

# **SOUTH KOREAN HISTORICAL DRAMA: GENDER, NATION AND THE HERITAGE INDUSTRY**

**Yun Mi Hwang**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
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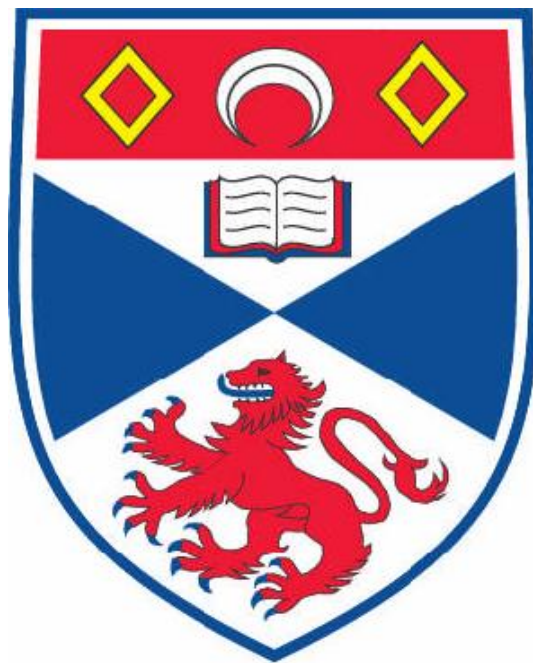
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GENDER, NATION AND  
THE HERITAGE INDUSTRY**

**YUN MI HWANG**

Thesis Submitted to the University of St Andrews  
for the Degree of PhD in Film Studies



**2011**

## DECLARATIONS

I, Yun Mi Hwang, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in September 2006; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2006 and 2010.

I, Yun Mi Hwang, received assistance in the writing of this thesis in respect of language and grammar, which was provided by R.A.M Wright.

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## ABSTRACT

From the dynamic landscape of contemporary South Korean cinema, one trend that stands out is the palpable revival of the historical drama (known as the ‘*sageuk*’ in Korean). Since the early 2000s, expensive, visually striking, and successful costumed pieces have been showcased to the audience. Now rivalling the other mainstream genres such as gangster action, romantic comedy, and the Korean blockbuster, the *sageuk* has made an indelible impact on the national film industry. Even so, the cycle has yet to receive much critical attention. This thesis addresses the gap, driven by the question, what is the impetus behind the surge of the ‘historical’ witnessed in recent *sageuk* films?

For this, I first take a diachronic view of the historical context of the genre, which later serves as the reference point for the genre memory. Adopting a synchronic approach, I then examine the industrial, political, and social contexts in Korea at the turn of the new century that facilitated the history boom. While national memory and transnational politics fuelled Koreans’ interest in their past, the popular media – cinema, television, publishing industry, and performance theatre – all capitalised on this drive. The government also took part by supporting the ‘culture content industry’ as a way to fashion an attractive national image and accelerate the cultural export system. Collectively, these efforts translated to the emergence of history as a commodity, carving a unique space for historical narratives in the national heritage industry. As such, different agents – the consumers, the industry, and the state – had their stakes in the national mobilisation of history and memory with competing ideological and commercial interests. Ultimately, the *sageuk* is the primary site in which these diverging aspirations and desires are played out.

In chapters that follow, I engage with four main sub-types of the recent historical drama, offering textual and contextual readings. The main discussion includes the ‘fusion’ *sageuk* (*Untold Scandal*), the biopic (*King and the Clown* and *Portrait of a Beauty*), the heritage horror (*Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace*), and the colonial period drama (*Rikidozan*, *Blue Swallow* and *Modern Boy*). While analysing the generic tropes and narrative themes of each film, I also pay attention to contemporary discourses of gender, and the cultural treatment of masculinity and femininity within the period setting. Such investigation, in turn, locates the place of the historical genre in New Korean Cinema, and thus, offers a much-needed intervention into one of the neglected topics in the study of cinematic trends in South Korea.

## TABLE OF CONTENT

ABSTRACT.....	i
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
A Note to the Reader.....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
The <i>Sageuk</i> : The Question of Genre .....	4
Literature Review .....	14
Methods of Research .....	29
Chapter Breakdown .....	32
PART I CONTEXTS.....	35
CHAPTER ONE The <i>Sageuk</i> in a Historical Context.....	36
Folkloric Adaptations in the Colonial Period: 1923 – 1939 .....	39
The Golden Age of the <i>Sageuk</i> : 1955 – 1967 .....	44
National Heroes on Screen: 1973 – 1979 .....	53
Erotic Period Drama: 1982 – 1987 .....	58
A Decade of Hiatus: The 1990s .....	66
Conclusion .....	69
CHAPTER TWO Mapping the Field: The <i>Sageuk</i> in the 2000s .....	71
New Historical Drama: Fusion <i>Sageuk</i> and Faction Films.....	73
Politicised Histories: At Home and Abroad .....	86
Consuming the Past: The Co-evolution of Historical Fictions .....	94
Korea Creative Content Agency and the Heritage Commodity Cycle .....	106
Conclusion .....	123
PART II HERITAGE AND INDUSTRY .....	125
CHAPTER THREE Imagining a New (Cinematic) Heritage: Fusion <i>Sageuk</i> .....	126
<i>Untold Scandal</i> .....	128
Rupturing the Cinematic Heritage of the <i>Sageuk</i> .....	134
Theorising Fusion <i>Sageuk</i> : Well-made, High Concept and Heritage .....	144
Conclusion .....	161
CHAPTER FOUR Recycling A Historical Life: The Biopic.....	162
<i>King and the Clown</i> .....	169
<i>Portrait of a Beauty</i> .....	187
Conclusion .....	204
PART III TRAUMA AND MEMORY.....	208
CHAPTER FIVE Allegories of the Purge: Heritage Horrors .....	209

History, Horror and National Allegory: Purging the Past Campaign.....	213
<i>Blood Rain</i> .....	222
<i>Shadows in the Palace</i> .....	236
Revising Female Ghost Horror and Royal Court <i>Sageuk</i> .....	244
Conclusion .....	250
CHAPTER SIX Memory and (Trans-) National Imperatives: Colonial Period Drama	
Recent Trends in Colonial Representation.....	254
<i>Rikidozan: A Hero Extraordinary</i> .....	257
<i>Blue Swallow</i> .....	275
<i>Modern Boy</i> .....	297
Conclusion .....	316
CONCLUSION.....	318
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	322
FILMOGRAPHY.....	348

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FIG. 1 <i>The Servant</i> .....	1
FIG. 2 <i>Spinning the Tales of Cruelty</i> .....	63
FIG. 3 The Last Image of Ok-nyeo .....	64
FIG. 4 <i>Mulberry Tree</i> (left) vs. <i>Surrogate Mother</i> (right) .....	65
FIG. 5 Fusion Costume in <i>Forbidden Quest</i> .....	76
FIG. 6 <i>Damo</i> (left) and <i>The Duelist</i> (right) .....	100
FIG. 7 The Royal Court in <i>King and the Clown</i> .....	114
FIG. 8 Reconstructed Gyeongbok Palace.....	114
FIG. 9 The Images of the Autopsy (Left) and <i>Blood Rain</i> (Right) .....	116
FIG. 10 Heritage Commodity Cycle .....	120
FIG. 11 Consumable Heritage.....	122
FIG. 12 Travelling Fish Soup .....	131
FIG. 13 Man in Nature: <i>Chihwaseon</i> .....	147
FIG. 14 Standardisation of <i>Sageuk</i> Posters .....	148
FIG. 15 The Mise-en-scène of Circumscription.....	155
FIG. 16 Jowon and Lady Jeong's Walk .....	158
FIG. 17 <i>Seopyeonje</i> : the Blind Song-hwa Sings under a Waterfall.....	159
FIG. 18 Colouring the Life of Hwang Jinyi: The Film vs. Television Drama .....	166
FIG. 19 The Feminine Masculinity: Gong-gil in Promotion Materials .....	181
FIG. 20 The Musical: <i>The Story of Gong-gil</i> .....	182
FIG. 21 <i>King and the Clown</i> Merchandise.....	184
FIG. 22 The Lavish Sex in <i>Portrait of a Beauty</i> .....	198
FIG. 23 The 'Poster' of a Beauty .....	200
FIG. 24 The <i>Vogue</i> Campaign: <i>Marie Antoinette</i> (left) and <i>Hwang Jin Yi</i> (right)....	206
FIG. 25 A Picture from the Cheongwon Massacre Excavation Site .....	220
FIG. 26 The Introduction of Won-gyu.....	225
FIG. 27 The Allegorical Moment: Won-gyu inside the Paper Mill.....	232
FIG. 28 The <i>Noir</i> -ish Interrogation Room in <i>Shadows</i> .....	239
FIG. 29 <i>The Evil Twin</i> : The Traditional Iconography of a Female Ghost.....	242
FIG. 30 <i>Rikidozan</i> : The Inscription of Self .....	265
FIG. 31 Park Gyeong-won holding the Japanese Flag:.....	288
FIG. 32 Commemorating Park Gyeong-won .....	295
FIG. 33 <i>Modern Boy</i> : Fancy Dining in Colonial Seoul.....	301
FIG. 34 The Uncanny Revival of the Sungnye Gate.....	307
FIG. 35 The Seoul Station Building in <i>Modern Boy</i> .....	308
FIG. 36 The Digitally Recreated Japanese General-Government Building:.....	310
TABLE 1. The Major <i>Sageuk</i> Cycles in the 2000s .....	11
TABLE 2. The List of <i>Sageuk</i> Films Released in the 2000s.....	74



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## A Note to the Reader

This thesis follows MHRA bibliographic convention in the footnote reference and the bibliography. All quotations from English-language sources, including Internet materials, preserve original punctuation and spelling. English translations taken from Korean-language material are my own unless stated otherwise. Korean words have been transcribed according to the ‘Revised Romanization of Korean’ adopted by the South Korean government in 2000 (i.e. *Joseon* not *Chosun* and Gwangju not Kwangju). In the main body of the text, Korean names, together with any Chinese and Japanese names, are presented family name first then (sometimes) hyphenated and mono-capitalised given name, in accordance with local practice. I have also used the established convention for well-known names (e.g. Park Chung Hee). I refer to *Korean Film Database Book 1995-2008* for English translation of film titles and spelling of the names of the actors, directors, and producers. For film titles and personal names not listed in the *Database*, I searched KOFA’s KMDb and used the translation and spelling provided there. For any other Korean names – those of scholars and critics as well as the film characters – I have transcribed them myself using the official Romanisation rule, unless I was able to find an individual preference for spelling (e.g. Kim Soyoung). ‘National Institute of the Korean Language’ published the ‘Standard Romanization of Family Name’ in 25 June 2009, giving guidance on how Korean family names should be written. Their suggestions, at times, greatly differ from common practice (i.e. Yi instead of Lee, Bak instead of Park). Even though some spellings look unfamiliar or even unusual, I have adopted their recommendations, mainly for consistency’s sake. My frequent use of ‘Korea’ refers to The Republic of Korea (or South Korea) and not

the entire Korean peninsula. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is referred to as North Korea. Monetary values are expressed in GBP, except in cases where I refer to direct quotations. The international currency rate, at the time of writing, between Britain and Korea is  $1 \text{ GBP} = 2,000 \text{ KRW}$ .

## INTRODUCTION

*The Servant* (Kim Dae-woo, 2010) is a South Korean costume drama that shrewdly reworks the classic romance ‘A Tale of Chunhyang’. Instead of dramatising the inter-class love story of Chunhyang and her upper-class *beau*, Mong-ryong, the film foregrounds the manservant Bangja as Mong-ryong’s accomplice and rival, who thwarts his master’s plan to get the girl and rise to fame. The film wryly suggests that the story of Chunhyang, as we know it, can work if, and only if, the three characters

### FIG. 1 *The Servant*

sustain their *ménage-à-trois*, despite their conflicting interests and desires. Peeling a layer away from the surface of a quintessential folk tale, the film enacts the acute tensions and multifaceted motivations involved in the making of Chunhyang saga. Such discursive tensions are also emblematic of the ‘history boom’ that presently storms South Korea, where different key agents – the consumers, the industry, and the state – raise their stakes in the national mobilisation of history and memory, with competing ideological and commercial interests.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the historical drama,

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<sup>1</sup> I am here influenced by the methodological approach mentioned in the ‘Introduction’ to *Cultural Studies and Cultural Industries in Northeast Asia*. Here the authors investigate the ‘equitably balanced triangulation of power among three key actors: the nation, the market, and the individual’ in studying the Northeast Asian region and its culture. See Chris Berry, Nicola Liscutin, and Jonathan D. Mackintosh, eds., *Cultural Studies and Cultural Industries in Northeast Asia: What a Difference a Region Makes* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), p. 2.

also known as the '*sageuk*' in Korean, is the primary site in which these diverging aspirations and desires are played out.

'South Korean Historical Drama: Gender, Nation and the Heritage Industry' concerns South Korean *sageuk* films of the 2000s. The genre has seen a palpable revival in this period where expensive, visually striking, and successful costumed pieces have been showcased to the audience. Now rivalling the other mainstream genres such as gangster action, romantic comedy, and the Korean blockbuster, the historical drama has made an indelible impact on the national film industry. Even so, the cycle has yet to receive much critical attention. I address this gap, driven by the question, what is the impetus behind the surge of the 'historical' witnessed in recent *sageuk* films?

In this Introduction, I delineate the corpus of the study by defining the *sageuk* genre, which involves an integrated discussion on Korean cinema and the theories of genre. I then review the critical literature on Korean historical drama to position myself in the existing scholarship. By doing so, I investigate the place of the *sageuk* in New Korean Cinema and reflect the discourse that surrounds the national cinema.

Once pejoratively considered 'an anomaly, a "hermit cinema"' that is 'essentially [...] disconnected from other national cinemas',<sup>2</sup> South Korean cinema has witnessed a phenomenal growth in the past decade or so. By successfully defending its domestic market from Hollywood, enthusiastically promoting its *auteurs* on the international film circuit, while still effectively disseminating the Korean Wave/*hallyu*, Korean cinema is indeed experiencing a 'renaissance'. As

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<sup>2</sup> David E. James, 'Art/Film/Art Film: *Chihwaseon* and Its Cinematic Contexts', *Film Quarterly*, 59.2 (2006), p. 4.

noted, one trend that stands out from the dynamic landscape of Korean cinema is the rise of the *sageuk*. After a decade-long period of lapse, the year 2003 marked a watershed moment for the genre when five medium-to-high budget historical dramas appeared at the local cinemas, some achieving notable critical and financial success. The *sageuk* boom soon reached its epitome when *King and the Clown* (Lee Joon-ik, 2005) attracted an audience of more than twelve million nationwide, making it the second highest grossing film in the history of Korean cinema. Such phenomenal success prompted the filmmakers to be more interested in venturing into and making sense of the past.

Surveying the *sageuk* trend of the 1960s Golden Age, film historian Lee Ho-geol concludes that ‘the past recreated through historical drama was [...] based on the demands of the times and closely related with the prevailing ideology’.<sup>3</sup> The present reflects upon the past while the past illuminates the present in the *sageuk*, channelling an array of aspirations and anxieties into an enclosed historical space. If historical drama is an effective lens by which to look at society, as Lee implies, how has the past ‘been rethought and dramatized in a contemporary idiom’ in the textual level, and further, what is the wider contextual implication of the current resurgence?<sup>4</sup> But before I engage with these questions, I first discuss what the *sageuk* is and how it is configured as a cinematic genre.

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<sup>3</sup> Ho-geol Lee, ‘Korean Cinema in the 1970s’, in *A History of Korean Cinema: From 1970s through 1990s* (Seoul: Korean Film Archive, 2006), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 4.

## The *Sageuk*: The Question of Genre

In this section, I define the scope of the thesis by examining the taxonomical issues surrounding the *sageuk*, examining genre discourse from both English and Korean sources. ‘*Sa*’(史) derives from the word ‘history’(*yeok-sa*), while ‘*geuk*’(劇) is synonymous with drama, play, or film. And if one overlooks the dangers of literal translation for the sake of brevity, ‘*sageuk*’ can be translated as ‘historical drama’ in English. Simply put, the *sageuk* now has the currency to mean any film or television drama that is set in the past. What becomes immediately apparent is that *sageuk* as a genre is, by definition, temporally restricted to a certain period. According to Barry Keith Grant, elements of genre include: conventions, iconography, setting, stories and themes, characters, actors and stars, and viewers and audiences.<sup>5</sup> For the historical genre, the setting – the physical space and temporal setting in the past – is one of the foremost generic aspects.

How to define this ‘past’, however, does not always yield a satisfactory or consensual answer. While Yi Gil-seong notes that the term *sageuk* usually does not apply to films depicting the Japanese occupation period (1910-1945), Yi Byeong-hun, in his original research on television *sageuk*, sets the time frame from ancient history to the end of the colonial era (circa 1945).<sup>6</sup> What can be easily overlooked in such clear-cut definitions is the fact that ‘historical drama’, by nature, is always in transition as the notion of the past changes over time. This means, for instance, the perception of the ‘historical’ to a present-day audience will naturally differ from that

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<sup>5</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* (London: Wallflower, 2007), p. 9-22.

<sup>6</sup> Gil-seong Yi, ‘The *Sageuk* and the Issue of Historical Perception’, in *The Scenery of Modernity: Korean Film History and Production Design*, ed. by Sun-ha Cha (Seoul: Sodo, 2001), p. 276. Byeong-hun Yi, ‘The Transformation of Television *Sageuk*’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, Hanyang University, 1997), p. 11.



of an audience of the 1960s.

What is more, this short definition of the *sageuk* does not account for the films that are set in an unspecified past, where the period setting often functions as a backdrop, allowing other generic tropes to emerge, such as martial arts, melodrama, romance, war, or ghosts and monsters. This point leads to the issue of ‘historical thinking’, a debate frequently summarised as ‘history’ vs. ‘costume’. Drawing examples from Hollywood, Robert Burgoyne contrasts the historical film with the costume drama and period romance, because the former is ‘centered on documentable historical events, directly referring to historical occurrences through [its] main plotlines’.<sup>7</sup> If so, the historical film asserts a degree of reverence in the way it approaches indexical history, while the costume/period drama strives for a perfect iconography of the times, placing emphasis on aesthetic pleasures even at the expense of historical accuracy. The idea that costume drama falsifies history and therefore should be distinguished from a *proper* history film has plagued the study of the genre, even though scholars like Pam Cook and J.E. Smyth have demonstrated that extravagant costume pieces also articulate their historicity by exploring the issues of nation, identity, and gender.<sup>8</sup>

Similar deference to ‘history proper’ permeates the study of historical genre in the Korean context where *yeoksa-geuk* (history drama) and *sidae-geuk* (period drama) are specified at either end of historical truth-value. For An Jinsoo, the period drama film is ‘constituted by folkloric and fictional stories set in an indeterminate pre-modern time-frame’, while the historical drama film ‘derives its narratives from

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<sup>7</sup> Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> See *Gainsborough Pictures*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: Cassell, 1997) and J.E. Smyth, *Edna Ferber's Hollywood: American Fictions of Gender, Race, and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009)

specific and official histories of the nation.<sup>9</sup> However, the widely held view on ‘history vs. costume/period’ that charts across different national cinemas is far from conclusive because all film texts are founded on the very tension between past truths and liberal imagination, albeit in varying degrees. This is why Marcia Landy warns us that the dogmatic adherence to fidelity may fall into the danger of undermining ‘the complex ways in which the visual image functions as history’.<sup>10</sup> Her argument resonates with Hayden White’s influential study on ‘historiography’ and ‘historiophoty’ which has been useful in appreciating how the visual medium ‘cinema’ has its own way of selecting, interpreting, and realising history on screen (historiophoty) that differs from the ‘representation of history in verbal images and written discourse’ (historiography).<sup>11</sup> What is more, the ways in which the audience arrives at a historical understanding is a different matter altogether, which involves a complex decoding process while relying on existing intertextual matrices. This issue of historical intertexts is further discussed in Chapter One.

Then, how does the *sageuk* come to be figured as a film genre? To answer this question, I analyse Lee Young-il’s observation of Korean genre formation during the 1960s Golden Age period. A renowned Korean film scholar, Lee notes that if a film attracted an audience of 30,000 or more, it became a model that later films would replicate. And it was through such a process that the *sageuk* and melodrama

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<sup>9</sup> Jinsoo An, ‘Popular Reasoning of South Korean Melodrama Films (1953-1972)’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California: Los Angeles, 2005), p. 64. Also see Yeong-suk O, *Korean Cinema and the Cultural Discourse in the 1950s* (Seoul: Somyeong Publishing, 2007), p. 110. As a generic term, *sidae-geuk* (period drama) is also used as a counterpart to *hyeondae-geuk* (contemporary drama). Interestingly, the Japanese pair *jidaigeki* (period drama) and *gendai-geki* (modern drama) are also based on the same Chinese characters.

<sup>10</sup> Marcia Landy, ‘Introduction’, in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. by Marcia Landy (London: Athlone Press, 2001), p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Hayden White, ‘Historiography and Historiophoty’, *The American Historical Review*, 935 (December 1988), p. 1193.

emerged as a genre because they could secure and retain committed audiences.<sup>12</sup> Lee goes on to argue that unlike melodrama which appeared ‘continuously’ (*yeonsokjeok*) throughout history, the *sageuk* is an ‘intermittent’ (*dansokjeok*) genre in nature.<sup>13</sup> His words illuminate various aspects of Korean cinema and genre; accordingly, I unpack his ideas in relation to the debates on genre theory developed in Western academia.

Firstly, it is telling that he focuses on the emergence of genre in Korea during the 1960s. If in the studio-driven Classical Hollywood period, the experimentation and repetition of successful formulas led to the formation of the classical narrative style as well as certain genres, such as the Western, in South Korea, the industrialisation and systematic changes brought upon the ‘cottage-style film industry’ in the 1960s paved the way for the rise of film genre, especially melodrama and historical drama.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the standardisation in filmmaking and mass-production of popular movies in the early 1960s helped the industry to come up with and make use of consolidated and specific generic formulas.

Secondly, Lee points out that the audience response to certain types of films and formulas, by way of attendance receipts, prompted the industry to develop and pursue the genre system specific to South Korea. Lee’s words echo the notion that genre criticism should acknowledge the triangulation of the industry, the film text, and the role of the audience; the last of which is often forgotten in traditional structuralist approaches to genre.<sup>15</sup> As Steve Neale argues, genres consists not only

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<sup>12</sup> Young-il Lee, *The History of Korean Cinema* (Seoul: Sodo, 2004), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). Soyoung Kim, ‘Questions of Woman’s Film: *The Maid*, *Madame Freedom*, and Women’, in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre and National Cinema*, ed. by Nancy Abelmann and Kathleen McHugh (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), p 185.

<sup>15</sup> Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 11.

of films but also of ‘specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process’; the process of dialogue between the producer, the text, and the consumer gives direction to generic formation.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, by comparing and contrasting melodrama and the *sageuk* as ‘continuous’ and ‘intermittent’ genres respectively, Lee discursively endorses the evolutionary model of generic development in Korean cinema. Ever since Thomas Schatz proposed a life cycle of a genre beginning with a ‘transparent’ stage to an ‘opaque’ and mature phase, scholars have been interested in the transformations of genre over time.<sup>17</sup> Although Lee does not specify the stages involved in the generic development of melodrama and historical drama, he alludes to the fact that the ‘intermittent’ *sageuk* would resurface periodically, in different generic guises, triggered by institutional or industrial reasons.

Lastly, further to this, he reveals that the *sageuk* as a genre has a volatile position in the history of Korean cinema. By highlighting the ‘uninterrupted’ existence of melodrama, unlike *sageuk*, Lee acknowledges ‘melodrama’ as the representative genre of South Korean cinema. In fact, the generic status of melodrama has been strengthened by the prolific scholarship on the topic. For instance, Abelmann and McHugh, in their edited collection *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama* (2005), argue that melodrama, more precisely melodramatic mode and sensibility, is best equipped to address the convoluted historical context of the

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<sup>16</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 36-41. Other works that update the evolutionary model are: John G. Cawelti, ‘*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films’, in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003) and Tag Gallagher, ‘Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the “Evolution” of the Western’, in *Film Genre Reader III*.

nation. They note the following:

[I]nstead of maintaining generic boundaries between the realistic and the melodramatic, between lived experience and fictional narrative, South Korean cinema construes melodrama as the most efficacious mode of realism.<sup>18</sup>

The discourse of melodrama's dominance in the Korean cinema has left a lingering impact in both academia and in the industry. Jason Mittell observes that 'genres are not intrinsic to texts' but 'are constituted by the processes' of labelling by external forces and elements.<sup>19</sup> If I apply this notion to Korea, when stamping a generic label to a film text, one which may contain a variety of formulas and hybrid conventions, the *dominant* melodrama is often brought in first to account for the film. An apt example to illustrate this point is the cinematic adaptations of the period folk tale 'A Tale of Chunhyang'. Calling Shin Sang-ok's 1961 film *Seong Chunhyang* a melodramatic romance and not *sageuk*, Lee Hyangjin adds the following:

Another sub-genre of melodrama is historical romance. Such films are typically set in a pre-modern Korean society. A close reading of a series of historical romances, however, reveals that *there is virtually no difference between this category and contemporary melodrama, except for that of temporal setting*. They both tend to focus on women's love affairs in their plot, treating the plights of 'wayward' women from a sympathetic perspective.<sup>20</sup> (emphasis mine)

Lee's subjugation of the *sageuk* by melodrama is typical of genre analysis in Korea, where the denigration of the primarily historic mode is prevalent, to the benefit of the ubiquitous melodrama. The overvaluation of melodrama and under-

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<sup>18</sup> Nancy Abelman and Kathleen McHugh, 'Introduction', in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Jason Mittell, 'A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory', *Cinema Journal*, 40.3 (Spring 2001), p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 59.

appreciation of the *sageuk* has led to a situation where many clearly period-set films have been all but *hijacked* by different genres, leaving the *sageuk* hollow and even indefinable. The present study, therefore, begins by acknowledging the complicated generic status of the historical drama in relation to melodrama, before moving on to the difficult task of drawing the genre boundary.

Embracing the issues pertaining to both ‘history’ and ‘costume’, I understand that the *sageuk* functions like a ‘supra-genre’, accommodating a vast number of films under its umbrella. Due to its expansive usage, other generic labels and sub-designations have been brought in to append a more specific meaning to each film text. ‘The *sageuk* traditionally has been a popular film genre throughout the colonial period and in the post-liberation period’, maintains Lee Young-il, who summarises the main strands of the 1960s historical drama as ‘the *sageuk* melodrama, royal court *sageuk* (*gungjung sageuk*), *sageuk* action, and the heroic biopic’.<sup>21</sup> His classification would serve as a basis for future studies of the genre. At the same time, if one considers Steve Neale’s notion that a genre is ‘always historically relative, and therefore historically specific’, it is not difficult to see how the generic landscape of the *sageuk* has evolved since the 1960s. Indeed, its categories have multiplied, from adaptations of the literary canon (*munye yeonghwa*) to period erotica.<sup>22</sup> Different sub-types and cycles would emerge and disappear throughout the history of Korean cinema and TABLE 1. introduces the type of *sageuks* that are in demand at present. What the inventory of labels indicates is not only the slippery nature of the *sageuk* but also the sign of its resilience and versatility, which has had both a positive and an adverse effect on the genre as an object of critical inquiry.

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<sup>21</sup> Young-il Lee, *The History of Korean Cinema*, p. 378.

<sup>22</sup> Steve Neale, ‘Questions of Genre’, *Screen*, 31.1 (1990), p. 58.

**TABLE 1. The Major *Sageuk* Cycles in the 2000s<sup>23</sup>**

The <i>Sageuk</i>					
Action	Fusion Melodrama (Chap. 3)	The Biopic (Chap. 4)	Mystery/ Horror (Chap. 5)	Colonial Period Drama (Chap. 6)	Erotica (Chap. 3&4)
<i>The Divine Weapon</i> (2008)	<i>Forbidden Quest</i> (2006)	<i>Chihwaseon</i> (2002)	<i>The Evil Twin</i> (2006)	<i>Private Eye</i> (2009)	<i>The Tale of Legendary Libido</i> (2008)

In contemplating the genre status of historical film, Marnie Hughes-Warrington laments that stamping a coherent generic convention seems like ‘a tall order, if not impossible’ and that boundary drawing refers back to the ‘nebulous nature of the concept of genre itself’.<sup>24</sup> Due to such confusion, the issue of standardisation posts problems in the official Korean cinema discourse. The government-affiliated Korean Film Archive (KOFA) operates an online ‘Korean Movie Database’, which is available in both English and Korean.<sup>25</sup> Under its directory groupings, ten genres are listed together with thirty-three different sub-genres.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, there seems to be little consistency when it comes to labelling historical drama/*sageuk*. A period horror, *Shadows in the Palace* (Kim Mi-jeong, 2007) is classified as ‘Mystery’ while the champion of new *sageuk*, *King and the Clown* is under ‘Drama’. Unlike *Modern Boy* (Jung Ji-woo, 2008) and *Private Eye* (Park Dae-min, 2009) which are appropriately listed under ‘Historical Drama’, another colonial period film, *Blue Swallow* (Yoon Jong-chan, 2005) is located in the group ‘Drama’. Such is the extent of the genre confusion that a cultural historian Yi

<sup>23</sup> Note that a film can be explained by using several different labels. For instance, *A Frozen Flower* (Yoo Ha, 2008) is a ‘royal court drama’ with ample ‘erotic’ elements that depicts the story of a historical king (hence, ‘the biopic’).

<sup>24</sup> Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 36-37.

<sup>25</sup> See <[www.kmdb.or.kr/eng](http://www.kmdb.or.kr/eng)> for the English version.

<sup>26</sup> The ten genres are: Action, Drama, Comedy, Gangster, Historical Drama, Horror, Melodrama, Musical, Sci-fi, and Western.

Yeong-hui claimed that from the industry's point of view, the presence of a visual marker, the *hanbok* (a traditional Korean costume) is enough to label a film a 'historical' drama.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the genre lends itself particularly well to iconographic interpretation, fittingly grounded in the viscosity of the film medium.

Although I am aware of the limits of boundary-drawing given the unsatisfactory nature of the exercise demonstrated above, I clarify my usage of the *sageuk* in order to avoid any conceptual confusion and delimit the corpus of this thesis. For the purpose of this study, I define the *sageuk*/historical drama as a blanket word to mean any (South) Korean feature films that deal with the past, from the antiquity till the end of the colonial period. While the methodological aim of this thesis does not concern the issue of fidelity and veracity, I have however limited the corpus to the films where the historical background is intrinsic to the narrative. This is to push aside other genre films, such as period martial arts *Shadowless Sword* (Kim Young-jun, 2005) and action comedy *Romantic Warriors* (Youn JK, 2003). While interesting texts in their own way, these films invite an additional study of the action/*wuxia* genre and therefore divert my focus, which is the re-imagining of the national past in the *sageuk* genre and the contingent historical discourses that surround it. In addition, the critically acclaimed period films by Im Kwon-taek, such as *Chunhyang* (2000) and *Chihwaseon* (2002), are not included in the main discussion because these films are a manifestation of Im's continued artistic endeavours and, therefore, are at a distance from the more populist and commercially oriented historical dramas that I investigate here.

To conclude, I specify the process by which I have chosen the films

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<sup>27</sup> Yeong-hui Yi, '1950s *Sageuk*', *KOFA Webzine: Cinema Paradise*, 1 (May-June 2008), p. 54.



discussed in this thesis. The first step was to gather all historical/period dramas produced in the 2000s in South Korea, which is summarised in TABLE 2. From that list, I then identified four dominant sub-cycles of the recent *sageuk*, presented in TABLE 1. They are ‘fusion melodrama’, ‘the biopic’, ‘mystery/horror’, and ‘colonial period drama’. While doing so, I have excluded the martial arts films and Im Kwon-taek films for the reasons explained above. From each sub-cycle, I have selected one to three films that best represent that given category, in the sense that the films contain clear generic and iconographic conventions while also raising interesting questions of gender and sexuality. In all, I have selected eight films to give an overview of the *sageuk* boom while still tracing the standardisation and variation of the genre. By isolating and examining both textual and contextual properties relevant to recent historical drama, I am practicing the role of an agent myself, constituting a film cycle by including certain titles and excluding others. Ideally then, this thesis contributes to the study of the *sageuk* as a genre in two ways. Firstly, it recuperates a marginalised genre, shedding new light on Korean cinema and the genre system. Secondly, it demonstrate how the emergence of new *sageuk* as a cinematic cycle is an instance of a discursively integrated model formed inside the wider culture, ‘surpass[ing] the boundaries of media texts and operat[ing] within industry, audience, and cultural practices’.<sup>28</sup> I engage further with the cross-media interaction and ‘genre-constituting “relays”’ that give shape to the new *sageuk* in the section ‘Consuming the Past: The Co-evolution of Historial Fictions’ in Chapter Two.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jason Mittel, ‘A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory’, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Barry Langford, *Film Genre*, p. 5.

## Literature Review

In this section, I situate my research within the academic field by reviewing critical literature on Korean historical drama. I explain how my work builds upon and differs from existing scholarship and, ultimately, sheds new light on the topic. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, I study the recent cycle of the *sageuk*, exploring a number of issues including, historical representation and film genre, cultural policy and creative industries, commodity and heritage industry, trauma and memory, and gender and nation. I employ textual analyses of individual films in combination with contextual research on South Korea to elucidate what is essentially ‘[a] culture-wide pull to the past’.<sup>30</sup> As I demonstrate here, the inter-disciplinary method of studying the films in correlation to their evolving socio-cultural contexts is a unique merit that distinguishes this research from previous studies.

In addition, what I discovered in the process of compiling this literature review is that most of the materials I discuss here are published in the Korean language and the *sageuk* has not been properly introduced to the English-speaking world. Meanwhile, recent English-language scholarship on South Korean cinema has been primarily devoted to the topic of New Korean Cinema. In the latter half of this section, therefore, I join the two bodies of knowledge – the *sageuk* and New Korean Cinema – to reflect the discourse that surrounds the national cinema.

For a long time, the *sageuk* has remained at the periphery of the academic discourse in Korea. The broad contours of the genre and the difficulty of the boundary-drawing, as mentioned earlier, has made the study a challenge for any film

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<sup>30</sup> Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 2.

historian. Only recently, have there been efforts to rectify past neglect and rescue the genre from oblivion. The *sageuk* scholarship, in general, falls under two types: the first type examines the historical drama as a genre or a cycle from the overall history of Korean cinema. Such historiographical inquiry includes works that focus on specific historical periods, such as the *sageuk* in the 1960s Golden Age. A rapidly growing body of work is the second type, which is an investigation into the current *sageuk* boom and its relevant contexts. What is noteworthy is that most previous researches focus on either of the two topics – historiography of genre or current manifestation – rarely making the connection between the two.

The exemplary model of the first historiographical type is Lee Young-il's *The History of Korean Cinema* (2004) originally published in 1969.<sup>31</sup> Lee is a father-figure of Korean film criticism, whose work still influences the ways in which scholars base their understanding of Korean film history. As mentioned before, he investigates the genre formation in South Korea, quoting the *sageuk* as an 'intermittent' genre. In effect, he studies the evolution of the *sageuk* genre in discrete periods and such approach has informed my appreciation of the history of the *sageuk*.

Yi Gil-seong similarly reviews the history of the genre.<sup>32</sup> He, unlike Lee Young-il, pays particular attention to the specificities of recreating historical space by analysing the art works, props, and costumes. In this sense, his approach is not dissimilar to C. S. Tashiro's focus on visual aspects of the period settings.<sup>33</sup> Even though Yi mainly repeats what earlier historians, such as Lee, have said about the history of the genre, his study contains original archival research and information on the period recreation in well-known *sageuk* titles.

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<sup>31</sup> Young-il Lee, *The History of Korean Cinema*.

<sup>32</sup> Gil-seong Yi, 'The *Sageuk* and the Issue of Historical Perception'.

<sup>33</sup> C. S. Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and History Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998)

The Sixth Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) organised a retrospective on Shin Sang-ok in 2001, showcasing his five *sageuk* films made during his prime years in the 1960s. A small booklet that accompanied the event contains one of the first revisionist studies on Shin's *sageuk* films. The methodological approach on the film texts is decidedly ideological however, clearly filtered through the contemporary lens of viewing Korea's modern history and Park Chung Hee's dictatorship (1961-1979). For example, according to Kim Mee-Hyun, *Eunuch* (1968) is a bleak examination of the nature of political power and Kim Sunah similarly argues that *One Thousand Year Old Fox* (1969) manifests Shin's deteriorating relationship with the dictatorship.<sup>34</sup> Such allegorical readings, while very useful in understanding Korea's socio-political situations, fall into the danger of undermining other fascinating facets of the film texts, such as imaginative recreation of the royal court.

An Jinsoo's eloquent analysis of post-war royal court *sageuk* attempts the opposite. While focusing on the melodramatic mode, he gleans the ambivalences and contradictions of the *sageuk* that inhibit a smooth narrative closure. For An, 'the burden of history' weighs down South Korean historical drama films, staging historical characters who are caught between moral dilemmas, such as Yeonsan in *Prince Yeonsan* (Shin Sang-ok, 1962).<sup>35</sup> These films, in all, 'simultaneously glorify and denounce the past', reflecting the volatile and troubled historical consciousness of the time.<sup>36</sup> The attention to the different modes of historicisation and reflective reading of the textual properties is the merit of his research.

Kim Soyoung, on the other hand, gives a feminist reading of Shin Sang-ok's

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<sup>34</sup> Mee-Hyun Kim, 'Shin Sang-ok's Historical Drama: Focus on *Eunuch*', in *Shin Sang-Ok: Prince of Korean Cinema, Leading the Desire of the Masses*, ed. by Sang-jun Han and Jeong-hwa Yang (PIFF, 2001), pp. 18-19. Sunah Kim, 'One Thousand Year Old Fox: An Allegory of Politics and Sexuality', in *Shin Sang-ok*, pp. 32-35.

<sup>35</sup> Jinsoo An, 'Popular Reasoning of South Korean Melodrama Films', p. 134.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

abovementioned *Prince Yeonsan*, examining how the film renders history as a private domestic drama. She, in particular, directs our attention to the *femme fatale* character Nok-su, noting how the film textually constructs her as a demonic figure that brings down the masculine power.<sup>37</sup> Also taking a feminist approach, Baek Moon-im analyses the changing perception and dominant discourse of femininity in Korean popular melodramas. By studying the quintessential folk narrative ‘A Tale of Chunhyang’ that appeared time and again, Baek notes how the concern over class, familial responsibility, and chastity shape and alter the characterisation of women in narrative fictions.<sup>38</sup> Lee Hana, similarly, charts the shifting iconography of an infamous courtesan Hwang Jinyi from the sixteenth century in popular culture. Looking at a number of period television dramas and films, she demonstrates how each female star who plays the role of Hwang brings new dimension to the feminine ideal.<sup>39</sup>

One of the most unique historiographical studies, in my view, is by Yi Yeong-hui who revisits the history of the *sageuk* from the 1950s post-war period to the present moment in her contribution to KOFA’s magazine *Cinema Paradise*.<sup>40</sup> Even though her writing veers towards popular journalism, Yi makes a number of original observations on historical drama and cultural consumption. For instance, the logical conclusion that the financial success of *Chunhyang Story* (Lee Gyu-hwan, 1955) immediately inspired other period productions is a well-established fact (see

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<sup>37</sup> Soyoung Kim, *Specters of Modernity: Fantastic Korean Cinema* (Seoul: Ssiat Press, 1999), pp. 126-138.

<sup>38</sup> Moon-im Baek, *Daughters of Chunhyang: An Incomplete Genealogy of Korean Women* (Seoul: Chaeksesang, 2001)

<sup>39</sup> Hana Lee, ‘Imagining a Feminine Icon: Multiple Metamorphoses of Hwang Chin-I in Cinema and Television’, *Korean Studies*, 33 (2009)

<sup>40</sup> These are the title of Yi’s articles: ‘Royal Court *Sageuk*’, ‘1960s Royal Court *Sageuk*’, ‘*Sageuk* Melodrama I’, ‘*Sageuk* Melodrama II’, ‘*Sageuk* in the 1970s’, ‘*Erotic Sageuk* in the 1980s’, ‘*Auteuristic Sageuk* in the 1980s’, and ‘*Sageuk* in the 1990s and the 2000s’.

Chapter Two). What Yi adds to this is that the rise of the historical genre in cinema at the time was a result of a complex cross-media exchange. She demonstrates how the traditional opera *chang-geuk* provided the actors, costumes, and even the stage designs for the cinematic period *mise-en-scène*. Just as television took over cinema's place as the top entertainment in the 1970s, the so-far-dominant *chang-geuk* exhausted itself in the latter half of the 1950s when cinema grew with force and outsourced its historical material. Yi also notes that *Lady Jang* (Chung Chang-wha, 1961) and *Queen Dowager In-mok* (Ahn Hyun-chul, 1962) are basically 'a summary and/or a close adaptation' of the radio drama that aired a year or two before.<sup>41</sup> If so, not only did these films capitalise on recognisable radio dramas and popular *chang-geuk*, they also secured ready-made screenplays, thus, easing the requisite historical research. She discusses the shifting historical consciousness manifest in historical dramas, like most historiographic studies on the *sageuk* do; however, her approach to popular culture is divorced from explicit ideological inclination.

Yi, at the same time, has the tendency to dismiss the contemporary culture-wide interest of the past as something driven solely by commercial interests. She understands that the current television *sageuk* boom is 'motivated primarily by the desire for genre texts' and this 'does not mean that the audience is suddenly interested in history'.<sup>42</sup> I contend that the historical and political contexts in Korea, in fact, serve as building blocks for these popular texts, as I demonstrate further in Chapter Two in relation to the overtly nationalistic *Goguryeo sageuks*. Whether prompted by anxiety or fascination, there is a clear and sustained nationwide energy to visit the past and make it relevant to the present audience. Even with this oversight,

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<sup>41</sup> Yeong-hui Yi, '1960s Royal Court *Sageuk*', *Cinema Paradise*, 3 (2 September 2008)

<sup>42</sup> 'Sageuk Melodrama II', *Cinema Paradise*, 5 (16 January 2009)

her research helps me think about the broader industrial implication of the *sageuk* boom and the cross-fertilisation of the historical material in the contemporary cultural scene.

The second strand in the *sageuk* scholarship charts the contours of the contemporary thirst for history. Published in early 2004, Hwang He Jin's article 'The *Sageuk* Films and the New Appeal' is one of the first academic texts to engage with the generic shifts witnessed in new *sageuk*. Here, she uses *Untold Scandal* (E J-yong, 2003), *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield* (Lee Joon-ik, 2003), and television drama *Damo* to define the buzzword 'fusion *sageuk*'. She notes that:

In fusion *sageuk*, cultural artefacts displayed on the screen recreate the past as present. Accordingly, the past is evoked by contemporary cultural indices. [...] This means, visual motifs such as food and clothing as well as the lifestyles give the audience an access into our history. One should note that all these elements have been 'recreated' in accordance to modern aesthetics.<sup>43</sup>

While describing a very current trend, Hwang is able to make a perceptive observation on how the assemblage of period artefacts convey the sense of history, providing an alternative mode of historical imagination outside the realms of institutionalised historical knowledge. She rightly points out that recent historical dramas, crystallised in the term 'fusion *sageuk*', open a historical space in which the viewers can negotiate the imageries of the past and make them relevant to present reality.

Chung Hye Seung also uses *Untold Scandal* as an entry point into the study on Korean historical drama.<sup>44</sup> After briefly introducing the history of the *sageuk*

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<sup>43</sup> He Jin Hwang, 'The *Sageuk* Films and the New Appeal: Beyond the Dialogue between the Past and the Present', *FIPRESCI Korean Film Critiques*, 15 (2004), p. 80.

<sup>44</sup> Hye Seung Chung, 'Reinventing the Historical Drama, De-Westernizing a French Classic: Genre, Gender and the Transnational Imaginary in *Untold Scandal*', *Post Script*, 27.3 (Summer 2008)

genre, she demonstrates how the film cleverly recontextualises the French novel into the Korean setting. Giving a close reading at both a narrative and visual level, she shows how the film speaks to the post-IMF Korea with regards to the changing gender roles, the nostalgia for an innocent past, and the desire for expatriation. A very important text on South Korean historical drama written in English, Chung's piece has helped shape my understanding of the film and the period genre and I engage with the text in depth in Chapter Three.

Lee Keehyeung, on the other hand, chooses to study, not one, but many examples of visual historical narratives. From social melodrama, faction, the fusion *sageuk*, colonial period dramas, to 1970s retro films, he surveys the characteristics and features of recent historical fictions.<sup>45</sup> In doing so, he offers tentative reasons why history is in such demand. His broad perspective prompts me to observe a culture-wide movement to open up a 'socio-cultural forum' that constructs, challenges, and negotiates the discourses of history.<sup>46</sup>

Park Yu-hee is a prolific scholar who has published widely on the historical genre that encompasses film, television, and literature. Approaching the *sageuk* boom from different angles, for instance, she discusses the representation of female characters in *Hwang Jin Yi* (Chang Yoon-hyun, 2007) and *Blue Swallow* while investigating the function of nationalism and cultural consumption in *Goguryeo* dramas in a different article.<sup>47</sup> Her analyses of film texts, however, are mainly narrative-driven and she gives little attention to the ways different filmmaking

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<sup>45</sup> Keehyeung Lee, 'On the Politics of Historical Representation through Televisual Texts in Contemporary South Korea', *Program/Text*, 15 (2006)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> 'A Study on Gender Appeared in the Historical Fiction: With Special Reference to Novels, Films, Dramas Since 2000', *Korean Classical Women's Literature Studies*, 15 (2007) and 'The Meaning of Historical Reconstruction in Recent Historical Fictions: *Goguryeo Sageuk*', *Hanminjok Munhwahakhoe*, 19 (2006)



techniques construct and provide the images of the past.

Park has served as the editor for *A Study on Popular Narrative: Historical Fiction* (2009), a culmination of the academic interest in the history boom.<sup>48</sup> Twelve writers contributed to this book-length project, drawing their arguments from cultural and historical archival research. In all, the book provides an encompassing and historiographic view of narrative histories produced since the early twentieth century. Examples range from ‘old-type printed classical/*guhwaljabon* novels’ to historical graphic novels of the 2000s. I found the piece by Yi Hyeon-gyeong especially helpful.<sup>49</sup> While discussing the ‘historical murder thrillers’ such as *Shadow in the Palace*, she notes how the academic historians’ research and government’s ‘Digital Cultural Heritage Content’ project have made an impact on the way the past is recreated and consumed in certain genre texts. The availability of quality historical material through state-sponsored initiatives is a point I pursue further in Chapter Two. At the same time, the book as a whole regrettably misses the point on the crucial industrial and commercial connections between various historical products and how such efforts generate and nurture a nationwide history boom. Even so, this edited collection is a groundbreaking text on Korean historical genre.

