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FORGOTTEN FEMMES, FORGOTTEN WAR: THE KIM SISTERS' DISAPPEARANCE FROM AMERICAN SCREEN AND SCENE

Danielle Seid

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the performance history of the Korean girl group The Kim Sisters, once highly visible racial icons, within the social and cultural context of 1960s Cold War America and popular entertainment culture. The Kim Sisters' disappearance from American screen and scene raises questions about public memory of the Korean War, the status of Asian American performers in popular entertainment industries, and shifting attitudes about race, gender, and sexuality in the 1960s. Focusing in particular on the production and reception of their feminine beauty on stage and television, this paper highlights the Kims' early years in the newly-formed Republic of Korea, as well as their success in the Las Vegas showroom scene and on television musical variety shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show*.

Keywords: Asian American, femininity, television, Cold War, Las Vegas, Korea

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From 1960 to 1967, the Korean musical act and girl group The Kim Sisters—comprised of sisters Sook-Ja (Sue), Ai-Ja, and Min-Ja (Mia)—performed on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1971) twenty-two times. The group's performance total on the show far exceeded the number of appearances by groups such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and The Supremes.¹ This paper moves from this bit of television and popular culture history to pose the following questions: First, who were

The Kim Sisters? And second, what contributed to their rise to stardom and eventual disappearance from American screen and scene?² Like many entertainers who appeared on the CBS Sunday night variety show, The Kim Sisters came to the Ed Sullivan Stage from afar. Born in Seoul, Korea to a musical family, Sue, Ai-Ja, and Mia grew up learning to sing and play numerous musical instruments within their large musical family. Prior to the war, the Kims' father Kim Hai-Song was a celebrated

composer and mother Lee Nan-Young was Korea's most famous singer and recording artist. On *The Ed Sullivan Show* and other popular television musical variety shows of the early 1960s, The Kim Sisters showcased their talent and years of musical training for millions of Americans, many whom had undoubtedly already begun to forget about the Korean War. As the U.S. prepared to enter another conflict with communists in Asia—this time in Vietnam—The Kim Sisters presented a beautiful image to American audiences that helped paper over the realities of the many tragedies and atrocities of the Korean War, including the Kims' own early lives in Korea.

Nostalgic Songs for a Forgotten War

The Kim Sisters' early years in Korea were marked by the effects of colonialism and war. The Korean War (1950-1953), which began with the North's invasion of the South in 1950 and escalated with the U.S.-led campaign to eradicate any communist activity in the peninsula, devastated and divided the country. Like many families who lived through the war, the Kim family was torn apart. The North Koreans captured Kim Hai-Song in 1950 and later executed him, while Lee Nan-Young and her children struggled to survive the war in Seoul and Busan, exchanging their entertainment labor with American G.I.s to meet basic needs for food and subsistence. Soon, The Kim Sisters made nostalgic American music, which comforted the G.I.s by reminding them of home in the U.S., the foundation of their act.³

During the war, under careful management by their mother, Sue, Ai-Ja, and cousin Mia, whom Lee Nan-Young adopted as her daughter, honed their musical and performing skills as a girl group and sister act, modeled after wholesome American entertainers like The Andrews Sisters and McGuire Sisters. A photo of one of The Kim Sisters' first performances during the war—the girls were eleven, twelve, and thirteen—depicts the Army nightclub environment in which the young girls forged their musical career.⁴ Though the Kim family enjoyed respected status in Korean society, in the aftermath of the Korean War, The Kim Sisters had no choice but to perform in bars and nightclubs around U.S. military bases where conditions were “seedy and sexualized.”⁵ Their early lives in Korea as performers reflect a stark contrast to images of the girls' smiling and excited faces on American television beginning in 1960—the year The Kim Sisters began their stage and television career in the U.S.

