect. Thus, family portraits were covered in fantasy and idealization that only presented what the public wants to see as an idealized family. However, in my work, *The Family* (Figure 12), family portrait reveals the hidden aspects of family living in a domestic setting. As none of them are having eye contact, the subtle

distance is emphasized.

Although some of pairs are interacting, they are only representing certain power hierarchy. For example, the woman in yellow dress expresses a struggle as she reaches out trying to escape



Figure 12. *The Family*, 4x6', oil on canvas, 2014.

from the man on her side. Although the image is interpreted and controlled by the viewers in the end, the open narrative allows the viewers to find themselves in the process of looking back into their own family experience. My works explore family in its various forms to understand and reconsider the idealized representation of family portraits.

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Image Sources

Figure 1: Park, Ji Won. *Behind the Curtain*. 2014. Oil on canvas.

Figure 2: Park, Ji Won. *Sharing the Distant Moment*. 2014. Oil on canvas.

Figure 3: Park, Ji Won. *Near Distance*. 2015. Oil on canvas.

Figure 4: Illustration from Korean elementary school textbook. Digital Image. N.p., 20 Aug. 2011. Web. 30 Apr. 2015.

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Figure 5: Park, Ji Won. *Mother and Child*. 2015. Oil on canvas.

Figure 6: Lancelot Blondeel. *The Bruges Mantelpiece to Charles V*. 1528-31. *Game of Thrones: Art and Power at the Renaissance Court*. WUSTL Department of Art History (Prof. Bass), 28 Jan. 2015. Web. 30 April 2015.

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Figure 7: Rembrandt, *Portrait of Cornelis Claez. Anslo and his wife*. 1641, Staatliche Museen, Gemaldegalerie, Berlin. *The Athenaeum*. Web. 30 April 2015. <<http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=31619>>.

Figure 8: Park, Ji Won. *The Weight of Family*. 2014. Oil on canvas.

Figure 9: *The Policeman's Daughter*. 1987. Saatchi Collection, London. *PAULA REGO*. 2nd ed. London: Phaidon, 1997. 169. Print.

Figure 10: *The Family*. 1988. Saatchi Collection, London. *PAULA REGO*. 2nd ed. London: Phaidon, 1997. 171. Print.

Figure 11: *Two Girls and a Dog*. 1987. *PAULA REGO*. 2nd ed. London: Phaidon, 1997. 149. Print.

Figure 12: Park, Ji Won. *The Family*. 2014.