Taking into consideration the merits and limitations of existing scholarship listed above, I position my research in the following way in order to make a new contribution to the field. I investigate the current state of the *sageuk* while not losing sight of the historical links preserved in the genre memory. In other words, I attempt to cover both the historiography (as done by Lee Young-il) and the current manifestation of the genre. Borrowing Ferdinand de Saussure’s concepts from

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<sup>48</sup> *A Study on Popular Narrative: Historical Fiction*, ed. by Yu-hee Park (Seoul: Theory and Practice, 2009)

<sup>49</sup> Hyeon-gyeong Yi, ‘The Liberal Imagination in Recent *Sageuk* films’, in *A Study on Popular Narrative: Historical Fiction*, pp. 349-351.

linguistics, I study the historical drama with a synchronic approach (occurring at a specific point in time, the present) with the support of diachronic knowledge (occurring over time, the review of history) which is mapped out by the generic trajectory. At the same time, I take caution when imposing a strong symptomatic reading, one that accounts for the films solely in relation to the socio-political contexts (Shin Sang-ok Retrospective). In addition, I analyse the narrative as well as the aesthetic and visual aspects of the film texts (Chung Hye Seung). I do so by giving attention to the technical features and production designs (Yi Gil-seong). I also consider cinema not merely as an art form but as a commercial product borne out of a specific industrial context (Yi Yeong-hui). Therefore I provide information on the production background, critical reviews, and box-office results. This also means that I try to make connections with the film industry and the other cultural domains, to paint a broad picture of the co-evolution of fictional histories in popular media (Lee Keehyeung). Moreover, I pay particular attention to how the government and research institutes are contributing to the history boom through their financial, legislative, and academic support (Yi Hyeon-gyeong). Finally, I attempt to bring into light the international dimension of the production and consumption of cinematic texts, by considering issues such as co-production, film festivals, and international distribution and circulation. So far I have reviewed the relevant academic field on South Korean historical drama and explained how my work enhances the established scholarship. Now I investigate the place of the *sageuk* in the formation of New Korean Cinema by surveying the English-language scholarship on Korean Cinema.

Apart from the works by An Jinsoo, Lee Hana, and Chung Hye Seung, the texts mentioned above are all written in Korean by scholars working inside Korea. Even though the academic interest in Korean cinema has seen a marked growth in

the last ten years, the *sageuk* genre remains largely untapped in the non-Korean imagination. This is somewhat understandable because as a subtitled film that is based on specific historical knowledge and cultural intertexts, the *sageuk* has an even limited chance to travel outside the country when compared to other genres like horror or action. At the same time, the apparent under-appreciation of the historical genre in English academic circles deserves special attention, as it provides interesting clues on the dynamic of discourse, representation, and the concept of a national cinema.

For instance, *Korean Film* (2003), one of the few English-language books to provide the history of Korean cinema, gives little regard to the historical genre when compared to melodrama and socialist-realist films.<sup>50</sup> An edited collection containing film reviews, *The Cinema of Japan and Korea* (2004), a book that claims to ‘best represent the diversity of each country’s cinema in terms of form, style historicity and narrative’, equally gives Korea’s vibrant *sageuk* tradition a miss.<sup>51</sup> A valuable contribution to the study on the Golden Age period (from 1955 to 1972 according to the authors), *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama* (2005) reiterates the dominant discourse by instating melodrama as the representative cinematic form in South Korea, while losing sight of the critical role that the *sageuk* played in resuscitating the national film industry in that period, and thereby ushering in the Golden Age.<sup>52</sup>

What is even more worrying is the oversight of more recent texts by Choi

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<sup>50</sup> Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo, and Han Ju Kwak, *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003)

<sup>51</sup> *The Cinema of Japan and Korea*, ed. by Justin Bowyer (London: Wallflower, 2004), p. 4. *Seopyeonje* (Im Kwon-taek, 1993) is the closest example of the historical drama in this volume.

<sup>52</sup> *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, ed. by Nancy Abelmann and Kathleen McHugh (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005)

Jinhee (2010) and Darcy Paquet (2010).<sup>53</sup> In Choi's *The South Korean Film Renaissance, Untold Scandal*, a film that turns the *sageuk* convention on its head, is placed under the banner of 'well-made' films, discussed alongside police-procedural *Memories of Murder* (Bong Joon-ho, 2003) and family horror *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim Ji-woon, 2003). Even though a brief reading into the meaning of its period *mise-en-scène* is included in the book, this does not advance our understanding of the historical genre itself. The record-breaking commercial success of *King and the Clown* seems to have made little impression on the scholars, whereupon Choi and Paquet only mention the film in passing.

Instead of the *sageuk*, the following topics on Korean cinema reserve the dominant place in the English-language scholarship: the study of *auteurs*, especially those who hold international (festival) recognition;<sup>54</sup> the K-Horror films that famously circulated under the distribution label 'Asia Extreme';<sup>55</sup> a methodological approach on gender and nation;<sup>56</sup> the star vehicles and the Korean Wave in Asia;<sup>57</sup> and the Korean blockbuster and its relation to Hollywood.<sup>58</sup> But by far the most

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<sup>53</sup> Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers & Global Provocateurs* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 2010) and Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves* (London: Wallflower, 2010)

<sup>54</sup> A few examples are: *Im Kwon-taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema*, ed. by David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002); Chris Berry, 'Scream and Scream Again: Korean Modernity as a House of Horrors in the Films of Kim Ki-young', in *Seoul Searching*, ed. by Frances Gateward (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007); and Steve Choe, 'Catastrophe and Finitude in Lee Chang Dong's *Peppermint Candy*: Temporality, Narrative, and Korean History', *Post Script*, 27.3 (Summer 2008)

<sup>55</sup> Grady Hendrix, 'Back with a Vengeance: The Psychic Delirium at the Dark Heart of K-Horror', *Film Comment*, 40.6 (2004); Chi-Yun Shin, 'Art of Branding: Tartan "Asia Extreme" Films', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 50 (Spring 2008); and Seongho Yoon, 'Empty Houses Haunted: Hauntology of Space in Kim Ki-duk's *3-Iron*', *Post Script*, 27.3 (Summer 2008)

<sup>56</sup> Nancy Abelmann, *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk and Class in Contemporary South Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003) and Kyung Hyun Kim, *Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

<sup>57</sup> *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, ed. by Beng Huat Chua and Koichi Iwabuchi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008)

<sup>58</sup> Chris Berry, "'What's Big About the Big Film?': 'De-Westernizing' the Blockbuster in

fashionable topic in Korean cinema now is 'New Korean Cinema' and four out of nine book-length texts published since 2000 are devoted to such study.<sup>59</sup>

Recent scholarship, in effect, collectively elucidates the shifting-contours of the 'New Korean Cinema' a term that has come to designate the current South Korean national cinema. The irony here is that this term has not penetrated the Korean popular discourse and it does not have currency inside the country. Moon Jae-Cheol uses the term 'Post-Korean New Wave Cinema', to mean what others basically call New Korean Cinema, placing the present moment as both continuation and rupture from the Korean New Wave that ended in the mid-1990s.<sup>60</sup> To make things more complicated, Choi Jinhee opts to use the word 'Renaissance', to place emphasis on the (First) Renaissance/Golden Age in the 1960s. The confusion over naming looms largely over Korean film studies outside Korea, so much so that a weekly film magazine *Cine21* posed the question 'What Should One Call Korean Cinema of Today?' Here the author wittily listed more labels, such as 'Glossy Korean Cinema', 'Post-IMF Korean Cinema', 'Unburdened Korean Cinema' and even 'Post-Burden Korean Cinema'.<sup>61</sup> For Julian Stringer, such confusion is a natural process in the formation of a new national cinema. He, however, adds that this could lead to an 'ontological uncertainty' when it is not clear what 'critics and audiences in diverse locations actually mean'.<sup>62</sup> Even so New Korean Cinema, for the time being, seems

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Korea and China', in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. by Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003) and Christina Klein, 'Why American Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema, or, Transnational Genres in the Films of Bong Joon-ho', *American Quarterly*, 60.4 (December 2008)

<sup>59</sup> They are *New Korean Cinema* (2005), *Seoul Searching* (2007), *New Korean Cinema* (2010), and *South Korean Film Renaissance* (2010)

<sup>60</sup> Jae-Cheol Moon, 'Cinematic Memory and Cultural Identity: Focusing on Post-Korean New Wave Cinema' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Chung-Ang University, 2002), pp. 8-10.

<sup>61</sup> Anon., 'What Should One Call Korean Cinema of Today?', *Cine21*, 585 (4 Jan 2007)

<sup>62</sup> Julian Stringer, 'Introduction', in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. by Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 6.

to have won dominance over other terms as the name of the national cinema.

Although New Korean Cinema generally means a period of new commercial filmmaking that strengthened the domestic market and the industry, many scholars have wrestled with its exact definition and periodisation, ever since the term came into existence. For Shin Chi-Yun and Julian Stringer, New Korean Cinema started in the year 1993 with the release of Im Kwon-taek's mega hit *Seopyeonje* which gave the industry a much-needed taste of commercial success.<sup>63</sup> Darcy Paquet, meanwhile, sees that 1996 announced the end of the Korean New Wave and heralded the arrival of New Korean Cinema. His rationale is that in 1996 two important events happened that flung open the doors to a new era of filmmaking: the release of Jang Sun-woo's *A Petal* and the high court's ruling that the government's pre-release censorship is unconstitutional.<sup>64</sup> Choi Jinhee suggests an even earlier date 1986, when direct distribution by foreign companies was approved by the government.<sup>65</sup> What is more, how the film scholars appreciate and study New Korean Cinema and what kind of films from Korea are actually consumed inside and outside the nation is an entirely different matter altogether. Robert L. Cagle touches upon this point when he says:

Perhaps the biggest problem plaguing South Korean cinema, at least in a global context, is its gross *mischaracterization* by some Western critics, as invariably filled with excessive violence, stomach-turning gore, and abnormal sexuality'.<sup>66</sup> (emphasis mine)

What Cagle is referring to is the successful penetration of K-Horror and extreme films to the western niche markets as well as the strong performance of visceral action films such as *Old Boy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003) in prestigious film festivals.

This point leads to the question, what kinds of films actually constitute New Korean

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>65</sup> Jinhee Choi, *South Korean Film Renaissance*, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Robert L. Cagle, 'Introduction', *Post Script*, 27.3 (Summer 2008)

Cinema and effectively, the national cinema?

National cinema is less a coherent and unified expression of a nation's cinematic culture and more a strategic and social construction. In other words, rather than a cultural manifestation of a collective national narrative, national cinema is a site of struggle over meaning and more importantly, representation. Andrew Higson famously noted that 'the politics of national cinema can be reduced to a marketing strategy, [...] setting a horizon of expectation for foreign audience'.<sup>67</sup> What he reveals here is that the articulation of a national cinema outside the country is as important as the one that is formulated inside. In a sense, what Cagle sees as 'mischaracterization' may be a blessing in disguise, as it suggests that once a 'hermit' cinema has now succeeded in stamping itself with a unique identity which, in this case, embodies 'excessive violence, stomach-turning gore, and abnormal sexuality'.

A genre that ensures a sense of belonging and shared history, the *sageuk* is at the core of this national cinema debate because the overwhelming growth of the genre inside Korea is matched with equitable absence in the critical discourse outside. In his study on European Cinema, Mike Wayne introduces four categories that help us explore the internal and external dynamics involved in the production of a national cinema: the embedded film, disembedded film, cross-border film, and anti-national national film.<sup>68</sup> I focus here on the first two concepts. Unlike the embedded film that primarily accommodates local audiences, the aim of disembedded film is 'wide circulation in the international market'.<sup>69</sup> But the reality is that filmmakers today try to cast their net to the largest market possible, making the distinction

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<sup>67</sup> Andrew Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, 30.4 (Autumn 1989), pp. 37-38.

<sup>68</sup> Mike Wayne, *The Politics of Contemporary European Cinema: Histories, Borders, Diasporas* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2002), pp. 40-46.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

between the two ever blurred. While at first, the *sageuk* seems to fit most perfectly into the embedded film with its locally specific settings and themes, it also contains ‘disembedded’ elements, evidenced by its appropriation of international period aesthetics (Chapter Three), the self-conscious use of horror/extreme elements (Chapter Five), and strategic pursuit of transnational filmmaking and co-production (Chapter Six). This is just one example that cinema produced in Korea is extremely hybrid, aiming to a large number of audiences in different locales.

Such industrial motivations and realities are often eschewed in the study of New Korean Cinema, when the scholarly research becomes dictated by the reproduction of a particular discourse on a national cinema. While the object of study, the cinema, itself functions discursively through complex desires and needs, the discourse perpetuates fixed ideas and the dominant ‘repertoire of national imagery’.<sup>70</sup> The *sageuk* deserves serious academic attention, not least to further develop the discourse of New Korean Cinema, and to challenge its current, limited construction. By rescuing the *sageuk* from near-oblivion, therefore, I hope to locate its place in the Korean film historiography, introduce the genre to Western academia, and ultimately, diversify the study of current Korean national cinema.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



## Methods of Research

In order to engage with a very current phenomenon in Korean cinema, I draw on several bodies of scholarship as well as non-academic materials. Here, I explain my means of acquiring and analysing the data and source materials. The primary source of investigation is the cinematic texts, which were acquired in DVD format. The secondary source materials include academic books and journals, film magazines and newspapers, film posters and production notes, industry statistics and cultural policies, interviews with practitioners, and unpublished dissertations and theses.

Firstly, the library at the University of St Andrews gave me access to many resources on Korean cinema published in English, as well as a number of Korean film DVDs. It is here that I studied different film theories and concepts, making use of its inter-library loan system to acquire materials reserved in other UK-based libraries. A number of academic databases, such as 'Project MUSE', aided my search of journal articles related to the topic. English-language industry magazines, such as *Screen International* and *Variety*, provided me with up-to-date industry facts and film reviews.

I have also made extensive use of academic databases on the Internet to gather Korean-language material. They are 'Research Information Service System' <[www.riss.kr](http://www.riss.kr)> powered by Korea Education and Research Information Service (KERIS) and two commercial databases 'Korean Studies Information Service System' (KISS) <<http://kiss.kstudy.com/>> and 'DBpia' <<http://www.dbpia.co.kr/>>. I was also able to access unpublished master's-level dissertations and doctoral theses in Korean through 'dCollection' <<http://www.dcollection.net/search/main.do>>.

Government publications on cultural policy, film industry data from Korean Film Council (KOFIC), and KOFA's movie database were also extensively used. In addition, I have consulted and analysed self-collected domestic news reports and film journals, such as *Cine21*, *Film 2.0*, *Movie Week*, and *Screen (Korea)*. From *Cine21*, a magazine that is in the forefront of bringing in 'serious' film culture in South Korea, in particular, I was able to access information on production notes, film reviews, promotion details, and box-office results.

Other secondary materials were gathered during my visit to Korea. The material used in Chapter One was primarily secured from KOFA in Seoul. In addition to watching old *sageuk* films on VHS and DVD and via the VOD service, I have consulted its library for film-related newspaper articles, books, dissertations, and theses.<sup>71</sup> In January 2010, I visited the headquarter of Korea Creative Culture Content Agency (KOCCA) in Seoul, conducting an interview with a project manager. During the interview, I took the opportunity to consult on the specifics of the operation of the Digital Cultural Heritage Content (DCHC) project. Documents on government policy, including the white papers on the cultural industry, and any other culture content-related materials were secured from this visit. These materials helped me formulate my core idea on the cultural industry in Chapter Two.

In addition, I have interviewed film directors, costume/production designers, and a playwright, in person, over the phone, or via e-mail exchange.<sup>72</sup> These interviews provided me with valuable information on the making of the *sageuk* from the practitioners' point of view, helping me clarify some points about a scene in the

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<sup>71</sup> I visited KOFA in Jan 2007, Dec 2007, Jul 2008, Jan 2009, and Jan 2010.

<sup>72</sup> The interviewees are: the director Lee Joon-ik (23 Jan 2010, by phone), Kim Dai-seung (27 Jan, in person), Chang Yoon-hyun (28 Jan, in person), Jung Ji-woo (30 Jan, in person), E J-yong (4 Feb, by phone), and Kim Mi-jeong (Feb 2010, via e-mail); production designer Min Un-ok (27 Jan 2010, in person); costume designer Sim Hyeon-seop (Jan 2010, via e-mail); playwright Kim Tae-ung (Jan 2010, via e-mail).

film and/or address any of my misunderstanding of the production background. The qualitative data from interviews, however, support, not supersede, my personal analysis and observation of recent historical dramas. I believe the utilisation of academic scholarship together with qualitative data makes the study of contemporary historical drama in South Korea more comprehensive and less biased.

## Chapter Breakdown

Chapters One and Two lay the foundation for study of the *sageuk* and they form PART I ‘Contexts’. Beginning with an extended contextualisation, Chapter One ‘The *Sageuk* in a Historical Context’ charts the genre from its inception in the colonial period to the late 1990s. By situating the *sageuk*’s place in the history of Korean cinema, the chapter serves as the basis for decoding the configuration of genre memory and its presentation in recent films. The history of the *sageuk* mirrors the ebb and flow of the film industry, one that is marked by continuity and interruption, and popularity and marginalisation. I use this fragmented cinematic heritage to echo the historical remembrance, exploring the implications of the *sageuk* genre.

Chapter Two ‘Mapping the Field: The *Sageuk* in the 2000s’ explores the political, social, and industrial reasons behind the rise of *sageuk* films in recent years. While national memory and transnational politics fuelled Koreans’ interest in their past, the popular media – cinema, television, publishing industry, and performance theatres – all capitalised on this drive. The government also contributed to the trend, by supporting the ‘culture content industry’, as a means to fashion an attractive national image and accelerate the cultural export system in the globalising world of today. By making reference to the ‘Digital Cultural Heritage Content’ project and ‘HanStyle’ initiative, I locate the place of fictional histories in the burgeoning heritage industry. In all, the *sageuk* plays an important role in igniting the consumer desire for heritage artefacts and thus constructing, what I call, ‘the heritage commodity cycle’.

By using the framework established in PART I, I study the major sub-cycles

of new *sageuk* in PART II ‘Heritage and Industry’ and PART III ‘Trauma and Memory’. Chapters Three and Four concern texts that refashion national heritage for maximum commercial impact. In Chapter Three ‘Imagining a New (Cinematic) Heritage: The Fusion *Sageuk*’, I discuss how *Untold Scandal* oscillates between authenticity and imagination, the traditional and the modern, and the local and the global to gain popular appeal. The manifest ‘fusion’ features of *Untold Scandal* are symptomatic of the stigma attached to the established *sageuk* genre. The film, therefore, is primarily invested with the energy to break away from the convention and usher in a new cycle of a historical drama. In order to understand how the film responds to the international period aesthetics, I discuss the three filmmaking modes and styles, namely, the ‘well-made film’, the ‘high concept’ movie, and ‘heritage cinema’.

Chapter Four ‘Recycling Biographical History: The Biopic’ concerns the biographical film, a type of popular narrative that has formed a substantial part of the *sageuk* productions. I study two cases of reviving and commodifying the life of a historical figure inside a fictionalised ‘cross-dressing’ narrative: a notorious tyrant in *King and the Clown* and a talented genre painter in *Portrait of a Beauty*. While giving a textual reading of each film, I discuss how the booming culture content industry encourages the circulation of historical lives by way of cross-fertilisation in different media. By introducing the logic of ‘One Source Multi Use’ (OSMU), a Korean motto for synergy and branding, I demonstrate the making of fictional history in the biopic genre.

In the final section, PART III, I discuss the instances where the national memory of trauma complicates the easy consumption of the past. In Chapter Five ‘Allegories of the Purge: Heritage Horrors’, I introduce what I call the ‘heritage

horror'. By giving a close reading of *Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace*, I posit that in heritage horrors, images of attractive period mise-en-scène compete with the equally striking images of violence, redolent in the nation's recent past. I demonstrate how both films use allegory to show the difficulty of breaking clean from the past via the murder investigation narrative, alluding to the 'Purging the Past' campaign that stormed Korea in the mid-2000s. Both films combine the heritage aesthetics and the shock of the body genre to create a peculiarly jarring sense of fascination and repulsion.

Moving closer to the present moment, Chapter Six 'Memory and (Trans)-National Imperatives: Colonial Period Drama' concerns the ways in which Korean cinema look back at the colonial period and its legacy. *Rikidozan*, *Blue Swallow*, and *Modern Boy*, in their own way, shrewdly negotiate the heightened visualisation of the period setting and the ethics of memory in the narrative. All three films are primarily motivated by the desire to revisit the colonial past in a new light. Even so, their contexts of production and reception reveal the limit of contemporary imagination when confronting unresolved national trauma.

**PART I**  
**CONTEXTS**

## CHAPTER ONE

### The *Sageuk* in a Historical Context

In order to fully explore the historical drama of the 2000s, the primary focus of this research, it is necessary to examine what came before; this chapter offers a selective look back at the history of the genre. More specifically, historical context of the *sageuk* is relevant for the present study in two ways. Firstly, by charting its generic trajectory, this chapter points out the cultural memories embedded in the genre and their lingering impact on later *sageuks*. As I demonstrate later, recent historical dramas refer to, play with, and at times consciously denounce the narrative and visual conventions established by earlier models. Such investigation historically situates the genre and allows us to trace the different imprints inscribed in the generic memory. Secondly, it locates the place of the *sageuk* in the history of Korean cinema. As a minor genre that principally depended on the strength of the industry and the market, the scale and number of *sageuk* productions exemplify the highs and lows of the national film industry. This means, the history helps us to review the social, political, and other industrial contexts that influenced the shaping of certain types and cycles of films. A critical survey of historical drama, therefore, demonstrates how the genre bears witness to the turbulent history of the national cinema.

I undertake this historiographical exercise by unveiling the layers of specific historical moments and events. In the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault suggests a way to approach history by identifying the various ruptures and discontinuities, what he sees as ‘transformations that serve as new foundations’ for the next layer of history.<sup>1</sup> His focus, here, is not to nurture a linear

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), p. 5.



historical trajectory headed for a teleological end point – the present moment. Rather the past is unearthed as ‘monuments’, which in this context are the film texts and the discourses that surround them. Echoing Lee Young-il’s understanding that the *sageuk* is an ‘intermittent’ genre, I believe the history of the *sageuk* is best accounted for in this way because each layer of history delivers a sense of disruption as well as continuation. In her discussion on 1970s historical drama, Yu Gina argues that the memories of the past reconstructed in these films did not survive, but only left ‘a trace of ephemeral memory’.<sup>2</sup>

The concern of historical remembrance, touched upon by Yu, points to a deep-rooted issue in Korean film history. Kim Soyoung exactly points to this when she says:

Even though only fifty years have passed, to the audiences of today the period from Independence to the 1960s is only remembered in fragments. As the ‘rediscovery’ of Kim Ki-young who made his first film in 1955 and the works by Im Kwon-taek who has been active since the 1960s demonstrate what Korean cinema has achieved since Independence is no trivial matter. However, when I examine the current discourse of Korean cinema, all I see is the rhetoric of the ‘new’ and the ‘unfamiliar’. *There really is little discussion on how recent films succeed or challenge the heritage of Korean cinema.* Perhaps this amnesia of Korean film history is due to the erotically-charged hostess films made under the *Yushin* Film Law. In other words, the nightmares created by such films overwhelm the legacy of those that came before. As a consequence, we start thinking Yu Hyun-mok and Kim Ki-young are very exceptional, and not the other way around. So we forget the fact that it is actually Yu and Kim who built the foundation on which Korean cinema could establish itself after Independence.<sup>3</sup> (emphasis mine)

The location of a ‘legitimate’ film history, therefore, is doubly important in the current milieu where the interest in Korean cinema – inside and outside academia –

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<sup>2</sup> Gina Yu, ‘History in Film, Film in History: Reproduction of the Collective Memory’, *FIAF Congress Symposium* (Spring 2002), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Soyoung Kim, ‘A Note on Post-Colonial Korean Classics’, *The Hankyoreh* (17 January 1998)

is growing with speed. My intention, therefore, is neither to provide an exhaustive list of Korean *sageuk* nor to chronicle its history in its entirety. Missing pieces are left to be detected and puzzled over intentionally, a manifestation of the convoluted discourses and vanishing memories.

In all, I attempt to bring in the relevant views on the history of historical drama, in order to find out how these cinematic texts have been produced and responded to the historical discourse of each period. I have periodised the *sageuk* in sections, roughly coinciding with the temporal division of the national film history: the colonial period, the 1950s/60s, the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s and onwards, uncovering each layer for its significance of the present moment.

## Folkloric Adaptations in the Colonial Period: 1923 – 1939

The account of the first film screening in Korea is a topic of continued debate.<sup>4</sup> What is clear, however, is that the introduction of cinema coincided with the rising colonial activities brought upon the nation at the turn of the last century. Observing American traveller and filmmaker Burton Holmes' visit to Korea in 1899, Kim Soyoung argues that such an early record of film screening (after the birth of cinema in 1895) is indicative of the fact that 'the invention and dissemination of cinema was coeval with the peak of imperialism'.<sup>5</sup> A silent film actor and later director, Ahn Jong-hwa, recollected his primary encounter with the new technology saying moving pictures were like 'a monster of civilization'.<sup>6</sup> Ahn's account gives us insight to the ambivalent feeling of fascination and apprehension that circulated in Korea when the visual medium was first imported. While describing exhibition practice of silent films in Korea, Kim Soyoung states elsewhere that:

First, the sound of siren, drum, and whistle was heard then a tight-rope performance happened, followed by a dance. After the performances were finished, the magic lantern was shown and finally it was time for the moving pictures. [...] Such ancillary devices prepared the audience to face the shock. [...] Traditional performances and pre-existent art forms introduced the moving pictures, realising a cross-cutting of the familiar and the new.<sup>7</sup>

What the above statement reveals is that cinema, during its nascent stage in Korea, was assimilated into native cultural forms, gradually forming a dominant space

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Ho Hyun-chan gives a list of diverging accounts on the first screening that happened between 1897 and 1905. See Hyun-chan Ho, *A Hundred Year of Korean Cinema* (Seoul: Munhak Sasang, 2003), pp. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Soyoung Kim, 'Modernity in Suspense: The Logic of Fetishism in Korean Cinema', *Specters of the West and the Politics of Translation: Traces 1*, ed. by Naoki Sakai and Yukiko Hanama (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000), pp. 303-304.

<sup>6</sup> Jong-hwa Ahn, *Secret Anecdotes of Korean Cinema* (Seoul: Hyeondae Mihak, 1988)

<sup>7</sup> Soyoung Kim, 'Visual Re/presentation of New Women in East Asia', *The Korean Association of Literature and Film* (Autumn/Winter 2006), p. 110.

within popular culture production. This partially explains why early silent features that cinematically revived century-old classics – ancient folklore, oral myths and *pansori* (traditional opera) literature – appeared as soon as narrative filmmaking in Korea started in the early 1920s. These folkloric adaptations, in my view, can be understood as an embryonic form of the *sageuk*. They were attractive to the makers who appropriated ready-made narratives into their films, as well as to the audiences who desired to see the well-known tales played out on the silver screen.<sup>8</sup> In this section, I introduce how these folkloric adaptations affirmed national and cultural identity in the colonial setting, where the audience could negotiate their colonial anxiety and viewing pleasure from the period romance.

Tellingly, it was Hayakawa Koshu, a Japanese theatre-owner, who made the first silent *sageuk*, *The Story of Chunhyang* in 1923. He hired a famous *gisaeng* (professional female entertainer) and a Korean *byeonsa* (voice actor) to play the role of the Chunhyang and her lover, cashing into their near-celebrity status, while effectively erasing any traces of Japanese cultural influence. The director, moreover, was keen to construct a satisfying period setting. In an interview he stated the following:

I was most concerned to avoid electricity poles, brick houses, Japanese-style houses, or people with short hair or modern clothes in the background. That would have destroyed the *realism* of the film. We had to throw away nearly 500 meters of film because of that.<sup>9</sup> (emphasis mine)

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<sup>8</sup> The following is the list of early adaptations: a film depicting the emblem of good daughter Simcheong, who sacrificed herself to make her blind father see, *The Story of Simcheong* (Lee Gyeong-son, 1925); a lady in waiting Un-yeong's forbidden love story, *The Story of Woon-yeong* (Yun Baek-nam, 1925); a fantastic fable centred around two brothers, *Nolbu Heungbu* (Kim Jo-seong, 1925); and a family melodrama portraying a wife agonised by her ruthless in-laws *The Story of Lady Suk-yeong* (Lee Gyeong-son, 1928).

<sup>9</sup> Excerpt from *The Daily News* (22-23 August 1923), quoted in *Everlasting Scent of the Classic: Choon-Hyang Jeon*, ed. by Jin-Sook Joo and Mee-Hyun Kim (PIFF, 2000), p 21.

Hayakawa's use of 'realism' indicates that period authenticity was an issue of consideration for even the earliest costume productions. The modernising national landscape had to be adjusted so as to capture the essence of the folk tale – an archaic love story where traditional virtues are preserved intact. Helped by this clever commercial strategy, the film achieved financial success and therefore for Jung Jong-hwa, *The Story of Chunhyang* is 'the first commercial film project made by a cinema manager who was well-aware of the demand of the Korean audience'.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, it was through the suffering body of Chunhyang, a symbol of chastity and loyalty that cinema theatres functioned as 'a public space of resistance'.<sup>11</sup> It is suffice to say that 'A Tale of Chunhyang' is by far the most popular folk tale and is distinctly engrained in the popular psyche of Koreans.

Starting from Hayakawa's 1923 film, seventeen other films have been made to date, as sure evidence of its continued cultural resonance.<sup>12</sup> Sheila Miyoshi Jager examines the Chunhyang genre tradition in the context of a national narrative by

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<sup>10</sup> Jong-hwa Jung, *Filmstory: A History of Korean Cinema* (Seoul: KOFA, 2008), p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Soyoung Kim, 'Visual Re/presentation', p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> The story itself unfolds in the following way: Chunhyang is Magistrate Seong's daughter, born of a low-class *gisaeng*, who falls in love with Yi Mong-ryong, a son of the local governor. They secretly consummate their marriage, without the consent of the Yi family. Soon the groom moves to another city leaving her behind. The newly arrived governor Byeon Hak-do makes sexual advances to Chunhyang who remains faithful to her husband. Byeon, then, tortures her and puts her under arrest for contempt. Upon hearing the news of Chunhyang, Mong-ryong, who has now topped the national examination and has been appointed as the King's secret inspector, comes to her aid and in turn arrests the corrupt governor. The following is the list of Chunhyang films: *The Story of Chunhyang* (1923), *The Story of Chunhyang* (Lee Myeong-u, 1935), *Epilogue of Lee Mong-ryong* (Lee Gyu-hwan, 1936), *Chunhyang Story* (Lee Gyu-hwan, 1955), a *chang-geuk*, *The Story of Great Chunhyang* (Kim Hyang, 1957), *The Story of Chunhyang* (Ahn Jong-hwa, 1958), *The Life of Deviated Chunhyang* (Lee Gyeong-chun, 1960), *The Love Story of Chunhyang* (Hong Seong-ki, 1960), *Seong Chunhyang* (Shin Sang-ok 1961), *Seong Chunhyang from Seoul* (Lee Dong-hun, 1963), *Chunhyang* (Kim Soo-yong, 1968), *The Story of Chunhyang* (Lee Seong-gu, 1971), *Bangja and Hyangdan* (Lee Hyung-pyo, 1972) *Seong Chunhyangjeon* (Park Tae-won, 1976), *Seong Chunhyang* (Han Sang-hun, 1987), *The Love Story of Juliet* (Andy Kim, 1999), *Chunhyang* (Im Kwon-taek, 2000), and *The Servant* (2010). For more on Chunhyang films, including North Korean versions, see Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, and Politics*, pp. 67-101.

saying:

The woman-as-nation-body was represented as being ignobly confronted with the violation of her body by an intruding 'evil' outsider (like the lecherous governor), who would steal the chastity and honor she was virtuously preserving for her lost lover and husband.<sup>13</sup>

While Jager is reading the motif of violence in the Chunhyang narrative as an allegory of the division of the peninsula after the Korean War, one can equally see how the same story can be construed as an acute metaphor for the nation under occupation. The message was that just as Chunhyang was redeemed in the end, Korea would be eventually liberated from the grasp of imperialism. The steadfast devotion and loyalty to her lover, in effect, symbolised the courage and hope for the whole nation. This means, Chunhyang films had the potential to confirm the cultural pride and consolidate national identity.

The arrival of sound technology injected a new boost to Korean cinema in the mid-1930s. Korea's first sound film happened to be another Chunhyang film, *The Story of Chunhyang* (Lee Myeong-u, 1935).<sup>14</sup> For the first time, the audiences could hear Chunhyang, distraught but relentless in spirit, eloquently protesting against the vicious governor Byeon in their native language. After the financial success of *The Story of Chunhyang*, a new wave of 'talkie' costume dramas emerged.<sup>15</sup> *The Story of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon* (Hong Gae-myeong, 1936) and *The Story of Simcheong* (An Seok-yeong, 1937), for instance, are updates of the earlier period dramas of the 1920s as much as they are adaptations of traditional folk tales. The precariousness of

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<sup>13</sup> Sheila Miyoshi Jager, 'Women, Resistance and the Divided Nation: The Romantic Rhetoric of Korean Reunification', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55.1 (February 1996), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Yecies, 'Sounds of Celluloid Dreams: Coming of the Talkies to Cinema in Colonial Korea', *Korea Journal*, 48.1 (Spring 2008), pp. 179-184.

<sup>15</sup> They are: a film that features a Robin Hood-like figure, *The Story of Hong Gil-dong: The Sequel* (Lee Myeong-u, 1936); and a film that imagines Mong-ryong's adventure as a secret inspector, *Epilogue of Lee Mong-ryong* (Lee Gyu-hwan, 1936).

the Korean language in the colonial context illuminates the importance of the *sageuk* talkies, precisely because by the late 1930s, the native language would be banned in schools and in everyday life.<sup>16</sup>

The nation and its nascent cinema increasingly came under the control of Japanese imperialism as the world headed to war. With the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the attack on Pearl Harbor four years later, the accelerating war efforts engulfed Korea; while domestically, ever exasperating control was exerted, resulting in an attempted cultural eradication of all things Korean. As a result, the burgeoning national film industry was heavily kerbed. The announcement of the *Joseon* Film Ordinance/*joseon yeonghwa-ryeong* in January 1940 came as the final blow, tightening the control of all aspects of filmmaking from production to exhibition.<sup>17</sup> Inevitably, a genre that embodies local traditions and cultural heritage – the *sageuk* – quickly disappeared from the scene, and remained almost forgotten during the tumultuous period that followed.

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the cultural eradication policy in the late-colonial period see Mark Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea: 1910-1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), pp. 141-170.

<sup>17</sup> After the enactment of the ‘*Joseon* Film Ordinance’, a number of production and distribution companies were consolidated into one central power; all creative personnel working in the industry had to register and receive approval from the colonial government. More on this, see Jong-hwa Jung, *Filmstory*, p. 79. Also see, Soyoung Kim, ‘Visual Re/presentation’, p. 125.

### The Golden Age of the *Sageuk*: 1955 – 1967

By the mid-1950s, South Korea was on its slow way to recovery, following the end of Japanese control in 1945 and the demoralising civil war (1950-1953). A breakthrough moment for the film industry occurred in 1955 with the release of Lee Gyu-hwan's *Chunhyang Story*. After its premiere on 6 January at the Guk-do theatre in Seoul, the film attracted a phenomenal 180,000 viewers.<sup>18</sup> The film has been lost but the record of its therapeutic viewing experience survives. Yi Gil-seong reports that the audience brought food to the cinema and watched the film over and over again, memorising the dialogue, while laughing and crying with the characters.<sup>19</sup> If Lee Myeong-u's *Chunhyangjeon* had wrung the hearts of Koreans under Japanese occupation exactly twenty years earlier, Lee Gyu-hwan's film 'offered the audience [...] collective empathy and the construction of a sense of collective identity' in the post-war context.<sup>20</sup>

The record-breaking success of *Chunhyang Story* spurred a boom of costumed productions, so much so that in 1956, a year after its release, more than half (sixteen) of the total cinematic output (thirty) was historical dramas.<sup>21</sup> That the

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<sup>18</sup> Jong-hwa Jung, 'Korean Films during Wartime' in *A History of Korean Cinema: From Liberation through the 1960s*, ed by Hyo-in Yi, Jong-hwa Jung, and Ji-yeon Park (Seoul: KOFA, 2005), pp. 61-62. Jung adds that this is an incredible record considering that the most popular foreign exports would draw about 30,000 to 40,000 audiences in a week. The film was also shown in Dong-A Cinema in Busan.

<sup>19</sup> Gil-seong Yi, p. 305.

<sup>20</sup> Jin-Sook Joo and Mee-Hyun Kim, *Everlasting Scent*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Jong-hwa Jung, *Filmstory*, p. 108. The following is a short list of 1950s *sageuk*: a Buddhist monk who falls in love later realising it was all a mid-summer night's dream, *Dream* (Shin Sang-ok, 1955); a political thriller set at the end of the Joseon Yi Dynasty, *The Youth* (Shin Sang-ok, 1955); a tragic saga set in the ancient Silla Dynasty, *Prince in Yam Clothes* (Jeon Chang-keun, 1956); a 'Romeo and Juliet' story based on an ancient Korean myth, *Prince Hodong and Princess Nakrang* (Kim So-dong, 1956); a farcical adaptation of a popular play, *The Wedding Day* (Lee Byung-il, 1956); one of the first films to experiment with colour technology, *Princess Seonhwa* (Choe Sung-kwan, 1957); and a folk adaptation which was marketed as a Korean Cinderella story, *Kong-jwi and Pat-jwi* (Yun Bong-chun, 1958).



*sageuk* resuscitated the film industry of the post-war period and encouraged its popularity into the 1960s is a fact not readily registered in the historical accounts of Korean cinema. In this section, I demonstrate how the *sageuk* reigned as one of the most popular genres in the Golden Age of Korean cinema and how this was realised through the development of filming technology, the diversification of source material, and exchanges with other cultural media.

If early colonial *sageuk* mainly took the form of adaptations of pre-modern folk tales that happened occasionally, the *sageuk* cycle in the late-1950s became more stable and substantial. The source material also shifted from folklore and oral myths to literary fiction and *chang-geuk* often centred on actual historical events.<sup>22</sup> This means, a number of the 1950s *sageuk* revived the lives of historical figures including the last prince of the *Silla* Dynasty in the tenth century in *Prince in Yam Clothes* to a sixteenth century *gisaeng* and martyr who drowned a Japanese military general in *Nongae* (Yun Bong-chun, 1956). As noted, many of these films are based on historical novels first serialised in the newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s and such practice of literary adaptation would continue well into the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> The recreation of historically-grounded and convincing past became increasingly relevant as the makers relied on the official annals and authoritative descriptions in historical novels.

Lee Ho-geol, attenuating into the period setting, categorises the themes of the 1950s *sageuk* in the following way: the star-crossed lovers (e.g. *The Shadowless Pagoda* [Shin Sang-ok, 1957]); set in a troubled historic past (*The Youth* [Shin

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<sup>22</sup> Ho-geol Lee, '1950s *Sageuk* films and the Representation of the Past', in *A Time of Glamour and Chaos: Korean Cinema in the 1950s*, ed. by Jinsoo An and others (Seoul: Sodo, 2003), pp. 182-185.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, Shin Sang-ok's 1955 film *The Youth* is based on Kim Dong-in's novel first serialised in *Dong-A Daily* in 1930. In 1957, similarly, Shin would make an adaptation of Hyeon Jin-geon's *Shadowless Pagoda* written in 1938.

Sang-ok, 1955]); or exotic and distant periods displaying ample spectacle (*Prince Hodong and Princess Nakrang*); that often ends by reconfirming traditional values such as patriarchy.<sup>24</sup> What is interesting about the late 1950s *sageuk* is the persistence of the ancient and exotic past, which fulfilled the public's longing to escape to a distant place.<sup>25</sup> If I delve further on this issue, the peaceful and exotic rural landscapes and traditional villages captured in the *sageuk* confirmed the continuation of history as they marked a stark contrast to the war-torn realities. The dominant reading of the 1950s *sageuk* is that the films provided emotional solace to the audience, who not only had been uprooted from their hometown but also had lost their family members in the ravaging war.<sup>26</sup>

The change of political power in 1961 when Park Chung Hee established himself after the 5.16 military *coup d'état* ushered in a new era for both the nation and the film industry.<sup>27</sup> A reigning dictator, Park proposed an aggressive modernisation scheme that would aid the miraculous economic development of Korea in later decades. The national film industry was also subject to regulatory impositions and administrative control, propelling the industrialisation of the whole sector. It was during his tenure that the Motion Picture Law was announced in January 1962, which was then revised three times in 1963, 1966, and 1973 in line with the developmental scheme of the Park Government.

An event that ushered in the sustained proliferation of the *sageuk* was the competitive release of two Chunhyang films in early 1961. An established director

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<sup>24</sup> Ho-geol Lee, '1950s *Sageuk* films and the Representation of the Past', p. 176.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>26</sup> More on 1950s Korean cinema, see Yeong-suk O, *Korean Cinema and the Cultural Discourse in the 1950s*. Also see, *A Time of Glamour and Chaos: Korean Cinema in the 1950s*.

<sup>27</sup> More on Park Chung Hee, see *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. by Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011)

Hong Seong-gi and relative newcomer Shin Sang-ok separately developed a film on the story of Chunhyang, aiming to release the films in the lucrative New Year's season. Both films featured the director's wife and muse, Kim Jee-mi and Choi Eun-hee respectively, in the role of the heroine. What is more, both films utilised the new cinematographic technique, the 'colour cinemascope' for the first time in Korea. The competition ended dramatically when, contrary to the popular consensus of anticipating Hong's success, Shin's *Seong Chunhyang* came out triumphantly breaking every box-office record.<sup>28</sup> By using 'colour' and 'cinemascope', both films revived the life of Chunhyang in vibrant colours and on a wide screen as never seen before. The colour of her vivid dress and light complexion, lush green pastures and thatched-roof houses of the Korean country-side together with the contrasting dark alleys of the prison where she is later kept highlighted the visual appeal of cinema and renewed the audience's fascination with historical productions.

After the competitive production of Chunhyang films, 'colour' and 'cinemascope' became two essential ingredients for expensive 'period' blockbusters.<sup>29</sup> Kim Mee-Hyun notes that 24 films out of 30 colour cinemascope films produced between the years 1961 and 1964 are either the *sageuk* or fantasy genre showcasing satisfying spectacle rendered by cutting-edge technology.<sup>30</sup> The high profile that Chunhyang films enjoyed should be understood in this context as it served as the ideal testing ground for new cinematographic technology, such as

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<sup>28</sup> Jong-hwa Jung, 'Film Technology in 1960s and 1970s Korean Cinema', in *A Study on Korean Film History: 1960-1979*, ed. by Hyo-in Yi and others (Seoul: KOFA, 2004), pp. 242-245.

<sup>29</sup> Jong-hwa Jung, *Filmstory*, p. 147.

<sup>30</sup> Mee-Hyun Kim, 'Cinemascope and Korean Film History', *Quarterly Journal of Film Language*, 1 (Summer 2003), p. 231. She also discusses other big-budget spectacles including *The Way of Hwarang* (Jang Il-ho, 1962) and *Qin Shu Huangdi and the Great Wall of China* (Gwon Yeong-sun, 1962).

sound, colour, and film format.<sup>31</sup> Given this context, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the *sageuk*, headed by Chunghyang films, was the driving force in the 1960s quantitative growth of Korean cinema.

At this point, I would like to draw attention back to director-cum-producer Shin Sang-ok. Historical drama occupies a prominent place in his oeuvres where '[m]ore than half of Shin Sang-ok's sixty-six South Korean films are *sageuk*'<sup>32</sup>. Keenly aware of the industrial aspects of filmmaking, Shin launched his own production company Shin Film, which would become one of the biggest film studios in Korea. It was the strong financial security and infrastructure that equipped him with the means to tackle a number of challenging *sageuk* projects. At a time when black-and-white film was still the preferred practice, as suggested by Han Sang-jun, Shin chose to make his costume dramas in colour, despite the cost.<sup>33</sup> He worked on different sub-types of historical drama, such as political thriller (e.g. *The Youth*), the biopic (*Prince Daewon* [1968]), films featuring feudal women oppressed by Neo-Confucian ethics (*Women of Yi Dynasty* [1969]), adaptation of the literary canon (*Deaf Samgryongi* [1964]), period horror (*One Thousand Year Old Fox*), and erotically charged royal court *sageuk* (*Eunuch*).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In 1971, director Lee Seong-gu would complete his *The Story of Chunhyang* with a 70 mm camera, the one and only attempt at 70 mm film in Korea. Ironically, a tale that reaffirmed the values of virtuous a woman attracted a blockbuster *event* status, at least until the early 1970s.

<sup>32</sup> Mee-Hyun Kim, 'Shin Sang-ok's Historical Dramas', p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Sang-jun Han, 'The Cinema World of Shin Sang-ok', in *Shin Sang-ok: Prince of Korean Cinema, Leading the Desire of the Masses*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>34</sup> Neo-Confucian orthodoxy defines the dogmatic and extreme Confucianism of the *Joseon* Yi Dynasty. After the fall of the *Ming* Dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century by the Manchu-led *Qing* Dynasty, the Yi monarchy took on the role of purveyor and guardian of Confucian orthodoxy by propagating the rigid hierarchy of gender and class while upholding propriety and prestige. This shift in state ideology would have particular implication on the status of women, who were stripped of their freedom of movement, right of inheritance, and other basic rights. See JaHyun Kim Haboush, *A Heritage of Kings: One Man's Monarchy in the Confucian World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 23-24. Korean historical dramas would intimately depict (or capitalise on) the realities of feudal women

In particular, Shin showed great interest in the ‘royal court *sageuk*’ (*gungjung* or *wangjo sageuk*) and continuously reworked the formula. ‘Royal court *sageuk*’ refers to films that foreground the conspiracy and intrigue inside the royal palace where the power struggle between the royal family, faithful servants, and rebellious retainers is played out.<sup>35</sup> After the success of his Chunhyang film, he adapted Park Jong-hwa’s historical fiction *Blood in Golden Linen Cloth/Geumsamui Pi* written in 1935, visualising the life of a notorious tyrant Yeonsan in an epic scale. Shin told the story of Yeonsan in two parts: *Prince Yeonsan* (1962) depicts Yeonsan’s agony in confronting the ghosts of his past – his mother, the former queen, had been falsely condemned for her violent and jealous nature and was executed; the sequel *Tyrant Yeonsan* (1962) illustrates Yeonsan’s increasingly manic behaviour, who indulges in an extravagant lifestyle with his favourite consort Jang Nok-su, until the supporters of the next king overthrows him.