In the aftermath of the Korean War that decimated, impoverished, and divided the peninsula, the newly-formed Republic of Korea (ROK) simply could not sustain a popular music industry. At that time, the ROK's citizens suffered widespread poverty and hunger, as the country worked to rebuild the infrastructure that was destroyed by the fighting between the North Korean communists and the U.N. troops, led by the U.S. military. Like many other necessities and comfort items, music records were largely bought and sold on the country's black market. With the help of the few records she could procure, Lee Nan-Young trained The Kim Sisters to perform American-style music. The first song the Kims learned was “Ole' Buttermilk Sky” by the American country singer Hoagey Carmichael. In time, The Kim Sisters' “arsenal” of songs was comprised mainly of American folk, jazz, country, hillbilly and swing standards, as well as Korean folks songs that played to the American G.I.s' tastes for local music.⁶

Sue, the oldest in the group, recalled her mother's strict management of the girls—monitoring rehearsals, choreographing routines, and booking performances—as the critical factor in the girls' early success in the makeshift music industry in ROK. While many Korean girls and women at the time became camp workers who exchanged sexual services with American G.I.s who occupied the ROK's military bases, the young Kims traded emotional and leisure services in the form of American-style entertainment. In 1958, while performing on the military entertainment circuit, The Kim Sisters met and impressed a former G.I. named Bob McMackin, an entertainment producer who worked in Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong. Soon after their meeting, McMackin arranged for the girls to travel to the U.S. to appear in an “Oriental spectacle” called *The China Doll Revue* at the Thunderbird Hotel in Las Vegas. With this invitation, The Kim Sisters became the first musical export to represent the ROK in the U.S. Securing the endorsement from Syngman Rhee, the new president of the republic, The Kim Sisters traveled to the U.S. as cultural ambassadors intended to promote a relationship of exchange and reciprocity between the two countries. Speaking very little English, though well versed in American popular music, The Kim Sisters arrived in Las Vegas in the winter of 1959. Their contract to appear in *The China Doll Revue* guaranteed the girls only four weeks in Las Vegas. They would stay much longer.

Beautiful Performers in Cold War America

The Kim Sisters were not only goodwill ambassadors for the Republic of Korea but also beautiful additions to the American Cold War landscape. The Oriental spectacle *The China Doll Revue* advertised the “Sensational Kim Sisters” alongside “famous Chinese hillbillies Ming and Ling,” and “20 of the most beautiful Oriental showgirls ever assembled on any stage, direct from So[uth] Korea, Japan, Honolulu, Hong Kong, and Macao!”⁷ While one could see beautiful showgirls in other Las Vegas shows like the *Lido de Paris* and the *Follies Bergere*, *The China Doll Revue* and other similar shows that played on the public’s fascination with and desire for Oriental culture, imagery, and bodies offered American audiences something different. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Las Vegas shows that featured Oriental performers enticed American audiences with the promise of sexual exoticism, surprise, and mystery. In this cultural terrain, The Kim Sisters were forced to balance their public image as beautiful and musically-talented Oriental femme performers with national fantasies surrounding Asian women’s gender and sexuality.

The allure of Las Vegas’ Oriental-themed shows drew energy and inspiration from other popular representations of Oriental femme beauty and sexuality in Cold War culture. The show programs for Las Vegas productions *Holiday in Japan* and *The World of Suzie Wong* displayed scantily-clad Oriental femmes positioned around traditional paper lanterns and a sexy Hong Kong femme attired in revealing *cheongsam* and fishnet stockings posed next to a rickshaw.⁸ A 1959 cover of the Las Vegas publication *Fabulous Las Vegas Magazine* featured Japanese showgirl Mariko Mizuno posed demurely in front of a parasol and with an Oriental fan hiding her mouth. The caption for the cover photo described Mizuno as “one of the gorgeous Oriental creatures... in the lavish spectacle *Holiday in Japan*...”⁹ Like The Kim Sisters when they first arrived in the U.S., Mizuno’s future in the country appeared uncertain, as the text emphasized that Mizuno “hope[d] to make the U.S.A. her new home.” However, unlike Mizuno, The Kim Sisters’ background as Korean performers “rescued” by the U.S. military, and their wholesome image as musical entertainers, meant their inclusion into the U.S., though still tenuous, was more likely.