*Prince Yeonsan* was not only a box-office success but also became the recipient of the Best Picture Award at the first Grand Bell Film Awards/*Daejongsang* in 1962. The two Yeonsan films exploited the potential of colourful historical spectacle, striking a balance between imagination and authenticity in the period reconstruction. Even though he sought consultation from historians, when it came to designing the costume for the King, the director took the liberty by draping him in light violet.<sup>36</sup> Although historically inaccurate, he did so when he realised that violet appeared more appealing than deep crimson on screen. Compared to another royal court *sageuk* released a year prior, *Lady Jang* shot in black and white, Yeonsan films are visually striking, showcasing shiny silk-based garments, spacious and well-

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under Confucius ideology. This point is further explored in the section on ‘1980s international festival films’ and in Chapter Three.

<sup>35</sup> Ho-geol Lee, ‘Korean Cinema in the 1970s’, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Gil-seong Yi, ‘The *Sageuk* and the Issue of Historical Perception’, p. 280.

decorated royal palaces, and dynamic camera movements including high angle shots and canted shots together with deep-focus photography. The dramatic orchestral music with strong percussion-base advances the ominous mood of the narrative, while the strong colour palette emphasises the decadence of the monarch. Shin refined the look of the *sageuk*, in such a way, by balancing convincing historical narrative with imaginative spectacle.

The nationalist reading stipulates that cinema flourished as a medium that encapsulated both the desires and frustrations of Koreans, caught in transition from an agricultural to post-industrial economy. The *sageuk* was thought to be an ideal medium to pack in contemporary concerns in a distant setting, protecting the makers from the strict censorship and regulation. ‘Nostalgic alleviation’ and ‘implicit social critique’, as suggested by the PIFF Shin Sang-ok Retrospective booklet, became one of the most discussed points of Shin’s *sageuk* films in the 60s. Kim Mee-Hyun notes that:

owing to restrictions like censorship, Korean cinema could accommodate almost no direct social criticism. Critical authorial perspectives could never be directly visible, either. However, whether consciously or unconsciously, Korean directors like Shin could deliver social criticism through the *sageuk*.<sup>37</sup>

In the Yeonsan diptych, a young military officer demolishes the aberrant King’s reign. This invites a more political reading as the film was released not long after Park Chung Hee’s junta government brought down the Syngman Rhee government in real life. The violent and unruly behaviour of the old power is ultimately what legitimises the coup. As Kim Soyoung claims, a film that was as popular as the Yeonsan diptych naturally would have participated in the meaning-making of public discourse.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Mee-Hyun Kim, ‘Shin Sang-ok’s Historical Drama’, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Soyoung Kim, *Specters of Modernity*, p. 130.

Even so, the films themselves are much more ambivalent in their treatment of the historical material. As suggested by An Jinsoo, the motifs of domestic melodrama overwhelm the straightforward allegorical and symptomatic reading. And, as despicable as Yeonsan is, the film makes it clear that he is the protagonist whose actions drive the narrative. In particular, the extended scene where Yeonsan agonises over his mother's tragic death allows the audience to identify and sympathise with the character. Moreover, he is given a chance to redeem himself at the very end of the film, when he returns to his faithful Queen and their children. What is clear, at least, is that the success of Yeonsan films helped the *sageuk* to develop as a fully-fledged genre and biographical drama set in the royal palace or elsewhere became a dominant strand in *sageuk* productions.<sup>39</sup>

Towards the end of the 1960s, however, the influence of 'horror/thriller' and 'sword play' motifs became increasingly visible in Korean cinema, reflecting the changing audience taste and shifting contours of popular entertainment. The new commercial strategy for filmmakers was to depart from authentic historical setting to a distant and fantastical background; the traditional *sageuk* formula would assimilate with Hong Kong-influenced martial arts and monster/horror narratives.<sup>40</sup> The year 1967 marks the release of an exemplary period female ghost film *A Public Cemetery of Wolha* (Gwon Cheol-hwi) and martial arts film *A Swordsman in the Twilight* (Chung Chang-wha), which ushered in a high volume of period fantasies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Even the staple blockbuster *sageuk* carefully crafted for

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<sup>39</sup> For instance, *Queen Jinseong* (Ha Han-soo, 1964) and *Femme Fatale, Jang Hee-bin* (Im Kwon-taek, 1968) are centred on women at the royal court. *Sejong the Great* (Ahn Hyun-chul, 1964) tells the story of Korea's most celebrated King. *Ten Years in Political Power* (Im Kwon-taek, 1964) depicts the rise and fall of politician Hong Guk-yeong from the eighteenth century. The founder of *Goryeo* Dynasty is revived in *Yi Seong-gye King Taejo* (Choe In-hyeon, 1965).

<sup>40</sup> Gil-seong Yi, p. 281.

maximum impact at the box-office, such as the Chunhyang films, was replaced by 'war or spy films'.<sup>41</sup> Kim Mee-Hyun disparagingly calls 'these hybrid genres, with ambiguous geographic and historical settings' as 'another aspect of the degeneration of the Korean Film Industry'.<sup>42</sup> I contend that these period productions are the manifestation of Korean cinema adapting to the changing industrial practice, political milieu, and audience taste. In all, the historical productions gradually declined in number, occasionally resurfacing in the form of literary film, quality film/*usu yeonghwa*, or nationalistic biopics, the latter of which would soon become especially prominent.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 221-222.

<sup>42</sup> Mee-Hyun Kim, 'Shin Sang-ok's Historical Drama', p. 17.



## National Heroes on Screen: 1973 – 1979

The strength of the flourishing film industry had significantly diminished at the start of the 1970s. The continued regulatory revisions of the Motion Pictures Law and the proclamation of the *Yushin* (Revitalising) Law in February 1973 by the dictatorship,<sup>43</sup> together with the popularity of foreign imports and the exponential growth of public television marginalised the film industry as a whole.<sup>44</sup> For instance, the annual ticket sales fell from 173 million in 1969 to 90 million in 1974, while the television ownership skyrocketed from 10.2% in 1970 to 78.5% in 1979. Not able to sustain business, many cinema theatres shut down; the number of cinemas dropped from 717 in 1971 to 488 in 1978.<sup>45</sup> Against this background, the production of historical dramas in the 1970s, according to Lee Ho-geol, ‘practically came to a halt’.<sup>46</sup>

The second revision of the Motion Pictures Law in August 1966 stipulated that film studios that produce *usu yeonghwa* (good or quality film) would be awarded the import rights for foreign films, which were far more popular than domestic features.<sup>47</sup> Such a coercive system of merit, designed for efficient state control,

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<sup>43</sup> *Yushin* (Revitalising) System, which followed university campus demonstrations, imposed the martial law. It removed all limits on Park’s tenure in office and gave him ultimate power to appoint and dismiss cabinet members. It realised the full-fledged dictatorship through constitutional reform. See C. I. Eugene Kim, ‘Korean at the Crossroads: The Birth of the Fourth Republic’, *Pacific Affairs*, 46 (Summer 1973), pp. 218-31.

<sup>44</sup> Television excelled in the area of historical dramas in the 1970s, marginalising the film industry further. See Ho-geol Lee, ‘Korean Cinema in the 1970s’, p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> Jong-hwa Jung, *FilmStory*, p. 162. Nearly thirty film theatres closed down per year in this period, many of which turned into wedding venues or supermarkets.

<sup>46</sup> Ho-geol Lee, ‘Korean Cinema in the 1970s’, p. 27.

<sup>47</sup> The four revisions of Motion Pictures Law that happened during the Park Chung Hee government are well-documented. Park Ji-yeon notes that points of consideration for the quota allotment were ‘the number of domestic films produced and their expense, the number of domestic feature films exported to foreign countries, the number of film exhibited and awarded in international film festivals, the number of quality films receiving domestic film awards’. Ji-yeon Park, ‘Korean Motion Picture Policy and Industry in the 1960s and 1970s’ in *A History of Korean Cinema: From Liberation through the 1960s*, ed. by Hyo-in Yi, Jong-

influenced the ideological shaping of Korean cinema because the acquisition of import quota was an extremely desirable ‘survival plan’ for the industry. This means companies started churning out films that exerted greater chance of fitting into the quota allotment, even if they had no potential for exhibition. Then in 1976, a new regulation was announced, detailing that production companies that do not fulfil the requisite quality film system were to be excluded from even being considered for the import quota assignment.<sup>48</sup>

In this exasperating situation, heroic biopics rose to prominence as the main strand of the *sageuk* in the 1970s, whose primary function was to enforce the state ideology. A sense of contamination can be detected from a once populist genre, indicating that it ‘sold out’ to power. Chung points to this when she says:

a genre so proficient at propagandizing national heroes was co-opted to serve the interests of Park Chung Hee’s authoritarian regime (1961-1979) and thus transformed into a vehicle for coercing the citizenry into personal sacrifices for the sake of state-initiated modernization and development.<sup>49</sup>

To be exact, heroic biopics portrayed masculine and sacrificial heroes who come to save the nation at a time of extreme difficulties, mainly the Japanese invasion period of the sixteenth century. Power is consolidated to one male hero, who after much difficulty wins the battle. Together with Great King Sejong whose life is dramatised in *King Sejong the Great* (Choe In-hyeon, 1978), Admiral Yi Sun-sin, who makes appearance twice in *Yi Sun-sin, the Great Admiral* (Lee Gyu-woong, 1971) and *A War Diary* (Jang Il-ho, 1977), became the two favourite icons of public indoctrination. A brave and righteous military admiral protecting the nation is the image that President Park would have liked to emulate. On this, Lee Ho-geol

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hwa Jung and Ji-yeon Park (Seoul: KOFA, 2005), pp. 155-156.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p 180.

<sup>49</sup> Hye Seung Chung, ‘Reinventing the Historical Drama’.

maintains that, ‘clearly, these films recalled the past because they intended to reinforce nationalism as the driving force of the dominant power as well as the ruling ideology’. Lee adds that national stability and prosperity were promised through the actions of ‘patriotic heroes’.<sup>50</sup> Quite naturally, these biopics are extremely male-centred and women rarely became the protagonist, unless they give up their life for the sake of the nation, as in *Non Gae, the Gisaeng* (Lee Hyoung-pyo, 1972) and *Japanese Invasion in the Year of Imjin and Gye Wol-hyang* (Im Kwon-taek, 1977).

Yu Gina examines how the *sageuk* was politically mobilised in the 1970s *Yushin* Period when she says, ‘the government endorsed these big budget state policy historical dramas pushing the audience to watch them out of obligation’.<sup>51</sup> Such a practice left an indelible mark on the genre, where ‘the *sageuk* quickly fell from the public’s favour’. The audience, in effect, rejected these texts that were instrumental in the projection of the dogmatic voice and the formation of a nationalist spectacle. To back her case, Yu points out the clear ideological shifts seen in two historical dramas by Shin Sang-ok: *A Court Lady* (1972, pre-*Yushin*) and *Three Days of Their Reign* (1973, post-*Yushin*). The main protagonist Kim Ok-gyun in *Three Days* is a revolutionist who staged a brief coup at the end of the nineteenth century. For Yu, *Three Days* is an anomaly in view of Shin Sang-ok’s *sageuk* trajectory, which so far had been centred on the tensions in the royal palace, among the ruler and his women. Films like *A Court Lady* were imbued with a touch of eroticism and sensuality.<sup>52</sup> This means, even Shin who had a spate of historical dramas under his hat, was not immune to interfering pressure from above. However, if I give Shin his credit, he made use of different genres throughout his career and his heroic biopic which

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<sup>50</sup> Ho-geol Lee, ‘Korean Cinema in the 1970s’, p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Gina Yu, ‘History in Film, Film in History’, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p 29.

features a politically-motivated and righteous hero, *Three Days*, differs from his usual royal court *sageuk* conventions. In other words, *Yushin* reform may have had a partial, but not complete, influence on his decision to make *Three Days*. What is clear, however, is that *Three Days* was deemed more conducive to the dominant ideology and other propaganda historical dramas thrived in the 1970s, facilitating a more blatant coalition with power.<sup>53</sup>

Given this, it is no surprise that many historical biopics were generously endowed with film awards and state grants. For instance, *An Jung-geun*, *The Patriot* (Ju Dong-jin, 1972), *General in Red* (Lee Doo-yong, 1973), and *A War Diary* all won the Best Picture Award at the prestigious Grand Bell Film Awards. Yet the audience response to these films, as suggested earlier by Yu Gina, was less than lukewarm. Even though it garnered four awards, including the Best Picture at the Sixteenth Grand Bell Awards, *A War Diary* attracted a meagre audience of 35,000 at the cinema.<sup>54</sup>

While propagandist biopics did thrive in the 1970s, a small cycle of *sageuk* emerged that focused on the theme of women's sacrifice under Confucius patriarchy. They are *A Court Lady*, *Gate of Woman* (Byun Jang-ho, 1972), *Fidelity* (Ha Gil-jong,

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<sup>53</sup> The following is the list of 1970s heroic biopics: *Wang-geon the Great* (Choe In-hyeon, 1970) is an epic action showing how General Wang-geon staged a coup and erected a new dynasty *Goryeo*. A visionary monk who predicted the Japanese invasion in the sixteenth century (*Imjin* War) is immortalised in *Great Monk Seo-san* (Chun Jo-myuong, 1972). In *Five Commandments* (Jang Il-ho, 1976), *hwarang* Wonsul who breaks the five commandments redeems himself by bravely charging into war and dying. A famous physician Hur Jun who sacrifices himself to stop the spread of plague during the *Imjin* Japanese Invasion is the subject of *Concentration of Attention* (Choe In-hyeon, 1977). In *Scholar Yul-gok and His Mother Sin Saimdang* (Jung Jin-woo, 1978), the young Yul-gok repents after his mother's death and conceives a strategy to win the *Imjin* war. Lastly *The Tripitaka Koreana* (Jang Il-ho, 1978) dramatises the collective effort to make 80,000 wooden printing blocks containing Buddhist scriptures to protect Korea from the invading Mongols in the thirteenth century.

<sup>54</sup> KMDb information: *A War Diary*,  
 <[http://www.kmdb.or.kr/movie/md\\_basic.asp?nation=K&p\\_dataid=03167&keyword=%B3%AD%C1%DF%C0%CF%B1%E2](http://www.kmdb.or.kr/movie/md_basic.asp?nation=K&p_dataid=03167&keyword=%B3%AD%C1%DF%C0%CF%B1%E2)> [accessed 1 December 2010]

1973), and *Red Gate of Tragedy* (Byun Jang-ho, 1978). Interestingly, as will be seen in the next era of film history, the theme of suffering women would endure far longer than the masculine heroism.

## Erotic Period Drama: 1982 – 1987

Park Chung Hee's dictatorship came to a sudden end in 1979 with his assassination, only to be succeeded by another military government. The new president Chun Doo Hwan began his tenure with his legitimacy to govern significantly damaged with his implication in the Gwangju Massacre of May 1980.<sup>55</sup> As a means to appease the general public, the Chun government lavished support on mass cultural events and sensational entertainment.<sup>56</sup> For instance, advertised as 'the greatest playground since the beginning of mankind', 'National Customs 1981/*Gukpung*', provided five days and nights of unending traditional songs and dances, attracting nearly ten million crowds to Yeoi Island.<sup>57</sup> Moreover South Korea was honoured as a proud host of two international sporting events in the 1980s: the Asian Games in 1986 and the Olympic Games in 1988. Retrospectively, the 1980s cultural scene is summarised by the '3S policy' that promoted screen, sex, and, sports, feeding the people with jolly entertainments while dulling the public critique of the regime.<sup>58</sup> Needless to say, what this means is that the days of the state-endorsed biopics of the 1970s were long over.

The year 1982 saw the relaxation of sexual content in cinema, which meant that as long as it did not feature any direct political comment, filmmakers could portray a higher degree of sexual content in their work.<sup>59</sup> Welcoming the change in censorship, the industry took the opportunity to revitalise the market by churning out *ero* films that can be shown at late night screenings. In a sense, cashing in on wanton

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<sup>55</sup> More on Gwangju Massacre see Donald N. Clark, *The Kwangju Uprising: Shadows Over the Regime in South Korea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988)

<sup>56</sup> Gil-seong Yi, 'The *Sageuk* and the Issue of Historical Perception', p. 284.

<sup>57</sup> So-won Kang, 'Korean Cinema in the 1980s', in *A History of Korean Cinema: from 1970s through 1990s*, p. 49.

<sup>58</sup> Jong-hwa Jung, *Filmstory*, p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo and Han Ju Kwak, *Korean Film*, p. 58.

sex for instant financial returns seems as destructive to the integrity and quality of cinematic production as the nationalistic biopics posing as propaganda. Yet both cycles of films should be appreciated as evidence of the film industry's desperate attempts to keep afloat by either relying on audience demand or state-support.

Henceforth 'melodramas and historical films with soft-core pornographic elements were the major trend' in the 1980s.<sup>60</sup> In the area of historical productions, the arrival of *ero* films shaped two divergent but closely related *sageuk* cycles: 'international festival-oriented films' (*gukje yeonghwaje yeonghwa*) and '*tosok ero*', which I translate as 'folk erotica'. Blending local flavour and eroticism with humour, folk erotica drew local audiences into the cinemas, while a certain level of artistic ambition and requisite sexuality characterised international festival films, which vied for global recognition by exoticising the national culture. What should be made clear here is that the two categories are not exclusive but rather two sides of the same coin.

Folk erotica set in pre-modern Korea feature virile men and women with uncontrollable sexuality, as seen in *Byeon Gwang-swoi* (Um Jong-sun, 1987) or a peasant girl selling her body for a living as in *Mountain Strawberries* (Kim Su-hyeong, 1982). These films are characterised by a sensational subject matter, such as the appearance of a hermaphrodite in *Sabangji* (Song Kyung-sik, 1988) and equally salacious film posters displaying semi-nude photos of the female star. In all, folk erotica made a spectacle of the female body in exotic past, especially through the soft-pornographic poster campaign.

The erotic period drama *Eoh Wu-dong* (Lee Jang-ho, 1985) was the second biggest Korean box-office hit in 1985. In it the wife of nobleman, Eoh Wu-dong, becomes a courtesan after her cruel husband abandons her. An emancipated woman,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p 65.

Eoh uses her sexuality to hold power over men, though tragically she commits suicide by the end of the film, again reiterating that a transgressive life for a woman must be punished by death. The scene where she seduces the King in a picnic was deemed too scandalous and the chairman of the Ethics Committee resigned after the obscenity dispute, suggesting that the state continued to intervene in the matter of censorship.<sup>61</sup> Even so, the success of *Eoh Wu-dong* spurred a short cycle of 1980s royal court *sageuk* that similarly spiced up the sexual content, as demonstrated by a remake of a Shin Sang-ok film *Eunuch* (Lee Doo-yong, 1986) together with *Prince Yeonsangun* (Lee Hyeok-su, 1987) and *Prince Yeonsan's Life* (Im Kwon-taek, 1987).

Although similarly packed with eroticism, the 'international festival *sageuk*' foregrounded native customs and traditions, catering to the curious eyes of a foreign audience. International film festivals offer a venue in which a national cinema can be 'discovered' and introduced to the rest of the world, as nominations and prizes from prestigious festivals increase global recognition, circulation, and audience awareness. While South Korean cinema, in recent years, has enjoyed great visibility at international film festivals with the success of Park Chan-wook and Im Kwon-taek, it was in the 1980s that the efforts to target overseas film festivals really took shape.<sup>62</sup>

The festival fever went hand in hand with the liberalising of on-screen sex, which had an immense impact on the 1980s *sageuk* scene.<sup>63</sup> *The Hut* (Lee Doo-yong, 1981) started the trend when it received an invitation to the official selection at the Venice Film Festival. The director Lee would go onto exhibit his evocatively titled

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<sup>61</sup> So-won Kang, 'Korean Cinema in the 1980s', p. 87.

<sup>62</sup> *A Coachman* (Kang Dae-jin, 1961) was invited to Berlin in 1961, however, more than a decade passed without a single Korean filmmaking it to international film festivals, reflecting the oppressive film making practice during the dictatorship era in the 1970s. Perhaps the highlight of the 1980s festival drive happened with Bae Yong-kyoon's *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?: A Zen Fable* which won the Best Picture at Locarno in 1989.

<sup>63</sup> So-won Kang, 'Korean Cinema in the 1980s', p. 87.



later film *Spinning the Tales of Cruelty Towards Women* (Lee Doo-yong, 1983) in ‘*un certain regard*’ section at Cannes. A film set during the colonial period *Blazing Sun* (Hah Myung-joong, 1984) was entered in the official competition section in Berlin. This success was furthered by Kang Soo-yeon’s winning the Best Actress Award at Venice for *Surrogate Mother* (Im Kwon-taek, 1986).

In 1984, when the film festival fever was reaching its peak, a literary critic Kim Yeol-gyu observed that:

The fact that Korean cinema is cultivating traditional subject matter is important because these efforts present a kind of modern and globalised vision of Korean cinema. Already there is a possibility that we [Koreans] can produce works like Ingmar Bergman’s *Virgin Spring*, Marcel Camus’ *Black Orpheus*, Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* [...] The topics of interest can be found, without difficulty, in Korean literature, folk literature, and folk religion.<sup>64</sup>

Kim gives us an insight into a marginal national cinema’s desire for international prestige alongside the likes of Bergman and Kurosawa. And this is precisely the reason why the film critics at the time were dismissive of *ero* films but generally supportive of festival films and its self-orientalising devices.<sup>65</sup> Behind this festival drive, however, lurked a more practical reason: the ever-powerful appeal of the ‘foreign import quota’. The recognition at prestigious international festivals could lead to a prized distribution license and yet again a policy originally designed to improve the quality of the national cinema was abused in the acquisition of profit.

In order to attract foreign attention, an emphasis was placed on the presentation of the ‘national’ and ‘traditional’ on screen. A number of topics and themes were favoured: shamans and exorcism (*The Hut*), the practice of surrogate

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<sup>64</sup> Yeol-gyu Kim, ‘Cinema and Traditional Subject Matter’, *Film/Yeonghwa*, 96 (November 1984), p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> Gil-seong Yi, ‘The *Sageuk* and the Issue of Historical Perception’, p. 285.

mothers (*Hanging Tree* [Jung Jin-woo, 1984]) and surrogate fathers (*Spinning the Tales*), and virginal widows (*Spinning the Tales*). Women in these films are gravely mistreated, abused by the confines of the Neo-Confucian obsession with the family offspring. The system violently reduced women to little more than vessels to provide a son and continue the family line. Almost all of these films end with the death of the female character; hanging was a particularly effective method as seen in *Hanging Tree*, *Surrogate Mother* and *Spinning the Tales of Cruelty towards Women*.

*Spinning the Tales*, for instance, graphically depicts the many miseries that could befall a feudal woman. The film follows Gillye, a young woman from a poor background, who is sold to an aristocratic family as a virgin widow. Following her rape by her brother-in-law, the family exiles her. A brief respite from her trauma comes when she meets and marries a servant. However, Gillye is again raped, this time by her new husband's master; the master is then murdered by his servant in retribution, and the couple are compelled to become fugitives. They eventually establish comfortable life, but as they remain childless, Gillye is forced to sleep with another man in order to bear a son. When the baby is born, she hangs herself, prompted by her shamed husband handing her a knife and demanding she end her life. The film was dubbed as an 'encyclopaedia of ethnography' and was praised for its carefully made costumes, authentic period décor, and historical architecture.<sup>66</sup> It is also beautifully shot and visually striking in some scenes, especially the dream-like flashbacks rendered in yellow-tint with muted sound, reminiscent of the aesthetic tradition of European art cinema. At the same time, the violence exacted on Gillye's body is captured by a voyeuristic camera, which at once glamorises and mystifies the violent acts.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

The film contains ample nudity, sadistic sex, and rape scenes, but its poster is markedly genteel compared to those of folk erotica (FIG. 2). And this quality best

summarises the international festival drive contained in the film.

Making a kitsch gesture, the poster displays a panoramic view of an European city in the background while positioning Gillye operating a spinning wheel in the foreground. The captions celebrate the achievements of the film: ‘Winning Best Cinematography Award at Chicago! Bronze Award from Brazil’s São Paolo Film Festival! Participation Award at the Academy

**FIG. 2 *Spinning the Tales of Cruelty*** Awards! Invitation to the London Film Festival!’ Continuing the excess of exclamations, the poster notes ‘From 60 years of Korean cinema, no other Korean film has stormed the world like this one!’

As noted, the international prestige seemed too alluring to confront or problematise the sadistic violence, injustice, and the display of suffering traditional women. Writing in 1988 after *Surrogate Mother* won the Best Actress Award at Venice, film critic Heo Chang-ui claimed:

To the eyes of the Western audiences what deserved the standing ovation is not just the aesthetic language and filmic technique of the film. [...] Rather, I am convinced that they were moved by the film’s ending where the surrogate mother Ok-nyeo *throws her life away as a protest to the inhumane institution of the past* that denies a mother’s love for her

child.<sup>67</sup> (emphasis mine)

*Surrogate Mother* deals with an ancient custom that is alien even to modern Koreans, *ssibaji*, which literally means ‘receiver of seed’. Heo here refers to the ending where the young surrogate mother Ok-nyeo hangs herself when her repeated request to see her natal son is denied by the upperclass family. The final image of the film is quite striking, where a hanged body draped in white is captured in a long shot, contrasted against the green of the field and the brown of a tree (FIG. 3).

### FIG. 3 The Last Image of Ok-nyeo

While Heo tries to reason with the film, it is not clear whether Ok-nyeo killed herself out of indignation (as Heo sees it) or because she found herself completely powerless and had no choice but to end her life of grievance. In other words, it is unclear whether the film criticises or *accepts* the violence of the old system and values. The self-imposed orientalism and sadistic violence on women has resonance with what Rey Chow calls ‘primitive passions’ seen in the early films by the Chinese Fifth Generation directors.<sup>68</sup> Like Chow, I want to scrutinise the poetic orientalism and cultural primitivism as a means to invite the foreign gaze, by paying

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<sup>67</sup> Chang-ui Heo quoted in, In-sik Byeon, *For Cinema and for the Future* (Seoul: Gong-gan Media, 1995), pp. 92-93.

<sup>68</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995)

attention to the construction of Korean history, women, and cinema. To be more specific, why has ‘women under oppression’ been singled out as an appropriate national metaphor and an adequate means to gain access to international image markets? I revisit this question in Chapter Three in relation to *Untold Scandal*.

**FIG. 4 *Mulberry Tree* (left) vs. *Surrogate Mother* (right)**

Given this context, one can argue that both festival-oriented period drama and the folk erotica are exploitive and only a thin line divides the two. Besides, many directors worked in both type of films. For instance, two years after *Spinning the Tales*, Lee Doo-yong released *Mulberry Tree* (1985), a hugely popular folk erotica. The similar imagery in film posters (FIG. 4) further suggests that the distinction between the two cycles is limited, if not, untenable. In a logic that evokes ‘embedded’ and ‘disembedded’ national films, one can argue that historical dramas, which received international recognition, were elevated to festival film status while others were labelled ero *sageuk* to be readily consumed in local theatres.

## A Decade of Hiatus: The 1990s

The 1986 agreement on direct distribution by foreign film companies (enacted in 1987) in Korea brought a seismic shift to the film industry, precisely because it invalidated the notorious import quota license. A large number of Hollywood films flooded into local screens and Korean cinema entered a new phase of recession in the 1990s. Domestic market share of Korean films dropped significantly, reaching its lowest point of 15.9% in 1993.<sup>69</sup> The popularity of *ero sageuks* died out eventually. Tellingly, the 1990s is the only decade since the introduction of cinema, where an adaptation of ‘A Tale of Chunhyang’ was not made and only a handful of historical dramas were produced in the entire decade. Yet there were detectable undercurrents that would eventually shape the 2000s *sageuk* scene. I summarise them as follows: the emerging interest in the colonial past; recontextualisation of the royal court *sageuk* genre through a murder-mystery plot; nostalgic mobilisation of national heritage on screen; and the dissemination of period fantasy aided by the developing digital techniques.

Im Kwon-taek’s hit action blockbuster *The General’s Son* (1990) opened the avenue for Korean action as well as period dramas set in the colonial era. A biopic of a legendary fighter and later politician Kim Du-han, the film presented a dramatic picture of the 1940s Seoul ruled by fedora-wearing macho men draped in slick suits. The film led to two sequels and spurred a trend of *noir*-ish melodrama, action, and the biopic set in the first half of the twentieth century. *Death Song/Sa-ui Chanmi* (Kim Ho-sun, 1991) is another colonial period biopic, depicting the tragic love story of a classical singer Yun Sim-deok. Another film that portrays a tragic life of a

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<sup>69</sup> See statistical data provided by Korean Movie Database.  
<[http://www.kmdb.or.kr/statis/statis\\_04.asp](http://www.kmdb.or.kr/statis/statis_04.asp)> [accessed 1 December 2010]

woman, *Myong-ja Akiko Sonia* (Lee Jang-ho, 1992) begins its narrative in the 1940s. *My Dear Keumhong* (Kim Yu-jin, 1995) presents the *ménage-à-trois* between a courtesan Geumhong, poet Yi Sang, and painter Gu Bon-woong in the 1920s. These films prefigure the explosive interest in reviving the colonial period that happened in the mid-2000s.

The most important (and the only) royal court *sageuk* in the 1990s is Park Jong-won's *Eternal Empire* (1994). An adaptation of Yi In-hwa's hit novel of the same title, *Eternal Empire* blends fact and fiction to construct a mystery behind the sudden death of King Jeongjo. Stylistically and thematically, the film is an homage to Shin Sang-ok's royal court *sageuk* of the 1960s. At the same time, the film updates the genre by foregrounding the murder mystery inside constructed history. The use of split screens, wipes, and quick editing, formal features that are uncommon in the *sageuk* genre increase the tension inside the treacherous court politics. The film, moreover, displays a marked progress in terms of historical research and period mise-en-scène. In all, it suggests a way forward for the classical *sageuk* genre. While it did not turn a huge profit at the box-office, the film was critically successful, winning the Best Picture at the Golden Bell Awards in 1995.<sup>70</sup>

*Seopyeonje* is no doubt the 'event' film of the early 1990s. Based on the bestselling novel by Yi Cheong-jun, who also wrote the film script, the film depicts the life of a *pansori* artist Yu-bong and his daughter Song-hwa who continued the last breath of the dying art into the 1960s. The film sold more than one million admission tickets in Seoul alone, a first for a Korean film, and its tremendous financial success ushered in a new era of films that celebrated Korean heritage and

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<sup>70</sup> Korean Movie Database reports that *Eternal Empire* sold about 47,000 attendance tickets in Seoul. See [kmdb.or.kr](http://kmdb.or.kr).

culture.<sup>71</sup> *Seopyeonje* not only helped Koreans rekindle their interest in national tradition and history, but it also taught the industry that traditional elements and themes, formerly thought as banal, have market potential as well as artistic value.

Finally, spurred on the success of *Ginkgo Bed* (Kang Je-kyu, 1995), a fantasy action with a reincarnation theme, other period fantasies set in a distant past began to appear, such as *Gateway of Destiny* (Lee Geung-young, 1996) and *Ghost in Love* (Lee Kwang-hoon, 1999). These films belong to a larger sub-cycle of time-travelling narratives that appeared in the late 1990s. David Martin-Jones suggests that time-travelling melodramas, such as *Calla* (Song Hae-sung, 1999) and *Ditto* (Kim Jung-kwon, 2000), are ‘characterised by decompressed narratives’ which examine ‘recent national history to contemplate the effect of the past on the present’ against the backdrop of the IMF economic meltdown.<sup>72</sup> In these period fantasies, history appears only in a glimpse. Even so, they feature big-budget spectacles and costumed stars, paving the way for a full comeback of the *sageuk* a few years later. It is worth mentioning here that recent developments in visual effects and computer image processing made it easier and less expensive for filmmakers to venture into period backgrounds and costumes.

By the end of the 1990s and early 2000, the film industry had picked up its strength and hailed the arrival of New Korean Cinema with the success of the Korean blockbusters *Swiri* (Kang Je-gyu, 1999) and *JSA* (Park Chan-wook, 2000). The revival of the *sageuk* genre would soon occur in 2003. Even though the genre was not strong throughout the 1990s, they had not completely disappeared and the preparation for a comeback was well under-way.

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<sup>71</sup> Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, p. 33.

<sup>72</sup> David Martin-Jones, ‘Decompressing Modernity: South Korean Time Travel Narratives and the IMF Crisis’, *Cinema Journal*, 46.4 (2007), p. 48.



## Conclusion

So far I have examined the history of the historical drama in the South Korean context. As a genre, the *sageuk* communicated the desires and aspirations of their audience in each historical period. Taking the form of folkloric adaptations in the 1920s, it became an integral vehicle for the popular acceptance of cinema. *Sageuk* talkies, moreover, provided an outlet for emotional purge and pathos for the colonised. The genre was formalised after the post-war cinema boom of the late 1950s, rising to greater prominence in the 1960s. Some historical dramas, especially the Chunhyang films, were present-day blockbusters that were extremely popular in local theatres. The genre diversified as a result, ranging from the period horror to the royal court *sageuk*. Entering the 1970s, the film industry went into a long depression, seeking a way out by collaborating with authority, as witnessed by the proliferation of heroic biopics. In the 1980s, the costume genre with strong erotic content became the dominant strand, which can be further divided into international festival films and folk erotica. While the historical drama remained almost forgotten in the 1990s, other forces were working together to make way for its return in the early 2000s. Generally speaking, the 1970s and 1980s left an indelible mark on the *sageuk*, hollowing out its status as a mainstream popular cinema of the earlier Golden Age period. The *sageuk* was labelled a conservative genre serving the dominant ideology (the heroic biopic), a cheap entertainment (folk erotica), or the embodiment of an orientalisng gaze (international festival films). Ultimately, the genre earned a place in the disreputable triumvirate of the Korean film industry, alongside sports drama and films centred on animals, the *sageuk* was considered box-office poison.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Darcy Paquet, 'Dressed for Success: Interview with E J-yong', *Screen International*, 1427

The specificities of the *sageuk* history direct our attention to the cultural and generic baggage which is crucial in our understanding of the current *sageuk* boom. Recent historical drama is conscious of its history, as it often acknowledges and challenges the conventions set by earlier examples. Echoing Kim Soyoung's thought on the amnesia of post-colonial classical Korean cinema, Chris Berry argues that 'in few countries has the destruction of cinematic heritage been as complete as in Korea'.<sup>74</sup> The fragmented memory of Korean cinema accounts for the misunderstanding and denigration of older Korean cinema, an issue especially relevant in the *sageuk* genre. Keeping this context in mind, I engage my study on South Korean historical drama by making reference to its generic trajectory and historical legacy in chapters that follow.

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(31 October 2003)

<sup>74</sup> Chris Berry, 'Introduction to "Recovering the Past: Rare Films Screened in Korea"', *Screening the Past* (18 December 1998)

## CHAPTER TWO

### Mapping the Field: The *Sageuk* in the 2000s

‘One of the paradoxes of contemporary society... [is an] appetite for innovation coupled with a deep nostalgia for the past’.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter investigates the contexts in which South Korean historical drama has risen to prominence during the 2000s. I begin my study on recent *sageuk* films, by investigating the two words ‘fusion’ and ‘faction’. I then delve into the immediately recognisable contexts, extending the research to the larger fields that advanced the *sageuk* boom. Firstly, the ‘history war’ in national and international platforms has kept Koreans interested in their past while facilitating an explosion of the historic discourse. Working in tandem with political contexts, the strengthening national film industry and the border-crossing exchanges between different cultural domains laid fertile ground for the general resurgence of the ‘historical’. Moving on, I investigate the broader implication of the ‘historical turn’ in the construction of the national heritage industry. I posit the *sageuk* as a flagship product of the emerging ‘culture content industry’ where traditional culture is refashioned for commercial purpose. The ‘Digital Cultural Heritage Content (DCHC)’ project and ‘HanStyle’ initiative both managed by the Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) brand a soft-nationalism via cultural products. Ultimately, by negotiating the place of the fictional histories inside the cultural industries, I demonstrate how the *sageuk*, together with DCHC and HanStyle, form a cycle of heritage commodification. As such, different agents are working together to commodify the ideas and images of the past. In all, new *sageuk* comes at this particular juncture of the nation where

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 174.

destabilising historical discourse and a booming heritage industry demonstrate the ways in which the past is evoked by the demands of the present.

## New Historical Drama: Fusion *Sageuk* and Faction Films

The explosive impetus of the *sageuk* was witnessed in the year 2003 with the release of five costumed dramas: *The Legend of Evil Lake* (Lee Kwang-hoon), *Romantic Warriors*, *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield*, *Untold Scandal*, and *Sword in the Moon* (Kim Eui-suk). The box office results of these films were promising. In a year when the highest grossing film was *Memories of Murder* with 5.2 million ticket sales nationwide, *Untold Scandal* was not far behind with 3.5 million tickets, the third highest overall. *Once Upon a Time in the Battlefield* placed sixth on the Top Ten list, with 2.7 million ticket sales.

Observing the burgeoning popularity of the *sageuk* in popular media, *Cine21* dedicated a special edition to ‘New Era of *Sageuk*’ in October 2003.<sup>2</sup> Two television dramas *Joseon Female Detective: Damo* (MBC, Jul – Sep 2003) and *Jewel in the Palace/Daejanggeum* (MBC, Sep 2003 – Mar 2004) and two feature films *Once Upon A Time in the Battlefield* and *Untold Scandal* were given as examples of the ‘new *sageuk*’ to be analysed and compared against traditional *sageuk*. This in turn demarcated a new cycle of visual historical narratives that encompassed both the small and big screens.

By 2006 when *Cine21* revisited the status of the *sageuk* in a piece titled ‘The Historical Film Fever of 2007: History Is the Jackpot’, it was clear that what first seemed like a passing phase was here to stay. The record-breaking success of *King and the Clown* in early 2006 not only bolstered the genre’s position in the nation’s annual filmic output but also gave the writer the confidence to predict that ‘perhaps the year after next, *Chungmuro* might relive the days of glory in the late 1950s when

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<sup>2</sup> Dong-cheol Nam, ‘New Era of *Sageuk*: What Has Changed?’ *Cine21*, 424 (28 Oct 2003), pp. 48-51.

twenty or more *sageuk* films were released in a year'.<sup>3</sup> Even though this optimism turned out to be a mere exaggeration, as only four out of the thirteen films the article introduced as 'in production' have materialised into finished products as of October 2010,<sup>4</sup> the *sageuk* has made an indelible impact on the national film industry.

TABLE 2 is the summary of the diverse range of *sageuk* films that appeared since the early 2000s.

**TABLE 2. The List of *Sageuk* Films Released in the 2000s**

	<b>Title</b>	<b>Release Date /Classification</b>	<b>Misc.</b>
<b>2002</b>	<i>Chihwaseon</i>	10 May / 12	Winner of Best Director at Cannes
	<i>Y.M.C.A. Baseball</i>	3 October / G	
<b>2003</b>	<i>Sword in the Moon</i>	16 July / 15	
	<i>Untold Scandal</i>	2 October / 18	3.5 million tickets sold nationwide 3 <sup>rd</sup> highest grossing Korean film of 2003
	<i>Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield</i>	17 October / 15	2.8 mil. tickets sold 6 <sup>th</sup> highest grossing Korean film of 2003
	<i>The Legend of Evil Lake</i>	27 Nov / 15	A loose remake of Shin Sang-ok's 1969 film with the same title
	<i>Romantic Warriors</i>	5 Dec / 18	
<b>2004</b>	<i>Fighter in the Wind</i>	12 Aug / 12	2.3 mil.
	<i>Rikidozan</i>	15 Dec / 15	1.3 mil.
<b>2005</b>	<i>Blood Rain</i>	4 May / 18	2.3 mil.
	<i>The Duelist</i>	8 Sept / 12	1.2 mil.
	<i>Shadowless Sword</i>	18 Nov / 12	
	<i>King and the Clown</i>	28 Dec / 15	12.3 mil., 2 <sup>nd</sup> highest grossing Korean film in the history of Korean cinema
	<i>Blue Swallow</i>	29 Dec / 12	
<b>2006</b>	<i>Forbidden Quest</i>	23 Feb / 18	2.6 mil., 8 <sup>th</sup> highest grossing film of 2006
<b>2006</b>	<i>The Evil Twin</i>	23 May / 12	
<b>2007</b>	<i>Hwang Jin Yi</i>	6 June / 15	1.3 mil.
	<i>Epitaph</i>	1 Aug / 15	

<sup>3</sup> Jong-do Yi, 'The Historical Film Fever of 2007', *Cine21*, 574 (26 Oct 2006) *Chungmuro* is a central district in Seoul populated by film companies since the 1960s. Now the word has symbolic meaning for Korean cinema, just as Hollywood represents mainstream American cinema.

<sup>4</sup> This is partly because the bubble had burst in 2007, resulting in the disruption and cancellation of a number of productions, and not just *sageuk* films.

	<i>Shadows in the Palace</i>	18 Oct / 18	1.4 mil.
<b>2008</b>	<i>Once Upon a Time</i>	30 Jan / 12	
	<i>Radio Dayz</i>	31 Jan / 12	
	<i>The Tale of Legendary Libido</i>	30 Apr / 18	Loose remake of a folk erotica <i>Byeon Gwang-swoi</i>
	<i>The Good, The Bad, and the Weird</i>	17 Jul / 15	7.0 mil., Biggest box office hit of 2008
	<i>Dachimawa Lee</i>	13 Aug / 12	
	<i>The Divine Weapon</i>	4 Sept / 15	3.7 mil. 6 <sup>th</sup> highest grossing Korean film of 2008
	<i>Modern Boy</i>	2 Oct / 12	
	<i>Portrait of a Beauty</i>	13 Nov / 18	2.3 mil., 7 <sup>th</sup> highest grossing Korean film of 2008
	<i>The Accidental Gangster and the Mistaken Courtesan</i>	3 Dec / 15	
	<i>A Frozen Flower</i>	30 Dec / 18	3.3 mil, 5 <sup>th</sup> highest grossing film of 2009
<b>2009</b>	<i>Private Eye</i>	2 Apr / 15	1.9 mil.
	<i>The Sword with No Name</i>	24 Sep / 15	1.7 mil.
<b>2010</b>	<i>Blades of Blood a.k.a Like the Moon Escaping from the Cloud</i>	29 April / 15	1.4 mil.
	<i>The Servant</i>	2 Jun / 18	3 mil.

Heralding the revival of the historical drama, the popular media rushed to give the cycle a name. The two most widely circulated terms are ‘fusion *sageuk*’ and ‘faction *sageuk*’. As the amalgamation of the English ‘fusion’ and Korean ‘*sageuk*’ suggests, fusion *sageuk* evinces its hybrid quality, a celebration of pastiche and promiscuity. The word ‘fusion’ has acquired buzzword status in Korea, manifest in a flurry of fusion artefacts from food and music, to general fashion style. An eminent scholar Lee Uh-ryung inaugurated ‘fusion’ as the key word of the twenty-first century, denoting it as a new kind of consumer taste.<sup>5</sup> Effectively, the coining of ‘fusion *sageuk*’ carries little negative connotation. The ‘fusion’ drive provides the very motivation to rework and reinvent *sageuk* styles at both narrative and aesthetic levels. For instance, *Once Upon A Time in a Battlefield* advertised itself as ‘An Exhilarating Fusion History Comedy’. In *King and the Clown*, the indigenous clown

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<sup>5</sup> Uh-ryung Lee, ‘Why “Fusion” Now?’, *Joong Ang Daily* (23 February 2002)

play is reconfigured by motifs borrowed from the Beijing Opera, resulting in an hybrid style that is familiar yet different. In the area of costume design, a delicate beige undergarment worn by Royal Consort Jeong in *Forbidden Quest* (Kim Dae-woo, 2006) manifests a fusion style: resembling a western brassier with tied ribbon at the back, the piece is in perfect harmony with other traditional garments, in its texture and colour (FIG. 5).

**FIG. 5 Fusion Costume in *Forbidden Quest***

Yi Yeong-hui makes a provocative observation that fusion *sageuk* is not as concerned with a commitment to historical veracity as it is with establishing intertextual images.<sup>6</sup> This means that today's audiences rely on their previous knowledge of historical drama (and effectively on the past), and not on truth-value facts to determine the 'fusion' status of film texts. So if a film or television drama radically departs from what is traditionally accepted as 'historical', it is considered a 'fusion', regardless of how the text actually mixes up the past and present, and fact and fiction. Therefore existing historical narratives and representations mediate the making of the fusion *sageuk*. In this sense, Robert Stam's idea of 'intertextual dialogism' helps us understand the construction and circulation of fusion images as

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<sup>6</sup> Yeong-hui Yi, 'Fusion *Sageuk*, the Unavoidable Feeling of Discomfort', *Bangsong Munye* (September 2007), pp. 33-34.



adaptations. Stam defines ‘intertextual dialogism’ as:

the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, which reach the text not only through recognizable influences, but also through a subtle process of dissemination.<sup>7</sup>

As such, historical meaning is derived from the consumer’s participation in the circulation of a series of films and their assimilation into the wider culture. What this, effectively, brings to light is that the christening of ‘fusion *sageuk*’ implies a conscious effort to untangle the memories of old *sageuk*. As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, with the example of *Untold Scandal*, the popular designations ‘fusion’ and ‘faction’ point to the very energy invested in order to break away from tradition and convention.

‘Faction’, is a portmanteau word made up of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. Robert Brent Toplin defines the term in the following way:

Faction-based movies spin highly fictional tales that are loosely based on actualities. Their stories identify some real people, events, or situations from the past but blend these details into invented fables. [...] Drawing inspiration from myths and legends as well as traditional practices of cinematic history, the creators of faction employ history in a manner that is less subject to debate over veracity than are the biopics or historical epics of earlier years.<sup>8</sup>

While Toplin regards ‘faction’ rather negatively, containing expedient narrative strategies that protect the makers from the attacks of ‘fact checkers’, the word is used neutrally in Korea, denoting historical narratives where the boundary between historical fact and fiction is blurred, and the story is peppered with mystery and conspiracy. Its generic themes converge with what Jerome De Groot calls ‘historical

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Stam, ‘Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation’, in *Film Adaptation*, ed. by James Naremore (Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 226.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 92.

conspiracy thriller', where a 'hero-adventurer' appears as 'investigator and iconoclast' who pursues hidden knowledge or secret facts in the narrative.<sup>9</sup> In other words, faction derives pleasure from dismantling factual history and inserting daring twists to the official historical discourse. The National Korean Institute (*Guklip Gukowon*) came up with a Korean word '*Gaksaek Silhwa*/Dramatised Real Story' to replace the English word 'faction' when the word came to be used widely in everyday. The need to translate this English word to Korean suggests that these fictionalised historical narratives have had a very real impact in society; it alludes to a top-down need for cultural adaptation, and the development of a specifically Korean version. The rise of faction *sageuk* films has much to do with the popularity of faction novels, a point that I return to subsequently.

What the emergence of 'fusion' and 'faction' conveys to us is that now the word '*sageuk*' itself is not sufficient to account for the recent manifestation of the historical drama. Just as '*tosok ero*/folk erotica' was coined in the 1980s to designate a cycle of period dramas containing ample sex scenes, 'fusion' and 'faction' have been selected because they best represent the core concerns of the historical genre at present. What, then, are the narrative and aesthetic features of the new *sageuk*, characterised by the terms 'fusion' and 'faction'? As a way to answer this question, I explore the following issues: the time frame, faction mode and fictionalisation, democratisation of history in terms of class and gender, the quality of production design, and genrification and audience targeting.

Firstly, new *sageuk* explores various epochs from the Korean past. While the *Joseon* Yi Dynasty (1390 – 1910) is still the preferred setting, more distant history is

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<sup>9</sup> Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 56.

also revisited for cinematic treatment. One of the last kings of the *Goryeo* Dynasty of the fourteenth-century, King Gongmin, is featured in a period drama with a gay subtext, *A Frozen Flower*. *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield* tracks back to an even more distant past by restaging a historic battle between the Kingdoms of *Baekje* and *Silla* in 660 AD. By suggesting a parallel between two ancient warring-states and the contemporary regional rivalry between Gyeongsang and Jeolla Province, *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield* intervenes in the contemporary political and social debates in a historical setting. In addition, period drama set during the colonial period has witnessed a soaring popularity in the mid-2000s exemplified by the blockbusters such as *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (Kim Ji-woon, 2008).

Secondly, recent historical drama, to varying degrees, have audaciously dispensed with the stiff historical tone that often dictated the narratives of earlier periods. This is where the fiction mode, in particular, becomes relevant. The premise of the period biopic *Portrait of a Beauty* is *what if* the celebrated genre painter Shin Yun-bok was a woman. To add, *The Sword with No Name* (Kim Yong-gyun, 2009) completely subverts the official memory of Empress Myeong-seong, who was murdered by Japanese assassins in 1895, by imagining her as a tragic heroine of a forbidden romance narrative.

While historical films in the past, especially the heroic biopics in the 1970s, favoured the “‘Great Man’ theory of history”,<sup>10</sup> new *sageuk* personalises and democratises history in terms of class and gender. History is drawn to the lower strata of the nation; there is a concerted effort to recapture the lives of ordinary people. Just as Amy Sargeant notes the prevalence of ‘downstairs’ and ‘kitchen’

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuses of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 20.

histories in recent British costume films,<sup>11</sup> recent *sageuk* films attempt to uncover the realities of subaltern lives, from those of the court ladies (*Shadows in the Palace*) to rebellious peasants (*Blades of Blood* [Lee Joon-ik, 2010]). For instance, a lowly clown Jang-saeng carries an aura of heroism that the emasculated King lacks in *King and the Clown*. The film makes it clear that Jang-saeng is the protagonist of history, bringing change to the feudalistic world. Such narrative recontextualisation transforms the royal palace which was traditionally plagued by the tragedies of the royal family, fights between jealous concubines, and the machinations of ambitious officials. Moreover history is being feminised as signalled by the prevalence of strong female protagonists who take the centre stage as detectives (*Shadows in the Palace*), scientists (*The Divine Weapon*), inventors (*A Private Eye*), and pilots (*Blue Swallow*).

In addition, historical research and pursuit of authenticity carry a new kind of *commercial* meaning. From the chic colonial period drama *Modern Boy* to the vibrant costume drama *The Servant*, recent *sageuk* flaunts meticulous period mise-en-scène rendered through high-production values. The production design accentuates the artistic quality and cultural prestige, yet distinctly under the ‘fusion’ rubric, where the image of the past is reinterpreted into something modern and appealing for the contemporary audience’s taste. The saturated media coverage points to the degree of attentiveness to visual detail. The makers of *Forbidden Quest* highly publicised the fact that 40% of the production budget was spent on the art department and that the costume designer Jeong Gyeong-hui personally designed 200

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<sup>11</sup> Amy Sargeant, ‘The Darcy Effect: Regional Tourism and Costume Drama’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 3&4 (1998), p. 179. Also see John Corner and Sylvia Harvey eds., *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents in National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 73.

*hanboks* for the cast.<sup>12</sup> The new language of visualising the past is guided by the principle of verisimilitude, recovering the viewing pleasures that were often lost in previous film and television productions. The makers' dedication to authenticity is so strong that it sometimes clashes with the designation 'fusion *sageuk*'. E J-yong, the director of *Untold Scandal*, resisted the view that his film is an instance of fusion *sageuk* because he is 'in principle a formalist who adheres to classic rules'. When making the film, he was motivated by the desire to recapture 'the lifestyles of the aristocrats as accurately as possible'.<sup>13</sup> But if we return to Yi Yeong-hui's earlier definition of 'fusion' that the term signifies a reaction against the established *sageuk* convention, not so much a dismissal of historical authenticity, *Untold Scandal* is indeed a fusion *sageuk*, and so are all other recent historical dramas. In fact, what director E implies is the concern that the word 'fusion' may undermine the serious historical research that was put into his work. This, in turn, suggests that the emergence of fusion qualities has brought change to the 'generic verisimilitude' in the *sageuk*, a notion that generic conventions establish a representational norm, not based on the lived reality per se, but specific to the genre in question.

The task of visualising history and creating a new generic iconography has been left in the hands of selected creative experts – production designers, art directors, and costume designers – who competitively and cooperatively invent the new look of the *sageuk*. Here I list a few prominent figures: Min Eon-ok (*Blood Rain*, *The Divine Weapon*, and *The Sword with No Name*), Jeong Gyeong-hui (*Y.M.C.A. Baseball*, *The Duelist*, and *The Servant*), Sim Hyeon-seop (*King and the Clown*, *Shadows in the Palace*, and *The Sword with No Name*) and Jung Ku-ho (*Untold*

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<sup>12</sup> Ju-yeon Bak, 'What Radical *Sageuk*?' *Newsmaker* 664 (7 March 2006)

<sup>13</sup> Dong-cheol Nam, 'New Era of *Sageuk*'.

*Scandal* and *Hwang Jin Yi*). In addition, there are screenwriters and directors who honed their skills crafting the historical genre. The writer Kim Hyun-jung wrote the screenplay for *Untold Scandal*, *Hwang Jin Yi*, and *Radio Dayz*. Kim Dae-woo, who co-wrote the screenplay for *Untold Scandal*, went on to write and direct *Forbidden Quest* and *The Servant*. Lee Joon-ik also has an illustrious career, completing his *sageuk* trilogy, *Once Upon a Time*, *King and the Clown*, and *Blades of Blood*. Their aesthetic achievements have received numerous awards and accolades; yet, we should remember here that these tributes differ greatly from the state-sponsored awards and import quotas which were given to the heroic biopics of the 1970s. If we take the 2009 Grand Bell Film Awards as an example, a number of period pieces received warm attention, including *The Divine Weapon* (Best Picture, Best Editing, Best Sound), *A Frozen Flower* (Best Music and Best Art Direction), *The Good, The Bad The Weird* (Best Costume), and *Portrait of a Beauty* (Best Cinematography).

What is more, new historical dramas are examples of what Darcy Paquet calls ‘genre jumpers’,<sup>14</sup> an instance of ‘creative genre mixing’ where comedy, expensive action, tears, drama, striking visual design, sex and anything else are all enmeshed in one film to maximise the market appeal. The exhibition practice in Korea is cutthroat at present and the *sageuk* film must be able to compete with other Korean genre films and foreign features (mainly Hollywood) to attract viewers. Historical dramas, therefore, just like any other Korean films, rely on the latest filming technique, star value, a complex and intriguing plot structure, tested and trusted generic conventions, and an effective marketing strategy. ‘Genrification’ in the historical drama has become more prevalent, which can be understood as a strategy to broaden the target audience and attract viewers with more critical tastes

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<sup>14</sup> Darcy Paquet, ‘Genre Jumpers’, *Screen International*, 1410 (27 June 2003), p. 13.

than in years past.<sup>15</sup>

One way to make the *sageuk* more attractive to modern-day audiences is to amplify the contemporary resonance. Even though they are set in a historical past, these films penetrate into the issues pertaining to Korea at present; contemporary relevance and sensibilities are never compromised. When history is indeed mobilised on screen, it results in a ‘meta-discourse on history’ itself, rather than a narration of historical incident or event; it becomes a kind of a window into the way contemporary Koreans perceive their past.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, one should not lose sight of the fact that the historical drama, by default, has always commented on the present moment, as seen in the 1960s Golden Age period. Yet there is a subtle difference in the way new *sageuk* uses the past. If the *sageuk* traditionally found messages from the past that were relevant to the present (the usurpation of Yeonsan’s rule in *Prince Yeonsan* prompts the viewers to think about Park Chung Hee’s coup), films like *Untold Scandal* and *Forbidden Quest* appropriate present issues to re-imagine the past. This means the focus is decidedly and exclusively on the present moment. For instance, the eighteenth century aristocrats supposedly upholding stiff Confucian morals reveal their decadent faces in *Untold Scandal* and they simultaneously communicate the specific social burden and issues that are pertinent in post-IMF Korea, such as the absence of fidelity in marriage and the dissolution of the family.<sup>17</sup> In sum, turning away from the portrayal of tedious court politics and

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Genrification’ is a concept originally developed by Rick Altman in his book *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), pp. 30-82. To simplify, it denotes the process of ongoing reconstruction and formalisation of film genres. Eckart Voigts-Virchow further investigates ‘genrification’ in the costume genre in “‘Corset Wars’: An Introduction to Syncretic Heritage Film Culture”, in *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions since the Mid-1990s*, ed. by Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004), pp. 9-27.

<sup>16</sup> Myeong-jin Bak, ‘Desire and Historical Imagination of Fusion *Sageuk*’, *Hwanghae Munhwa*, 52 (Autumn 2006), p. 375.

<sup>17</sup> The divorce rate, instances of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, and family

powermongers at the royal palace, binary depictions of women as either sexualised vamps or victims of Neo-Confucian ethos, and the moralistic hagiography of masculine heroes, recent historical dramas not only revise the *sageuk* formula but also open up fresh interpretations of the national past.

Ultimately, the appropriation of cutting-edge aesthetics, genrification, and contemporary resonance contained in recent historical dramas are strategies to attract a broader spectrum of audience, especially the younger consumer group in their 20s. Currently in Korea, one of the most powerful consumer groups is the female, aged from 25 to 35. Park Yu-hee notes that:

These women with eclectic taste consume a diverse range of genres from melodrama, historical fictions, to detective stories. They also consume different media from film, novel, to television drama. It is their eclectic taste that gives the direction and momentum to the production of cultural content.<sup>18</sup>

Park's observation resounds with Andrew Higson's words that '(English) heritage films, appeal to an older middle-class, professional audience, yet in addition, they seek to attract the relatively youthful audience that constitutes the mainstream core'.<sup>19</sup> The use of catchy dialogue, modernised costumes, and young stars in new *sageuk* is a sure sign of this trend. The new *sageuk*, mimicking the marketing of western costume drama, is explicitly pursuing the attention of female audiences, especially the younger demographic. Films like *Untold Scandal* are undoubtedly aimed at a female audience, who not only delight in the period décor but also relates to the liberated female sexuality. What becomes important here again is that if the

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suicide all increased after the economic crisis hit Korea to the point that the Korean government had to intervene by establishing a new family policy. Young-ju Chun, 'Determinants of Consensual Divorce in Korea: Gender, Socio-economic Status, and Life Course', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 40.4 (Autumn, 2009)

<sup>18</sup> Yu-hee Park, 'A Study on Gender Appeared in the Historical Fiction', p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 105.



*sageuk* is to connect with the audience of today, the genre must completely reinvent itself by shattering the stigma that it is conservative and unattractive at the box-office. This is the core concern of fusion and faction *sageuk* as I demonstrate in later chapters. Before I engage with the films in depth, I first examine the specific socio-political contexts in Korea that facilitated the *sageuk* boom in the next section.

## Politicised Histories: At Home and Abroad

In her study on the cinematic preoccupation with the French past, Naomi Greene quotes historian Jacques Le Goff who postulates:

In our world where collective memory changes, where man, confronted with the *acceleration of history* [...] wants to escape from the anguish of becoming an orphan of the past, without roots, where men are passionately in search of their identity, where people everywhere try to inventory their heritage and to preserve it [...] where bewildered people seek to master a history that seems to escape them, what could be better [suited] to bring them information and answers than the new history?<sup>20</sup> (emphasis mine)

South Korea also seems to be experiencing this kind of ‘acceleration of history’, evidenced not only in the rise of historical fictions in popular culture, but also in the explosion of the public discourse that accompanies the history boom.

Decades of colonial occupation, a civil war and national partition, drawn out military rule, and the eventual democratisation make up the socio-political background on which modern Korea stands. History has become particularly politicised in recent years, both as a sign of growing democracy and a collective desire to break free from the legacy of the traumatic past. Choi Chungmoo, in her influential piece ‘The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory’ argues the following:

Assuming South Korea to be postcolonial eludes the political, social, and economic realities of its people, which lie behind that celebrated sign ‘post’ of periodization, without considering the substantive specificity of Korean histories.<sup>21</sup>

As I discuss further in PART III, the lingering anxiety and unsolved issues of the

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Le Goff quoted in Naomi Greene, *Landscapes of Loss: The National Past in Postwar French Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> Chungmoo Choi, ‘The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea’, in *Formation of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, ed. by Tani E. Barlow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 349.

national history, such as collaboration during the colonial period, provide an important motivation to revisit the past in the popular culture of the present. The outbreak of the Asian Monetary Crisis in 1997, in particular, brought the nation to a sudden halt, calling forth a need to critically examine the successes and failures from history while reflecting on the unique Korean ‘compressed modernity’.<sup>22</sup>

The present de-colonisation discourse reverberates in movements to investigate the past, which is happening in many levels of society, from government agencies to individual histories. The ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea’, established in 2005 most recently led the institutional campaign to ‘settle the past/*gwageo cheongsan*’, addressing such issues as Japanese collaboration, crimes committed by past military regimes, and mystery deaths in various quarters of society. New historical facts and data were discovered, as a result of the campaign, all of which were bombarded at the public through the media. Suddenly, the whole country became obsessed with remembering the past and remembering it accurately. Collectively, these efforts worked together to disperse the spectres of the past. As I engage more in-depth in Chapter Four, the ‘Settling the Past’ campaign brought a paradigmatic shift in understanding national history as well as accessing historical truth.

Korean cinema is working in tandem with the nationwide investigative mood, hatching up the past and presenting it on screen. Injected with a new vigour to engage with once-taboo subjects, Korean cinema does not let even the most controversial moments escape the re-scrutinisation process. *Taegeukgi* (Kang Je-kyu, 2004), *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (Park Gwang-hyun, 2005), *A Little Pond* (Lee

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<sup>22</sup> Kyung-Sup Chang ‘Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition’, *Economy and Society*, 28 (1999)

Sang-woo, 2009), and *71-Into the Fire* (John H. Lee, 2010) evince many different ways in dramatising the Korean War. North-South Korean relations have also been an extremely popular topic in Korean cinema in recent years.<sup>23</sup> These films imagine the situation if and when two Koreas meet, sometimes with seriousness and other times with humour. Also popular are the films that depict the political upheavals during the military governments.<sup>24</sup> In addition, films that combine the ‘faction’ mode and the fantasy genre, such as *2009 Lost Memories* (Lee Si-myung, 2001) and *Hanbando* (Kang Woo-suk, 2006), connect the past and present to purge post-colonial anxiety.

The introspective apprehension of the nation’s history has been matched with strained diplomatic relations with neighbouring Japan and China, a geographic position that demands Korea examine its place in the de-stabilising East Asian polity. Japan’s continued refusal to apologise for the atrocities committed during the colonial period and the Pacific War continue to anger Koreans, especially the subjugation of so-called ‘comfort women’, where hundreds of Korean women were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army. Japan’s high-ranking politicians make regular visits to the *Yasukuni* Shrine, which houses the remains of the most notorious war criminals, causing diplomatic frictions.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the publication of a new Japanese History textbook that downplayed colonial and wartime aggression flamed a nationalist uproar not only in Korea but also in China. As Kim Mikyoung notes, the textbook controversy goes back as early as 1955, but

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<sup>23</sup> They are: *Swiri*, *The Spy* (Jang Jin, 1999), *JSA, Double Agent* (Steve Kim, 2003), *Lost in the South Mission: Going Home* (Ahn Jin-woo, 2003), *Love: Impossible* (Zeong Cho-sin, 2003), *Spy Girl* (Park Han-jun, 2004), and *Dream Come True* (Kye Yoon-shik, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Such as: *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong, 1999), *Silmido* (Kang Woo-suk, 2003), *The President’s Barber* (Lim Chan-sang, 2004), *The President’s Last Bang* (Im Sang-soo, 2005), *The Old Garden* (Im Sang-soo, 2006), and *May 18* (Kim Ji-hun, 2007)

<sup>25</sup> ‘Japan PM Visits Yasukuni Shrine’, BBC News (17 October 2005)

the Japanese Education Ministry's approval of the New Japanese History (*Atarashii Rekishi Kyoukasho*) in April 2001, resulted in violent public protests.<sup>26</sup> To further impair Seoul-Tokyo ties, the Japanese sovereign claim over Dokdo/Takeshima, a group of small islet off the east coast of Korea, led to a series of mass-candlelight demonstrations in Korea.<sup>27</sup> These rocky islands are now 'axiomatic of the nation's pride', unveiling the lingering anxiety toward its old master.<sup>28</sup> Extravagant measures were taken to settle the Dokdo dispute, including a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* (9 July 2008) sponsored by Koreans, including a popular singer Kim Jang-hun, proclaiming Dokdo belongs to Korea.<sup>29</sup>

Korea's growing economic and cultural interdependence on China quickly deteriorated with the commencement of a Chinese state-funded research project, the 'Serial Research Project on the History and Current Status of the Northeast Border Region' (2002-2006). More commonly called the 'Northeast Project', this project charts the peripheral region's history and geography.<sup>30</sup> The area in question is China's Northeast province, which borders not only (North) Korea and Mongolia but also Russia. When the three ancient kingdoms of Korea – *Gojoseon* (BC 2333 - BC 108), *Goguryeo* (BC 37 - AD 668), and *Balhae* (AD 698 - AD 926) – were included in this research on Chinese history and heritage, Koreans who consider themselves as the rightful descendants of these kingdoms were infuriated. The controversy

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<sup>26</sup> Mikyoung Kim, 'Myth and Fact in Northeast Asia's History Textbook Controversies', *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (15 August 2008)

<sup>27</sup> Tong-hyung Kim, 'Koreans Denounce Japan over Claims to Dokdo Islets', *The Korea Times* (22 February 2006)

<sup>28</sup> Alexis Dudden, 'Dangerous Islands: Japan, Korea and the United States', *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (11 August 2008)

<sup>29</sup> A similar video campaign appeared on the centennial anniversary of the 1910 Annexation. See In-sik Kang and Mi-ju Kim, 'Dokdo Video Ad Goes up in Times Square', *Joong Ang Daily* (2 March 2010)

<sup>30</sup> Yonson Ahn, 'Competing Nationalisms: The Mobilisation of History and Archaeology in the Korea-China Wars over *Koguryo/Gaogouli*', *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (9 February 2006)

escalated to new heights when the news that China began proceedings to register *Gwanggaeto Daewangbi*, the stele of *Goguryeo*'s most celebrated king, as an UNESCO world heritage site, reached Korea.<sup>31</sup> An ambitious general and ruler, Gwanggaeto conquered vast lands, most of what is now Manchuria. *Goguryeo*, therefore, carries a more symbolic meaning in the twenty-first century as it evokes a distant memory of the large territory that once belonged to the nation. The public's reaction against China was heated to say the least. In fact, some Korean ultra-nationalists in both the liberal and conservative camps made almost anachronistic claims to 'restore the lost former territories!'<sup>32</sup>

Feeling powerless in the face of one of the world's strongest powers, Korea tried to reconfirm its national sovereignty and ethnic identity by establishing academic research bodies. The 'Goguryeo Research Foundation' (*Goguryeo yeongu jaedan*) was launched in March 2004, which was subsumed by the 'Northeast Asian History Foundation' (*Dongbuga yeoksa jaedan*) in 2006. Confronting 'distortions of history that have caused considerable anguish in this region and the world at large', this research institute aims to realise 'a basis for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia'.<sup>33</sup> However the mission statement makes the nationalistic agenda clear when it claims that the Foundation will 'continue to spare no effort to protect [Korea's] historical and territorial sovereignty'. The political motivation is clear: as China is gathering academic proof, Korea will counteract by engaging in an equally scholarly

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<sup>31</sup> Yonson Ahn, 'The Contested Heritage of *Koguryo/Gaogouli* and China-Korea Conflict', *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (11 January 2008)

<sup>32</sup> The 'Gogurye Three-legged Bird (*samjok-o*) Festival' in 2006 is one example of how such quasi-expansionist nationalism manifests itself. The festival included the inauguration of 'Corea Scout'. About fifty middle school students posed in front of the camera wearing a red armband and a uniform that is worryingly reminiscent of the youth movements of the totalitarian regimes of the West. See <<http://www.coreawelt.net/>>

<sup>33</sup> Jae-jeong Chung, 'President's Message: Northeast Asian History Foundation', <[http://english.historyfoundation.or.kr/?sub\\_num=119](http://english.historyfoundation.or.kr/?sub_num=119)> [accessed 1 December 2010]

endeavour. Other big and small research centres soon sprung up, setting up a number of academic conferences and publications, all funded by the government.<sup>34</sup> Apart from the state-level tensions, ordinary citizens also participated in this history war online as ethnic bashing between the Koreans and the Chinese continued.<sup>35</sup>

What is most significant in the context of this thesis is that, the ‘Northeast Project’ controversy stimulated a phenomenal *Goguryeo* ‘boom’ in popular media. Han Seok-jeong boldly claims that never have Koreans been so interested in history as in 2004, which is all due to the Northeast Project.<sup>36</sup> Similarly Kim Wi-hyun reports that seven major South Korean newspapers and magazines together published a shocking 1,499 articles regarding this ancient dynasty in 2004 alone.<sup>37</sup> The public interest was soon channelled into the realm of popular culture, resulting in a number of fantastic narratives centred on an ancient past.

Images of rehabilitation and the conquering of land were staged, most distinctly in four television *sageuks* that dealt with the Kingdom of *Goguryeo*: *Jumong* (MBC, May 2006 – Mar. 2007), *Yeongaesomun* (KBS, Jul. 2006 – Jun. 2007), *Daejoyeong* (KBS, Sep. 2007 – Dec. 2007), and *The Legend/Taewangsasingi* (MBC, Sep. – Dec. 2007). The particulars of the current socio-political affairs are well-integrated into these period epics, which excessively recycled the ‘nation under attack by foreigners’ motif. The invaders came either from the northern regions or from the seas, all of which were crushed by a well-known king or a military general. By celebrating the military prowess, these *sageuk* dramas projected an image of

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<sup>34</sup> Seok-jeong Han, ‘The Northeast Project Controversy and the Memory of Manchuria’, *Munhwa Gwahak*, 40 (2004), pp. 13-14.

<sup>35</sup> Hong Myeon-gi, ‘Korea-Bash and China-Bash: Historical Cultural Discourse between Korean and Chinese Internet Users’, *Historical Issues in Northeast Asia* (April to December 2007), pp. 35-40.

<sup>36</sup> Seok-jeong Han, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Wi-hyun Kim, ‘The Task of our Academy after Northeast Project’, *Dongyanghak*, 42 (2007), p. 314.

Korea that is independent, powerful, and unified. What is more, they are distinctly more conservative in nature when compared with fusion *sageuk* productions. Even so, these dramas attracted a wide viewership. Arguably the most conservative of the four, *Yeongaesomun* makes it clear that the drama is riding the tide of the *Goguryeo* boom in the production notes, which read:

Korea faces a serious situation at present. China has devised a historical distortion called the ‘Northeast Project’ and tries to erase the history of *Goguryeo*. This drama is centred on Yeongaesomun and the torrid times in which he lived, in order to confirm our national identity and unearth the hidden history of the kingdom. We [the makers] would like to guide the future of Korea by evoking the national spirit and essence of the past, so our nation can reach out to the world.<sup>38</sup>

This explicitly nationalistic message curiously reverberates with the strategies of the 1970s propaganda *sageuk*. The drama itself heavily relies on racial stereotypes through its rendering of linguistic accents, costumes, and the physical features of the foreigners. Primarily, it is nationalism that functions as an effective marketing tool to sell the *Goguryeo* dramas. This reveals that the popular media is not immune to the commercial allure of historical topics such as the *Goguryeo* controversy, at once propelling the fascination for history while fuelling nationalism with fictional historical narratives.

The anxiety over national history, prompted by internal and external forces, is the immediate foundation on which historical fiction came to be established in Korea. It has called on ordinary citizens to take on the role of historians, producing and consuming historical discourse. History has become a fashion and fetish in itself, where even the most controversial and taboo moments are under the investigative lens to be analysed, discussed, and consumed in various medial platforms. In this

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Production Note: *Yeongaesomun*’ <<http://tv.sbs.co.kr/ygsomun/>> [accessed 26 November 2010]



context, the *sageuk* is in a privileged position to imagine the nation's past as demanded by the present. It consolidates the conflicting memories and purports a smooth national narrative; these fictional narratives reiterate and reinforce the national imaginary in operation at present. In sum, dismissing these texts as a symptom of a small country's defensive nationalism would be to underestimate the magnitude of the impact because the nationwide preoccupation with history became the very inspiration for a whole range of cultural products, as I now further demonstrate.

## Consuming the Past: The Co-evolution of Historical Fictions

The recent circulation of the ‘historical’ and the ‘traditional’, as already noted, in popular culture is a reflection and refraction of a series of national and international issues presently facing Korea. The *anxiety* of the nation’s past has driven *sageuk* in recent years, yet so too has the *fascination* of the past. This allure of the history is the impetus for the cultural consumption of the national heritage. I, therefore, extend my discussion on the historical drama by situating the genre in the broader picture of the South Korean cultural industry. In this section, I examine the ‘history boom’ that is sweeping across a number of popular cultural domains. The demand for popular historical fictions, both in visual and literary media, testifies to the national impetus in re-writing the past. It, moreover, creates a synergising effect when each medium/product feeds into the production of another, making further ripples in the commercialisation of history. As I discuss further in Chapter Four with reference to ‘One-Source Multi-Use’, the commercial interest is one of the main logical drivers to re-circulate the historical material.

I start the discussion by examining the current situation of the film industry. The rising demand for the *sageuk* films coincides with South Korean filmmaking achieving a new momentum, predicated in part upon the growing international visibility in the festival circuit and the local interest in commercially-oriented films. With the dissemination of the Korean Wave – the immense popularity of Korean pop culture including film, music, television and even fashion in many Asian countries – Korean cinema sports greater chances of export to the region, giving a further boost to the industry.

The context of how a fairly marginal national film industry rapidly grew in

strength at the end of the last century has been well-documented.<sup>39</sup> Such a renaissance was made possible when the following factors worked fortuitously together: the end of *jaebeol* control and the influx of deregulated new money by venture capital companies;<sup>40</sup> the change of political power and the relaxation of censorship; the emergence of cinephiles and film school graduates who would make their careers as filmmakers; a new distribution system and the spread of multiplex cinemas; and general innovation and modernisation of the infra-structure system. As a result, the market share for domestic films at local theatres reached its peak of 64.2% in 2006.<sup>41</sup> And from 1996 to 2004, the average budget for Korean films nearly quadrupled.<sup>42</sup> In particular, the marketing cost has increased tenfold in this period.<sup>43</sup> In 2009, the total production number reached 138 films, a remarkable rise from just 43 films in 1998.<sup>44</sup> Although the quantitative expansion does not always translate to a qualitative growth of the industry, especially considering the worries that ‘New Korean Cinema’ had reached its peak too early and is now on the decline, this astonishing set of data gives force to the argument that filmmaking in Korea has indeed entered a new phase, leaving the period of stagnation in the 1990s behind. In what ways, then, has the strengthening Korean cinema influenced the course of *sageuk* productions?

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<sup>39</sup> One of the first publications on the topic is Dong-mi Hwang, *Analysis of Korean Film Industry – After Hollywood’s Direct Control*, (KOFIC, 2001). Darcy Paquet has written extensively on the subject. See his ‘The Korean Film Industry: 1992 to the Present’, in *New Korean Cinema* (2005) and *New Korean Cinema* (2010).

<sup>40</sup> Sometimes spelled ‘*chaebol*’, ‘*jaebeol*’ is ‘a family-owned and managed group of companies that exercises monopolistic or oligopolistic control in product lines and industries’. Octopus-like conglomerates such as Hyundai and Samsung are globally-known Korean *jaebeol* groups. Jung-en Woo, *Race to the Swift: State and Finance in the Industrialization of Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 149.

<sup>41</sup> I here refer to statistical data provide by Korean Movie Database.

<sup>42</sup> <[http://www.kmdb.or.kr/statis/statis\\_04.asp](http://www.kmdb.or.kr/statis/statis_04.asp)> [accessed 26 Nov 2010]

<sup>43</sup> <[http://www.kmdb.or.kr/statis/statis\\_02.asp](http://www.kmdb.or.kr/statis/statis_02.asp)> [accessed 26 Nov 2010]

<sup>44</sup> Anon., *The Guide to Korean Film Industry and Production* (KOFIC, October 2008), p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> <[http://www.kmdb.or.kr/statis/statis\\_01.asp](http://www.kmdb.or.kr/statis/statis_01.asp)> [accessed 26 Nov 2010]

In her discussion on Korean fantasy films, Kim Soyoung postulates that the significance of the growing industry is that it gave space for filmmakers to try their hand at a variety of genres. In effect, long forgotten Korean horror re-emerged after the success of *Whispering Corridors/Yeogogoedam* (Park Ki-hyung, 1998), while sports films, gangster comedies, teen films, and martial arts action started making regular appearances at the local theatres, further diversifying the generic landscape of Korean cinema.<sup>45</sup> Due to this sudden expansion, the industry experienced a kind of vacuum of narrative inspiration. It is in this context that a prominent film producer, Shim Jae-myung, and the manager of a major film company, No Jong-yun concur that the film industry ‘has turned to history for stories’.<sup>46</sup> This means that even a risky and expensive *sageuk* project has become a feasible option for film companies. Financial stability also meant that detailed historical research and cutting-edge computer graphics could be made available, further raising the production standard of the *sageuk* and providing a satisfying spectacle for a local audience reared on Hollywood.

As suggested earlier in the *Cine21* article by Nam Dong-cheol, television is equally, if not, even more fervently venturing into historical productions. Cinema and television are closely linked at the level of story-telling, narrative structure, and aesthetics even though their relationship has not always been amicable. Similar to the situation faced by other national film industries, the growth of television in the 1970s posed a formidable threat to the weakening film industry.<sup>47</sup> While the film industry

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<sup>45</sup> Kim, Soyoung, *Spectres of Modernity: Fantastic Korean Cinema*.

<sup>46</sup> Jang-su Bae, ‘Films based on Actual Historical Events’, *Kyunghyang Daily* (25 February 2004)

<sup>47</sup> See Tino Balio, *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (London: Routledge, 1990) and *European Cinemas in the Television Age*, ed. by Dorota Ostrowska and Graham Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) The first Korean television drama, *A Long Way around the Country/Gukto Malli*, was aired in July 1964. Myeong-hwan O, ‘Producers

was subject to strict control under the dictatorship, public television enjoyed relative support and stability, firmly holding its place as the main household entertainment. Since the 1980s, historical drama has formed the regular diet of television programming, with MBC's royal court drama *500 Years of the Joseon Dynasty* (1983-1990), as the prime example. This ambitiously titled television *sageuk* ran for eight years, painting detailed portraits of past kings and loyal subjects, and capturing the decisive moments from the national history in 538 episodes.<sup>48</sup> The royal court drama and *daeha sageuk* (big river, from the French *roman-fleuve*) were the two mainstay genres for television *sageuk*, until the late 1990s when shifting audience tastes, coupled with the changing public memory of the national past demanded a generic shift. Television started airing extremely popular *sageuk* dramas from the late-1990s. For example, *Tears of the Dragon/Yong-ui Nunmul* (KBS1, 1996 – 1998), *Hur Jun* (MBC, 1999 – 2000) and *Jewel in the Palace* all reached a phenomenal 50% or more viewing record.<sup>49</sup>

Given this context, one can argue that television was the first to chart the territory of the 'new *sageuk*', after which cinema, motivated by its rival's success, also re-invented its own style and content of the historical drama. Despite their usual competition for public appeal, recent exchanges between the two media in the area of historical productions have been exciting and challenging. As John Ellis claims, both film and television are realising the necessity to 'move away from the idea of the

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of Historical Drama', *Bangsong Munye* (September 2007), p. 26. More on television's growth posing threat to cinema, see n. 44 in p. 53.

<sup>48</sup> Myeong-hwan O, 'Producers of Historical Drama', p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> Sin Ju-jin examines the characteristics of recent television historical serials, which closely resembles those seen in the cinema. She lists four points: the interest shifting from royalty to common people and professionals; the prevalence of period-set melodrama; popularity of hybrid genres; and collective nostalgia for a mythic place. See Ju-jin Sin, 'De-historicism in *Sageuk* and the Male Heroic Fantasy', *Literary Notebook: A Quarterly Journal*, 22 (Summer 2008), pp. 57-67.

medium-specific text towards a more flexible notion of narrative concepts and possibility of interaction' for mutual growth.<sup>50</sup> The specificity of each medium – comparatively low-budget television and high-risk expensive feature film with a limited exhibition window, in general, has resulted in a different treatment of historical topics. Park Jong-won who has an unusual career of having directed both *sageuk* film (*Eternal Empire*) and television drama (*King Jeongjo's Murder Mystery: Eight Days* [Channel CGV, 2007]) spoke of this experience when he said:

In television drama, the narrative matters the most. So we shoot inside a studio set using a few cameras. In contrast, it is the visual elements that drive cinema. The story is also important but how to show it is even more important.<sup>51</sup>

If I unpack what he is saying: a television drama is pitched at a broad audience. Editing is used in a way to best convey the narrative. The medium, therefore, has an edge in exploring long and complicated stories.<sup>52</sup> Moreover even after the series has begun airing, if needed, television dramas can change and modify the content of later episodes in line with the viewer's response to the earlier ones. At the same time, any aesthetic judgment must be made within the budget, which is smaller per minute compared to a feature film. Cinema, on the other hand, has concentrated production values and is targeted at a specific audience group. It must attract viewers to the theatres in a short period of time in order to recoup the cost; celebrity casting, strategic planning, advance publicity, and product differentiation are the principles of its operation.

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<sup>50</sup> John Ellis, 'British? Cinema? Television? What on Earth Are We Talking About?' *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 1.1 (May 2004), p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> Nam-ung Heo, 'Television Film is a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Genre: Interview with Park Jong-won', *Film 2.0*, 368 (1 January 2008), p. 68

<sup>52</sup> Most television dramas air two to three hours per week and for four weeks to up to a year or even longer. This means that a television drama is at least ten hours long, significantly longer than a feature film.

When the strength and weakness of each medium are taken into consideration, an effective cooperation can be realised by way of adaptations, sequels, and tie-ins. For instance, once television whets the appetite of the audience with an engaging period narrative, cinema then can recycle the material by adding spectacular action sequences and expensive visual designs. The case of *Damo/The Duelist*, in my view, demonstrates such interdependence of television and film in the realm of historical productions.

In July 2003, Korea's major broadcasting station MBC produced a 14-episode *sageuk* drama *Damo*, based on Bang Hak-gi's graphic novel. Introducing a rare female profession from the past – the police investigator – the drama visited the Neo-Confucian dynastic era from a fresh angle. The main protagonist is a lower-class female investigator Che-ok, played by actress Ha Ji-won, who becomes entangled in a love-triangle with her chief officer Hwangbo Yun and bandit leader Hwang Seong-baek, who later turns out to be her estranged brother. The series suggested a winning formula by combining ample action sequences with a tragic romance narrative. *Damo* was a sleeper-hit with the daily ratings reaching over 30% and the Internet audience forum recording 250,000 posts less than a month after the series had started. Even after the drama had ended the fans kept visiting the official website, posting their reviews and demanding an immediate re-run. By October 2004, the number of such posts reached an astonishing three million.<sup>53</sup> The series, in effect, gave impulse to a new kind of fandom for television dramas, who jovially called themselves *Damo paein* (addicts).

Two year after the initial *Damo* boom, Lee Myung-se released *The Duelist*:

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<sup>53</sup> The official Homepage of *Damo*,  
<<http://www.imbc.com/broad/tv/drama/damo/againfestival/event01/index.html>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

*A Detective*. Also based on Bang Hak-gi's graphic novels, *The Duelist* was marketed along the following lines, 'from the creator of celebrated thriller *Nowhere to Hide* (1999) comes a new *Joseon noir*'.<sup>54</sup> As such, the film positioned itself as a stylised cinematic update of a popular television series by an internationally-recognised *auteur*. The tagline also indicated the fact that it is really the success of the television drama that gave the green light to the film version. Ha Ji-won played Nam-sun in *The Duelist*, reprising her feisty role as the female detective of *Damo*. In the film, while investigating a counterfeit ring case, Nam-sun becomes infatuated with a mysterious swordsman Sad Eye, played by the handsome Gang Dong-won. While in *Damo* all three characters tragically die during their final fight, *The Duelist* ends with a fantasy sequence where Nam-sun and Sad Eye engage in a passionate dance-like sword play, as if to suggest that their love is consummated through a duel. The film, therefore, offers the pleasure of romantic fulfilment to the audience, albeit metaphorically, which was denied in *Damo* (FIG. 6)

**FIG. 6 *Damo* (left) and *The Duelist* (right): Recognisability and Cross-fertilisation**

The transference of *Damo* fans to *The Duelist* is further evidenced in the area of fandom. When *The Duelist* was first released, it did not do well at the box-office and the film was withdrawn from cinemas after just a few weeks. Then the fans started the 'Re-screen *The Duelist*' campaign, securing a special screening in a

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<sup>54</sup> Anon., 'Playing with the Shadows', *Screen* (September 2005), p. 115.



multiplex in Seoul. Four hundred fans, selected by lottery, were invited to an event that was attended by the director Lee. According to historian Kim Gi-bong, who was present at the screening, the majority of the audiences were women in their twenties.<sup>55</sup> Just as *Damo* created a sea of avid followers, *The Duelist* also attracted a smaller but equally passionate group of fans.

*The Duelist* invites the viewers into a colourful past dazzling with action sequences, with the hopes of drawing in not only the existing fans of the television drama but also a larger audience through the Lee Myung-se brand. The film does not specify the temporal setting, nor does it develop the character of Nam-sun. Moreover, *The Duelist* dispenses with causality and linear narrative while audaciously experimenting with fast-paced editing, especially in the almost confusing chase scenes. Clearly, such creative sensibility is characteristic of Lee, 'the Grand Style' as it has been called by Jean-Pierre Geuens.<sup>56</sup> As he have done so in *Nowhere to Hide*, he pays less attention to the storytelling details of this period action but rather focuses on the 'formal manipulation, on tweaking the image, on styling it, on flushing it with colorful aphrodisiacs and powerful steroids'.<sup>57</sup> Even so, the audience who has a previous knowledge of *Damo* finds little trouble in locating him/herself inside the world of *The Duelist*. While the critics were quick to judge the narrative incoherence and over-zealous stylisation, one can argue that when considering the broader *Damo-to-The Duelist* trend, the film quite successfully updates and distributes the *Damo* 'content'. In his study on Channel Four Films and British Cinema in the 1990s, John Caughie uses the terms 'logic of convergence' and 'technology of immediacy' to explain the intimate relationship between television

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<sup>55</sup> Gi-bong Kim, *The Age of Faction* (Seoul: Phronesis, 2007), pp. 7-8.

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Pierre Geuens, 'The Grand Style', *Film Quarterly*, 58 (Summer 2005), p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

drama and the film industry.<sup>58</sup> In the Korean case, it is neither a major broadcasting stations nor vertically-integrated media pragmatics that drives the convergence. As I explain further in Chapter Four, different agents take up the historical material as ‘content’ for commercialisation when there is a financial interest and expediency. The study on inter-media exchange, therefore, calls for a case-by-case approach. The important point is that the circulation of similar generic images in both film and television augments the process of ‘intertextual relay’ in the *sageuk*, ‘providing sets of labels, terms, and expectations that will come to characterize the genre as a whole’.<sup>59</sup>

It is not only film and television capitalising on the history boom, other sectors in the cultural industry – theatre, musical, opera, and the bookselling industry – are also taking a ‘historical turn’. Jeong Su-jin, in her article ‘The Book Market is in Love with the *Joseon* Dynasty’, examines the popularity of both fictional and non-fictional depictions of the *Joseon* Dynasty. Faction novels, in particular, have been in much demand since the mid-1990s. As mentioned before, Yi In-hwa wrote the best-selling historical fiction *Eternal Empire*, which was adapted into a film. Yi conceived his novel – about the mysterious death of King Jeongjo – inspired from a short poem from the official record of the royal court. The book was marketed in a way that it implied that it had uncovered new historic evidence and was a true account of the King’s reign, even though the fictional elements are ample. This became the established strategy for the formulation and marketing of subsequent historical fiction novels. Surveying a number of books dedicated to historical periods, Jeong unsurprisingly concludes that ‘South Korea is having a torrid affair with the

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<sup>58</sup> John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 182.

<sup>59</sup> Steve Neale, ‘Questions of Genre’, p. 49.

*sageuk*'.<sup>60</sup>

What is more, a number of faction novels have been adapted into *sageuk* films and television series. Kim Tak-hwan is one of the most sought-after writers of historical fiction in Korea now. His novels *Immortal Yi Sun-sin* (1998) and *I am Hwang Jinyi* (2002) have both been adapted for television, while the rights for *Banggakbon Murder Case* (2003) and *Leeshim, A Court Lady of Joseon in Paris* (2006) have been sold to film companies. Also framed within the faction genre, Ya Seol-rok's *wuxia* graphic novel was turned into a period action/biopic *The Sword with No Name*. The first North Korean novel to be published officially in the South, Hong Seok-jung's *Hwang Jinyi*, was adapted into a blockbuster *sageuk* featuring *Hallyu* star Song Hye-kyo. Lastly, the author of *The Tree with Deep Roots*, Yi Jeong-myeong wrote *Painter in the Wind*, which was made into a television series within a year of its publication.

In addition, the interest in the colonial period has been kept afloat with a wealth of fiction and non-fiction published in the 2000s. These literary texts are similarly invested with energy to uncover new layers of history. Yi Ji-min's *Die Out or Survive?* (2000) broke new grounds by portraying a seductive and appealing upper-middle class lifestyle in the 1930s. Her award-winning novel was later turned into a sleek period drama *Modern Boy*. In the non-fictional genre, *Please Allow us a Dance Hall in Seoul* [sic] (Kim Jin-song, 1999), *Modern Boy Walks the Capital* (Shin Myeong-jik, 2003), and *The Age of Love* (Kwon Bod-re, 2003) all presented rich archival data on the culture, lifestyle, entertainment, and romance during the colonial period. These texts provided the ideas and historical knowledge which film and

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<sup>60</sup> Su-jin Jeong, 'The Book Market is in Love with the *Joseon* Dynasty', *Movie Week* (23 October 2007), pp. 126-127.

television makers could incorporate in their works.

Finally, as a newspaper article ‘The Golden Age of *Sageuk* Musical’ reports, opera and musical theatre are drawing inspiration from historical topics.<sup>61</sup> The musical *Hwang Jinyi* was released after the hit television *sageuk Hwang Jinyi* was broadcast in 2006, drawing in the spectators who desired to consume more images of this famous courtesan. This medial cross-over was not limited to narrative content, and now it is common to find industry professionals commissioned to produce designs for stage and screen. The musical *Hwang Jinyi* is an excellent example of this fruitful pollination of talents, as it was scored by Michael Staudacher who previously worked on *Blue Swallow*. Similarly, Jeong Gyeong-hui, costume designer for *The Duelist* and *The Servant*, provided the costumes for this musical. Ten year after its first performance, the musical *The Last Empress/Myeongseong Hwanghu*, continues to sell tickets, helped by the *sageuk* boom. A musical adaptation that combines the folk story ‘A Tale of Simcheong’ and ‘A Tale of Chunhyang’, *Indangsu Love Song*, was released in the Fall 2006 musical season. A television drama, which drew attention both inside and outside Korea, *Jewel in the Palace*, is now performed as a musical. The play *Yi* became the model for the film *King and the Clown* as well as *Yi*, the musical, which was first shown to the audience in late 2006. Interestingly, the musicals mentioned above also adopt a fusion style by mixing traditional Korean melodies with western-style music. The dance choreography also combines Korean-style dance with jazz movements.<sup>62</sup>

In all, according to the Samsung Economic Research Institute, *sageuk* is a product in demand. It listed *King and the Clown* in the fourth place and the

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<sup>61</sup> Ji-hyeon Kim, ‘Musical Dons *Hanbok*: The Golden Age of *Sageuk* Musical’, *Movie Week*, 252 (4 November 2006), pp. 98-101.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

*Goguryeo sageuk* in the fifth place in the ‘Ten Products of the Year’, a prestigious barometer for products that signify social influence.<sup>63</sup> What is clear, therefore, is that a number of different popular media are working together to create and sustain the public’s interest in historical fictions, making an even greater social, economical, and political impact. The *sageuk* is reconfigured as a cultural genre, its form and content secured through the simultaneous development of the historical in different media sectors.