The Kim Sisters entered the Las Vegas entertainment scene as spirited girls in their late teens. Generally speaking, popular press across the country received

and represented the Kims in two dominant registers of beauty befitting their age and transition from girls to women: cute and sexy. Because of their association with Las Vegas showrooms, as well as their history of performance for American G.I.s in Korea and Japan, where Cold War sex trade economies developed and thrived around U.S. military bases, The Kim Sisters’ sex appeal posed a potential problem for mainstream culture. Many articles and reviews of The Kim Sisters in the popular press made direct appeals to the male viewer by using language like “Oriental magic,” “intoxicating,” and “mischievous” to refer to The Kim Sisters’ sexual allure. Though not as explicitly sexualized as Las Vegas showgirls who performed in shows such as *Holiday in Japan*, The Kim Sisters were nonetheless positioned as femmes with “sexual capital.”¹⁰ Approaching the mid-1960s, the Kims’ increasingly mature, sexualized appearance clashed with the cute, wholesome image they first presented to American audiences on television. Their initial introduction to American audiences built on images of childish innocence and the 1950s appearances of the Korean Children’s Choir, which completed a series of enormously successful tours in the U.S. to raise funds for orphaned children from the war.¹¹ Overall, The Kim Sisters played to the largest demographic in television viewership during the Cold War—middle-aged white women. In the process of Americanization that their television appearances represented, though, the Kims were received within the context of past and ongoing anxieties about Oriental women’s status within the nation via the white nuclear family.

American women had long consumed images of Oriental femmes since at least the nineteenth century, using such images, as Mari Yoshihara argues, to find new forms of gendered and sexual expression, freedom, and power often denied to them in their lives.¹² In the first half of the twentieth century, the legal exclusion of Asian immigration that targeted Asian women, beginning with the Page Act of 1875, and anti-miscegenation laws across the country, contained the more direct threat of Asian femme sexuality within the U.S. However, during the Cold War 1950s and 60s, with the expansion of the U.S. military across Asia and the Pacific and increasing numbers of Asian war brides entering the U.S., many of whom came from Korea, Asian femme sexuality presented a potentially more intimate and immediate threat to the nation. Between fantasies about Asian femme sexuality and white feminine ideals, performers like The Kim Sisters, who garnered much male sexual

attention, entered into “a negotiation of distance and approximation” with evolving gender and sexual ideals.¹³ In other words, the countercultural movement in the 1960s for sexual liberation, as well as the movement for civil rights, largely determined the contours of The Kim Sisters’ career trajectory and their reception by American audiences.

In American mainstream culture, the changing sexual mores of the late 1950s and early 1960s were reflected in visual representations of women’s sexuality in popular Hollywood movies and Broadway plays. Many of these representations involved French culture, settings, and bodies. The year The Kim Sisters arrived in the U.S., the MGM film *Gigi* (1958), about a young white femme in Paris, and still-popular films from the early 1950s *The Girl in a Bikini* (1952) and *The Light Across the Street* (1955), both starring Brigitte Bardot, enticed and drew American audiences to movie theaters across the country. Meanwhile, in Las Vegas, femme sexuality was on display in spectacular live shows such as *Nuit de Paris* (The Dunes), *Follies Bergere* (Desert Inn), and *Le Lido de Paris* (Stardust), which advertised sexy showgirls “imported from Paris... to [its] American home.”¹⁴

Alongside representations of white women’s increasingly liberated sexuality, American popular culture often imagined the Orient in sexualized terms with films such as *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955), *China Doll* (1958), *Sayonara* (1956), and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), starring Nancy Kwan. These Cold War “Orientalist” films imagined an erotic East-West intimacy with white male protagonists adventuring in Asia and the Pacific.¹⁵ In these films, however, the Orient and Oriental women, however, were *over there* and not *here*. With regards to representations and images of domesticated Asian femmes like The Kim Sisters, American producers faced a problem of how best to contain the potential gendered and sexual threat Oriental women in popular culture symbolized. As performers who quickly moved into the national spotlight, while maintaining their ties to Las Vegas’s showroom scene, The Kim Sisters negotiated their presentation of gender and sexuality within and in response to popular movies and plays about white and Oriental women’s increasingly liberated sexuality.