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<sup>63</sup> Jeong-ho Yi and others, ‘Ten Hot Products of 2006’, *CEO Information* (20 December 2006)  
<<http://m.seri.org/doc/mov03.html?flag=0&menucd=0102&pubkey=db20061220001>>  
[accessed 1 December 2010]

## Korea Creative Content Agency and the Heritage Commodity Cycle

In this final section of the chapter, I reflect on how the government is responding to the circulation of historical material in popular culture. I argue that from the level of policy to the actual running of the culture content industry, the South Korean government is taking a pro-active approach by devising ways to reap the economic benefits of the traditional culture.<sup>64</sup> The state, in particular, subsidises and oversees the industry operation in order to promote a distinct national brand to the rest of the world. To begin, I introduce the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) and its many projects and initiatives, while examining the structural forces contained in the heritage management at the national level. The public's desire to sensually experience and consume the past is captured in the 'Digital Cultural Heritage Content' (DCHC) and 'HanStyle' projects from KOCCA.

A weekly magazine *Korean Economy Business* featured a special issue on 'culture content' in November 2005 with a sensationally-titled piece: 'The World War of Culture Content: Securing the £600 billion Market'.<sup>65</sup> Introducing the far-ranging benefit that *The Lord of the Rings* franchise brought to the New Zealand economy, the article reported that 'South Korea's share of the global culture content market is £22 billion, an amount which almost equals the export sales of two million Hyundai cars (model: NF Sonata)'. As if these astronomical figures are not enough of a shock tactic, the piece concluded that 'it is no mere exaggeration that Korea's

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<sup>64</sup> In Korea, the English translation 'culture industry' and 'cultural industry' are used interchangeably to signify the Korean word *munhwa saneop*. I use 'cultural industry' to avoid the more ideological and critical notion of the 'culture industry' proposed by Max Adorno and Theodor W. Horkheimer. See 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (London: Blackwell Verso, 1997)

<sup>65</sup> O-jun Gwon and others, 'The World War of Culture Content: Securing £600 Billion Market', *Korean Economy Business*, 521 (28 Nov 2005)

future depends on its culture content industry'. The provocative use of the 'automobile analogy' is a clarion call to business venture to treat the cultural sector seriously; the reference to Hyundai Motor is acutely intriguing, as that company has so long served as the symbol of the nation's economic growth. In 1995, the famous 'Jurassic Park metaphor' – the overall revenue that Spielberg made from his dinosaur film equalled the sale of 1.5 million Hyundai cars – was a story so alarming for the Kim Young Sam government that it prompted immediate action to revolutionise the nation's approach to media industries. And still this comparison holds sway after ten years.<sup>66</sup> The fact that *Jurassic Park* was seen as a compelling example is not a coincidence. Janet Wasko, who pioneered the study on film industrial issues, notes 'popular films often initiate or continue an endless chain of other cultural products'<sup>67</sup>, giving *Jurassic Park* as the prime example of successful product merchandising. Since the 1960s, Korea has depended heavily on exports, such as automobiles, electronics, semi-conductors, and shipbuilding, but today, partly due to the Asian Monetary Crisis and the demise of these traditional industries, there is consensus that a new kind of export system must be realised. 'Framed around the idea of exportability', therefore, cultural industries have risen in profile in Korea in recent years.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, the excessive 'hard vs. soft industry metaphor' allows a glimpse into the nation's continued effort to refashion its image as a post-industrial and developed state with strong cultural capital.

In order to exploit the potential of the national cultural industry, the central

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<sup>66</sup> Seong-ho Jin, 'Samsung, Daewoo, Hyundai, Lucky Gold Star, and Doosan: *Jaebeol's* War over Television Image Market', *Chosun Daily* (1 January 1995)

<sup>67</sup> Janet Wasko, *Hollywood in the Information Age: Beyond the Silver Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Jung-yup Lee, 'Managing the Transnational, Governing the National: Cultural Policy and the Politics of "Culture Archetype" Project in South Korea', a paper presented at 'Inter-Asia Cultural Typhoon in Tokyo – Cultural Studies in Asia: Past, Present and Future', Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (3-5 July 2009)

government took decisive steps in shaping and cultivating the ‘culture content industry’. Under the auspice of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT), the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) opened in 2001, overseeing the planning, production, and utilisation of culture content. In July 2001, culture technology (CT) was designated as one of the six fields for focused-development. KOCCA, as a result, envisions a high goal to ‘establish a comprehensive support system to nurture the content industry, and aim[s] to develop Korea as one of the world’s top 5 contents powerhouses’.<sup>69</sup> In his inauguration speech for the new Culture Content Centre in Seoul, the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Yu In-chon reported that the national budget for the Culture Content Project is approximately £120 million in 2009, a 61% increase on the previous year.<sup>70</sup>

According to ‘Cultural Industry Framework Act’ passed in 1999, content means ‘material or information including signs, letters, voice, sound, and images’. The word ‘culture content’, as such, can be applied to a wide-range of cultural items from animation, film, television, computer games, and music. Since the content signifies an idea, programme, or genre, it requires a device or medial platform for its application. I emphasise here that the adoption of the word ‘content’, as opposed to ‘product’, underscores the importance of a digitally-based raw material in the Korean context. On this, Lee Jung-yup observes that ‘as the origin and usage of the term suggests [...] culture content is heavily ridden with techno-economic assumptions on the one hand, and increasingly culturally-oriented connotations on the other’.<sup>71</sup> A uniquely Korean phrase ‘One-Source Multi-Use’ is the motto that supports content

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<sup>69</sup> ‘KOCCA: Introduction’, < <http://www.kocca.kr/eng/about/about/index.html> > [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>70</sup> Gyeong-seong Gwon, ‘Content is Leading the Creative Economy’, *Media Today* (7 May 2009)

<sup>71</sup> Jung-yup Lee, ‘Managing the Transnational, Governing the National’, pp. 12-14.



management, which means that the smallest seed of an idea, the content, should aim to generate a magnitude of product.<sup>72</sup> What then is the place of traditional culture and historical material in this forward-looking culture content industry? To answer this question, I must first introduce the innumerable digitisation projects that have established the rise of the culture content industry.

One underlying principle to the structure of the cultural content is to optimise its accessibility, convenience, and immediacy by rendering it in digital form. Korea has boosted its status as an IT powerhouse, with a high penetration rate of broadband connections.<sup>73</sup> In effect, the ‘knowledge and information resource management project’ has harnessed the high-tech industries and advanced communication technologies, over the past ten years, to very efficient ends.<sup>74</sup> Here I introduce a few of the projects including the digital archives, databases, and portal sites that are relevant to the production of historical drama.

‘The Annals of the *Joseon* Dynasty’ is an official historical record written by the court historians in the years between 1392 and 1863. A total of 1,893 books exist, chronicling the working day at the royal court of each king. In 1995, the annals were translated into modern Korean and were made available on CD-ROM format. At first, the CD set was sold for as much as £2500. Ten years on, funded by the national lottery, the National Institute of Korean History completed the digitisation project and now the annals are available online, accessible to the public, free of charge at <<http://sillok.history.go.kr/main/main.jsp>>. This means that anyone with a reading

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<sup>72</sup> In 2008, KOCCA launched ‘OSMU Killer Contents’ programme, propelling the spread of the motto. See the following link for 2009 Call for Application. ‘Call for Application: 2009 OSMU Killer Contents Project’ (20 July 2009)  
<[http://www.kocca.kr/notice/notice/1245343\\_1126.html](http://www.kocca.kr/notice/notice/1245343_1126.html)> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>73</sup> For four consecutive years (2001 – 2005), South Korea was the number one country from the OECD members that had the highest rate of broadband internet access. Anon., ‘Number One in Fast-Speed Internet for Four Years’, *The Hankyoreh* (29 May 2005)

<sup>74</sup> Anon., ‘Gov’t to Digitize Cultural Content’, *KBS News* (16 April 2009)

knowledge of Korean can visit the website and browse through the complete records of historical kings. Now one can find out for him/herself how King Yeonsan is actually remembered in the annals by reading the day-to-day entries. It goes without saying that digitised annals, complete with instant access to quality research, revolutionised the requisite historical inquiry of *sageuk* productions. This democratisation of history, furthermore, enhances the agency of the historical consumer; personal access to history that bypasses institutions or professional historians realises ‘an enfranchisement of the individual into history’ and ‘the evolution of an historical subject with investigative agency’. Quoting Vivian Sobchak, Jerome De Groot demonstrates how these technologies and tools, ultimately, nurture accultured consumers with a reflective historical knowledge.<sup>75</sup> This is exactly what is happening in Korea where the available digitised knowledge has made an impact on both producers and consumers of historical material.

The conversion of the annals is only the beginning of knowledge-based digitisation projects in Korea: ‘Korea National Heritage Online’, a £8 million venture, was established in 2005 <[www.heritage.go.kr](http://www.heritage.go.kr)>; National Museum’s Mobile Exhibition website hosts an extensive ‘Full Text Cultural Properties Database’; and a variety of other portal sites, like ‘Korean History Online’, are now available to the public <[www.koreanhistory.or.kr](http://www.koreanhistory.or.kr)>. A further £60 million ‘National Digital Library’ <<http://www.dlibrary.go.kr>> opened in 2009, dubbed as ‘the world’s first purposed-built library with the largest dedicated space for users to access online content’.<sup>76</sup>

Even more impressive is the £190 million investment in the Korea Knowledge Portal,

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<sup>75</sup> Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>76</sup> It took seven years to realise this eight-stories building containing over 600 computers that allows access to one hundred million digital contents, including 380,000 digital books. See Kelly Ng, ‘First Dedicated Digital Library Opens in Korea’ (4 June 2009) <<http://www.futuregov.net/articles/2009/jun/04/worlds-first-dedicated-digital-library-opens-korea/>> [accessed 26 November 2010]

a super-database equipped with a one-stop integrated search engine for all kinds of information and data from national agencies and ministries <www.knowledge.go.kr>.<sup>77</sup> Such projects give Yu Dong-hwan the confidence to assert that ‘never has the world seen such a scale of “knowledge digitisation projects” and “database construction” conducted by any single government’.<sup>78</sup> By digitising historical data and heritage properties through advanced informational technology, Korea not only demonstrates its technological prowess but also enables the wider dissemination of cultural heritage intended for academic research as well as commercial usage. Multiple exposure of the ‘historical’ in popular media is made possible precisely through these digitisation projects.

Returning to KOCCA, the state-sponsored digitisation efforts have paved the way for the launch of the ‘Digital Cultural Heritage Content (DCHC)’ project.<sup>79</sup> One of the principal projects of KOCCA, the DCHC is the site where the digitisation process meets the national cultural heritage to serve the evolving culture content industry. Its rationale can be explained in the following way: if the culture content industry is to thrive, a constant supply of creative resources must be made available. Effectively, traditional culture is the well of creativity from which the industries draw their water from. Initiated in 2002 with approximately £25 million of the national budget, the DCHC aims to structure a database of cultural heritage.<sup>80</sup> The types of

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<sup>77</sup> As an experiment I typed in ‘*hanguk-yeonghwa*’ (Korean cinema) in Korea Knowledge Portal in May 2010. This gave me 13,231 results which ranged from information on documentary film made by Korean Dairy Industry Association, a still-cut image of Korea’s first sound film *Chunhyangjeon* to e-learning courses offered by Korean Film Academy. Suffice to say, the database does contain an impressive amount of information.

<sup>78</sup> Dong-hwan Yu, ‘The Current Situation and the Task of Developing the National Cultural Heritage Contents’, *Gukhak Yeongu*, 12 (2006), p. 26.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Introduction to Digitisation of Cultural Heritage Project’, <<http://www.kocca.kr/business/support/digital/index.html>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>80</sup> As of December 2009, a total of £30 million has been spent. See KOCCA, *Digital Cultural Heritage Content Project: 2002 – 2009* (Dec 2009), p. 5.

mandated content include narrative, image design, and historical knowledge, which are categorised under the following four sections.

- Imagination: myth, folklore, history, culture, and narrative
- Emotion: painting, calligraphy, clothing, images, design, music, and dance
- Dynamism: warfare, games, international relations, commerce, management, and strategy
- Wisdom: architecture, cartography, agriculture, fisheries, food, medicine, and technical subjects

When rendered as content, this list is incredibly diverse, containing everything from the founding myths of the ancient kingdoms and *Joseon* era experiments in rocket-launching, to the curriculum for women under colonial rule. The DCHC projects are awarded annually, with the KOCCA issuing a ‘call for public application’ as either a commission task or free entry. Competition between projects is fierce, with many proposals seeking KOCCA funding. On average, the agency covers around 50 – 75 % of a tender’s budget. As of December 2009, 182 projects have been completed amounting to 263,000 individual items.<sup>81</sup> Pilot materials and prototypes are advertised on the official website to allow potential customers to further investigate content before purchasing it. All profits from sales are returned to the developers.

The official website <<http://www.culturecontent.com>> contains an impressive number of materials ready for a variety of applications, including historical drama, animation, and fashion designs and in the classroom. In 2008 alone, the number of uses of DCHC amounted to 2,424 cases (163 offline and 2,261 online).<sup>82</sup> The DCHC project requires expertise from various fields, drawing on the talents of academics, cultural entrepreneurs, and IT specialists. The project bridges

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, *2008 White Paper on Cultural Industry* (August 2009), p. 86.

the humanities and arts with science and technology, in a truly interdisciplinary manner to create revenue; in turn, it has given fresh breath to dying disciplines in the humanities.

One crucial point that distinguishes the DCHC venture with other digitisation projects, including ‘The Annals of the *Joseon* Dynasty’, is that its main purpose is to amplify the *commercial* potential of the historical material. The guidelines for application clearly state that the project does not support ‘the recording and structuring of databases for purely academic research with no industrial application’.<sup>83</sup> DCHC is testament to how the national heritage is valued as a resource to generate profit in Korea’s culture content industry. This means that Korea may not be able to produce a film on the same scale as *Jurassic Park* but it nonetheless can showcase and sell cultural products based on locality and tradition. But does DCHC have any actual influence on the production of the historical genre? Here I introduce two examples of DCHC application by historical films and television productions. Other case studies are discussed further in Chapter Three in relation to the OSMU logic.

When their request to shoot inside the royal palace was denied by the Cultural Heritage Administration, the makers of *King and the Clown* resorted to the rather hastily built sets in Buan Cine Theme Park, an open set originally designed for the television *sageuk*, *Immortal Yi Sun-shin* (KBS, 2004-2005). The producer Jeong Jin-wan expressed the predicament when he said:

When we first arrived in Buan, the situation there was appalling. If we were to build an authentic set for the movie that would have blown up the production cost to twice as much as we had originally planned.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> 2009 Call for Application: Digital Cultural Heritage Content Project, (14 October 2009) <[http://www.kocca.kr/notice/notice/1245398\\_1126.html](http://www.kocca.kr/notice/notice/1245398_1126.html)> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>84</sup> Hui-gyeong Yu, ‘Digital Cultural Heritage Content Project and *King and the Clown*’,

At this time, ‘Digital Hanyang (Seoul)’, a DCHC commissioned in 2002, came to their rescue, supplying the production team with

authentic background

**FIG. 7 The Royal Court in *King and the Clown*** images of the old Capital. Dubbed ‘cyber reconstruction of national landscapes’, ‘Digital Hanyang’ recreated the geography of nineteenth century Seoul, including the landmark Gyeongbok Palace, residential areas, roads, and rivers. From the website <<http://digitalhanyang.culturecontent.com>> one can view old maps, two-dimensional images, and three-dimensional models (FIG. 8). The accurate spatial arrangements of the city are accompanied by suggestions for use in various media. KOCCA reported that the *King and the Clown* production team took advantage of the project during the pre-production stage, by simulating the mise-en-scène recreated through the virtual 3-D model of Gyeongbok Palace (FIG. 7).<sup>85</sup> The panoramic birds-eye shot of the old capital in the scene where Jang-

**FIG. 8 Reconstructed Gyeongbok Palace: 'Digital Hanyang'**

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*Munhwa Daily* (14 February 2006)

<sup>85</sup> KOCCA, *Digital Cultural Heritage Content Project: Achievements and Visions* (Seoul, December 2006), p. 20.

saeng and Gong-gil arrive in Seoul, was also created with the help of ‘Digital Hanyang’. In such a way, the DHCH not only heightened the historical accuracy (in colour, period décor, and coats of arms) in the film but also helped lower the production cost. If DCHC’s contribution to *King and the Clown* is somewhat incidental and spontaneous, the next example occurred with a more specific plan.

KOCCA commissioned a £125,000 project ‘The Autopsy Report/*Geom-an*’ in 2002 in answer to the rising popularity of fiction novels and historical mysteries. ‘The Autopsy Report’ <<http://egurman.culturecontent.com/main/default.asp>> is made up of real murder investigations that happened during the *Joseon* period. After the historians translated 531 dense historic accounts of murders written in archaic Korean into a comprehensible language, the writers used that data to construct fifty murder case narratives. The end product is digestible yet original material on forensic medicine, police investigation, and the legal system of a century ago. ‘The Autopsy Report’ is divided into three types of content: the ‘Summary of the Autopsy’; a more detailed ‘Translation of the Autopsy’; and the fictional ‘Autopsy Scenario’ and the ‘Images of the Autopsy’. The ‘Images of the Autopsy’ section, in particular, consists of illustrations of each autopsy scenario and can be incorporated into a storyboard during the pre-production stage as the basis for mise-en-scène and cinematography. ‘The Autopsy Report’ content played a key role in the production of the television drama *Byeolsungeom* (2005-) a kind of *CSI: Korea* set in the eighteenth century.<sup>86</sup> Showcasing ‘a scientific crime investigation in the *Joseon* era’, *Byeolsungeom* proved to be quite successful, now running in to a third season for a cable television channel.<sup>87</sup> In both *Blood Rain* (Kim Dai-seung, 2005) and *Shadows in the Palace*,

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<sup>86</sup> KOCCA, *Digital Cultural Heritage Content Project*, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Investigative Docu *Byeolsungeom*: Scientific investigation existed even in *Joseon* period’.

the autopsy scene occurs at the pivotal moment of the narrative (FIG. 9).

The use of old medical terminology and surgical devices heighten the verisimilitude of the period murder investigation to a degree never seen before. The makers of *Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace* did not acknowledge whether they have or have not consulted the ‘The Autopsy Report’; however, what is clear is that the availability of such DCHC has raised the standard of authenticity in historical murder investigations. A certain level of realism is now required to satisfy the audience already accustomed with the images of a historical autopsy. Hence one cannot ignore the influence that ‘The Autopsy Report’ had on the making of *Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace*.

**FIG. 9 The Images of the Autopsy (Left) and *Blood Rain* (Right)**

Capitalist logic validates the utilisation of heritage in popular visual culture through the DCHC project. The government, academia, and industry are engaged in a dialogue with the articulation and translation of traditional properties unique to Korea with a universal appeal that can be packaged for versatile use. Yet the hard-nationalistic fervour is not lost in the industrial drive as the spirit of DCHC is to give greater exposure to Korean cultural heritage: tangible and intangible, natural and artificial, and artistic and academic.

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Main homepage <<http://www.imbc.com/broad/tv/ent/chosunpolice/>> [accessed 1 December 2010]



The second KOCCA project that is relevant to the production of the *sageuk* is ‘HanStyle’. If DCHC projects aim to construct a catalogue of heritage materials to be used in visual media-related products, HanStyle concerns the merchandising of goods and the branding of Korean artefacts.<sup>88</sup> Administered by the Vice-Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the HanStyle Support Council laid the foundation for the promotion plan in 2006. First initiated under the banner of ‘Han Brand’, the project soon re-launched with a subtler name ‘HanStyle’ in 2007.<sup>89</sup> With the prefix ‘*han-*’ deriving from the word ‘Korea’ (*hanguk*), HanStyle is the representative brand for traditional culture and artefacts. HanStyle has three aims: ‘commercialisation’, ‘globalisation’, and ‘usage in everyday life’. These aims translate the belief that unique traditional culture should be effectively branded as ‘Korean’ to be disseminated into a global market. The expected result of HanStyle is the enhancement of the national image, the creation of new job opportunities, and the sustainable expansion of the Korean Wave.<sup>90</sup> This explains the reason for providing information on HanStyle in English on the official website of the Korea Tourism Organisation.<sup>91</sup>

HanStyle concerns six aspects of Korean culture and each component is given attention in different ways:

- Korean alphabet/*hangeul* (e.g. developing online Korean language courses)
- Korean food/*hansik* (e.g. standardisation of Korean recipes)
- Korean clothes/*hanbok* (e.g. new designs for traditional Korean costume)
- Korean house/*hanok* (e.g. architectural symposia for Korean-style housing)
- Korean paper/*hanji* (e.g. support for research on mulberry trees, the main ingredient of Korean paper)

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<sup>88</sup> MCT, ‘HanStyle Development Summary Plan: 2007-2011’ (15 February 2007)

<sup>89</sup> Tae-ho Kim, ‘A Study on the Role of HanStyle Expo as a Promotion of Korea Traditional Contents’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, Dankook University, 2008). pp. 10-11.

<sup>90</sup> Anon., ‘Understanding HanStyle’ <<http://www.han-style.com/hanstyle/intro/info.jsp>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>91</sup> See <[http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/CU/CU\\_EN\\_8\\_1.jsp](http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/CU/CU_EN_8_1.jsp)>

- Korean music/*hangukeumak* (e.g. development of mobile ringtones based on traditional music)

Privileges and certification are given to business ventures and artisans who create quality products that fall into these categories. Under the slogan ‘Korea the Sense’, the HanStyle Expo was held three times: 28 September – 1 October 2006 in Ilsan Kintex; 31 July – 3 August 2008 in Samsung KOEX; and 23 July – 26 July 2009 in Samsung KOEX.<sup>92</sup>

The first HanStyle Expo was organised by the Ministry of Culture, Gyeonggi Province, Ministry of Industry Resource, and North Jeolla Province. The slogan was ‘From Tradition to Future, Globalize the HanBrand’. 108 businesses participated in the Expo, attracting 41,000 visitors who paid a small entrance fee. Various exhibitions were on display, from demonstrations of Korean cookery to photography exhibitions. A fashion show and traditional music performances were also part of the programme. An academic conference on the branding of Korean products was held concurrently. The second Expo was more concerned with ‘business to business’ relations, unlike the first Expo which was closer to ‘business to customer’ type. Despite the smaller admission numbers (this time 12,000 visitors attended), the Expo still attracted many buyers: 917 in total, including 144 from overseas.<sup>93</sup>

At the Expo, appropriately, heritage artefacts are displayed, information is exchanged with manufacturers, and buyers are actively sought. By applying local culture to streamlined commercialisation, HanStyle has furthered the reinvention of traditional arts and artefacts. As an outcome of the HanStyle project, fashionable and contemporary cultural products have been developed and manufactured; information

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<sup>92</sup> Tae-ho Kim, ‘A Study on the Role of HanStyle Expo’, p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 30. Also see, Anon., ‘Call for Participation: HanStyle Expo 2009’ (1 June 2009) <<http://www.mcst.go.kr/web/notifyCourt/notice/mctNoticeView.jsp?pSeq=4662>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

is available from the website, tellingly accessible in Chinese, English, and Japanese as well as Korean. <<http://www.han-style.com/index.jsp>>. The Korean clothes (*hanbok*) section is an interesting example of HanStyle impact. The official webpage contains the history of *hanbok*, types of *hanbok*, and other accessories attached to *hanbok* (such as pendants and trinkets). It also provides interview clips with *hanbok* specialists, an online forum, and contact details for *hanbok* designers and related institutes. The pictures from the HanStyle Expo and a list of participating manufacturers and heritage artisans are also included. As such the website and the Expo combined further the exposure of heritage products within and beyond Korea. What is more, the promotion of HanStyle parallels the campaign to boost the national brand.<sup>94</sup> Moon Seungsook argues that ‘brand capitalism is about the accumulation of profit through the selling of abstract ideas about, the images of, success, glamour, happiness and sophistication, rather than selling specific and fixed material products’.<sup>95</sup> In view of this, HanStyle becomes an effective tool in consolidating Korea as a national brand.

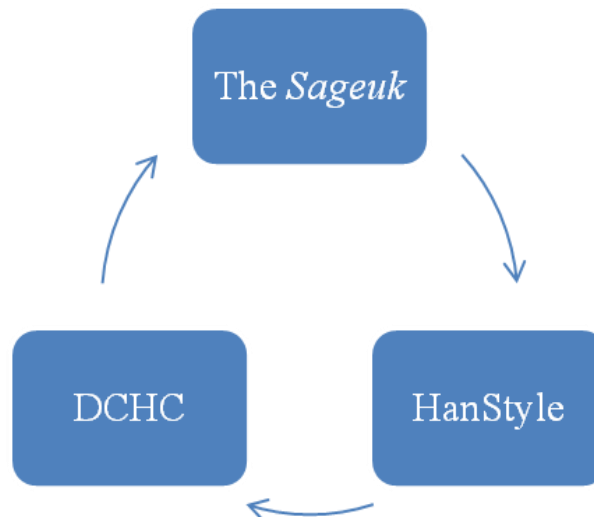
What, then, is the implication of HanStyle in the proliferation of the *sageuk*? Firstly, costume designers can derive ideas for research from the *hanbok* designs supported by HanStyle. The availability of other tangible heritage properties through HanStyle may also ease production designers’ task of recreating the period mise-en-scène. But more importantly, HanStyle provides a potent venue to purchase artisanal and traditional crafts such as elegant calligraphy like the ones that decorated the walls in *Untold Scandal*; *haute couture hanbok*, the kind that Nok-su wears in *King*

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<sup>94</sup> The Lee Myung-bak government launched the ‘Presidential Council on Nation Branding, Republic of Korea’ in January 2009 to strategically enhance Korea’s national image in the world. See <[http://www.koreabrand.net/en/how/how\\_search\\_index.do](http://www.koreabrand.net/en/how/how_search_index.do)>

<sup>95</sup> Seungsook Moon, ‘Buddhist Temple Food in South Korea: Interests and Agency in the Reinvention of Tradition in the Age of Globalization’, *Korea Journal*, 48.4 (Winter 2008), p. 172.

*and the Clown*; and ornate hand-crafted drawers, like those seen in *Portrait of a Beauty*. One can also obtain contact details for referenced specialists and artisans through the HanStyle Expo and webpage. Thus, HanStyle feeds into the commodity culture, potentially setting in motion the purchasing power of an audience attracted by the heritage commodities displayed on the screen. Both the ‘Digital Cultural Heritage Content’ Project and ‘HanStyle’ market traditional properties unique to Korea. I propose that together with *sageuk* films (and television), they form the three corners of the heritage commodity triangle (FIG. 10)



**FIG. 10 Heritage Commodity Cycle**

Firstly, the digitised heritage content from DCHC provides the knowledge and ideas for design, easing the process of period recreation. Then the *sageuk* captures the attention of an audience with its attractive narrative and period spectacle. Finally, the flickering images of period artefacts on the big screen are materialised into tangible products through the HanStyle, fulfilling the audience’s desire to possess their own heritage products. This process is similar to ‘the patina system’,

opening up a venue so the viewer can buy into the film.<sup>96</sup> The complete cycle, moreover, generates a growing public awareness in localised traditions and history, which in turn, facilitate the development of more DCHC. The perpetuation of this cycle is evidence of the heritage consumption that is growing in Korea.

In my view, heritage consumption is present across different demographic groups. The younger generation, the largest grouping to go to the cinema, may attend a chic period drama like *The Servant*, while the older generation, with higher purchasing power, can further indulge in traditional designs and modernised heritage artefacts. The changing lifestyle, tastes, and consumption patterns in Korea at present have propelled the heritage commodity cycle. Moral criticism of excessive consumption and blind materialism had been of national concern until the ‘IMF crisis’; however, the 2000s is marked by a stronger sense of quality and tradition over disposable transitory fashions.<sup>97</sup> Accultured taste is now demarcated by carefully selected high-end heritage products.

Most middle-class families may not be able to indulge in expensive leisure activities such as collecting rare antiques; yet, they can still wear ‘utility’ *hanbok*, buy a fashionable refrigerator decorated with traditional patterns, or even take a weekend trip to the old city of Gyeongju and stay at the first *hanok* hotel Millennium Palace ‘Ragung’ (FIG. 11).<sup>98</sup> In sum, Korean-themed products are abounding, with ever-expanding innovations in design and decoration. Social and cultural meanings are created through such consumption, as the artefacts of the past come alive and are providing useful in everyday life. In the materialist orientation of modern life,

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<sup>96</sup> Marine Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies*, p. 168.

<sup>97</sup> Seung-kuk Kim, ‘Changing Lifestyles and Consumption Patterns of the South Korean Middle Class and New Generations’, in *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*, ed. by Beng Huat Chua (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 74.

<sup>98</sup> Hotel ‘Ragung’ <[http://www.smpark.co.kr/sub\\_main02.asp](http://www.smpark.co.kr/sub_main02.asp)>

heritage consumption has become an index of prestige, and the efforts to update and refashion the look of historical drama are partially due to the consumer's expectation of the desirable consumables seen on the screen.

**FIG. 11 Consumable Heritage:  
From a Decorated Refrigerator (top)  
to a Korean-style Hotel 'Ragung' (down)**

## Conclusion

The past is seen as a resource for many avenues in Korea: for mediation, for reconciliation, and for consumption. The logic of commodity production and consumption explains how the newly fashioned tradition and heritage culture is rendered in a visual form. Ironically, it is these products that serve as catalysts for the 're-evaluation of the historical past'.<sup>99</sup> For sure, the KOCCA is accelerating the 'invention of tradition' through the 'ready-made' tradition of practical and commercial usage. The main idea of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's edited collection *The Invention of Tradition* is that invented traditions can have the function of social cohesion in a national context.<sup>100</sup> In the Korean example, tellingly, economic interest is prioritised over political reasons. The global refashioning of Korean culture in the twenty-first century is being realised through the cultivation of Korea's cultural heritage. Yet there is a danger that such projects objectify and fetishise tradition, making it an empty signifier. This worry looms largely over the various projects conducted by the KOCCA.

Recent *sageuk* provides a succinct example of how cultural heritage is reinvented, packaged, and circulated in Korea, a process mediated by the negotiation of the local and the global, and the traditional and the modern. Competing ideological and commercial interests drive the phenomenon; accordingly, the genre is positioned in this complex matrix of motivations. The ordinary citizen expresses their desire for historical material and the industry supplies a number of products while the government facilitates the exchange through institutional means. Such a process encapsulates the ways in which a nation makes uses of its past for the profit

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, p 221.

<sup>100</sup> *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)

of the present; yet, the process of looking back is inevitably embedded with both anxieties and aspirations. As the title of Robert Hewison's famous book *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* succinctly demonstrates, nostalgic evocation is believed to be a degenerate sign of a society.<sup>101</sup> In the Korean case, however, the rise of a digital heritage industry is captured in a completely different rhetoric, one of cultural pride, celebration, and opportunity. Any hint of anxiety associated with globalisation and economic instability is veiled under an aggressive promotion of cultural industries and a triumphant gaze towards the outside. I believe the kind of teleology invested in the national heritage invites further scrutiny.

In sum, seamless integration of culture, economics, and politics cater for a nostalgia for national history and traditional heritage. Although Jean Baudrillard defined the modern world as a drive for consumption,<sup>102</sup> to treat these phenomena as mere symptoms of capitalist society would be to overlook the complex layers of aspiration at work, such as de-centring of globalisation, re-examination of the nation's cultural heritage, and the negotiation of native culture in the international platform. The *sageuk*, in this sense, uses the space carved out by the history boom in various ways. It engages in dialogue with older *sageuk* while also making connections with the international costume aesthetics (the focus of Chapter Three); it provides fresh interpretations of famous historical figures (Chapter Four); it functions as an allegory for national trauma and the purge (Chapter Five); and it serves as a means to revisit and re-assess the colonial period (Chapter Six).

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<sup>101</sup> Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987)

<sup>102</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998)



**PART II**  
**HERITAGE AND INDUSTRY**

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Imagining a New (Cinematic) Heritage: Fusion *Sageuk*

This chapter investigates the ways in which *sageuk* films of the 2000s contemplate Korean cultural heritage on screen by negotiating the dynamics of the local and global, and the traditional and modern. Using *Untold Scandal* as a case study, I demonstrate how new *sageuk* refashions the Korean past – the lifestyle, costumes, architecture, and landscape – rendering it appealing to a contemporary audience. One of the most successful historical dramas in recent years, *Untold Scandal* visualises a successful *mélange* of the French novel *Les liaisons Dangereuses* and eighteenth century Korea. Its meticulous and sumptuous set design not only paved the way for future costume drama but also allows us to examine the ‘invented heritage’ in historical productions. Locating a national essence in the age of globalisation seems to be only a myth, as local heritage is constantly repackaged according to the perceptions held by others. It is telling, therefore, that recent films by Im Kwon-taek, an auteur whose untiring efforts to capture authentic culture and heritage, were shown the backdoor by local audiences, while fusion *sageuk*, with its playful and unapologetic appropriation of the past, is enjoying sustained popularity. By deconstructing the conventions in past *sageuks*, such as the ‘feudal women under oppression (*yeoseong sunansa*)’, a popular motif in international festival films, *Untold Scandal* attempts to negate the stigma attached to historical drama. The film also reworks the 1980s ‘period erotica’, thereby significantly broadening its appeal to a contemporary audience.

In the latter half of this chapter, I contextualise *Untold Scandal* in relation to international period aesthetics, making reference to three existing film styles and

concepts. Upon its release, the film was understood as an instance of the ‘well-made’ film within Korea. At the same time, the aggressive and careful marketing tactics bring another term into the picture, the Hollywood ‘high concept’ movie. Finally, the reliance on authentic production design invites a cross-cultural reading with the European ‘heritage cinema’ framework. I believe these concepts help us untangle the aesthetic strategies and financial orientation of *Untold Scandal* as well as the many other costume dramas that followed.

## *Untold Scandal*

*Untold Scandal* marked a watershed moment for the historical genre, while suggesting a model for cross-cultural adaptations. The film is based on the renowned French epistolary novel *Les liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. Writing in the last days of the *ancient regime*, Laclos weaved the intricate plot in 175 letters, revealing the hypocrisy, double standards, and false morality of the French upper class. Milan Kundera considered the book ‘to be one of the greatest novels of all time’ for its compelling observation on innate human wickedness.<sup>1</sup> Laclos’ work has enjoyed sustained popularity over the years, notably inspiring a string of film and television productions around the globe. *Untold Scandal* not only builds upon the source novel but also makes intertextual references to previous adaptations, especially *Dangerous Liaisons* (Stephen Frears, UK/USA, 1988) and *Valmont* (Miloš Forman, UK/France, 1989). Both films stay in period but ‘the battle of the sexes’ motif is more emphasised in Frears’ film, a theme *Untold Scandal* also borrows in the narrative and the visuals. While using a French novel, *Untold Scandal* transposes the setting to late eighteenth century Korea, exposing the face of Korean aristocracy drenched in decadence under the guise of a strict Neo-Confucian ethos. To the audience familiar with the French novel or its other adaptations, the similarities found in these two radically different worlds provide a moment of pleasant surprise in the film.

*Untold Scandal* is set in 1782, a prosperous time under King Jeongjo’s reign. The highly respected but two-faced Lady Jo sustains a malicious friendship with her cousin, a suave womaniser Jowon. Lady Jo asks Jowon to seduce a 15-year-old girl

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera, *Slowness*, trans. by Linda Asher (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p. 9.

So-ok who is to become her husband Lord Yu's third concubine; yet, he is already in pursuit of a virtuous widow Lady Jeong. When Lady Jo promises sexual favour, upon his triumph over Lady Jeong, the two bet on a game of seduction and betrayal. The ensuing drama more or less follows Laclos' novel; however, the ending is significantly different in the film. Jowon is stabbed in the back by Lady Jeong's jealous brother-in-law. The heart-broken Lady Jeong walks into a frozen lake and drowns. After the pornographic paintings exposing her secret sexual life circulate around the high society, Lady Jo flees to China. Finally, So-ok, carrying Jowon's child, successfully marries into the Yu family.<sup>2</sup>

In the novel, Valmont records his sexual feats in letters and they form the backbone of *Les liaisons*. In contrast, the libertine Jowon *sketches* his scenes of sexual conquest in *Untold Scandal*. As a result, the collection of letters is replaced by a 'picture book' (*hwajip*) in the film. The careful mise-en-scène is filled with both epistolary and pictorial allusions, underscoring the visual nature of cinema; a copious number of books, calligraphy, watercolours, portraits, and writing devices are displayed in the film.

*Untold Scandal* is striking not only in terms of its *visual* trans-culturation of the French original, but also in its rendering of careful period design. Different filmmaking elements work together to present a historical period, to a degree never before seen in Korean *sageuk*. The frame is filled with sumptuous furniture, colour-coordinated intimate décor, and luxurious costumes worn by the privileged. What is more, in order to realise a convincing period look, the makers placed original

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<sup>2</sup> In the novel, the abandoned Mmd Tourvel (Lady Jeong in the film) dies of a broken heart without giving Valmont (Jowon) an opportunity to reconcile his misdeeds. Cécile (So-ok) miscarries her child with Valmont. Cécile's admirer Danceny (In-ho) challenges Valmont to a duel and kills him. Unlike Jowon who is stabbed in the back, Valmont perishes with dignity. After the intimate correspondence between Merteuil and Valmont circulates around high society in Paris, Merteuil leaves the country, disfigured by small pox.

heritage artefacts in front of the camera. Jung Ku-ho who doubled as the costume and production designer, stated that he showcased genuine décor, believing that ‘only the real artefacts can look real on screen’.<sup>3</sup> Nearly half of the production budget was used in acquiring such expensive props and costumes.

Accordingly, the cinematography is primarily interested in capturing the perfect image of the past. The director of photography Kim Byeong-il noted that it was the first time he did not use any filters or additional manipulation on the camera lens lest they tarnish the natural texture and colour of the *hanbok*.<sup>4</sup> The camera carefully captures the fine texture of the period setting through static close-ups and slow tracking shots. One such example is Jowon and Lord Yu’s breakfast scene that immediately follows the opening title. The scene begins with an over-head close-up of a colourful fish soup. Conversation between the two men has already begun. Yet the camera is still positioned directly over the dish and it follows the soup bowl to the dining table (FIG. 12). There is a cut and only then does the camera retreat back to reveal the setting and the characters. In other words, the period object (fish soup) makes a grand entrance, before the human figures do, and not the other way around. While the morals of the characters might be less than recommendable, the visual composition and style still leave the audience in awe.

While the film spent the bulk of its production budget on acquiring authentic artefacts to recreate the world of the aristocrats, it also does not hide the fact that ‘foreign’ motifs and ‘fake’ elements are incorporated. For Grant McCracken, patina denotes the value placed on material objects that show the evidence of age and careful maintenance; accordingly, ‘patina serves as a kind of visual proof of status,

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<sup>3</sup> Anon., ‘Interview with Jung Kuho’, *Screen* (October 2003), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Anon., ‘Capturing the Natural Primary Colours’, *Cine21* (7 October 2003), p. 90.

[...] the greater the patina on certain objects, the longer the owner has enjoyed certain status'.<sup>5</sup>

**FIG. 12 Travelling Fish Soup**

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<sup>5</sup> Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988), p. 32.

In *Untold Scandal*, the film crew used 450 bottles of cooking oil to wax and soften the paulownia flooring, in order to give it an aged and subdued glow. The brassware shown in the breakfast scene, similarly, had to be polished for two weeks to achieve that particular shine.<sup>6</sup> Through such means, the film manipulates the audience's perception of patina, striking a balance between authenticity and necessary 'faking' process to actualise a *realistic* look. Moreover as the filming was done in winter, the out of season lotus flowers had to be imported from Thailand and Vietnam to fill the pond.<sup>7</sup> Yet again, the charm of the image preceded the rule of authenticity. The negotiation between market driven-patina and artifice give insight to the process of period recreation in *Untold Scandal*. As I argued in Chapter Two, the perfect image of heritage artefacts becomes the primary motivator for the audience to pursue and purchase such objects, setting the heritage commodity cycle in motion. The fashionable *hanbok* and period décor displayed on screen would certainly boost the appeal of heritage commodities. Visual opulence and conspicuous consumption, therefore, are not only relevant inside the world of film, but also outside in the real world. Therefore, the film maximises the link between onscreen objects of desire and off-screen purchases on many levels.

In an interview director E claimed that his idea for the film came when he imagined a scene where people in *hanbok* move about while Johann Sebastian Bach is playing in the background.<sup>8</sup> An experimentation of such clashing images and moods was what he intended in his film. His statement would become the fundamental principle of the fusion *sageuk*, where historically accurate elements mingle with anachronistic and foreign motifs, while still striking a harmony.

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<sup>6</sup> DVD Director's commentary.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Darcy Paquet, 'Dressed for Success'.



Ultimately, it is by mixing disparate references, *Untold Scandal* is able to modernise the look of *sageuk*. This point, in turn, begs questions of genre and reference.

Namely, what is the place of *Untold Scandal* in the history of *sageuk* and how does the film respond to its cinematic heritage? In other words, where does the motivation to be 'new' and to be a work of 'fusion' derive from?

## Rupturing the Cinematic Heritage of the *Sageuk*

Jung Ku-ho, an established fashion designer, shared his vision for the costume designs in *Untold Scandal* by saying ‘if the rich middle-class So-ok and her mother wear *Versace*-like flamboyance, Lady Jo’s style is the controlled brilliance and sophistication of *Hermès*’.<sup>9</sup> His choice of words, which sounds like they may have been taken from a Paris runway, attaches a sense of luxury and exoticism to traditional *hanbok*. In a different interview, he claimed that his inspiration for the film came from *The Age of Innocence* (Martin Scorsese, USA, 1993). Jung stated that the meticulous period reconstructions of *The Age of Innocence* made a ‘strong impression’ on him and he was most struck by the harmony of the colours where ‘red flowers, orange-colour décor and a bright white dress are all displayed in a pink room’.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, neither the director E nor Jeong made any reference to past Korean *sageuk* in their interviews, while the critics were more than ready to compare the film with other period dramas, especially those by Im Kwon-taek. For instance, a fashion stylist Seo Yeong-hui noted that ‘[*Untold Scandal*] marks the arrival of a new generation of visual work’ adding that ‘if Im Kwon-taek recreated Korean beauty in the most earnest way, E uses tradition as a basis but adds modern sensibilities’.<sup>11</sup> Similar comparison can be found in Derek Elley’s review of *Untold Scandal*. He praises the film by saying:

For auds who find the recent costume dramas of veteran Im Kwon-taek (*Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon*) rather bloodless, static trawls through Korea's cultural history, *Untold Scandal* will come as a piquant delight. It's a movie with one eye on the present without losing its focus on the

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<sup>9</sup> Min-gyeong Sin, ‘Costume Style’, *Screen* (October 2003), p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> Anon., ‘Interview with Jung Kuho’, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> Hyeong-suk Yi, ‘The Revival of Luxury Costume from *Joseon* Period: The Beauty of *Hanbok* in *Untold Scandal*’, *Munhwa Daily* (23 Oct 2003)

past, and a rich testimony to the possibilities of Korean cinema.<sup>12</sup>

To reiterate, while the makers referred to Bach, designer brands, and a Hollywood period drama to introduce the film, the critics, both at home and abroad, compared it with the works of a celebrated Korean auteur.

In my interview with the director, I brought up this issue, asking whether any Korean films influenced him when making *Untold Scandal*. To this, he answered:

Growing up I was engrained with the message that ‘Korean culture is unique and attractive’. We are led to naturally accept clichés like ‘5000 years of splendid national heritage’ and ‘the glorious spirit of our ancestors’. [...] By making a *sageuk* film, I wanted to see for myself how much I know about Korean culture and whether it is as beautiful as people say it is. I was also dissatisfied with the art and historical research in earlier historical dramas. To me the costumes looked rather shabby, the acting exaggerated, and the story predictable, although I’m sure the makers at the time put in their best efforts. I realised I needed to make a new and fashionable *sageuk*, really tackling the issues I had about the genre.<sup>13</sup>

From his words, it becomes clear that *Untold Scandal* was a project designed to break away from the *sageuk* formula from the start. As I soon demonstrate, the film makes reference to visual themes and narrative motifs commonly found in past historical dramas so long as it can deconstruct them. The issues on reference, acknowledgement, and omission in *Untold Scandal* give us insight into the position of recent *sageuk* films in the history of South Korean historical drama. In order to dispel the myth that the *sageuk* is box-office poison, a radical intervention was called for and *Untold Scandal* did just that. Especially, the film recycles and revises the theme of ‘the feudal women oppressed by the Neo-Confucian family structure’ in the narrative.

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<sup>12</sup> Derek Elley, ‘*Untold Scandal*’, *Variety* (13 October 2003)

<sup>13</sup> Personal phone interview with director E (4 February 2010)

By setting the narrative inside the aristocratic world of the *Joseon* Dynasty, the film reworks the ‘female subjugation’ motif, where women are relegated to the domestic chores of child bearing and rearing. This has been a popular motif throughout *sageuk* history from Shin Sang-ok’s royal court drama of the 1960s to the costumed period films with an erotic streak of the 1980s. In these narratives, a wife is pressurised to provide a son (*Women of Yi Dynasty*); an arranged marriage and the practice of concubinage lead to tragic consequences (*Eunuch* [1968]); and a virgin widow lives with her in-laws (*Spinning the Tales*). *Untold Scandal* reworks all these themes to arrive at a very different conclusion. At first Lady Jo and Lady Jeong appear to be typical upper-class ladies confined within the patriarchal family structure. Lady Jo has failed to provide a male heir for the family. According to the family law of the late-*Joseon* Dynasty, this is one of the ‘Seven Instances of Wifely Disobedience’, giving her husband the right to abandon her.<sup>14</sup> The tragedy in *Surrogate Mother* and *Spinning the Tales* mentioned earlier stems from this same obsession with female reproductive duties. Lady Jo welcomes the idea of a young concubine so long as she can exact revenge on her husband. The fact that she asks Jowon to ‘impregnate’ her before the wedding night points to her intention. Ultimately, the contamination of the Yu bloodline is what she desires. Manipulative and/or sexually voracious females, such as Nok-su in Yeonsan films or Eoh Wu-dong, are certainly punished by death. However, no such tragedy befalls Lady Jo, except for her having to leave a life of luxury behind. With her pretty face intact (in the novel, her character contracts smallpox), she escapes to China. One could even argue that she has achieved her freedom since she has been relieved of her duties as an

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<sup>14</sup> Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 273-275.

obedient wife and daughter-in-law.