Relatedly, writers and critics often commented explicitly about the role of feminine beauty in securing The Kim Sisters’ place within American culture. As new arrivals in the U.S., with a musical repertoire of American musical favorites, The Kim Sisters possessed

beauty and talent that seemed to promise the Korean femmes cultural, national, and, eventually, legal citizenship. In the February 1959 *Las Vegas Sun*, Ralph Pearl, Las Vegas television host and entertainment critic, wrote, “The best thing we can do to keep the Kim Sisters in America is tear up their passports so they can’t return to South Korea when they are famous and wealthy.”¹⁶ Pearl’s comment expressed an urgency to possess The Kim Sisters, to claim them as citizens. Bentley Stegner, a writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, titled his 1960 write-up of The Kim Sisters, “Korea Captures Us With 3 Cute Kims,” an allusion to guerilla tactics used in the Korean War and suggestion that Oriental cuteness could be powerful and threatening.¹⁷ Across national popular press, the Korean girl group was consistently referred to as “dolls,” “lovelies,” and “maids” whose appearance was irresistible and endearing. Like many articles discussing The Kim Sisters’ beauty, the 1959 *Life Magazine* feature story on the Korean trio highlighted the girls’ feminine virtues. The second half of the article, titled “Fitting into U.S. ways,” described how The Kim Sisters kept the customs of Korean culture, dutifully sending home most of the money they earned, and remaining faithful to a Korean tradition that a “girl should not go out alone until she is 23.”¹⁸ According to the article, Sue, the oldest of the Kim Sisters—who filled the role of parent to sister Ai-ja and cousin Mia—solved the problem of romantic-sexual interest from men by telling men who wanted to take her out after nightclub shows that her younger sisters had to come along too.

In the changing sexual landscape in the U.S., The Kim Sisters were frequently portrayed as sexually conservative and innocent femmes who adopted and assimilated into *some* American values, especially in their love of shopping, while rejecting the more liberal sexual values taking root in the late 1950s and early 60s. Ken Hansen’s report, “Yankee Ways Surprise the Kims Still They’re Game To Try Them” published in the October 16, 1959 *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, emphasized the Korean femmes’ resolve to maintain their sexual and moral innocence even as they tried on American customs. “The girls,” Hansen wrote, “don’t drink, don’t smoke, and don’t date” because though they’ve “become pretty much Americanized,” they follow the Korean tradition that one is not considered an adult until age twenty-three.¹⁹ Hansen’s report painted The Kim Sisters as not only beautiful performers in Cold War America but also new femme citizens from a foreign culture with gender and sexual ideals that clashed with America’s emerging youth and counterculture.

Though today they have been largely forgotten and erased from American public memory, as well as histories of early television and popular music, The Kim Sisters crystallize both a key moment in Cold War American popular culture and postwar U.S.-Korea relations. As beautiful performers who appeared on American television at the height of the Cold War and following the Cold War's first hot conflict, The Kim Sisters helped focus American audiences' attention on the "attractive" qualities of liberal democracy and capitalism—the values of a postwar American empire which were largely secured and shored up in opposition to the threat of Asian communism.²⁰ Along with images of Asians on television news reports about U.S. wars in Asia and the Pacific, the Kims were some of the first Asian faces and bodies to appear on American network television. As Korean femme performers and representatives of the ROK who appeared frequently on American television, The Kim Sisters were important cultural actors that implicitly endorsed postwar U.S. liberal values, even as they signified loss and trauma related to the Korean War.