Lady Jeong remains faithful to her dead husband, who died before they could consummate the marriage. The government has honoured this virgin widow by presenting a chastity gate to her dead-husband's family. Neither Lady Jeong nor her birth family receives the credit; it is her in-laws who must make sure she lives up to the honour by remaining celibate. The actual gate is not shown in the film but its symbolic presence resonates. The chastity gate has been a recurring motif in past *sageuks* such as *Chastity Gate* (Shin Sang-ok, 1962), *Gate of Woman*, and a period horror *The Song under Moonlight* (Park Yun-gyo, 1985). In *Untold Scandal*, however, the chastity gate does not seem to carry much meaning for Lady Jeong when she gives herself to Jowon. In another scene, when Jowon quietly enters into her bedroom at night she pulls out the silver dagger/*eunjangdo*, as any virtuous upper-class lady would do. But she does not use it. In *Spinning the Tales*, Gillye sharpens her dagger daily, as instructed by her mother-in-law. The primary purpose of the dagger is to kill herself, rather than an assailant, if she ever encounters a sexual threat. In *Untold Scandal*, as far as the narrative goes, the 'chastity gate' and 'silver dagger' are obsolete signifiers that do not bind the women under submission. What is more, Lady Jeong attends Catholic mass at night, a religion that was considered dangerous and banned at the time. In this sense, Lady Jeong is equally as threatening to the Neo-Confucian patrilineal family as Lady Jo is.

Lady Jeong's reference to China, a metaphor for a new world, together with her attachment to butterflies, represent her yearning for emancipation. And she achieves that freedom through death. While some reviewers considered the scene

where she throws herself under the icy cold water too ‘melodramatic’,<sup>15</sup> her reason for suicide is very different from the protagonists in *Spinning the Tales* and *Surrogate Mother*. While Gillye and Ok-nyeo hang themselves, according to Heo Chang-ui, as mentioned before, as a silent protest to their tragic fate, Lady Jeong walks into the lake as a means of romantic fulfilment. She recounts her words to Jowon saying ‘we have no place in this world (but in the next we may)’. As ironic as it may sound, for Lady Jeong, her suicide signifies her desire to be reunited with her dead lover.

Lastly, a girl whom Lord Yu calls a ‘flower about to blossom’, So-ok is no exemplary concubine to an aristocratic family. So-ok follows her desire and exchanges letters with her sweetheart Gwon In-ho. Even after Jowon rapes her, she continues the sexual relationship with him. She finally marries into the Yu family while carrying Jowon’s child. After the end credits roll, the film shows So-ok’s life after the wedding. Her posture and costume is the double of Lady Jo, suggesting that So-ok will live like her predecessor, commanding power and respect. Small subversions echo loudly in an oppressive society. While beautiful young women endure hardship under Neo-Confucian patriarchy in earlier *sageuks*, female characters in *Untold Scandal* are not mere victims as they place personal desires, individual happiness, and ambition above other values.

It is not only the women who attempt to attack the institution of the family. Jowon, an accomplished painter and swordsman, also participates in the game of rebellion. *Untold Scandal* opens with a voice-over-narration that introduces the scandalous picture book, wrapped in a red silk cover. As a truncated hand opens the pornographic book, erotic images appear and disappear in a succession of dissolves. Then one of the images dissolves into a scene where Jowon is painting a naked

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<sup>15</sup> Yeong-seop Sim, ‘Review of *Untold Scandal*’, *Cine21* (14 October 2003), p. 107.

model. Outside the room, a family memorial rite is taking place. Both parties – Jowon and the family – engage in their ritual with equal solemnity, one for carnal pleasure and the other for the prosperity of the family and parallel editing deftly synchronises the acts. As Jowon signals to the naked woman to come near, the camera cuts to the long-shot of the family members dressed in white rising up after a full bow, as if to beckon his call. Although humorous, his gesture is symbolic of disrespect to the family, belittling the seriousness of the ritual.

Jowon continues his part in defaming Neo-Confucian morality and family values by seducing the virtuous Lady Jeong and impregnating So-ok. As a result, he is killed by Lady Jeong's brother-in-law. The brother-in-law makes it clear that Jowon is eliminated to save the honour of the family. He shouts, 'you have indeed debauched my sister-in-law! And having had her did you forsake her? I will seek justice for the name of my family!' Even so, the legacy of the scandal will live on through Jowon's bastard child who succeeds Yu's family name.

*Untold Scandal* contains explicit depictions of sex in a pre-modern setting, a common trope in 1980s folk erotica and festival films. The sexual content here, however, is at a distance from how sexuality was exploited in those earlier *sageuk* cycles. The film does not show the passionate affairs between virile man and insatiable woman (*Byeon Gwang-swoi*) or women selling their bodies for survival (*Wild Strawberries*) nor are copious scenes of rape and violence in nature included for spectacle's sake (a popular Im Kwon-taek motif). Rather, *Untold Scandal* ruptures the generic imagination of period erotica by embedding a new gender relationship rendered through strong female characters holding agency over their desires. These women use sex for pleasure, such as So-ok who after being instructed by Jowon, soon excels in the art of love; or for power such as Lady Jo who toys with

young Gwon In-ho and manipulates him into exposing Jowon's affairs. Even Lady Jeong succeeds in experiencing the joys of love, a privilege not reserved for most virgin widows in past *sageuk*. After *Untold Scandal* made an impact at the box-office, a number of high-concept costume dramas with explicit sexual content appeared, such as *Portrait of a Beauty* and *The Servant*. These films can be placed within the larger cinematic trend of urban dramas that contain extra-marital affairs, such as *An Affair* (E J-yong, 1998) and *Happy End* (Jung Ji-woo, 1999), to more recent *Marriage is a Crazy Thing* (Yoo Ha, 2002) and *My Wife Got Married* (Chong Yunsu, 2008). Negotiating the conventional moral codes while charting the shifting sexual ethos in a domestic setting, these films feature women with new sexual-assertiveness and self-representation. The female characters are not afraid to express their desires, at least in narrative terms, by starting the love affairs. It is the attack on the female subservience within the family system together with a strong erotic content in *Untold Scandal* that helped maximise the film's commercial potential and contemporary resonance. The film, in turn, realises a feminist reappraisal of the traditional *sageuk* formula by grafting in a contemporary gender dynamic and female identities.

Demonstrating how *Untold Scandal* proposes a commentary on post-IMF Korea, Chung Hye Seung argues the following:

Given its Western and contemporary flavours, one might even question whether or not this film is a historical drama at all [...] the film is clearly an example of a contemporary melodrama *disguised* as a historical drama.<sup>16</sup> (emphasis mine)

Chung is right to point out that *Untold Scandal* does not look like the usual *sageuk* films; however, her word 'disguise' obscures the point on how the film directly engages with the generic convention of the *sageuk*. One of the main reasons, I

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<sup>16</sup> Hye Seung Chung, 'Reinventing the Historical Drama'.



believe, the film managed to achieve such commercial and critical success is precisely because the film is a revisionist historical drama that strategically takes a shot at the generic imagination, expanding the possibility of the historical genre.

Rather than following the conventional *sageuk* tradition, in other words, *Untold Scandal* claimed its identity as an *haute couture sageuk* and this point was well-integrated in the marketing strategy.<sup>17</sup> No newspaper and film journal reviews failed to mention the extensive care put in to creating such an authentic period look. As an instance of pre-release promotion, *Cine21* featured a ten-coloured-page article where the production designer Jung ‘gives [the readers] a sneak preview of the costumes, houses, lifestyle, and customs’.<sup>18</sup> An article from *Movie Week* ‘Watching *Untold Scandal*: The Price Tags of Ten Period Decors’, functions very much in the same way. Published before the general release date, this article was intended to instruct the audience identify which expensive décor deserved special attention during the screening. The props range from a painted hanging scroll/*jokja* worth £400 to a small *hwagak* drawer inlaid with burnt ox horn worth £5,000.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, *Munhwa Daily* featured an article introducing six certified artisans who provided their craftsmanship for the film.<sup>20</sup> The piece noted that from furniture to palanquin, from a comb to candelabrum, everything one sees in the film is made by renowned craftsmen. The period décor, therefore, ‘has been recreated through imagination, yet they are not fake *but an updated version of genuine art*’.<sup>21</sup>

This kind of saturated media promotion seems to have worked wonders at

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<sup>17</sup> Hyeong-ju Jo, ‘*Untold Scandal*’, *Film 2.0*, 339 (20 September 2003), p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Hye-ri Kim, ‘*Untold Scandal*: Production Design’, *Cine21*, 419 (20 September 2003), p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> Jun-taek Im, ‘Watching *Untold Scandal*: The Price Tags of Ten Period Decors’, *Movie Week*, 94 (23 September 2003), pp. 72-74.

<sup>20</sup> Hyeong-suk Yi, ‘The Revival of Luxury Costume from *Joseon* Period’.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis mine)

the box-office. After its release on 2 October 2003 in 260 screens, *Untold Scandal* set the record for the fastest ticket sales of an opening week, attracting 1.12 million viewers.<sup>22</sup> It also broke the record for the highest pre-opening reservation rate, reaching 80%.<sup>23</sup> Later the film won the Best Costume Award at the 41<sup>st</sup> Grand Bell Film Awards and Best Art Award from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Korean Film Award. It was also shown at a number of film festivals and was honoured as the closing film at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2004. *Untold Scandal* was particularly successful in Japan, mainly because of the lead actor Bae Yong-jun's popularity there. Released in Japan in May 2004, it sold 800,000 admissions, earning a £6 million profit. It became the third most successful Korean film in Japan after *Swiri* and *JSA*, at the time.<sup>24</sup>

The notable commercial success was accompanied by equally enthusiastic critical reviews, coming from inside and outside Korea. Without fail, all the reviews pointed out its visual charm. Inside Korea, *Untold Scandal* was heralded as the film that 'announced the arrival of "well-made" historical dramas'.<sup>25</sup> Dan Fainaru writing for *Screen International* praised the film as 'a meticulously stylized show piece directed with great precision and an eye for glossy glamour', while Derek Elley from *Variety* compared it to 'a 10-course treat for the eyes and ears'.<sup>26</sup> One review, however, particularly stands out. Writing exclusively for Korean film weekly *Film 2.0*, British film critic Tony Rayns expressed his strong dismissal when he said

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<sup>22</sup> The total screen number in 2003 was 1132. This means *Untold Scandal* was shown in nearly 25% of all screens in that opening weekend. See Anon., *2004 Nationwide Survey on Screen Numbers* (KOFIC, May 2005)

<sup>23</sup> Cheol-yeon Kim, 'Untold Scandal Breaks One Million Record in the Opening Weekend', *Korea Film* (6 October 2003) <[http://www.koreafilm.co.kr/news/news2003\\_10-6.htm](http://www.koreafilm.co.kr/news/news2003_10-6.htm)> [accessed 21 May 2009]

<sup>24</sup> Dong-cheol Nam, 'Investigating Hallyu', *Cine21* (13 July 2004)

<sup>25</sup> KOFIC, *Korean Film Observatory* (Spring 2006), p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Dan Fainaru, 'Untold Scandal', *Screen International*, 1425 (17 October 2003), p. 32. Derek Elley, 'Untold Scandal'.

*Untold Scandal* is ‘a novelty hit’ and ‘a rich kid’s movie’ that merely makes ‘expensive aesthetic choices’. He added the following:

This faithful adaptation lacks psychological depth or a genuine sense of eroticism. Every bit of the creative energy has been used on the lighting and costume designs. [...] In Britain, this kind of films is called ‘heritage cinema’, a concept synonymous with the annihilation of creativity.<sup>27</sup>

Rayns ends his piece by suggesting the film is ‘the worst kind of heritage film’ in which ‘everything is artificially designed to honour the lifestyle of bygone days’.

One point that Rayns could not have foreseen is that a number of other *sageuk* films followed *Untold Scandal*, imitating its aesthetic and stylistic choices. The film is certainly more than a ‘novelty hit’ as it became a benchmark for subsequent costume productions. But what is most interesting about Rayns’ critique is that in the knowing eyes of a Western film critic, the film was reminiscent of heritage cinema, a concept not yet familiar in Korean film discourse. Inside the nation, meanwhile, the film was framed as a ‘well-made’ film, a term that is exclusively relevant to Korean cinema. At the same time, the marketing strategy that helped the film achieve a spectacular box-office result, in my view, is very similar to the ones often seen in ‘high-concept’ films. The media discourse surrounding *Untold Scandal* clearly suggests that the film is a culturally hybrid text. But, then, how does it exactly fit within these film styles and concepts? In the next section, I contextualise the film in relation to the international period aesthetic by engaging with the contested categories of ‘well-made’, ‘high-concept’, and ‘heritage’.

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<sup>27</sup> Tony Rayns, ‘Three Views on *Untold Scandal*’, *Film 2.0* (14 October 2003), pp. 39-40.

### Theorising Fusion *Sageuk*: Well-made, High Concept and Heritage

The industry buzzword ‘well-made’ emerged with force in the early 2000s in Korea. Park Dong-ho, the CEO of Korea’s biggest production/distribution company CJ Entertainment, looked back at the achievements of Korean cinema claiming:

The year 2003 will be remembered for well-made films, such as *Memories of Murder*, *Old Boy*, *A Good Lawyer’s Wife*, and *A Tale of Two Sisters*. These critically-acclaimed and profitable films completely shifted the production trend of Korean cinema. I suspect that ‘well-made’ films will continue to hold power in the next few years.<sup>28</sup>

According to Darcy Paquet, ‘well-made’ film is ‘a commercial feature that makes use of defined genres and the star system, but which contains both a distinctive directorial style and commentary on social issues’.<sup>29</sup> The emergence of mid-budget and successful well-made films diversified the existing models of commercial filmmaking in Korea. At the lower-end of the budget spectrum, there is the producer-oriented project that normally takes the form of high-concept comedies, recycling the motifs of sex, humour, or gangster action. The other end is the expensive Korean blockbuster that arrests the audience’s attention with action, special effects, and star power.<sup>30</sup> The well-made film, placed in the middle, is normally attached to the name of an auteur. Such directorial input is seen to ‘reconcile [the] commercial sensibility and aesthetic quality of a film’ and has a further impact in blurring the distinction between mainstream film and art cinema.<sup>31</sup>

In her book, Choi Jinhee examines the configuration of mise-en-scène in *Memories of Murder* and *A Tale of Two Sisters*, together with *Untold Scandal*, under the banner of ‘well-made’ films. By doing so, she, unfortunately, eschews the issues

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<sup>28</sup> Jung Jong-hwa, *Filmstory*, p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, p. 144.

of history and representation, the process of period reconstruction, and diverging generic and aesthetic demands in the films. Choi, moreover, quoting *The Hollywood Reporter*, also translates ‘well-made’ film as ‘high-quality’ commercial films.<sup>32</sup> If one endorses the use of ‘high-quality’ as the translation of ‘well-made’, there is the danger of glossing over the cultural association of the word ‘quality’ cinema and its potential implication in the genre of period adaptations, by the likes of *Untold Scandal*. As Truffaut’s famous attack on the ‘tradition of quality’ in French cinema demonstrates, in European film discourse, the word ‘quality’ often functions as an ideological designation with an almost-derogative connotation.<sup>33</sup> For instance, Jill Nelmes argues that quality cinema is:

motivated by traditional models of high culture and leaning on respectable literature for its value, [the term] *offers little in the way of art* besides the technical transposition of literary scripts to the screen.<sup>34</sup>  
(emphasis mine)

Such statements summarise the dismissal and derision surrounding the word ‘quality’. Conscious of the negative connotation attached to ‘quality’, I stay with the original Korean term ‘well-made’. To be precise, ‘well-made’ films are commercial genre films that boast a high-standard of craftsmanship in the finished product, without the ideological undertone. Together with the Korean blockbuster, the term ‘well-made’ has come to represent another side of the versatile Korean cinema on a par with Hollywood at the local box-office. *Untold Scandal*, effectively, is labelled a ‘well-made’ film in journalistic discourse for its commercial and artistic orientation. At the same time, ‘well-made’ does little to further explain the specific marketing strategy and aesthetic requirements of a historical production. Therefore I engage with two

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Neuper, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> Jill Nelmes, *Introduction to Film Studies* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 136.

other filmmaking modes in film studies, namely, the ‘high concept’ film and ‘heritage cinema’.

Building upon the study on classical Hollywood cinema by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, Justin Wyatt examines ‘a particular stylistic system with clear economic and aesthetic determinants’ in post-1960s Hollywood and calls it the ‘high concept’.<sup>35</sup> Wyatt summarises high concept as ‘the look, the hook, and the book’, noting, ‘the look of the images, the marketing hooks, and the reduced narratives form[s] the cornerstones’.<sup>36</sup> In short, he argues that every facet of the film, from the pre-production to its exhibition, is carefully determined by economic factors, in order to maximise the financial impact. And this has led to a system of ‘high concept’ that is recognisable among mainstream films. It is worth pointing out that, *Untold Scandal*, a medium-budget historical film, makes use of high-concept marketing ploys, entering the highly risky and competitive exhibition market through saturated booking, in a manner quite different from the usual art-house inflected costume drama of the West. The film’s spectacular box-office results on the opening weekend, mentioned earlier, could not have been possible without the sustained campaign to advertise the film beforehand. And one of its most effective promotion methods was the poster campaign. Chung Hye Seung closely examines the theatrical poster saying (FIG. 14):

Upon close scrutiny, one notices that the three stars in traditional attire are posing on a European style velvet canapé or settee. The dimly lit space displays black wallpaper with an abstract modern pattern, another ‘alien’ element in the supposedly *Chosun*-era interior.

What is equally striking about this image to me is the self-conscious performance of

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<sup>35</sup> Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

the characters, who directly look at the camera. The poster image is not taken from a scene in the film; the characters/actors appear as if they are posing for a portrait in a private salon. This is in stark contrast to more traditional *sageuk* posters, such as Im Kwon-taek's *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon*. In both film posters, the images are captured from a scene that actually appears in the film, often revolving around the themes of love and nature (FIG. 13).

**FIG. 13 Man in Nature: *Chihwaseon***

The poster for *Untold Scandal* is set indoors and accordingly it manifests the artificial and *staged* nature of the setting. This 'new' format of period poster campaign was deemed successful, so much so that other new *sageuks*, from *King and the Clown*, *Forbidden Quest*, to *The Servant* all used the triangular portraiture positioning of the actors (FIG. 14). In such a way, this particular style of poster campaign has become part of the high concept marketing strategy

relevant to new *sageuk* films. The careful placing of the hands and the faces, turned slightly to the side, together with the striking costumes and colours help the audience immediately recognise and decode what the film has to offer: affluent class and the games of love, risqué costumes and decadence, and of course a touch of humour and frivolity. The standardisation of *sageuk* posters that foregrounds the distinctive

generic image is an apt example of how film genres are reconstructed discursively through genrification.

**FIG. 14** Standardisation of *Sageuk* Posters:  
*Untold Scandal, King and the Clown,*  
*The Servant and Forbidden Quest* (clockwise)



If 'high concept' guides our understanding of the industrial/marketing issues pertaining to *Untold Scandal*, heritage cinema discourse provides a theoretical language to engage with the aesthetic strategy of the film that register and respond to the global period genre. Furthermore, by considering the points of convergence between *Untold Scandal* and a Eurocentric heritage cinema discourse, I hope to extrapolate what Pamela Church Gibson calls 'a fissuring and fracturing in the monolith of heritage'.<sup>37</sup> Simply put, heritage cinema 'reinvents and reproduces, and in some cases simply invents, a national heritage for the screen'.<sup>38</sup> The concept of heritage cinema came into circulation in Britain in the 1990s, designating a cycle of costume dramas from the previous decade such as *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), *A Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1985), and *Little Dorrit* (Christine Edzard, 1988). By highlighting the splendour of upper class interiors and pastoral landscapes and by transforming the past into an object of easy consumption, these films entered the international image market with prestige.<sup>39</sup> The texture of the past as a source of visual attractions is stamped with a mark of authenticity, a point that distinguishes heritage cinema from more generic costume drama.

In a more critical reading, however, Andrew Higson problematised the representation of the nation's past in costume films which assert 'quality' by using the literary canon as source material.<sup>40</sup> Critics of heritage cinema, in particular, condemned the aesthetic choices that accentuate the glamour of the image in heritage filmmaking, such as the calm camera that captures the lavish period mise-en-scène

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<sup>37</sup> Pamela Church Gibson, 'Fewer Weddings and More Funerals: Changes in the Heritage Film', in *British Cinema of the 90s*, ed. by Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2000), p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. by Lester D. Friedman (London: Wallflower, 2006), p. 91.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

under the polished lighting and fluid panoramic long shots of landscapes and country houses.<sup>41</sup> The main reason for the attack was that the films rendered the past, ‘as a visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films (and original literary sources)’.<sup>42</sup> In a symptomatic reading, heritage critics argued that the political milieu of Britain – economic restructuring and instability – had much to do with this rendering of an insular and picture-perfect past. Following this line of argument, *Chariots of Fire* is an embodiment of Thatcherite patriotic rhetoric and the subversive and liberal content, such as class ridicule in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* is overwhelmed by glamorous aesthetics in the Merchant Ivory’s 1992 adaptation. Accordingly, heritage cinema was thought to serve the dominant ideology by providing a safe and nostalgic past that the audience can retreat into from the chaotic present, and as a consequence, construct a unified national identity.

Now remembered as one of the defining genres of British cinema in the 1980s, heritage cinema was attacked for its ideological conformity to the ruling hegemony and deployment of a regressive nostalgia. To Sheldon Hall, therefore, what is at stake is ‘a particular *attitude* to those films’,<sup>43</sup> since the discourse is always brought back to ‘critical attitudes and priorities [rather] than [...] aesthetic, cultural or economic practices’.<sup>44</sup> As seen from above, the methodological drive of heritage film criticism is based on a number of binaries: spectacle vs. narrative,

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<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Tana Wollen, ‘Over our Shoulders: Nostalgic Screen Fictions for the 1980s’, in *Enterprise and Heritage: Cross-currents of National Culture*, ed. by John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (London: Routledge, 1991). Cairns Craig ‘Rooms without a View’, *Sight and Sound*, 1.2 (1991)

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Higson, ‘Re-presenting the National Past’, p. 91.

<sup>43</sup> Sheldon Hall, ‘The Wrong Sort of Cinema: Refashioning the Heritage Film Debate’, in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. by Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2001), p. 191. (emphasis mine)

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

conservative vs. progressive, and positive vs. negative. Quite naturally heritage criticism falls into the dangers of simplifying and limiting the complex relationship between the text, context, and audience.

This ideological one-sided criticism soon led to attempts at recuperation. While some highlighted the films' challenge to mainstream codes of gender and sexuality, others brought textual pleasure in costume fashion to the fore.<sup>45</sup> Yet heritage cinema was still suspected of a rampant commodification of the past, a point of both fascination and denunciation in Western heritage discourse. Even so, it proved to be a resilient critical concept, not confined to a particular period or nation but one that spread over to post-Thatcherite costume dramas and other national cinemas. Situated within the larger European film culture, the respective cinematic traditions and political histories complicate the initial degradation of heritage cinema. For example, Ginette Vincendeau problematises the 'Thatcher-heritage correlation' by suggesting that 'French heritage films also rose to prominence in the 1980s during the first phase of Mitterrand's socialist government' and that 'the simultaneous success of the genre in two very different political contexts should at least make us wary of a direct, "reflectionist" interpretation'.<sup>46</sup> Lutz Koepnick affirms German heritage films, such as *Aimée & Jaguar* (Max Färberböck, 1999), that go head on with the national trauma in order to reclaim sites of 'counter-factual models of social accord and multicultural consensus' from a history of intolerance and persecution.<sup>47</sup> Richard Dyer broadens the existing heritage criticism by bringing in different

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<sup>45</sup> Examples are Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1996), Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), and *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002)

<sup>46</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, 'Introduction', in *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: BFI, 2001), p. xix.

<sup>47</sup> Lutz Koepnick, 'Reframing the Past: Heritage Cinema and Holocaust in the 1990s', *New German Critique*, 87 (Autumn 2002), p. 58.

European cinemas into the picture, such as *Jean de Florette* (Claude Berri, France/Switzerland/Italy, 1986), *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, Denmark, 1987), and *Belle Epoque* (Fernando Trueba, Spain/Portugal/France, 1992).<sup>48</sup> Recent examples reaching from Poland to Thailand have added to the ever-growing corpus of global heritage cinema discourse and I want to reflect on the idea of Korean heritage cinema and what it entails.<sup>49</sup>

At this point, I return to Tony Rayns' view that *Untold Scandal* is 'the worst kind of heritage film'. Perhaps the film reminded him of the Merchant Ivory films and all their associations; effectively, he launches an ideological attack in a way similar to the early critics of British heritage films. Interestingly, while Rayns considers *Untold Scandal* as an instance of 'heritage cinema', other scholars have a quite different understanding of what Korean heritage film is. For instance, Julian Stringer, in his article on *Titanic* (James Cameron, US, 1997), lists heritage titles from 'nonwhite (middle-class?) east Asian films' that 'have drawn on the perception of "indigenous" emotionality and projected the results widely on the international film festival and globalized art-house cinema circuits'.<sup>50</sup> Included in this list is Im Kwon-taek's *Seopyeonje*. In a similar vein, Choi Jinhee argues that films such as *Blood Rain*, *Forbidden Quest* and *Untold Scandal* 'diverge from heritage films directed by Im Kwon-taek, which lament the fading traditional art forms and urge the viewer to appreciate and preserve cultural heritage and tradition'.<sup>51</sup> Tellingly, Rayns'

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Entry on Heritage Cinema in Europe', *Encyclopedia of European Cinema*, ed. by Ginette Vincendeau (London: BFI, 1995), pp. 204-05.

<sup>49</sup> Ewa Mazierska, *Polish Postcommunist Cinema: From Pavement Level* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 63-90. May Adadol Ingawanji, 'Nang Nak: Thai Bourgeois Heritage Cinema', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 8.2 (2007)

<sup>50</sup> Julian Stringer, "'The China Had Never Been Used!': On the Patina of Perfect Images in *Titanic*", in *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, ed. by Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1999), p. 209.

<sup>51</sup> Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, p. 151.

critique acknowledges the specifically ideological nature of the heritage discourse, distancing himself from Stringer's and Choi's more general understanding of heritage cinema as texts that mobilise and negotiate national heritage on screen. If we posit Im Kwon-taek films as 'heritage cinema', then *Untold Scandal* and the other *sageuks* that followed may be considered as instances of 'post-heritage' – film texts that consciously subvert the conservative aspects of early heritage cinema.<sup>52</sup> To me, the contention over Korean heritage cinema reveals that the heritage discourse itself is much more complicated and complex than some earlier critics envisioned it to be. In light of this, I do not wrestle over who has got the 'correct' definition and which film is the 'right' heritage film or even 'post-heritage', for that matter. Instead, I analyse *Untold Scandal* in relation to the existing heritage cinema criticism while also referring to Im Kwon-taek's films for comparison. Such an exercise will illuminate the dynamic relationship between *Untold Scandal* and Im Kwon-taek films as well as the film's appropriation of global period aesthetics.

As Rayns observed, the aesthetic features of *Untold Scandal* share striking similarities with heritage cinema originally understood in the British-European context. The film presents the comfortable life of the high society in the *Joseon* Dynasty with painterly images, and even though the film ends tragically, it still provides a rose-tinted vision of the past. There are, of course, dissimilarities. Firstly, with regards to the source material, *Untold Scandal* and other new *sageuks* do not attach themselves to canonical writers or rely on cultural prestige of the literary source. Instead the films borrow material from various media such as well-known foreign novels (*Untold Scandal*), original scripts (*Forbidden Quest*), historical fiction

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<sup>52</sup> More on post-heritage see Pamela Church Gibson, 'Fewer Weddings and More Funerals'. Claire Monk, 'Sexuality and Heritage', *Sight and Sound* (October 1995), p 33.

written by contemporary writers (*Portrait of a Beauty*), graphic novels (*The Duelist*), and the theatre (*King and the Clown*).

Moreover, *Untold Scandal*, like all new *sageuk*, is situated within the current industrial filmmaking practice in Korea where genre hybridisation is a defining feature. While British heritage cinema ‘straddles the traditional art-house circuit and the mainstream commercial cinemas’, in *Untold Scandal*, the editing, camera work, and acting follow that of any mainstream Korean feature from the early 2000s that received local and international attention.<sup>53</sup> For instance, the editor Han Seung Ryong was conscious of the pace of this period piece, especially in conversation scenes, making cuts as he would do in any contemporary-set films, to keep a sense of ‘tension’ in the narrative flow.<sup>54</sup> Effectively, the ideological dichotomy splitting between a progressive narrative and a regressive static image is not applicable in this instance.

In *Untold Scandal*, what is more, the claustrophobic spatial arrangement and the well-arranged period décor do not simply valorise the upper-class, but rather underscore their hypocrisy and immorality; in other words, the beautiful images advance the narrative and do not deflate or contradict it. The film frequently projects close-ups of inanimate objects, from a shot of traditional confectionary that Lady Jo reaches for, to an image of a small ‘imported’ standing clock that Lady Jeong glances at. Here the omnipresence of objects not only reifies the objects of their desire but also underscores the superficiality of human relationships. Hence, the presentation of aesthetic objects is a constant reminder of the surface quality of their lives and not merely a summation of gratuitous images.

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew Higson, ‘Re-presenting the National Past’, p. 93.

<sup>54</sup> Seung Ryong Han, ‘A Study on Contemporary Editing Style of Historical Drama *Untold Scandal*’, *Journal of Digital Media* (Summer 2005), p. 216.

Moreover the static or slow-tracking ‘heritage’ interior shots frequently convey a salient feeling of circumscription. Due to the fact that it was difficult to push heavy dollies and crane cameras into small Korean houses, the camera is often positioned outside looking into the room.<sup>55</sup> In these scenes, such as Jowon’s first meeting with Lady Jo in her reception room where she asks him to deflower So-ok, layers of squares divide the screen (top, FIG. 15).

**FIG. 15 The Mise-en-scène of Circumscription**

The characters inside the boxed house are framed by the double appearance of walls, sliding doors, and latticed windows, as well as standing blinds. Trapped inside the layers of frames, they appear even more fixed, surrounded as they are by

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<sup>55</sup> Anon., ‘Director’s Interview: E J-yong’, *Kino* (October 2003), p. 78.

expensive period décor that grabs our attention. In another scene where So-ok picks up In-ho's letter, a low-angle shot allows her to be visually oppressed by the jagged edges of the tiled roof above her (bottom, FIG. 15). The two male seducers, In-ho and Jo-won meet near fenced walls and doors; tellingly, they need to hurdle over the obstacles to reach the ladies. The authentic and attractive period setting, while demonstrating their life of comfort, suggests that the aristocrats have become the puppets in a theatre of opulence and surface-morality.

When the camera actually moves, it does so slowly as if to bring out the suffocating ambiance of the film. In panning shots, the camera stops at the edge of the frame, often confining the characters. Moreover, by making the camera reposition to reveal what is not seen, the film plays with the off-screen space. In one scene, Jowon is in a moment of ecstasy, which at first appears to come from reading Lady Jeong's letter, until the camera tilts slightly downward to reveal a courtesan felling him. In sum, the cinematography of *Untold Scandal* is far more self-conscious of its narrative engagement than most heritage films receive credit for.

The outdoor scenes, in contrast to the interior ones, represent freedom, happiness, and health. I analyse here a moment that draws attention to the issue of the spectacular image in heritage cinema. I am influenced by Rosalind Galt's reading of 1990s Italian popular 'heritage' melodramas, such as *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, Italy/France, 1988). She aims to 'map heritage film differently' by 'theorizing the relationships among specific national histories, landscape images, and melodramatic narratives'. Through such means, she constructs a 'nuanced approach to read [the film's] intersection with history, nation and spectacle'.<sup>56</sup> In *Untold*

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<sup>56</sup> Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 9-10.



*Scandal*, after rescuing Lady Jeong from a group of hoodlums on the street in accordance with his conniving plan, Jowon escorts her back to her house. As he takes her on a scenic walk, the tight frame opens up. The film optimises the sense of being outside by contrasting it with the constrictive space inside the houses. The camera moves fluidly, starting at the sky-level capturing the green leaves on a tall tree in a long shot then tracking down to the level of the characters who are enjoying each other's company. Finally, a vista of a forest is displayed against which the two characters are contrasted with the lush greens in the background.

Suddenly they stop their conversation as the camera captures them in a medium two-shot. Turning their heads up, they look directly at the camera (FIG. 16). Cut to their POV, a picturesque pagoda stands on the far-side of a serene pond filled with water lilies. Even CGI-assisted golden carps can be spotted swimming inside the water. The camera then cuts back to the faces of Jowon and Lady Jeong, clearly taken back by the beauty of what they see. What is noteworthy about this short scene is not the fact that an upper-class lady is walking with a man outside her family in broad daylight (another narrative experimentation that diverges from past *sageuk*). It is that Lady Jeong, albeit initiated by Jowon, leisurely admires the view of the landscape. In order to historically decode this seemingly gratuitous moment, I briefly introduce how landscape and women have been used in the tradition of international festival films, spearheaded by Im Kwon-taek. Undoubtedly the most celebrated Korean auteur, Im is known for capturing strikingly authentic Korean scenery, with the help of his long-time cinematographer Jung Il-sung.

**FIG. 16 Jowon and Lady Jeong's Walk**

At the same time, the atmospheric and sublime national landscape has become the background where women are victimised by violence and oppression. David E. James notes that:

Im will mobilize as the two privileged symbols on which the historical trauma of the nation is reenacted: the body of the Korean landscape, especially its spectacular mountains, and the bodies of Korean women, especially those of the working class.<sup>57</sup>

From *Surrogate Mother* to *Seopyeonje*, his films exoticise the brutality exacted on the bodies of women and capitalise on the touristic appeal of the landscape, just as many other period dramas with an erotic streak in the 1980s did. In *Seopyeonje*, the father's unshakable faith in 'tradition' prompts him to make his daughter blind. The blind Song-hwa relentlessly practices the art of *pansori*, nevertheless, singing outdoors in nature regardless of the season (FIG. 17).

**FIG. 17 *Seopyeonje*: the Blind Song-hwa Sings under a Waterfall**

The beautiful scenery and the music obfuscate the uncomfortable truth of such extreme violence. While reinstating the 'female/nature/spectacle' equation, he would reprise that beautiful moment in his compendium to *Seopyeonje*, *Beyond the Years*

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<sup>57</sup> David E. James, 'Im Kwon-taek: Korean National Cinema and Buddhism', in *Im Kwon-taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema*, p. 56.

(2006), this time highlighting cherry blossom trees. Ironically, in both instances, only blind Song-hwa cannot see the beauty that surrounds her.

Given this context, this brief scene in *Untold Scandal*, cannot but recall the ways in which suffering women have been spectacularised in nature in Korean cinema. The scene, in this sense, can be analysed on two levels. The authentic Korean scenery in international festival films led by Im Kwon-taek has been read as something spectacular and pained, embodying the nation itself. Yet in *Untold Scandal*, the beauty of the landscape is to be admired without this historical burden. Unlike Ok-nyeo or Song-hwa whose suffering is *signified through nature*, Lady Jeong rather *stands at a distance* to admire the view. Accordingly, I argue that here the images do not ‘fall out’ of the narrative but grant an affirmative meaning to the Korean landscape and women in cinema. I would not go as far as to say that the scene is politically potent; however, it is a highly self-reflexive moment in the Korean historical genre. While emphasising the insular nature of the society through distinctly heritage-esque cinematography, *Untold Scandal* sheds the cultural baggage of Korean cinema. Therefore, whether *Untold Scandal* fits into a heritage or post-heritage cycle is not as important as the question of how the film engages with aspects of Korea’s cinematic heritage, especially the re-writing of the *sageuk* genre. I argue that the film opens a new way to imagine the Korean past on screen, so long plagued with guilt, condemnation, and victimisation. A double consciousness is at work in the text: the film offers the local audience an opportunity to experience the past in an unburdened and sensuous way. It also, meanwhile, achieves a global standard of period aesthetics, through the branding of ‘high concept’ and ‘heritage’ filmmaking.

## Conclusion

By calling the achievements of the 386 Generation directors, including Kang Je-gyu and Kim Ki-duk, ‘the adventurous spirit of children without [a] father’,<sup>58</sup> the film critic Kim Young-jin points to the issue of cinematic heritage and preservation. Darcy Paquet expands on this noting that this younger generation of filmmakers is ‘unable to claim affiliation to any lineage within film history’.<sup>59</sup> And this is how ‘the amnesia of Korean film history’ that Kim Soyoung mentioned earlier actually manifests itself.<sup>60</sup> E J-yong’s dissatisfaction with older Korean films obliquely alludes to the situation. The cinematic heritage of *sageuk* is preserved in Korea, somewhere skewed, as memories of the popularity in the early 1960s are fragmented and overshadowed by later periods. For directors like E, therefore, the *sageuk* formula is something to tamper with and break away from.

Towards the end of the final credits in *Untold Scandal*, two images of So-ok appear in a small square frame on the screen. In the first one, she is in a traditional wedding gown and then in the next, she caresses her pregnant belly wearing an aristocratic lady’s attire. By revealing her future after the end credits, the film makes certain the demise of an aristocratic family. The old order, the family, will crumble from inside with the arrival of an illegitimate child. I allegorically read this moment as new *sageuk* disrupting the old regime in order to usher in a new cycle of the historical genre, one that is distinctly Korean but scandalously ‘fusion’.

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<sup>58</sup> 386 Generation directors designate a group of directors who rose to fame in the mid-to-late 1990s and ushered in a new era of filmmaking in Korea. They share similar experiences in that they were born in the 1960s and went to university in the 1980s. More on 386 Generation directors, see Jinhee Choi, p 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, p. 65.

<sup>60</sup> Soyoung Kim, ‘A Note on Post-Colonial Korean Classics’.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Recycling A Historical Life: The Biopic

The biopic, or biographical film, dramatises the life of a historical personality on screen, whether in part or whole. What Burgoyne calls ‘perhaps the most familiar form of cinematic historiography [and ...] by far the largest subgenre of historical filmmaking’<sup>1</sup> in Hollywood, the biopic also has a substantial presence in Korean cinema. As mentioned in Chapter One, period biopics enjoyed immense popularity during the Golden Age of the 1960s, with films like *Lady Jang* and *Undercover Agent Park Mun-su* (Lee Gyu-woong, 1962). These popular biopics provided a small layer of national history through the life of recognisable figures from the past.

The biopic, at the same time, is also remembered as one of the least favoured genres; this ill-reputation is greatly attributed to the specificity of the genre’s history during the *Yushin* dictatorship period. As noted, biopics that were subservient to the dominant ideology flooded the local screens in the 1970s. These films showcased the achievements of prominent national *male* leaders, who deliver the nation from foreign invasion or great famine. According to revisionist historiography, Park Chung Hee who gained his political power through a military coup symbolically endorsed his legitimacy via the cinema, as a necessary vehicle for the continuation of his reign. It is only natural, therefore, that these thinly veiled propaganda films quickly lost the interest of Korean audiences. A telling example is *King Sejong the Great* (1978). One of the most expensive films to be made for its time, it was never to be shown in theatres; such was the public’s marginalising of the prescribed

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, p. 16.

ideological scheme.<sup>2</sup> In the Korean psyche, as a result, the biopic genre attests to historical trauma, invariably reviving the memory of the dictatorship.

With the arrival of the New Korean Cinema, the biopic has made a comeback, by shedding its propagandistic mantle and appealing to popular taste. The numbers may not be as high as when the genre was at its peak in the 1960s or when it was pursued for political ends in the decade that followed; even so, there is a detectable trend in recent biopics. Firstly, it is no longer fashionable to depict the lives of past royal family members or brave generals. Instead, unknown and even controversial figures are discovered for cinematic treatment. For instance, two ‘underdog’ sports biopics were released in the 2000s: the boxing film *Champion* (Kwok Kyung-taek, 2002) and the baseball movie *Mr. Gam’s Victory* (Kim Jong-hyun, 2004). Colonial period biopics have also been on the rise with examples including *Fighter in the Wind* (Yang Yun-ho, 2004), *Rikidozan: Hero Extraordinary* (Song Hae-sung, 2004), and *Blue Swallow*.

While Lupo and Anderson argue ‘multiple productions on the same biographical subjects’ and ‘respective update crawls’ are common practices in the biopic genre,<sup>3</sup> the recent trend is to take the historical reconstruction to the extreme, by way of fictionalisation. Even though the biopic is nominally ‘a flexible *fictional* discourse’, which straddles ‘the desire for historical fidelity and the necessary reframing of inherited cultural narratives’, recent Korean biopics are driven by the ‘faction’ mode that radically deconstructs existing historical knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Thus the Great Admiral Yi Sun-sin, famous for sinking Japanese battleships in the sixteenth

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<sup>2</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization*, p. 279 (n.27)

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Anderson and Jon Lupo, ‘Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century’, in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. by Steve Neale (London: BFI, 2002), p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> Belén Vidal, ‘Feminist Historiographies and the Woman Artist’s Biopic: The Case of Artemisia’, *Screen*, 48.1 (Spring 2007), p. 89.

century and a national hero that Park Chung Hee strove to emulate, is reduced to a mere caricature in *Soldiers of Heaven/Cheon gun* (Min Jun-gi, 2005). He appears as an emasculated petty smuggler who must be shown the right path by South and North Korean soldiers travelling back through time. The film is closer to sci-fi action fantasy than a biopic; yet, it consciously plays against the established persona of the admiral, as constructed in previous television and film biopics, as well as through the national school curriculum and the many statues memorialising him. The fact that the audience enjoys these subversions may indicate that post-modern history writing is currently in fashion, demonstrating the extent to which the liberal imagination is permitted when appropriating well-known historical persons in contemporary Korean cinema. The traditional notion of a biopic is being reformulated, moving beyond hagiographic accounts of heroes to discover the historical everyman.

I argue that the particular drive for biopics is also influenced and shaped by the KOCCA's efforts to commercialise historical material for maximum financial impact. In Chapter Two, I explained that OSMU (One-Source Multi-Use) operates on the principle of the current culture content industry paradigm. Conceptually OSMU is similar to horizontal integration, tie-ins, and the branding and franchising of cultural products, where the success of a 'content' is measured by the reach of its wide-range benefits.<sup>5</sup> Under the logic of OSMU, the initial idea (content) is not exhausted by one product but is reformatted and sent to different markets to generate a synergising profit.

The biopic genre is particularly amenable to the OSMU drive. The *recognisable* iconography of the historic figures engrained in the collective psyche is

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<sup>5</sup> For more on OSMU see Yo-sep Song, 'An Exploratory Study on Conceptual Model Organization of One Source Multi Use: Focused on the Visual Contents Industry of U.S., Japan, and Korea', *Inmun Kontencheu*, 9 (June 2007)



a merit unique to the biopic genre, which works advantageously in OSMU adaptations. For instance, even someone who is not very well versed in history would have heard of the scandalous story of the tyrant Yeonsan and the *femme fatale* Nok-su. Moreover if a particular aspect of a product is proven successful, others that follow can embellish that tested element. The representation of feminine masculinity in *King and the Clown* was considered one of the main reasons why the film gathered such phenomenal publicity. As a result, the two musicals that followed the film, first *Yi* and then *The Story of Gong-gil* (FIG. 20) heavily emphasised the androgynous image of the character.

At the same time, a product in the OSMU chain, must be able to stamp a mark of distinction upon its release, dependent on careful market research and a needs analysis. This is where ‘product differentiation’ becomes a key strategy in the acceleration of the commercial chain. An example of this can be seen in the television drama *Hwang Jinyi* (KBS, 2006) and the film *Hwang Jin Yi* (2007). Both are biographical *sageuk* of the famous courtesan Hwang Jinyi and were released a year apart from each other. After the success of television drama *Hwang Jinyi* the makers of the film version made strategic choices to be *different* from the television version and, thereby, presenting a fresh and appealing biopic. This is most clearly suggested in the contrasting colour palette of the poster campaign (FIG. 18). It is product differentiation, therefore, not hierarchy of adaptation that often advances the OSMU biopic chains. The case of ‘Hwang Jinyi’ also allows us to consider the competitive market aspect of the OSMU drive. The director of the film *Hwang Jin Yi*, Chang Yoon-hyun expressed his feeling for the ‘rival’ television drama *Hwang Jinyi* saying:

I realised how quickly a television drama can be made. I first heard the news that a broadcasting station is making a Hwang Jinyi drama when our team was already working on the script and casting the leads. By the time we got ready for production, the drama had already aired, completing the series even before we had finished shooting.<sup>6</sup>

**FIG. 18 Colouring the Life of Hwang Jinyi: The Film (left) vs. Television Drama (right)**

Unlike the situation in the US where a selected number of multi-national media conglomerates, such as TimeWarner and Sony, control a horizontally-integrated content distribution system, Korean popular media is decentralized in nature, run locally by smaller players and *jaebeol* groups. Even the biggest media company CJ Entertainment operates within the film industry, rarely branching out to other fields like publishing, television, or merchandising. This means, the biopic trend is realised by the participation of different production companies and industry agencies. This is why products within a content chain can be set against each other: i.e. Hwang Jinyi film and television releases were too close to each other and could have potentially threatened each other's influence in the market. Such an industrial praxis limits a sustained content boom, although it allows us to trace conflicting

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<sup>6</sup> Gi-ju Sin, 'Director's Cut: Chang Yoon-hyun', *Premier Korea* (June 2007), p. 91.

interests and diverging industrial motivations while consuming a historical life on screen.

With this context in mind, this chapter examines two biopics, addressing the intricate interplay of history-making in the biopic genre and the heritage-making process in the ‘culture content industry’. The lives of historical figures – the tyrant Yeonsan and his court jester Gong-gil in *King and the Clown* and the master of erotic painting Shin Yun-bok in *Portrait of a Beauty* – have become ‘content’ to be circulated in various media, manifesting OSMU logic. Accordingly, they can be contextualised within a larger social and industrial paradigm, which has been set up to create multiple ancillaries. In all, the kind of commercial motivation shifts the emphasis away from the issue of authenticity and fidelity in the biopic genre and suggests a new model for understanding the liberal construction of historicity in popular culture and media, even as it engenders a backlash from academic historians and other interest groups.

*King and the Clown* is by far the most successful *sageuk* film in recent years. As a way to examine the reasons behind its record-breaking success, I analyse the representation of homosexuality and soft-masculinity embodied in the character Gong-gil that struck such a chord with the audience. *Portrait of a Beauty* cashes in on the fact that very little is known about the life of eighteenth century painter Shin Yun-bok, other than that he was male. Borrowing the tropes of the erotic genre, the film imagines Shin as a female artist and heroine of a tragic romance. The stylised eroticism endows an up-market façade for a wider appeal. Separate from the comparable textual and thematic elements, such as the cross-dressing narrative and the negotiation of contemporary masculinities and femininities, the two biopics bear the mark of the rapidly evolving heritage industry, stipulated by the logic of capital.

The films themselves can be positioned within the matrix of other commodifications of the historical subject, whose relation dictate and illuminate the internal logic of each text. Therefore my analyses of the films follow the cycle of an OSMU chain, paying attention to which product came before and what came after the films.

### *King and the Clown*

The tenth king of the *Joseon* Dynasty, Yeonsan (1576 – 1606) is one of the most infamous tyrants recorded in the official ‘Annals of the *Joseon* Dynasty’. Historical records censure the psychologically unbalanced and ruthless King, who did not possess any kingly qualities. His trauma is thought to have stemmed from the death of his mother Queen Yun, who was poisoned with the approval of his father, the King. He tried to compensate for the loss by seeking corrupt pleasures and indulging in an extravagant lifestyle with his favourite concubine Jang Nok-su, a *femme fatale* figure who expedited his fall. He was eventually overthrown and died in exile at the age of 30. The dramatic story of King Yeonsan and Nok-su has continued to fascinate the general public, evidenced in the number of adaptations of radio dramas, popular fictions, and films over the years.

As noted in Chapter One, Shin Sang-ok was the first to capitalise on the Yeonsan narrative in cinema with his two Yeonsan films (1962). Mirroring the immense popularity of the erotic films of the 1980s, *Prince Yeonsangun* and *Prince Yeonsan's Life* cashed in on the hedonistic lifestyle of the Yeonsan court. It is undeniable that the character of Nok-su played by Kim Jin-ah who was dubbed, ‘one of the greatest sex symbols in the 1980s’ and Kang Soo-yeon, in the second film, who did not shy away from disrobing in her previous films, helped boost the box-office receipts. With their sexual allure unveiled under translucent garments, the two Nok-su characters played a main role in shaping the Yeonsan narrative as ‘the fall of man’ manipulated by a vamp.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The story of Yeonsan and Nok-su was also reprised for television, notably in *500 Years of the Joseon Dynasty* and *Jang Nok-su* (KBS, 1995). Indeed, Nok-su continued to fascinate the audience, perhaps more so than the King himself. She was once a lowly *gisaeng* who rose to the position of royal consort.

Just when one assumed that the Yeonsan narrative had been exhausted, Yeonsan and Nok-su once again appeared in popular media at the millennium, in the play *Yi* (Kim Tae-ung, 2000) and its adaptation *King and the Clown*. *Yi* provides a radically fresh interpretation on the life of Yeonsan. The playwright Kim stated that the idea for the play came from official historical record, *The Diary of King Yeonsan*.<sup>8</sup> Taking his cue from a brief record of a defiant court jester Gong-gil, Kim developed the fully blown story of Gong-gil and his fellow clowns in Yeonsan's court. 'Yi' is an honorific form of address that the King used to his closest court officials. In the play, the beautiful Gong-gil (yi) attracts the King's affection and becomes addicted to power and wealth. Using *sohakjihui*, a traditional Korean performance centred on banter, the play *Yi* radically reinterprets the story of Yeonsan by imagining his encounter with the world of the clowns.

While closely following the plot of *Yi*, *King and the Clown* changes the title to the less obscure *Wang-ui Namja*, or 'King's man' in English. Such a decision foregrounds the role of Gong-gil as well as the homosexual subtext. Breaking away from the earlier screen portrayals as the terrible, sex-crazed, and self-destructive tyrant, Yeonsan is treated sympathetically in the film, as an emasculated and oedipal man. While keeping the comedic effect of the traditional clown performances of *Yi*, the film tones down the romantic liaison between the King and Gong-gil, which is more pronounced in the play. In all, the film strives for a broader appeal, especially with the clown trio who provide slapstick humor while easing the homoerotic

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<sup>8</sup> In the entry for 29 December 1505 (11<sup>th</sup> Year of Yeonsan), it is recorded that 'the actor Gong-gil said the following while playing the role of an old scholar... "A king should act like a king and his subjects like subjects, a father like a father, a son like a son. When a king does not act like a king and his subjects not like subjects, how can I eat food even if it is served before me." The King thought him disrespectful so punished him with sticks and banished him to a far away place'. This record has been retrieved from the website, 'The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty'.

overtones.

A film with a moderate £4 million budget, *King and the Clown* became the highest grossing film in South Korea by selling 12.3 million admission tickets nationwide in early 2006.<sup>9</sup> When the film climbed back up to the top of the box-office in its third week of release, its surprise success was assured. As the whole nation immediately fell under the spell of *King and the Clown*, the media heralded the news of multiple-viewings, the emergence of die-hard fans of the actor Lee Jun-ki who played Gong-gil, and the film's popularity among those aged between 40 and 60, the least likely demographic to go to the cinema.<sup>10</sup> *King and the Clown* inscribed the 'event' heritage status through a massive viewing phenomenon, just as *Seopyeonje* did so in 1993. The media also did not forget to mention that the President and the First Lady also visited the cinema to see the film.<sup>11</sup> If the traditional singing *pansori* became the main attraction in *Seopyeonje*, it was now the tight-rope performance and clown acts that drew the public's attention. The film went on to receive numerous film awards in Korea, collecting eleven awards from the 43<sup>rd</sup> Grand Bell Awards, including 'international popularity award', a newly inaugurated award for that year, as if to suggest that *King and the Clown* syndrome initiated such a prize. The phenomenal success of this costume drama without any bankable star bewildered both film critics and industry insiders alike. They speculated that the main reason behind the success is the *subdued* representation of homosexuality and *overt* capitalisation of soft-masculinity which struck a chord with the sexual politics and public discourse of the Korean social imagination. While

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<sup>9</sup> When it was first released in 256 screens on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2005, very few would have expected that the film would reclaim the number one ranking at the box-office in February with an increased 491 screens. But such was the power of 'word of mouth' publicity.

<sup>10</sup> Seok Mun, 'The Success of *King and the Clown* I', *The Hankyoreh* (25 January 2006)

<sup>11</sup> Jeong-rok Sin, 'The President Watches *King and the Clown*', *Chosun Daily* (22 January 2006)

featuring Gong-gil and Jang-saeng as members of the *namsadangpae*, an itinerant entertainment group known for its homosexual practices, the film never explicitly acknowledges the nature of their relationship. The intense online discussions on whether *King and the Clown* is queer cinema or not, in effect, helped the publicity. Moreover the audience passionately consumed the images of Gong-gil, which is in line with the fashionable feminine masculinity in Korean pop culture. For this reason, I begin my analysis by studying how the film represents homosexuality in a period setting.

The clowns in *King and the Clown* belong to *namsadangpae* (the prefix *nam-* meaning male), an all-male travelling theatrical group that grew in popularity during the late nineteenth century. *Namsadangpae* toured throughout the country offering six main acts: tightrope walking (*eo-reum*), acrobatic feats (*salpan*), mask dances (*deotboegi*), disk spinning (*beo-na*), percussion-based farmer's music (*pungmul*), and puppet shows (*deol-mi*).<sup>12</sup> Younger members of the group called *piri* played the female roles; cross-dressing was a regular feature in *namsadang* performance.<sup>13</sup> It is also a well-documented fact that the group members offered not only their talents but also their bodies for food and shelter during their tours.<sup>14</sup> Especially in winter, when the weather did not permit travelling, they took shelter in Buddhist temples, a practice, which raised suspicion of the monks' hidden sexual desires.<sup>15</sup> The idea of a female impersonator and open homosexual practice seem to

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<sup>12</sup> Kyung-wook Jeon, *Korean Mask Dance Drama*, trans. by So-il Hong (Seoul: Seolhwadang, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> It should also be noted here that there is *sadangpae*, all-female travelling group cross-dressing as men.

<sup>14</sup> Young Ja Kim, 'The Korean "Namsadang"', *The Drama Review*, 25.1 (March 1981), pp. 9-10. Also see, Young-gwan Kim and Sook-ja Hahn, 'Homosexuality in Ancient and Modern Korea', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 8.1 (January-February 2006), p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Rutt, 'The Flower Boys of Silla', *Transactions of the Korean Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 38 (1961), pp. 59-60.



be at odds with the *Joseon* Dynasty which upheld the strict division of gender roles and decorum. These aspects explain why the performers were positioned in the lowest strata of the social hierarchy, often subject to oppression and poverty.

Jeon Kyung-wook, while observing Korean traditional mask dances, notes that ‘comic satire in the mask dramas is aimed mainly at two groups of people from the elite class in the society: the immoral Buddhist monks and the degenerate aristocrats’.<sup>16</sup> In mask performances, class conflicts reveal the hypocrisy of the ruling class and reconciliation is achieved through a dance at the end. The *namsadang* performance, in effect, had a strong populist orientation realising moments of release similar to what Bakhtin calls the ‘carnavalesque’, whose central tenets are ridicule of officialdom, extravagant juxtaposition, violations of decorum, and the celebration of bodily excess. What Bakhtin stresses in particular is the inversion of hierarchy where ‘temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men’ is realised.<sup>17</sup> This element of transgression is precisely at the core of the pleasure of watching a *namsadang* performance.

In this sense, the King’s encounter with the world of the clowns is the epitome of a carnivalesque moment. Initially, the film juxtaposes the two distinct social groups and cultures. The King’s festivity is presented in an orderly and serious manner, filmed in slow motion where the occasional overhead shots highlight the controlled grandeur of the spectacle. In contrast, the clown’s stage is filled with grotesque bodily gestures, tattered costumes, and crude language, caught freely by the moving camera. Interacting with the audience who surrounds them in a circle, the clown act further blurs the boundary between the stage and the spectators. When

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<sup>16</sup> Kyung-wook Jeon, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 15.

their performance catches the attention of the head eunuch Cheo-seon, the clowns are given a chance to perform in front of the King, who immediately approves of their humour. When the King physically treads into the clown's stage in the scene where they lampoon the corrupt officials, reality and performance collapse together, usurping social distinctions and hierarchies, albeit momentarily.

What *namsadangpae* and its carnivalesque features remind us is the almost-forgotten history of homosexuality and cross-dressing in Korea, which carved a space for the critique of a strictly androcentric and patriarchal society. However, *namsadangpae* is only a vanishing memory, whose existence is neither widely registered nor acknowledged in contemporary popular culture. While appropriating the *namsadangpae*, *King and the Clown* engages in a dialectic of denial and admission about the homosexual content, a necessary step to ensure the marketability of the film in mainstream culture.

What the film does, therefore, is to foreground the indeterminacy of the androgynous Gong-gil, and not homosexuality per se, engendering a conceptual space for the representation of both queer identity and feminine masculinity. Accordingly, the film skirts the topic of homosexuality carefully by teasing the audience visually and verbally only to repress an explicit expression of homoerotic desire. The intentions are uncertain, the actions hidden, and desire is never really annunciated, ultimately the film is imbued with a sense of ambiguity. As Judith Butler argues 'culturally marginal forms of sexuality falling outside the heterosexuality continuum are effectively rendered unintelligible by mainstream narratives',<sup>18</sup> Gong-gil becomes an enigma that is decodable only through his relationship with other men, such as a lecherous aristocratic man, a fellow clown

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 42.

Jang-saeng, and the King himself. The appearance of cross-dressing performance theatre in a disparate period setting aids the exploration of alternative sexualities in the film; at the same time, the film sutures the threat of homosexuality by not spelling out the reciprocated desire of Gong-gil.

The appearance of Gong-gil in the opening sequence draws the audience into the world of the performance and generates pleasure in watching a beautiful man dressed in female clothes. A close-up of *beoseon*, a *Joseon* fetish *par excellence*, appears first on screen.<sup>19</sup> Jang-saeng, in a mask, has assumed the role of a fallen nobleman/*yangban*. There is a cut and, we see Gong-gil on the rope, wearing a short pink blouse and a mask of a bride. Gong-gil slowly takes the mask off to reveal his almond-shaped eyes, slim eyebrows, fair skin, and long straight hair, features that are imbued with feminine beauty. He can almost pass as a woman, except his flat chest briefly shown under his blouse betrays his gender. He is an open spectacle, possessing both feminine features and a distinctively masculine body. In a later scene, he affirms his masculine prowess by competing in a double-act filled with acrobatic jumps with Jang-saeng. His body is an idealised synthesis of strength and beauty, which is in direct contrast to other parodies of femininity performed by the clown trio. In the scene where he plays the *gisaeng*, unfortunately, Gong-gil attracts the attention of an older nobleman in the audience, foreshadowing the illicit transaction between a pretty boy and an abusive aristocrat.

Gong-gil's body is clearly spectacularised but the representation of homosexuality is ambivalent, at best, in *King and the Clown*. Gong-gil and Jang-saeng seem to have a strong bond; yet, the film never overtly acknowledges the

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<sup>19</sup> *Beoseon* is a white sock with a pointed nose. It frequently appeared in erotic *sageuks* as a signifier of seduction and desire, as seen in *Untold Scandal*, where Lady Jo sexually teases Jowon with her *beoseon*-clad foot.

nature of their romantic relationship at a visual level. Inside the royal palace, Jang-saeng and Gong-gil share a room (separate from the clown trio). In one scene, Jang-saeng tucks in the blanket around Gong-gil's body, an act suggestive of a compassionate marriage based on devotion and care. Later, when Jang-saeng is imprisoned and tortured, Gong-gil slits his wrist to make a plea to the King. In his analysis of *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, US, 2004), Nikoloutsos argues that the film 'stimulate[s] the viewer's imagination through a series of erotically charged interactions' between the two male leads and 'exploits the appeal of the image of two men who presumably have sex off screen'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, *King and the Clown* creates an atmosphere of eroticism in several scenes, only to question the very possibility by never showing any explicit physical manifestation. In so far as the narrative goes, Gong-gil and Jang-saeng can realise their romantic coupling only as a performance on stage by *masquerading* appropriate male and female roles. Only the hanging masks on the wall – the bride and *yangban* – symbolically suggest the nature of their relationship both inside the performance and in real life.

The film uses the tropes of forbidden love and longing, poetically alluding to the impossibility of their love in a striking melodic tone; at the same time, this undercurrent of homosexuality is connoted via cultural stereotypes. In his analysis of Korean queer films, Park Jin-hyung notes the following:

In the case of male homosexuality, any sign of male homoeroticism or even an erotic representation of the male body (for either male or female eyes) must be erased to ease homosexuality's acquisition of social use-value. The existence of controlling heterosexual disciplinary structures can be seen in many areas of dominant society, including cinematic representation in popular film.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos, 'Alexander Bromance: Male Desire and Gender Fluidity in Oliver Stone's Historical Epic', *Helios*, 35.2 (Fall 2008), p. 223.

<sup>21</sup> Jin-hyung Park, 'Representation, Politics, Ethics: Rethinking Homosexuality in Contemporary Korean Cinema and Discourses', *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and*

*King and the Clown* resolves homophobic tensions and thus helps to establish ‘social use-value’ and normality by providing non-threatening, yet still erotic images. Zhang Benzi, writing on the use of the Beijing Opera in *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993) argues that ‘in Chinese culture, there seems to be a clear demarcation line between female impersonation that appeals to male pleasure and homosexuality that threatens male normality’.<sup>22</sup> *Farewell My Concubine*, in fact, functions as an important cultural reference from which *King and the Clown* borrows thematic motifs. The feminine facial features and coquettish mannerisms of Gong-gil somewhat mirrors that of the graceful Leslie Chung, the star of *Farewell*. By staging Queen Yun’s execution scene influenced by the famous Beijing Opera, and more specifically by borrowing the iconography of *Farewell*, *King and the Clown* acquires the cultural status already established by foreign traditional theatre. While the high-pitch voicing, acting, and make-up are similar, the Chinese traditional art form has been *Koreanised* in the film, especially in the paper costume, suggesting an awkward and humorous cultural appropriation.

Upon its initial release, the homosexual theme of *King and the Clown* was (sub-)consciously ignored. Yi Jong-do writing for *Cine21*, stated ‘Gong-gil is a striking character, almost as interesting as Yeonsan in the film. With delicate features he delivers complex and secretive *male friendship*’.<sup>23</sup> Nowhere in this review does Yi associate the film with ‘homosexuality’. In numerous interviews in the media and even on the DVD commentary, the director, producers, and actors have shown a concerted effort to exclude any queer reading, arguing that such a view obscures the

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*Sexualities*, ed. by Fran Martin, Peter A. Jackson, and Mark McLelland (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 206.

<sup>22</sup> Benzi Zhang, ‘Figures of Violence and Tropes of Homophobia: Reading *Farewell My Concubine* between East and West’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 33.2 (1999), p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> Jong-do Yi, ‘Overturning the Established Historical View: *King and the Clown*’, *Cine21* (27 December 2005). emphasis mine.

true message of the film. When asked bluntly how he defines the relationship between Jan-saeng and Gong-gil in an interview, the director Lee Joon-ik clarified that Yeonsan's stolen kiss from Gong-gil is 'not a real kiss' and only an expression of Yeonsan's emptiness and dissipation after eliminating his political enemies.<sup>24</sup> As such, 'buddy film', 'brotherly love', and 'platonic camaraderie' were frequently deployed in publicity materials and film reviews. To be sure, these are not innocent signifiers. For instance, Robin Wood notes 'buddy movie' contains elements which qualify as a 'homophobic disclaimer' in the diegesis.<sup>25</sup> The makers, moreover, considered the reference to homosexuality a mere 'code', a generic and thematic motif that supports the main narrative. This defensive response lends insight into the persistent anxiety about homosexuality in popular discourse.

*King and the Clown*, however, experienced a discursive shift when the homosexual theme engendered a social discourse in the public sphere. While the film was riding the tide of 'word of mouth' publicity, online discussion on whether one should categorise it as an instance of queer cinema or not was hotly debated among bloggers and netizens.<sup>26</sup> After the film had achieved success, a monthly film magazine *Screen* published an article titled 'Is the Queer Boom here?' discussing *King and the Clown* alongside *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, USA, 2005), *Time to Leave/Le Temps Qui Reste* (Francois Ozon, France, 2005), and *Maison de Himiko* (Isshin Inudou, Japan, 2005).<sup>27</sup> In the context of the article, *King and the Clown* represented Korea in the arena of queer films from different national cinemas. These

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<sup>24</sup> *The Hope of Cinema Factory*, ed. by Yeong-seok Kim and others (Seoul: Hangilsa, 2007), pp. 430-432.

<sup>25</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 293.

<sup>26</sup> 'Netizen's Review' section, which amounted to more than 3,000 posts in [www.naver.com], is a good place to observe the audiences' reaction to the film's queer motif.

<sup>27</sup> Anon., 'Queer Cinema: Past and Present', *Screen* (April 2006), pp. 106-108.

controversies were permitted in so far as it drew commercial interest to the film, which was benign enough since most of the discussion boiled down to the representation of soft-masculinity, as embodied by the pretty boy Gong-gil.

The body shape, facial features, and modes of self-representation define the new soft-masculinity, sometimes called '*kkotminam*' (flower boy). Endorsed by the advertising industry, a number of buzz words indicating new types of masculinity emerged ranging from the 'flower boy', 'metrosexual', 'cross-sexual', 'ubersexual', and the like. The exact difference between the terms is not as important as the projected desire to refashion traditional masculinity. Currently the most sought-after stars in Korea – from teen idols to television personalities – are moulded into the identikit image of slender, fair-skinned, and feminised masculinity, where an influence from the Japanese *shojo* and *yaoi manga* is clearly detectable.<sup>28</sup> Trumping the established icons of strong and rugged male images, these varieties of soft-masculinity have won the place of dominant masculinity. In his study on shifting screen masculinities, Jo Heup notes that macho masculinities represented by Park Nou-sik, Sin Young-kyun, and Nam Koong Won in the 1960s Golden Age period have now given way to a 'softer' masculinity led by Yoo Ji-tae (*One Fine Spring Day* [Hur Jin-ho, 2001]), Han Seok-kyu (*Christmas in August* [Hur Jin-ho, 1998]),

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<sup>28</sup> While other Japanese cultural products – including films and music – were banned, symptomatic of the Korean anxiety over the colonial past, Japanese *manga* and animation were staple entertainments for the younger generations. From the 80s, television stations broadcast Japanese animation (dubbed into Korean) and they were extremely popular. The *yaoi* genre is characterised by its primary subject matter: homoerotica and homosexual romance between beautiful male characters. Welker defines the typical male protagonists of *yaoi* in the following way:

The beautiful boy himself is a composite [...] of nineteenth-century European aesthetes and decadents, the Vienna Boys' Choir, and androgynous celebrities such as David Bowie, all of which seem to be layered on top of a beautiful girl. See James Welker, 'Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: "Boys' Love" as Girls' Love in *Shôjo Manga*', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 31.3 (Spring 2006), p. 842.

and Park Shin-yang (*The Letter* [Lee Jung-gook, 1997]).<sup>29</sup> He notes that these actors have appeared in television adverts where they are captured in a ‘narcissistic pose’, as if ‘deep in thought’, making their images readily available for consumption.<sup>30</sup>

According to Mark Simpson who famously coined ‘metrosexual’, the word carries all the consumerist tendencies mentioned above. ‘Metrosexual man might prefer women, he might prefer men, but when all’s said and done nothing comes between *him and his reflection*’.<sup>31</sup> These narcissistic qualities have evolved to a new standard of mediated masculinity whose appeal primarily lies in the combination of feminine qualities and an available heterosexuality. This points to the crux of the question of how feminine masculinity, such as that of Gong-gil, has gained mainstream status. To be sure, the South Korean adoption of the various masculinities are firmly grounded in a heterosexual setting and are deemed innocuous enough, otherwise they may have never reached such a level of popularity in cultural discourse.

Fully aware of the commercial viability of the character of Gong-gil to younger female (and male) audiences, the marketing department utilised a cross-promotional strategy, exposing his images to sites frequently visited by these target consumers, by posting film posters near Girls’ schools, sending adverts to fashion magazines, disseminating promotional images of Gong-gil on cable television and fan cafés, and releasing a pop music video featuring romantic close-ups of Gong-gil (FIG. 19).<sup>32</sup> This suggests that soft-masculinity underpinned by an awareness of the

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<sup>29</sup> Heup Jo, ‘The Representation of Masculinity and “The Inscription of Self”’, *Quarterly Journal of Film Language* (Summer 2003), p. 183.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Simpson, ‘Here Come the Mirror Men’, *The Independent* (15 November 1994) reproduced in <[http://www.marksimpson.com/pages/journalism/mirror\\_men.html](http://www.marksimpson.com/pages/journalism/mirror_men.html)> [accessed 1 December 2010] (emphasis mine)

<sup>32</sup> So-na Kim, ‘OSMU and *King and the Clown*’ (unpublished master’s dissertation,



*yaoi/shojo* genre and mediated by a metrosexual discourse was mobilised as a commercial opportunity in South Korean popular media while remaining unthreatening to the dominant heterosexual hegemony. The feminine masculinity, which has acquired social currency, blankets the film's otherwise controversial theme of homosexual love.

**FIG. 19 The Feminine Masculinity: Gong-gil in Promotion Materials**

The film's 'original' treatment of history and masculinity, however, returns to a more conservative ending. Certainly, the historical setting of *King and the Clown* furthers the opportunity to examine the threat to masculinity under a strictly patriarchal monarchy. The country is run by an emasculated tyrant, who lacks authority and power, using the lowly clowns to realise a brief moment of transgression. However, it is Yeonsan's indulgence of the clowns that seals his fate. In the hunting scene, a usurper states that Yeonsan has humiliated the nation by his association with the clowns and must be eliminated. And this elimination does occur in the end. As the final scene in the film signifies, especially the frozen image of Gong-gil and Jang-saeng in mid-air jumping from a tight-rope while Yeonsan and

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Dankook University, 2007), p. 74.

Nok-su sit in their place as spectators,  
the film reassures the eventual triumph  
of the hierarchical and heterosexual  
norm, where everybody returns to their  
ordained place. The comradeship that  
was briefly imagined is usurped by the  
reinstatement of vertical power relations  
between the ruler and the ruled and it is  
this final frozen image that the film ends  
on.

In sum, the film is firmly  
grounded in the heterosexual setting so

#### **FIG. 20 The Musical: *The Story of Gong-gil***

as not to provoke a homophobic reaction, allowing for a popular consumption. The  
imaginative historicity and contemporary ambiguity of *King and the Clown*,  
ultimately, had the benefit of embodying different audiences. The younger viewers  
seemed to be fanatically drawn to the pretty Lee Jun-ki while the older audiences,  
already familiar with earlier Yeonsan adaptations, delight in the retelling of an old  
story.<sup>33</sup> With this in mind, I now move beyond the textual analysis, considering the  
larger cultural and industrial context in which *King and the Clown* was produced.

According to the Bank of Korea the product inducement effect of *King and*

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<sup>33</sup> The producer Jeong Jin-wan confirms this when he says the following:  
the teens and those in their twenties understand the film as a melodrama centred  
on Gong-gil, and the late-twenties to thirty-to-forty year olds enjoy the sarcastic  
clown play by Jang-saeng. The 50+ audience reads the film as a royal court  
drama centred on Yeonsan. This is the feedback I got from the test screening in  
December, before the general release.

In the same article, the other producer Jeong Seung-hye confirms that she was aware of *yaoi*  
marketing from the beginning. Seok Mun, 'Success of *King and the Clown* I'

*the Clown* reached £70 million, near twenty times its original budget.<sup>34</sup> Setting a successful model for OSMU, the film generated a wide range of licensed merchandise and tie-ins. Coinciding with the release of the film, the play *Yi* returned to the stage in December 2005. A joint event was established where those who brought a cinema ticket would receive a 30% discount on the play ticket. After 44 successful shows in Seoul selling 30,000 attendance tickets, *Yi* then toured to the rest of the country in January 2006.<sup>35</sup> In October 2006, the musical *Yi* was staged following the popularity of the ‘movie-to-musical’, or *movical* trend.<sup>36</sup> Then in 2007, a new musical based on *King and the Clown* appeared in theatres, titled *The Story of Gong-gil*, making Gong-gil the single most important character in the show (FIG. 20). The musical fully capitalised on the ‘Gong-gil factor’ in a tagline that read ‘the cross-dressing clown Gong-gil and his most beautiful love story in the world’.

In Oct 2007, *The Story of Gong-gil* was granted permission to perform in the actual grounds of Gyeonghui Palace, attracting many foreign tourists who came to watch the musical with a traditional motif in a historic royal palace.<sup>37</sup>

Ironically, originally rejected by the National Heritage Administration to enter the actual palaces during the production stage, *King and the Clown* has eventually found a way back to the real historical setting. The musical subsequently toured Asia, performing in Shanghai and Beijing, thereby breaking the myth that historical productions are too culturally specific to be exported abroad. *King and the Clown* and its ancillaries represented Korean culture abroad, riding the tide of the cultural export drive and *hallyu* phenomenon.

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<sup>34</sup> Seong-jae Kim, ‘*King and the Clown* Economic Effect’, *The Hankyoreh* (14 February 2006)

<sup>35</sup> Jeong-ae Yi, ‘After *King and the Clown*, *Yi* Does Encore Performance’ *The Hankyoreh* (19 Jan 2006)

<sup>36</sup> Darcy Paquet, ‘Korea Sings for “King”’, *Variety* (19 November 2006)

<sup>37</sup> Bo-bae Yi, ‘Musical Gong-gil in Old Palace’, *Sisa Focus* (15 October 2007)

The publication and music industry also took notice of the *King and the Clown* trend; a string of historical novels have been published examining and recuperating the life of Yeonsan.<sup>38</sup> These and other books made further ripples in the increasing popularity of historical fiction novels. Furthermore, the scriptwriter Kim Hyun-jeong published a novelisation of the film – *King and the Clown: Movie Story Book*, complete with full colour-pages. In addition, Art Service, a subsidiary of Cinema Service and the main distributor of the film, released a number of different DVD packages from a single feature DVD to a four-item box set containing the theatrical release and the extended version, the original soundtrack, and the published version of the play *Yi*. Lastly, Lee Byung-woo's OST was one of the highest selling records of 2006.

**FIG. 21 *King and the Clown* Merchandise: From Handpuppet Set to Film Posters**

The film also succeeded in launching wide-range merchandising. On 11 January 2006, online store G Market opened a charity auction for the hand puppet set featured in the film, which quickly

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<sup>38</sup> They are: *Prince Yeonsan: Fiction and Reality* (Byeon Won-lim, 2008); *Unofficial Annals of Joseon: Prince Yeonsan* (Go Wu-yeong, 2006); *Yoonsan and the Royal Family* (Ji Du-hwan, 2008); and *Purge and Massacre: King Seong-jong, Yeonsan, and Jungjong and their Subjects* (Kim Bum, 2006).

sold for £1000.<sup>39</sup> Afterwards other items, including the sword, bow and arrow, and different clown masks were auctioned off. The ardent fans who did not win any items in the auction did not need to despair because in April 2006, Art Service in conjunction with internet shopping mall Interpark <[www.interpark.com](http://www.interpark.com)>, launched themed merchandise including the hand puppet set (sold at £30), a five set miniature mask frame, four original posters signed by the actors, and a set of six *King and the Clown* bookmarks (FIG. 21). In such a way, the film set the model for the practice of highly successful film-related merchandising.<sup>40</sup>

What is more, Anseong, a small satellite city near Seoul and home of *namsadang* performance has experienced a surge of tourists since the success of the film. Now there are guided-tours around the Anseong area and people are flocking into the *namsadang* instruction centre to learn the dying art of tightrope walking – cultural tourism and the promotion of national culture was made possible through the popularity of *King and the Clown*.<sup>41</sup>

*King and the Clown* marks the epitome of recent *sageuk* films in terms of financial returns and social impact. Such was the value-added impact of the film that later *sageuk* productions are undeniably influenced by the lucrative merchandising model set by this example. By grafting the clown world into the familiar Yeonsan narrative, the film revived the commercial possibility of the Yeonsan biopic, and effectively, suggested a successful OSMU model. The film utilised a careful strategy to negotiate the full potential of the material by avoiding negative controversy, while

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<sup>39</sup> Mi-yeong Mun, 'Lee Jun-ki's Hand Puppet sold for £1000', *Joong Ang Daily* (18 January 2006)

<sup>40</sup> Anon., 'Interpark Sells *King and the Clown* Merchandise', News Wire: Korea Press Release Network (14 April 2006)

<sup>41</sup> Korea's official tourism organisation advertised the region Anseong and its weekly re-enactment of *namsadang* performance by using *King and the Clown*. See 'Anseong *Namsadang Nori*' <[http://asiaenglish.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/SI/SI\\_EN\\_3\\_6.jsp?cid=309587](http://asiaenglish.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/SI/SI_EN_3_6.jsp?cid=309587)> [accessed 1 December 2010]

boosting its cross-over consumption of gender and sexuality. The film updates the cultural practice of the *namsadang* performance, by borrowing the images of a female impersonator in the Chinese Beijing Opera while importing tropes of a feminine masculinity. The industry and the consumers struck a chord, re-enforced by the government's agenda of expanding the culture content industry, realising a profitable venture called the *King and the Clown* phenomenon.

### *Portrait of a Beauty*

*Portrait of a Beauty* is part of another successful biographical OSMU cycle. The second feature of Jeon Yun-su, the maker of the hit debut *Le Grand Chef* (2007), the film was listed as the seventh highest grossing Korean film of 2008, no mean feat for an 18-rated costume drama. In this section, I examine the aesthetic and commercial motivation involved in filming the life of a (female) artist Shin Yun-bok. I also refer to the television drama *Painter in the Wind* which is another fictional biography on Shin. In *Portrait*, Shin disguises herself as a man and enters the Royal Academy of Painting. Her pursuit of beauty and talent to draw dissipates with the progression of a romance narrative. In the end, she becomes an object of desire for male characters inside the screen and for audiences beyond it, much like the female models in her own paintings. I then go on to broaden the discussion by examining the contours of the Shin Yun-bok syndrome in the Korean cultural scene and its implication in the reinvention of Korean aesthetic heritage.

While his paintings have enjoyed continued popularity throughout history, little is known about the life of Shin Yun-bok (1758?-1813). He specialised in genre painting, capturing the customs and lifestyles of people from all classes. With detailed brushstrokes he depicted upper-class libertines, lovers in secret *rendezvous*, and *gisaeng* in their quarters, never failing to capture the sensuous ambiance.<sup>42</sup> Just as the Renaissance instituted humanism in the art of the fifteenth century Europe, Shin revolutionised the art scene of late eighteenth century Korea; before him only idealised landscapes in the Chinese style and symbolic *literati* paintings were

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<sup>42</sup> For more on the life of Shin in English see: Ah-young Chung, 'Mysterious Artist Resurfaces on Modern Culture Scene', *The Korea Times* (9 October 2008) and Won-bok Lee, 'Shin Yun-bok and Korean Wave', *The Hankyoreh* (25 October 2008)

deemed highbrow.<sup>43</sup> His collected works, *Transmission of the Spirit of Hyewon* is listed as National Treasure No. 135 and ‘Portrait of a Beauty’ and ‘Scenery on *Dano* Day’ are two of his most well-known paintings from this collection. Together with his rival and contemporary Kim Hong-do, he is one of the most celebrated painters in Korea. But before I engage with the television drama and film on Shin Yun-bok, I first discuss the issue of gender in the Korean biopic tradition.

Through the body of a historical figure, the biopic can render a space to explore the issue of gender. George Custen’s quantitative research provides evidence of the extreme gender imbalance in the biopics of the Classical Hollywood era. He notes ‘the biography of the single famous woman accounts for only 1/4 of all biopics [...] Conversely, men alone account for 65 percent of all biographies, more than twice the number of biopics than women account for.’<sup>44</sup> Following the logic of the traditional dichotomy of male/public and female/private spheres, there are fewer female biopics simply because women were not seen in public let alone feature in public history. On this, Dennis Bingham notes that:

biography requires a subject, usually someone who has done something noteworthy in the public world. Women historically have not been encouraged to become such subjects, at least not of discourse that patriarchal society takes seriously. Women cannot be *consistently posed as the objects of male looks and language and also be the subjects of their own stories*.<sup>45</sup> (emphasis mine)

When a woman breaks out from the private sphere, therefore, often the historic life was little more than a chance to gaze at a woman in public. It is telling that the tragic love stories and dramatic lives of courtesans, entertainers, and paramours occupy a

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<sup>43</sup> Sun-u Choe, ‘Korean Painting’, *Korea Journal*, 19.4 (April 1979), p 15.

<sup>44</sup> George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> Dennis Bingham, “‘I Do Want To Live!’: Female Voices, Male Discourse, and Hollywood Biopics”, *Cinema Journal*, 38.3 (Spring 1999), p. 4.



large number of female biopics; here the women are remembered for their notoriety rather than their achievements, offering a moment of cinematic moral outrage.

In Korea, a country traditionally indoctrinated by the ethics and teachings of Confucius that valued the divide between men and women, the status of the female has been particularly precarious. On observing the pan-Asian Confucian legacy on women, Ko, Haboush, and Piggott argue that the ‘real and alleged power of Confucianism’ is to subject women to control and moral training, and effectively ‘[erase them] from official discourses and records’.<sup>46</sup> What is more, following the neo-Confucian belief in self-effacement and modesty, individuals, especially women who flaunted their gifts and talents were implicitly looked down upon or publicly chastised. This cultural practice has had a lingering impact on bias against women in historiography whether in written words or screen images. The transgression of normative gender roles in female biopics, in effect, is dealt with both fascination and condemnation.

This means, the narrative of a female genius negotiating her talent in society is acutely missing in Korean film history, in contrast to the cycle of female artist biopics in the Western tradition. Some examples are: *Camille Claudel* (Bruno Nuytten, France, 1988), *Artemisia* (Agnès Merlet, France/Italy, 1997), and *Frida* (Julie Taymor, US/Canada/Mexico, 2002). These contemporary biopics more often than not envision the woman artist in relation to her male mentor, often at the expense of her agency and accomplishments. This is why Joan Lynch dismisses *Camille Claudel* saying:

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Introduction’, in *Women and Confucian Cultures, Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, ed. by Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush and Joan R. Piggott (London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 3.

beneath the melodrama – a love story in which a historical figure, a brilliant woman, degenerates into madness – is the story of self-interested biographies and the subordination of women's history to the complicity of patriarchal interest and generic requirements'.<sup>47</sup>

Then how does *Portrait of a Beauty* treat this rarest of topics: the Korean female artist through the life of Shin Yun-bok? As a way to answer this question, I first delineate the contours of the Shin Yun-bok OSMU chain and locate the place of the film.

Shin Yun-bok was revived in the 2000s, both on the small and big screens, where the OSMU logic validated and even accelerated the commercial interest in his life. The explosive intensity in which the life of Shin was picked up and circulated in popular media merits close attention. Riding the crest of a booming culture content industry and its desire to animate the desire for the past, the discovery of Shin translated to the re-discovery of the period in which he lived and worked. His audacious works became the very evidence that Confucian Korea was not merely a 'stifling, straight laced society' and that the 'ancestors were gentle, open people with a romantic and humorous streak'.<sup>48</sup> Aided by the fact that very few historical records are available about his life, the bookselling industry, television, and film industries have all spurred on their efforts to *invent* a Shin Yun-bok.

The first example is a three-volume historical novel *Painter in the Wind* (Yi Jeong-myeong, 2006). This is also the first text to posit that Shin may have been a cross-dressing female artist. The book is reminiscent of other historical 'faction' mysteries surrounding classical art, such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, and *Painter* became an instant bestseller. In this

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<sup>47</sup> Joan D Lynch, 'Camille Claudel: Biography Constructed as Melodrama', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 26.2 (1998), p. 117.

<sup>48</sup> Won-bok Lee, 'Shin Yun-bok and Korean Wave'.

novel, Shin is rendered as a talented student at the Royal Academy, who with her teacher Kim Hong-do, investigates a number of cases concerning the Royal paintings in order to aid the King. The author Yi told the media that the inspiration for the book came while he was admiring the actual painting 'Portrait of a Beauty'. He was struck by the sensitivity with which Shin executed the portrait, capturing the model's innermost emotions that a male painter, in his view, would not have been able to capture. When the book became sensationally popular, many critics were concerned with the limits of artistic license. To that degree An Hwi-jun, then head of the Cultural Heritage Committee, reproached it as 'the worst case of historical distortion', citing that 'changing the gender of a historical figure pushes the boundaries of historical fiction'.<sup>49</sup> The point boiled down to the worry that younger readers may take the novel at face value and confuse the real Shin Yun-bok with the fictional female version.

Soon after the book's publication, SBS (Seoul Broadcasting Station) acquired the rights and produced a sixteen-episode television drama with the same title. Closely following the book, this teleplay combined comedy, action, and thriller with a star-crossed love story. Gender misrecognition and homoerotic tension rises when both her teacher Kim and *gisaeng* Jeong-hyang fall in love with Shin. Jeong-hyang even pledges an oath to her everlasting devotion to Shin, all the while Shin remains ambiguous about her own feelings towards Jeong-hyang. The ensuing quasi-lesbian love affair, albeit containing no physical interaction, could have been considered too controversial for prime-time television.<sup>50</sup> Even so, *Painter* reaped the benefits of a brief media furore on account of the cross-dressing and lesbianism; a

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<sup>49</sup> Chang-hwan Kim, 'Special: Let's Talk about Shin Yun-bok', *Weekly Hankook* (5 November 2008)

<sup>50</sup> Hye-myeong Bak, 'Let's Talk about Yaoi Code', *Cine21*, 678 (20 November 2008), pp. 69-70.

row that was eased by *King and the Clown*'s introduction of a period queer motif to mainstream culture.

The script for the film *Portrait of a Beauty* was being developed, though separately, at around the same time as the appearance of the novel and its television adaptation. Here Shin Yun-bok also appears as a woman in men's clothes. But unlike *Painter*, *Portrait of a Beauty* is realised principally as a melodrama (with no murder mysteries to solve) and is thus distanced from the television production in terms of genre and target audience, suggesting a further instance of 'product differentiation'. Due to the strict censorship of sexual material on public television, *Painter* shied away from showing any naked female torsos in the paintings, not to mention actual naked bodies. The 18-rated feature film, in contrast, was able to engage more fully with the explicit nature of the celebrated paintings. What is more, the risqué paintings function as a narrative nodal point in *Portrait*, pieces of a puzzle to reconstruct the life of the artist. This means, each painting is given autobiographical weight in the film, in a manner similar to other fictional biopics like *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, UK/USA, 1998) and *Becoming Jane* (Julian Jarrold, UK, 2007) where existing works of the artists, whether literature or painting, provide clues to imagine the lives of their creators.

For this reason, *Portrait of a Beauty* was still thought of as original and thus marketable, even when released so soon after the television series had ended. In fact, the film was designed to target a more mature adult audience already familiar with the tame *Painter of the Wind* and wanting something more sensual. Tellingly, the film's poster campaign was one of the most erotically-charged teaser promotions of that year. The popular media guaranteed the celebrity sex and highlighted the actress Kim Min-seon's determination (who played Shin Yun-bok) to 'show everything

without holding anything back' in pre-release interviews and publicity materials.<sup>51</sup>

Susan Felleman's observation that in artist's biopics 'artistic sensuality and human sexuality are constantly collapsed through scenes' is doubly true here as the film exploits not only the sensuality of the original paintings but also the sex scenes portrayed by the actress playing the painter.<sup>52</sup>

The film begins with an apologetic 'disclaimer' that 'some parts of the film may not coincide with historical fact'. Although conceived as a complete fiction, the film makes reference to the biopic genre by dramatising scenes from her childhood. While observing a number of films with a cross-dressing motif such as *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, UK/USA, 1982) and *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, USA, 1982), Marjorie Garber argues that the protagonists in these films are 'compelled' to wear the opposite sex's clothing in order to secure employment, escape repression, or gain artistic or political freedom.<sup>53</sup> This is the way in which popular mainstream cinema appropriates the theme of transvestism without delving too much into the psychological dimension of such sartorial choices. Garber also concludes that the narrative tension deriving from gender confusion dovetails into an eventual heterosexual coupling.

Shin Yun-bok in *Portrait of a Beauty*, in contrast, dons male clothing for a more serious end. Historically in Korea, women could neither receive formal art training nor become professional painters. And when her older brother commits suicide, Shin is forced to assume his identity in order to fulfill her father's personal ambition. The opening sequence is a succinct summary of her guilt-ridden and

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<sup>51</sup> An instance of a 'not-so-subtle' marketing is an article titled 'How Much Skin Did the Two Actresses Show?', *Hankyung* (11 November 2008)

<sup>52</sup> Susan Felleman, 'Dirty Pictures, Mud Lust, and Abject Desire: Myths of Origin and the Cinematic Object', *Film Quarterly*, 55.1 (2001), p. 29.

<sup>53</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992). p. 249.

liminal life. The girl, whose real name is never given, is first introduced as a voyeur hiding behind a rugged stone, quietly watching her brother being pressured by his elders to paint. The shallow depth of field conveys a sense of secrecy and urgency of the situation, underscoring her illicit act of watching; she is left lingering in the marginal space as a voyeur. After finding out the real talent behind what he presumed to be his son's paintings, the father confronts his daughter whose fingers are smeared with drawing ink. Examining her body to see whether she can pass as a boy, the father violently strips off her blouse and skirt, leaving her standing half-naked. The scene is filmed in a disturbingly intimate manner, with close-ups of a preadolescent body captured in rapid cuts as the orchestral music soars in the background. It should be noted here that he does not strip her completely; he only takes off the garments that signify femininity. While most female characters take an active part in donning male garb in films mentioned by Garber, Shin is symbolically and physically stripped off of her female identity by an authoritative and patriarchal power. Later, she regains her feminine identity only after another male character, Gang-mu, enacts an equally ritualistic '(un)dressing' scene. After the funeral of her brother, she is sculpted into a boy and sent as a pupil to Kim Hong-do, a renowned painter at the Royal Court. Shin is given a chance to paint; yet, it is her father who imposes a new purpose in life on her, suggesting her refracted relationship with art early on in her life.

Ten years on, we see a teacher and a student at an unusual lesson. While Kim plucks on a stringed instrument, Shin rhythmically draws a bamboo plant on paper. At first sight, it appears that Shin and Kim are engaged in a 'prototypical artistic relationship', that Felleman suggests develops when 'a young woman artist [...] (is) apprenticed to an older male, a relationship of power and gender that is at the same

time entirely realistic and profoundly mythic'.<sup>54</sup> In *Portrait*, it is through the tutelage that the mythic is established. There is no physical contact between the teacher and his student. Moreover Shin draws the plant from her mind without seeing an actual specimen. The teacher lectures in an equally abstract manner saying 'capture the ephemeral moment of time' and 'draw what you see in your heart'. The camera cuts along with the beat of the music, accentuating the movement of the brush that plays with the shades of black ink. Such is the manner in which Shin practices the formulaic Chinese-style painting, executed by imitation and practice which contrasts with her later paintings where the lives of real people are candidly captured.

Soon Shin sets off to paint genre pictures as commanded by the King. She captures scenes from the real world, from a blacksmith's workshop, a wedding scene, people working at a stone mill, to women weaving and ironing. While giving a glimpse into the vibrant life of *Joseon* society to a contemporary audience, these moments provide Shin with artistic inspirations. Different types of editing technique and shot compositions deliver a sense of 'a work in progress', seamlessly demonstrating the talent of the artist. First, close-ups of the hand and the paper appear, followed by a profile shot, an overhead shot, and a full shot of Shin at work. She no longer has to rely on her imagination to draw; this sequence makes way for her discovery of the human body and sexuality. This is also the moment in which she befriends a low class merchant Gang-mu who becomes her love interest.