Television Variety Shows

The Kim Sisters dazzled American audiences on numerous popular variety shows and military comedies on American television during the Cold War 1960s. For their appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in October 1964, The Kim Sisters performed two highly energetic numbers.²¹ In contrast to their debut performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* four years earlier that showcased the girls as innocent teenyboppers, The Kim Sisters' performance in 1964 reflected a more mature, sophisticated feminine style and presentation, which clearly drew from and adapted the iconic image of Suzie Wong. The Kims, all in their early twenties, were attired in their signature costume— sleeveless, fitted Chinese *cheongsam*.²² Their form-fitting sequined dresses were accentuated with glamorous makeup and hair, particularly their dark, heavy eyeliner and sleek pulled-back coiffure. In terms of performance style, the Kims' usual vivacious energy drove the set. For their first number, The Kim Sisters sang "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho," a popular African-American spiritual covered by many American pop artists in the late 1950s, including Elvis Presley. In the late 1950s, the song, originally composed by African slaves in the nineteenth century to celebrate black resilience and resistance, was treated to a rock makeover. The Kim Sisters' jazz-swing rendition, sung in three-part harmony, contained syncopated

rhythms, punctuated visually by the girls' rhythmic body movements. Alternating between medium and tight close-ups, the television studio cameras framed and amplified The Kim Sisters' enthusiastic smiling faces, which broadcast their mastery of and excitement for American musical culture.

At the same time, The Kim Sisters' performance of "Joshua" reflected an anxious negotiation of Korean domestic inclusion into the nation. The collision of young and beautiful Korean performers with the Cold War nation, during a time of civil rights struggle and the youth countercultural movement, was all the more noticeable given the episode's other musical act—The Rolling Stones. On the one hand, the girls offered an impressive performance of a well-known American song with African-American origins, thus earning them *honorary whiteness*²³; however, on the other hand, for popular music in the early to mid 1960s influenced by rock n' roll, folk, and soul, "Joshua" lacked the cool factor of songs performed by British Invasion groups such as The Rolling Stones and The Beatles, as well as popular American girl groups such as The Supremes and The Ronettes. By the early 1960s, the swing and big-band musical styles The Kim Sisters performed were quickly falling out of fashion, as youth tastes had become decidedly more rock n' roll. Appealing instead to an older demographic, The Kim Sisters' television performances, epitomized by their rendition of "Joshua" on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964, retained and relied on the stylistic qualities of vaudeville performance that placed them out of sync with 1960s youth culture.

Like many of their appearances on television variety shows, the Kims' set began with a performance that aimed to demonstrate proficiency and fluency in American music before ascending to a musical climax that demonstrated the Kims' willingness to work for and earn their place within American culture. Their second number, "When The Saints Go Marching In," the famous marching song commonly associated with parades and other celebrations of victory, clearly illustrated the Kim Sisters' enormous musical talent and labor. When Sullivan introduced the Kims' performance of "Saints," he stressed their *mastery* of the bagpipes, which they had learned at Sullivan's request only a few weeks before their appearance on the show. The girls, still in *cheongsam* but with the addition of Scottish berets, performed "Saints" as bandleaders flanked by a marching, twenty-piece Scottish cavalry—The Glen Eagle Pipers from Long Island—attired in traditional kilt and bearskin hats. The staging of this grand musical

performance granted the girls authority over the brigade by positioning them as the bandleaders and main musical performers. At the center of this visual spectacle, the young Korean femmes' bodies, adorned in ethnic costume while performing American music, drew attention to processes of racial assimilation in Cold War American culture.

One way that the Kims were consistently framed as racial and ethnic performers on television, and thus national culture, was through the construction and presentation of kinship. From their first performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1960 to their last in 1967, The Kim Sisters—the only frequently recurring Asian American act on the show in the 1960s—approximated the status of virtual family members and adopted sisters and daughters to the American public via entertainment producers like Sullivan, whom the Kims called *papa*.²⁴ Sullivan's paternalism—the fact that he credited himself with saving the girls from their destitute lives in postwar Korea—reinforced a notion that the U.S. often protected Asian women from the harms of communism during the Cold War.²⁵ On another popular television variety show, *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show* (1956-1963), The Kim Sisters were similarly presented as rescued and adopted performers.²⁶ Dinah Shore, who famously sang a Chevy jingle and a song about maternal love on the show, had long been a popular feminine figure in American popular culture since the 1940s.²⁷ Given Shore's image as America's sweetheart and eventually ideal white mother, the Kims' appearances on the show took on a mother-daughter quality, combining the group's dazzling energetic style with visual and musical representations of interracial kinship.

The medley of songs The Kim Sisters performed for their first appearance on *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show* in 1960 typified the kind of performance that made the group a success when they first arrived in the U.S. The girls, wearing sleeveless bright blue silk *cheongsam* with white flowers, opened their set with "China Nights" ("Shina No Yoru"). For their performance of the song, a favorite of American G.I.s stationed in Korea during the war, the girls twirled blue-and-white spiraled parasols—blending Korean, Japanese, and Chinese racial and cultural symbols. For their next number in the medley, "Bill Bailey," sung in English, the girls donned black top hats and carried canes, which were lowered by wire to the stage. Snapping their fingers and patting their thighs, the girls sang a swing-jazz version of the well-known tune, a song made famous by vaudeville performers in the 1920s before being re-popularized in the 1950s.

Shore prefaced The Kim Sisters' performance by telling audiences that you would never know they "don't speak English well" and they "still don't understand what they're saying." In her comment about the Kims' English language ability—like Ed Sullivan, Shore stressed how it was the G.I.s who *taught* the Kim Sisters how to sing—Shore evoked an image of a white mother explaining her adopted Korean children's progress at language assimilation.

Toward the end of the episode, The Kim Sisters performed in a Broadway medley alongside Dinah Shore and guest performers Sally Ann Howes and Andy Williams. The medley included songs—a little "marquee shopping" Shore quipped—from *Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady*, *Gypsy*, and *Flower Drum Song*. For this finale, The Kim Sisters wore pink *cheongsam* while singing the number "Chop Suey" from the popular musical *The Flower Drum Song* based on C.Y. Lee's novel about San Francisco's Chinese American community. As the medley moved into the final song, "Take Me Along with You," Sue, Ai-Ja, and Mia walked downstage holding hands before sitting on stage stools nearest the television camera. A chorus of around twenty Broadway performers quickly joined the girls, standing behind and around them. In this "family portrait," The Kim Sisters were positioned visually as the adopted Korean children of Shore and the large extended family of white stage performers who surrounded them. Such an image endorsed a liberal hope for racial inclusion and the promise of a multicultural democracy in Cold War America.

Conclusion: Try to Remember

The Kim Sisters' appearance in popular culture at the height of the Cold War highlighted both the growing desire in the U.S. to adopt orphaned Korean children, especially girls, and the far more anxious inclusion of Asian women into the nation. As "adopted" performers in their late teens—and beautiful young women from a famous musical family in Korea—The Kim Sisters problematized the ideal conditions of childish innocence that were used to encourage Korean transnational adoptions after the war. The Kims appeared and disappeared from American screen and scene in the crucial interim period of two wars in Asia (Korean War and Vietnam War), a time when "positive" representations of a U.S. military presence in and control of Asia and the Pacific functioned to normalize such dominance. On American television variety shows, the combination of Orientalism and the presentation

of the Kims as adopted performers joining with and assimilating into American culture helped to obscure the unsightliness of The Korean War. Ultimately, as American culture began to bury the Korean War deep within the American psyche,²⁸ so too did The Kim Sisters' stunning talent and success become largely erased from public memory.

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About the Author

Danielle Seid is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Oregon, where she researches and teaches film and media history. Her current book project explores the relationship between Asian/American women performers, feminine beauty, U.S. imperialism in Asia and the Pacific, and network television. In addition to her scholarship on racial icons and Asian/American performers in popular culture, she also writes about queer and trans representation in literature, film, and new media, particularly how such representations are mediated by race, ethnicity, and class. Her recent publications include articles in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Amerasia Journal*, and a collection titled *Race and Cinema*.



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