The scene where she is led to a secluded ravine where women bathe marks a pivotal moment for Shin. Just as she did so ten years ago, Shin hides behind rugged stones and watches, this time women at leisure bathing and washing their hair. She is taken back to her primal scene, one of voyeurism, which unleashed her fascination

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<sup>54</sup> Susan Felleman, 'Dirty Pictures, Mad Lust', p. 29.

for drawing. From her POV, the bare breasted women are in the open air; the scene then cuts back to a head-shot of Shin, suggesting the artistic progression of her mind. The scenery then dissolves into a close-up of a brush working away at the painting, cross-cutting with human figures in the real world. The film replicates the real Shin's disregard for scientific perspective by capturing sections from the bathing scene then showing the corresponding part of the painting. The rapid cuts smoothens the transition from the physical world to the painting, allowing the audience to admire both the models and the resulting image of the painting. In such a way, *Portrait of a Beauty* takes care in visually creating the famous painting 'Scenery on *Dano Day*'<sup>55</sup> on screen, and this is the first of many instances where the film provides satisfaction to the audience who recognise the paintings.

In another example, when the teacher Kim flips through Shin's collection of paintings, a number of famous works including 'A Widow Seeking Forbidden Pleasure' and 'Who Will Be the Hero at the Brothel' appear on screen. The paintings start 'talking', capturing the moment when Shin witnessed the event, such as two men fighting over a *gisaeng* in a brothel. Accordingly, the aural device animates flat and still paintings, making the scenes come alive on screen.

'Scenery on *Dano Day*' scene has another important narrative function. This is the moment where Gang-mu accidentally discovers her real identity. As the ensuing romance narrative unfolds, her position, unfortunately, changes from the subject of the gaze to an object of desire. She is gradually transformed into a woman in love at the expense of losing her subjectivity as an artist. The film romanticises her sexual awakening by displaying explicit sex scenes in a highly stylized way. Gang-mu and Shin share their first romantic moment while making bronze mirrors together.

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<sup>55</sup> *Dano* is seasonal festival that falls on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May according to the Lunar Calendar.



The scene borrows the motif of a hot and passionate summer night frequently used in the 1980s folk erotica, where fireflies, a passing cloud over a full moon, and the sound of cicadas make way for lovers on their way for an amorous *rendezvous* in an abandoned water mill. With a lyrical string melody plucking at the emotions, the scene suggests the burgeoning romantic charge between the two characters. But it is the next sex scene that most concretely reveals the erotic strategy of the film.

Gang-mu and Shin meet again in a merchant's warehouse, a space crowded with exotic and expensive objects. Borrowing Diane F. Sadoff's terminology, this scene is best described as a 'hip mix of sex with luxury' that 'tart[s] up' the overall quality of the film in a predictable and unthreatening way for mainstream cinema.<sup>56</sup> While taking a tour of the warehouse, Shin first lingers on a lone white dove locked in a cage, a signifier of female entrapment and the desire for liberation. However in the surroundings of such a sumptuous period mise-en-scène, 'the bird in a cage' functions blandly as an emphatic object for Shin, soon to be overwhelmed by more luxurious décor – the white horse, masks, a bear skin, cushions, and expensive silks. Shin and Gang-mu move in slow-motion, their voices muted, against gauzy backlighting and romantic music.

After an extended moment of foreplay, they face each other in a two shot, looking intensely at one another. There is a cut and the camera repositions itself closer in a medium two shot. Shin's long hair has been undone and her blouse has also disappeared. All that is left for Gang-mu to do is to remove her last piece of the clothing by undoing the ribbon. Finally the two engage in heavily choreographed sex as the camera captures them with gentleness, all the while investing energy in

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<sup>56</sup> Diane F. Sadoff, 'Sex, Costume Drama and *The Golden Bowl*', *Henry James Review*, 23 (2002), p. 39.

creating the perfect image of desire: Shin's naked body. By alternating between medium-long shots and close-ups, the camera objectifies her luminous skin, then dollies out to reveal the foreground cluttered with bookcases and other objects. The lavish mise-en-scène hides and reveals the bodies in a voyeuristic manner, as if to mirror the overall atmosphere of exhibition and coyness (FIG. 22). At the same time, the restrictive framing traps the lovers within the mise-en-scène, conveying a claustrophobic feeling. Even though the scene manifests the heroine's first sexual encounter and pleasure, there is no close-up of Gang-mu's face in ecstasy; it is her body that the audience identifies as the object of desire. Hence, the audience/camera is positioned as a voyeur, sutured into the look of a decidedly heterosexual male gaze. Shin Yun-bok who once held the power of the look becomes an actor in a visual erotica.

**FIG. 22 The Lavish Sex in *Portrait of a Beauty***

Afterwards, Gang-mu gives Shin a dress as a gift and expresses his desire to see 'how beautiful she is'. In a full shot, against the background of a wooden lattice wall, she stands with her back to the camera. Strong backlighting creates shimmering shadows around her body. In successive dissolves, Shin takes off her clothes one by one and then puts on the female garments. This marks the final transition of Shin Yun-bok, from a cross-dressing painter to a woman who redeems her femininity with the help of her lover. While she awkwardly stands with her new look, it is Gang-mu who leads her to stand before a mirror and lets her see her *female* self for the first time.

The explicit sexual material in *Portrait of a Beauty* is generically motivated by the period erotica of the 1980s, which used the period setting to experiment with exotic and often humorous sexuality. Along with the hostess films, pointed out by Kim Soyoung earlier, folk erotica was treated with disdain as a kind of embarrassing and thus erasable memory.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, while making reference to folk erotica, deemed a low-form of art, *Portrait of a Beauty* revamps period sexuality with up-market aesthetics and big-budget period designs, heightening the appeal to younger urban cinema-goers. In other words, the film erases the vulgarity associated with folk erotica by providing a sense of acculturation and good taste through conspicuous consumption of period décor and stylised sex scenes. As noted in Chapter Three, there has been a considerable effort to 'sex up' the *sageuk* genre in recent years and *Portrait* clearly aims to be part of that trend. Yet the exact nature of the gender and sexual politics construed in *Portrait* is more conservative when compared to other recent erotic *sageuks* that present strong female subjectivity and a reflective

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<sup>57</sup> Soyoung Kim, 'A Note on Post-Colonial Korean Classics', *The Hankyoreh* (17 January 1998)

assessment of the Neo-Confucian social structures.

Films like *Untold Scandal* take a revisionist approach by somewhat liberating female sexuality while also presenting erotic material to a contemporary audience. Shin's sexual energy in *Portrait of a Beauty*, however, is solely devoted to Gang-mu. She then falls victim to her once-benevolent teacher Kim Hong-do. As soon as she symbolically regains her feminine identity, the teacher-pupil relation between Shin and Kim radically alters. The ever jealous and obsessive teacher rapes her, indicating that she is no longer his talented pupil but an object unto which he can unleash his sadistic power. Just as countless traditional women were victimised in international festival films or royal court *sageuks*, Shin Yun-bok becomes a tragic heroine in a sexualised melodrama. With no agency of her own to negotiate, she cannot position herself as a female artist living in pre-modern society.

The explicit sexuality in *Portrait of a Beauty*, as noted, was what made the media most excited when the film was released. Using publicity techniques honed in promoting the 1980s folk erotica, a titillating tagline ('Sensation *Joseon* Melo: Eroticism at the Tip of the Brush') and a barely-clad Kim Min-seon on the film posters, ensured an effective marketing strategy (FIG. 23). To this end, the explicit sex scenes of *Lust, Caution* (Lee Ang,

**FIG. 23 The 'Poster' of a Beauty** China/Taiwan/USA, 2007) were used as a reference point to promote *Portrait*. In

particular, the scene at the red-light district where two women enact various sexual positions in front of spectators appears as *Portrait*'s answer to the famous fragmented sex scene of *Lust, Caution*, an 18-rated film that hit local screens earlier that year.

As the novelty of Shin's cross-dressing quickly dies away, what remains is the film's promise to enact eroticism in a historical space. After Gang-mu's death, Shin goes into exile wearing the dress that Gang-mu gave her. The final image of Shin in the film is of her letting go of the self-portrait – the famous 'Portrait of a Beauty' on the floating water. Once an aspiring and defiant painter who wished to capture 'the beauty of human nature of loving and hating' begins to ring hollow towards the end; the web of obligations spun by the male authority and her lover have elided her desire and life. She is a palimpsest on which different male figures came to inscribe, erase, or reinstate her feminine identity, shaping her as a talented painter, a woman in love, and a mysterious exiled figure. Just as the real Shin Yun-bok whose final days were left in oblivion, the fictional Shin quietly vanishes from the screen.

Even though *Portrait of a Beauty* did not deliver satisfaction as a female artist biopic with a feminist agenda, it still played an important part in propelling the OSMU Shin Yun-bok franchise. As the film entered into the OSMU chain relatively late following on from the successful novel and television drama, it did not generate as impressive profit or ancillary products as *King and the Clown* did. Even so, *Portrait of a Beauty* maintained the focus on the artist by joining forces with other products from different media. After the publication of the book *Painter in the Wind*,

in particular, a string of other fictionalised biographies appeared on the scene.<sup>58</sup> The popularity of these fictional biopics has resulted in the proliferation of academic books written by art historians who tried to rectify the many myths surrounding the painter. In effect, the bookselling industry became an additional arena for different interest groups to fight over and reclaim Shin Yun-bok. The increased interest in his life translated into increased attention to his art. The original painting ‘Portrait of a Beauty’ and his other major works are housed in the Gansong Art Gallery, a small and private gallery in Seoul. In October 2008, when the television drama *Painter* was still on air, the gallery held its bi-annual exhibition for two weeks. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the exhibition attracted a phenomenal number of visitors, about 20,000 in a week.<sup>59</sup> The news that people queued for hours just to enter the gallery further fuelled the public’s interest in Shin Yun-bok. No doubt many visitors went to see the paintings after having consumed the fictional biographies in the popular media. In this sense, one can see how the Shin Yun-bok boom offered an opportunity for the middle-class leisure activity of gallery-going, again diversifying the types of cultural consumption in operation in the national heritage industry.

Finally *Portrait of a Beauty* also rode the wave of Shin Yun-bok merchandising. The scriptwriter Han Su-ryeon published the novelisation of the film, to coincide with the film’s release. The OST also went on sale simultaneously. Shin Yun-bok’s paintings were also reproduced for different products. From prints of his paintings, magnetic puzzles based on ‘Scenery on *Dano* Day’, to marble dolls

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<sup>58</sup> They are: *Hyewon Shin Yun-bok: Master of Genre Painting* (Min Byeong-sam, 2006), *Shin Yun-bok: The Novel* (Baek Kum-nam, 2008), *The Lifestyles of the Ancestors through Shin Yun-bok’s Genre Painting* (Choe Seok-jo, July 2009), *Shin Yun-bok who loved Joseon Beauties: World Renowned Artists and their Paintings* (2009), comic strip for children *Kim Hong-do and Shin Yun-bok: Two Genius Painters in the Joseon Renaissance* (2008), and *Painter in the Wind for Teenagers* (2008)

<sup>59</sup> Semi Bak, ‘Shin Yun-bok Virus’, *Chosun Daily* (27 October 2008)

modelled on 'Secret Meeting under the Moonlight', other products all plastered with Shin's paintings went on sale in the mid-2000s. Yet, as with other OSMU driven projects, after the appeal of the 'content' reached its peak, related products quickly disappeared from the market. The Shin Yun-bok boom led to a passionate but ultimately short-lived national obsession with the life of this artist, whose life remains as mysterious as ever.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored the current practice of biopic-making in Korea. Mixing fact and fiction to revive a historical life, both *King and the Clown* and *Portrait of a Beauty*, negotiate traditional and contemporary expressions of gender in popular visual culture. *King and the Clown* deconstructs the full spectrum of masculinity, from troubled patriarch to a convincingly feminised male image, by making reference to the contemporary fashion industry, pop culture, and female sub-cultures. While also borrowing the tropes of the cross-dressing narrative, *Portrait of a Beauty* imagines a woman painter whose idealised femininity is ultimately reduced to a spectacle in an eroticised period romance. When considering the issue of gender in the biopic, *King* suggests fluidity and transformation of a dominant masculinity whereas *Portrait* reinstates conservative ideas of the suffering feminine beauty through the body of a historic figure.

But both films share the fact that they made a positive impact on the market, demonstrating the type of industrial operation needed to render an OSMU chain successful. Suggesting the commercial possibility of a period biopic, both *King* and *Portrait* worked harmoniously with other related products, aiding and sustaining the history boom. One should, however, note that not all OSMU biopics have been a success, given the unpredictable relationship between the production trends and consumption patterns in the market. This is especially the case when external forces enter into the industrial configuration in the shape of national trauma. As a way to close Part II ‘Heritage and Industry’ and shift the register in preparation for Part III ‘Trauma and Memory’, I return to the film *Hwang Jin Yi* mentioned briefly in the Introduction of this chapter.



A much anticipated big-budget *sageuk*, *Hwang Jin Yi* is based on a novel by a North Korean writer Hong Seok-jung and was born with the hopes of setting a precedent in joint North-South Korean filmmaking. Such cultural border-crossing was possible due to the reconciliatory and cooperative mood between the two states in the mid-2000s. A legendary courtesan from the sixteenth century, Hwang lived in the city of Songdo, now called Gae-seong and part of North Korea. When it was introduced to South Korea in 2003, the novel was received with enthusiasm as it contains authentic regional dialect and rich geographical descriptions of locations that are unreachable to the readers in the South. Through the life of Hwang Jinyi, therefore, the novel carved a space to articulate commonality, affirming a shared cultural heritage between North and South. The filmic adaptation made by the South, however, suppressed almost all of the North Korean flavour, especially the authentic language. This may be partially explained by the political misfortunes that the film experienced during its production. In 9 October 2006, North Korea conducted a surprise nuclear test, immediately straining international relations and stalling all cultural/economic exchanges between the two states.

As a result, instead of highlighting the cultural prestige of the source novel, the film fashioned the image of the heroine through modernised production and costume designs, especially by appealing to the star power of Song Hye-kyo. A relative newcomer to film acting, Song is a popular model, television actress, and *hallyu* star who has a significant following in the greater Asian market. *Hwang Jin Yi* heavily relied on her star persona, with the mise-en-scène, cinematography, the narrative, and marketing strategies working together to maintain and accentuate her mainstream image. The ‘revolutionary’ and ‘class-conscious’ character Hwang Jinyi, originally conceived by Hong Seok-jung was eclipsed by the powerful ‘star-as-star’

image of Song Hye-kyo.<sup>60</sup>

**FIG. 24 The *Vogue* Campaign: *Marie Antoinette* (left) and *Hwang Jin Yi* (right)**

The star-centred marketing strategy culminated in the *Vogue* Korea cover project that coincided with the general release of the film (June 2007). The cover image strikingly resembles that of Kirstin Dunst who posed for *Vogue* America in September 2006, playing her character from Sophia Coppola's own period drama *Marie Antoinette* (FIG. 24). By making direct reference to the *Marie Antoinette*–*Vogue* connection, the film *Hwang Jin Yi* branded its identity as a luxurious fashion movie and a teen romance. Any connection between the adapted film and the North Korean novel was effectively diluted in the process; such repositioning came at the expense of losing the unique association with the cultural other of the North. The film fared disastrously at the box-office suggesting that it ultimately failed to negotiate the different pulls – the desire to forge a unified North-South cultural heritage and the need to make a fashionable *sageuk* heavily reliant on the star image. The story of *Hwang Jin Yi*, therefore, teaches us the perils of different ideological

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979), pp. 182-184.

and commercial interests are at work when constructing a famous person's life. Underneath the celebratory mood of selling national heritage on screen, there lurks the dangers of returning to the past given Korea's convoluted modern history. For this reason, the film is an appropriate bridge to introduce the subsequent chapters. Chapters Five and Six examine two sub-categories of the new *sageuk* that engage with the traumatic national past in different ways. While similarly commodifying the past, they demonstrate the conflicting tension between the engagement of trauma in the film text and the historical imagination that is socially accepted and desired by the nation. Chapter Five deals with the psychological influence of trauma – the purge discourse – on the individual and Chapter Six looks at how Korea imagines its colonial past as well as its relationship with its former master.

**PART III**  
**TRAUMA AND MEMORY**

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Allegories of the Purge: Heritage Horrors

Using *Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace* as case studies, this chapter discusses the recent manifestation of the South Korean period horror. While both films are framed within the horror and mystery narrative, stylistically, they display features of heritage aesthetics where established costume/production designers display their talents in creating a compelling period setting. This means, the camera lingers on the artefacts and costumes from the carefully crafted mise-en-scène while still giving the audience a good number of chills and thrills. And the process of the period reconstruction is well documented in the promotional material and the DVD supplements, confirming that the glossy image and convincing historicity is one of their key attractions. In both films, the period mise-en-scène competes with the equally striking images of violence, redolent of the nation's traumatic past. Heritage aesthetics, in effect, combined with the shock of a body genre to create a peculiarly jarring sense of fascination and repulsion.<sup>1</sup> These two aspects frame the overall structure of the films and I, therefore, call them 'heritage horror'.

A type of *CSI: Korea* set in pre-modern times, both films are centred on murder investigations. Each protagonist, Won-gyu and Cheon-ryeong, sets out to uncover the truth with the newest scientific technology and a matching rational mind. Their investigations, however, end disastrously when they find themselves somehow implicated in the case itself. Specifically, giving a detailed textual reading, I focus on the issues of collective guilt and the inscription of trauma in *Blood Rain* and then show how *Shadows in the Palace* revisits the two older *sageuk* genres – the female

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44.4 (Summer, 1991), pp. 2-13.

ghost horror and royal court *sageuk* – as a way to revisit the lost history of women.

As noted in Chapter Two, spurred on a culture-wide obsession with history and helped by the liberal political milieu, New Korean Cinema is audaciously visualising and narrating the national past. Even the most controversial and taboo moments do not escape the attention of the filmmakers, who articulate different ways to engage with the past. By successfully fending off Hollywood's cultural imperialism and winning the hearts of local audiences, Korean cinema has gained a strong cultural status, as *the* medium to represent the nation. Observing the popularity of recent history films, Yi Seung Hwan argues that:

When our collective memory and filmic representations strike a chord together, the power of cinema as the emblem of private evidence is amplified. Popular film, in this sense, may even function as a trustworthy historian who *demand*s that the public should correct false collective memory.<sup>2</sup> (emphasis mine)

The trend of re-writing history continues with formidable force in Korea where historical representations reach beyond the function of entertainment, influencing how people should understand their history. I argue that these two historical fantasies, while set in a distant past, are invested with such a political energy. In particular, I read both films as an allegory for one of the most poignant social issues affecting Korea today: the 'Settling the Past/*gwageo cheongsan*' campaign (also called the 'Purging the Past' campaign). At the same time, they contain elements that are equally marketable outside the national border.

The cross-over of the *sageuk* into horror has special 'financial' implications for the Korean film industry at present. As I mentioned in the Literature Review, a number of recent K-Horrors and violent films have penetrated the foreign niche

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<sup>2</sup> Seung Hwan Yi, 'A Representation of Korean Society with Historical Memory: *White Badge* and *R-Point*', *Film Studies*, 27 (2005), pp. 202-203.

market with the boom of the Tartan 'Asia Extreme' label. A now defunct UK-based distribution company, Tartan launched this label in 2001, ambitiously 'picking up' and 'repackaging' a string of Asian films that pushed the limits of screen violence and gore. In her research on 'Asia Extreme', Shin Chi-Yun rightly observes that 'the name of the label itself, invoke[s] and in part rel[ies] on the western audiences' perception of the East as weird and wonderful, sublime and grotesque'.<sup>3</sup> In the last ten years, Korean films, especially those graced with a brand of an auteur, such as Park Chan-wook, have been lumped together with those of their Asian neighbours and exported to various corners of the world.

Against this backdrop, even period horrors like *Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace* have enjoyed international exposure, albeit in different ways. *Blood Rain* has been successful in terms of overseas DVD distribution. Palisades Tartan released the *Blood Rain* DVD in October 2009 in the UK and Pathfinder distributed the film to the US DVD market around the same time. Considering the fact that *King and the Clown*, the most locally popular *sageuk*, has not been picked up by any UK or US-based companies, *Blood Rain* certainly has not done badly in the area of foreign sales.

*Shadows in the Palace* took a different approach in targeting overseas markets. A month before its general release in Korea, the film premiered at the 2007 San Sebastián International Film Festival as part of the official competition. It was also heavily advertised at the Asian Film Market at the Pusan International Film Festival that year. In his interview with Darcy Paquet, Tom Oh of CJ Entertainment stated that:

[p]articularly for Latin American and European markets, horror is still one of the more vibrant genres for us [...] We have seen some declining interest in the genre in Asia, but on the whole horror works well on DVD

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<sup>3</sup> Chi-Yun Shin, 'Art of Branding: Tartan "Asia Extreme" Films'.

and is one of our strongest sellers.<sup>4</sup>

If so, *Shadows*' entry to San Sebastián is strategic, targeting a film festival that is most geographically and linguistically (Spanish) proximate to the area where the demand lies (Europe and Latin American). The story of their circulation shows us the various ways in which a culturally-specific *sageuk* sub-genre can make its way into the global market. But to the local audience in Korea, the films refer to a specific historical event.

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<sup>4</sup> Darcy Paquet, 'Korean Industry Pushes Horror Revival: Asian Film Market Sees Genre's Creative Renewal', *Variety* (8 October 2007)



## History, Horror and National Allegory: Purging the Past Campaign

A popular mode of signification, allegory disguises a certain message under the surface. How to read a cinematic text allegorically, from its dynamics of expression to interpretation, may not be straightforward since different elements of the film all contribute to the decoding process. Ismail Xavier notes that:

When conveyed by a narrative film, allegory is not simply produced by a storytelling process involving agents and actions, but also results from visual compositions that, in many cases, establish a clear dialogue with particular iconographical traditions, ancient and modern.<sup>5</sup>

Hence for Xavier, allegorical unravelling in cinema is a ‘multi-focal cultural gesture’.

From the many different variations of allegory, I am here interested in Fredric Jameson’s formulation of the ‘national allegory’ and its aptness for reading South Korean heritage horrors. In his influential and equally contentious article ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, Jameson concludes that:

Even those (narratives) which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*<sup>6</sup> (original emphasis)

His schematic generalisation initially brought fury to post-colonial theorists, in particular, as seen from Aijaz Ahmad’s attack on the ‘First-Third World opposition’ as well as the worrying depths of Eurocentrism in his thinking.<sup>7</sup> Over the years, however, different voices have affirmed Jameson’s contribution to the study of

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<sup>5</sup> Ismail Xavier, ‘Historical Allegory’, in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. by Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 337.

<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text*, 15 (Fall 1986), p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the “National Allegory”’, in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 78

allegory. For instance, Elliott Colla reassesses national allegory in the context of Egyptian antiquity and popular consumption saying ‘the psychological narratives of individual characters have a clear relation to wider political narratives; [...] the two narrative arcs are quite often mediated through the image of the nation’.<sup>8</sup> Here the key word is the ‘individual’ and the ‘nation’. The inextricable relationship between personal and national narratives, as grounded in the national allegory, lends a discursive frame through which we can analyse a number of cultural texts observable in different historical contexts. I, therefore, attempt to glean a historical meaning beyond the immediate and diegetic signification of *Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace* by arguing that the personal narratives of the protagonists have a wider political implication, suggesting the purge discourse relevant in the nation. In both films, moreover, not only do the personal and the collective collide in a violent manner, but also the past and the present converge in the realm of representation. Allegorical structures are subversive in the sense that they allow access to the trauma – at both an individual and collective level – embedded in the texts. In addition, by borrowing from the conventions of horror, which according to Paul Wells, ‘is predominantly concerned with death and the impacts and effects of the past’, the films evoke the ghosts of the past, which literally comes back to haunt the present.<sup>9</sup> The horror genre has particular resonance in Korean film historiography. In her conversation with Chris Berry on the Korean fantasy/horror genre, Kim Soyoung argues that:

The fantastic mode of cinema in its powerful conjuration of the obstinate past also provides a rich platform on which to think about non-

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<sup>8</sup> Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham: Duke University, 2007), p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London: Wallflower, 2000), p. 7.

synchronous synchronicity and the working of the pre-modern in modernity. This is crucial to any understanding of the constellation of condensed modernity constructed in ‘peripheral’ nation states such as South Korea.<sup>10</sup>

Making reference to the Benjaminian ‘constellation’ of arranging historical moments from different periods of time, a critical concept I refer to later, Kim decodes the effects of dictatorship’s dogmatic development projects of the 1960s. In this context, the fantastic mode in cinema revived the marginalised and the oppressed in the figure of the ghost, vampire, and alien monster, threatening the social status-quo as well as the progress of modernisation. Fast-forward to the present, just as another fantastic mode, the time-travelling narrative decompresses the compressed modernity, the period horror suspends the present moment, reaching back to imagine and understand the origin of the trauma. What is at risk in these two films, therefore, is the lingering impact of the past in the present. And this is exactly what the ‘Settling the Past’ campaign is concerned with.

The following is a short introduction to the historical context of the ‘Settling the Past’ campaign, where current postcolonial discourse has been channelled into a national movement to ‘cleanse’ the wrongs of the past. After 35 years of colonisation by Japan, Korea was caught between the Cold War ideological conflicts that split the nation in two. An immediate purge was delayed when the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK 1945-1948) resurrected bureaucratic control, reinstating the majority of Japanese collaborators in government positions out of necessity and convenience.<sup>11</sup> Korea was soon hit by a bloody civil war that left three million casualties; the border between the South and North was firmly marked,

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<sup>10</sup> Soyoung Kim and Chris Berry, “‘Suri Suri Masuri’: The Magic of the Korean Horror Film: A Conversation”, *Postcolonial Studies*, 3.1 (2000), p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War I: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes 1945-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 152-158.

furthering the agony in the collective Korean psyche. Under three decades of military regimes, the course of history was no longer in the hands of the people. During this period two coups were staged, severely suppressing any democratic and resistance movements, most famously the Gwangju Massacre. A civilian government was finally established in 1992; yet, the anxiety over the nation's history still persists, which stems from the historic failure to resolve the trauma of the past.

South Korea's first civilian president Kim Young-sam strove to establish a model of democratic leader by distancing himself from the previous military general-turned-presidents and adopting the 'Making History Right (*yeoksa baro se-ugi*)' campaign<sup>12</sup>. In 1995, mid-way through his tenure, former presidents Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo were indicted for mutiny and corruption as well as crimes against humanity. They were subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment in 1997 but were soon pardoned.<sup>13</sup> The demolition of the Japanese General-Government Building, a monumental symbol of the colonial rule, also began in 1995. When the opposition party led by Kim Dae-jung won power in 1998, the political milieu took an even more progressive turn. A recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, President Kim pursued 'reconciliation and cooperation' with North Korea by adopting the 'Sunshine Policy'.<sup>14</sup>

The backdrop to this political liberalism was the silenced voices calling out for the need to confront and deal with the unsolved issues from the national history. For instance, the 'Presidential Truth Commission on Suspicious Deaths' (PTCSD) was launched in October 2000 and it was seen as the fruit of the citizens' yearning

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<sup>12</sup> See, Yeong-o Yun, *Making History Right: Kim Young-sam and His Government Policy* (Seoul: Miraemedia, 1996)

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), p 511.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 501-504.

for justice, culminating in the ‘422-day sit-in in front of the National Assembly’.<sup>15</sup>

The government’s response to the public by offering an institutional means to investigate past incidents marks a milestone in Korean politics and justice.

The next president, Roh Moo-hyun, a former human-rights lawyer, drew the scalpel to one of the most contentious issues in Korea. Befitting the image of the newcomer to politics, Roh kick-started a fully-blown campaign to ‘purge’ the past. The general public, who agreed that the legitimization of history is a necessary step for Korea’s future prosperity, supported Roh’s bold undertaking. In a survey conducted by the Korean Society Opinion Institute (KSOI) in August 2004, 62.1% respondents agreed with the President’s view that ‘historical truth must be revealed’; whereas only 34.9% answered ‘(these investigations) are meaningless as it denies our communal past’.<sup>16</sup>

Not long after, the main investigative body for the ‘Settling the Past’ campaign, the ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea/*jinsil hwahaereul wihan gwageosa jeong-ri wiwonhoe*’ (TRCR) was established in December 2005. Even though TRCR is a state-endorsed body, its operation is independent from any governmental entities, thereby granting them autonomy and freedom.<sup>17</sup> The president of the Commission delineates the scope of the investigation as follows:

To reveal the truth of our history, we investigate past incidents, such as anti-Japanese movements during the Japanese rule, the history of Koreans residing abroad before and after the Korean War, and the

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<sup>15</sup> Koen De Ceuster, ‘Settling the Past and the Distribution of Justice in Post-Authoritarian South Korea’, *International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) Newsletter*, 30 (March 2003), p. 3. For more on PTCSD see Rae-Kun Park, ‘The Clarification Commission for Suspicious Death’, *Democratic Law*, 24 (2003)

<sup>16</sup> The total number of questionnaire participants was 700. Anon., ‘Special Issue: Public Opinion on Participatory Government 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase’, *Trend and Analysis: Korea Society Opinion Institute*, 20 (19 August 2004)

<sup>17</sup> Official Homepage, TRCR, <<http://www.jinsil.go.kr/index.asp>>

civilian massacres that occurred from August 15, 1945 to the end of the authoritarian regimes.<sup>18</sup>

With an annual budget of £9 million and 240 staff members, TRCR started its investigation by accepting public petitions from 1 December 2005 to 30 November 2006. After two years of its research period, the outcome of each petition was released.<sup>19</sup> As of 30 July 2010, the Commission has examined 11,174 cases and the outcomes of 8,468 successful investigations (75.6% of the overall) have been published. Once a case is closed, the Commission releases a statement of ‘recommendation’ demanding certain actions from the responsible bodies/perpetrators. These actions range from an ‘official apology’, ‘compensation’, to ‘the legislation of related law’. The official website is extensive and frequently updated, with the information also available in English. For instance, the detailed outcomes of 384 cases, conducted by three different Investigation Bureaus, are open to the public online.

More than 70% of these successful claims are under the category ‘mass killing/sacrifice of civilians’, an issue particularly relevant in the period around the Korean War. After the nation was divided into the Communist North and Capitalist South, the ideological internal conflict, or ‘the resistance to the southern system’ as Bruce Cumings calls it, was frequent. The ‘4.3 Jeju Insurgency’ and ‘Yeosu and Suncheon Incident’ are just a few of many cases that resulted in mass killing.<sup>20</sup> In 2007, the facts behind the ‘No Gun Ri Civilian Massacre’ were unveiled by TRCR, which confirmed that the US took part in the refugee killing in July 1950. While

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Greeting by Lee Young-Jo’, TRCR, <<http://www.jinsil.go.kr/English/Commission/index.asp>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>19</sup> Charles J. Hanley and Jae-Soon Chang, ‘Summer of Terror: At Least 100,000 Said Executed by Korean Ally of US in 1950’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (23 July 2008)

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War I*, pp. 250-267.

scholars and war veterans have voiced the fact that numerous civilian killings happened during the Korea War, this time a government body (TRCR) officially declared it to be true. This discovery had an immense social impact and a film *A Little Pond* (Lee Sang-woo, 2009) based on that particular incident was made by an independent production company. Featuring some 200 actors, many of whom worked without pay, *A Little Pond* premiered at the Pusan International Film Festival in 2009 and was also shown at the London Korean Film Festival in November 2010. Closing a chapter to settle the past of the national history, TRCR concluded its operation in July 2010.

Tellingly, the rhetoric of ‘settling the past’ has a future-tense ring to it. The painful past is now being excavated from oblivion in order to push the country forward. For instance, President Roh claimed that:

I have been equally stringent at shedding light on Korea’s own turbulent history because true reconciliation, whether domestic or international, is possible only on a foundation of historical truth. Moreover, *our understanding of history shapes our very future and destiny*.<sup>21</sup> (emphasis mine)

His words echo Ahn Byung-ook, a historian and former president of TRCR, who claims that ‘the issue of how to “settle the past” arose out of social demands to critically review and eliminate the past wrongs, so that they would no longer impart a negative influence on Korean society’.<sup>22</sup> Just as Andreas Huyssen observes that ‘the blind spots on the maps of the past are often invested with utopian energies very much oriented toward the future’, the current ‘looking back’ movement entails both a

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<sup>21</sup> Moo-hyun Roh, ‘History, Nationalism and Community’, *Global Asia: A Journal of the East Asia Foundation*, 2.1 (Spring 2007), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Byung-ook Ahn, ‘The Significance of Settling the Past in Modern Korean History’, *Korea Journal*, 42.3 (Autumn 2002), p. 8.

therapeutic and practical purpose.<sup>23</sup>

The ‘Settling the Past’ campaign is important in the context of this thesis because it ignited a wave of public discussion of Korea’s modern history. New historical facts, witness accounts, and especially the black-and-white images of brutality were bombarded at the public through the media. One such example is TRCR’s release of a photograph in August 2007 from the Cheongwon Massacre excavation site where the remains of 110 victims were recovered. The scattered bare bones, suggesting a hasty or even live burial, registered in the minds of contemporary Koreans as a trauma that eludes comprehension or contextualisation.

#### **FIG. 25 A Picture from the Cheongwon Massacre Excavation Site**

The photographic evidence became belated and tangible evidence of the ‘modernist event’ in the Korean context. In his efforts to make sense of the ‘holocaustal’ events in the twentieth century, Hayden White argues that these traumatic moments are *not just* ‘unrepresentable’. He notes that the very violent nature and mass-mediated reproductability makes the events unrepresentable ‘in the realist mode’.<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Hayden White, ‘The Modernist Event’, in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television,*



modernist event resists conventional narrative, adequate communication, and easy emplotment; we lack the proper representational tools to codify and untangle what is presented before us. The powerful and traumatic photographic images, such as those of the ‘Cheongwon Massacre’ (FIG. 25), made the whole nation have no choice but to face the so-far-hidden events and episodes from history. The collective memory has amplified, resulting in a paradigmatic shift in viewing history and understanding its implication. But because of our very proximity to the events (i.e. they are within living memory), how to properly deal with this past and its images have become the crux of the question.

Both *Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace* deploy various strategies from the melodramatic mode and the images of gore to access and represent trauma. Now that a century of history has been opened up for public scrutiny through the ‘Settling the Past’ campaign, however, there is a danger that only a few people may be exempt from the shared guilt. Responsibility may fall on the shoulders of the unexpected when a silenced past catches up to the present. Made against the backdrop of the purge campaign, both films allegorically show the dangers that occur when the past is blast opened.

## ***Blood Rain***

*Blood Rain* is the second feature by Kim Dai-seung, who trained under the apprenticeship of Im Kwon-taek. Kim's works are known for their socially daring content. His first film *Bungee Jumping of their Own* (2001) is one of the first Korean mainstream features to touch upon the issue of homosexuality, while his third film *Traces of Love* (2006) went head-on with the collapse of the Sampoong Department Store in 1995 that killed 500 people. His three films, including *Blood Rain*, all engage with the issue of memory on a both personal and collective level. As I demonstrate here, he experiments with non-linear narrative and temporality in *Blood Rain* to convey the vivid bodily and visual sensation of trauma.

The plot of *Blood Rain* is as follows. The date is 1808 and a successful police investigator Won-gyu and his team arrive in Dong-hwa, a small island famous for its paper mill. The purpose of their visit is to investigate an arson case. A grizzly murder is discovered upon Won-gyu's arrival and it transpires that this will be the first of five murders that will happen over the next five days, all imitating the past execution of Gang, a rich merchant, and his family. It was seven years earlier that the five family members were executed on account of practicing Catholicism: his son was killed with a spear; his daughter boiled to death; his wife suffocated with the application of wet paper on her face; and his elderly mother killed by a blow on the head. For Gang, his limbs were tied to four cows charging in different directions, tearing his body apart. Now the village shaman Manshin prophesises that the accusers who still remain anonymous will suffer the same consequences in the next five days. Believing that the spirit of Gang has returned to seek revenge, the whole town goes into frenzy and the rumours about the identity of the informers become

rampant. Won-gyu, at first, sets out to seek the truth behind the murders. Yet, his rational mind and modern investigative methods slowly falter when he is not able to prevent the future murders. In the end, it is revealed that the judge who gave a concession to the executions is none other than his own father, whom Won-gyu admired with utmost deference. With the perpetrator behind the murder plot now caught, Won-gyu leaves the island, though greatly dispirited and scarred.

*Blood Rain* was released in 2005, when the ‘Settling the Past’ movement was building momentum. The need to rake over the past and resolve historical trauma never before had such a strong public resonance in Korea. Engaging with the purge campaign on a narrative and aesthetic level, the film sets out as a murder investigation and thriller, with a twist in the end. The straightforward *whodunit* narrative is complicated by the prominent supernatural dimension, such as dead fish rising up to the surface, water tasting of blood, and finally the blood rain, itself, that soaks everybody. The camera shows no mercy in pushing the limits of what is representable by following the end of an extremely gory execution. Climaxing in the scene of Gang’s death, the audience must endure a realistic computer-assisted image of ripping limbs and organs gushing out of the body. Through such images of violence, the film makes a visceral attack on the audience. At the same time, we are reminded that cinematic representations, however gruesome, cannot be matched with the brutality of the reality, all-too-plainly shown in the photographs of actual massacres, such as the Cheongwon case.

In the opening, *Blood Rain* announces the exact date of the setting, 1808, with an intertitle. By locating the historical background of the period, such as the ban on Catholicism, the film cocoons the narrative in the late Yi Dynasty. In retrospect, the mid to late-nineteenth century is the nation’s period of regret and a short-lived

prosperity on the threshold of modernity. Korea was at the brink of whirlwind change; yet, the seclusion policy adopted by Regent Heung, the failed reformation of the old system (1864-73), and the warring political factions severely weakened the country. The opportunity for modern state building and industrialisation would be delayed for decades, unlike Japan, which quickly adapted to the changing world with the Meiji Restoration in 1868.<sup>25</sup> The deferred modernity is thought to be the root of all grief, starting with the *unequal* treaties with the foreign powers in 1876 to the Japanese absorption of Korea in 1910.<sup>26</sup> By returning to early nineteenth century, therefore, the film sets out to trace Korea's burgeoning modernity, placing its lens on what went wrong. The small island, in this sense, functions as a metonym for the nation, a feudal state secluded from the outside world yet prosperous thanks to the paper mill business.

The film begins with an ethnographic look on the lives of the islanders, busily working away in their daily duties, cooking, transporting goods or preparing for the shamanistic ritual in their weather-worn clothes. The camera captures the dirty faces of villagers in long shots to highlight the sense of community, as intended by the director; here their individuality is easily elided.<sup>27</sup> The paper mill is seen as an inhuman place where workers are subject to mistreatment in the name of development. When a worker carrying a box of paper accidentally falls into the water, his superior beats him saying paper is 'worth more than (his) life'. Ordinary citizens become mere cogs in a wheel, serving the flourishing business of the paper mill. The drive for prosperity and the resulting cruel treatment of workers evokes the memory of South Korea's own developmental history in the post-war authoritarian era, where

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<sup>25</sup> Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 56-57.

<sup>27</sup> Han-seok Jeong, 'Blood Rain', *Cine21*, 499 (26 April 2005)

the sprawling factories and vast warren of sweatshops, such as the fabric and garment manufacturing complex ‘Peace Market’ of the 1970s, caused silent grievance to numerous workers.<sup>28</sup> In the film, everyone on the island from the current mill owner, Lord Kim, down to the peasant housewives depends on the paper business for their livelihood. It is this blind reliance on development at the expense of other values, like humanity or justice that leads to tragic consequences, just as Korea’s modern history also testifies.

While the paper mill boasts its advanced technology and efficient production structure, the island as a whole is still a feudal and deeply superstitious society. The place is characterised by a fight over hegemony between rationality and mysticism, symbolised by the co-existence of the modernised paper mill and a female shaman. This is the

**FIG. 26 The Introduction of Won-gyu**

context in which the protagonist Won-gyu enters the scene. He is an outsider, who has received the gift of Enlightenment, evidenced by the modern technology he associates himself with. As the intertitle ‘first day’ appears on screen in an iris shot, a cut displays that this is actually Won-gyu’s POV observing the island through a telescope from the boat (FIG. 26). The camera work and editing demonstrate here that he has successfully placed the island under his scrutiny; the confident expression

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<sup>28</sup> George E. Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent within the Economic Miracle* (London: Zed Books, 1990)

on his face delivers a sense of authority and trust on his part. Not long after he arrives on the island, he examines the first corpse, speared from the navel to the throat and quickly concludes that the victim was dead when the spearing happened. Later, he supervises an elaborate autopsy with a team made up of a physician, a painter, and two investigators (FIG. 9). He first puts on a pair of spectacles in order to read the report and then concludes that the cause of death is poisoning. Through such means, the film sustains the audience's interest in the period murder investigation by providing historically authentic methods and rich forensic detail, aided by the Digital Cultural Heritage Content project.

In light of the purge discourse, Won-gyu is seen as a person equipped with the appropriate tools and knowledge to tackle the murder cases, just as TRCR and other investigative bodies have the necessary resources and institutional support to uncover the past. In this sense, he represents the people in Korea, who set out to uncover the truth behind the past, participating in the 'Settling the Past' campaign. Won-gyu, who supports the rationale of science, naturally, does not believe that the vengeful spirit of the merchant Gang is committing the murders. Instead he is convinced that only the identification of the real murderer can bring peace to the island. To access the truth, he has to struggle with the backward bureaucracy of the island that hinders the progress of his investigation. While the film reveals the unsavoury side of other characters, Won-gyu at first appears flawless and trustworthy. His eventual demise, therefore, comes as a great shock to the viewer, who has come to identify with him.

Signs of his fall are first suggested in the scene where he visits the paper mill for the first time. Travelling by horse, Won-gyu arrives at a clearing in the woods on a top of a hill. Inside the wooden gate, he gets off the horse, his face clearly

impressed by the setting of the place. There is a cut and we see Won-gyu walking towards the mill with his back turned against the camera. As the string music crescendos, the camera dollies up to reveal the full scale of the paper mill, making him physically dwarfed in comparison. Once inside the mill, he carefully examines the place until a mechanic reel breaks, loosening a wooden plank that strikes him down. This accident leaves a deep cut on his right arm and the wound remains with him until the end of the film. Maureen Turim notes that 'the metaphor for psychic trauma relies on a comparison to the more visible damage done to a physical body by a blow, shock or cut'.<sup>29</sup> As an externalisation of the 'psychic trauma', Won-gyu's wound functions as a bodily inscription of trauma that is neither easily healed nor forgotten.

Won-gyu's accident, in this sense, is just the beginning of his gradual demise. Although he does not acknowledge the existence of ghosts, he realises the enormity of the murder plot when he says 'the past must be alive some way seeing that someone would do something crazy like this (revenge)'. The closer he gets to the core of the case, he realises that the past has a tight grasp on the present and does not want to let go. He is then confronted with surreal and irrational events that he cannot account for, such as the awful stench coming from the water. Growing more desperate by the day, Won-gyu even resorts to violent interrogation by threatening and torturing one of the suspected informants. In *Blood Rain*, violence and fear are deeply embedded in the very structure of society, mirroring the tragic modern history of Korea.

Finally, Won-gyu finds out that this seemingly serene and prosperous town

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<sup>29</sup> Maureen Turim, 'The Trauma of History: Flashbacks upon Flashbacks', *Screen*, 42.2 (Summer 2001), p. 205.

has its dark secrets. The aristocrat Lord Kim, who took over Gang's paper mill after his execution, condoned his death out of the jealousy that a merchant could accrue such wealth and respect. His son, Kim In-gwon, denounces the father in order to avenge the death of his lover, who was Gang's daughter. Du-ho, a seemingly loyal servant to Gang, bitterly betrayed his master's generosity out of spite. What is more, the lower classes tacitly approved Gang's death through their silence so that their debts would be cancelled. Even Won-gyu's superior officer, who accompanied him to the island, is suggested as a figure of moral weakness, who lifts evidence from a crime scene and pulls strings in the government for his own interest. Finally the victim Gang is not without fault from the way he treated Du-ho. With precision, *Blood Rain* catalogues human fallacy through weak, immoral, and selfish people. Collective guilt is amplified in the scene where Gang is dragged to the execution site. Here the badly-bruised Gang pleads to the spectators to clear his name but no one responds to his plea. This scene clearly suggests that it is not just the five informers but all the islanders who are responsible for the deaths. Therefore in the scene where the townspeople decapitate chickens, to use their blood for protection, the camera takes time to capture the sacrificed chickens in a close-up, reminding us of the communal sin of the massacre. Not one, but three chickens are butchered live on camera, directing our attention to the wrongful accusations and stories of innocent victims who were charged with crimes they did not commit.

An even more shocking revelation awaits Won-gyu when he finds out that the person who sentenced the whole family to the execution board is none other than his own father. At first, the unsuspecting Won-gyu listens to his junior officer describing the identity of the judge; he then quickly realises that the personal profile perfectly fits with that of his deceased father. At this moment Won-gyu is suddenly



transported back in time to the moment the father condemns Gang. The camera zooms in on the faces of five informers one by one, who are clearly suffering discomfort at the sight of the execution. Won-gyu's terrified face is spotted among the group of spectators and just as others support the execution through their silence, Won-gyu stands speechless and frozen. As now dismembered Gang looks off-screen to his left just before his death, the film cuts to the eye-line match of Won-gyu's face, as if to directly attribute the blame to him. The execution has a physical impact on Won-gyu; the gash on his arm opens up and the blood flows once again.

This scene is disorienting in a sense because in reality, Won-gyu could not have witnessed the execution that happened seven years ago with his own eyes. Thomas Elsaesser understands that the traumatic event 'intimately links several temporalities'. He notes that they 'coexist within the same perceptual or somatic field, so much so that the very distinction between psychic time and chronological time seems suspended'.<sup>30</sup> In view of this, the scene above is either a fantasy sequence inside his mind, or an *imagined* flashback, triggered by the revelation of the trauma that disrupts the physical space and temporalities. What is noteworthy here is that Won-gyu slips into the scene of the execution almost imperceptibly and the sense of disorientation and moral confusion make way for the violent confrontation with the historical trauma in the scenes that follow.

What the seamless editing and manipulation of temporality allude to, moreover, is the permeable boundary between the past and the present, or more precisely the influences they have on each other. The linear progress of time in *Blood Rain*, which showed one murder per day, is disrupted and from now on the

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Postmodernism as Mourning Work', *Screen*, 42.2 (Summer 2001), p. 197.

identification of the murderer is not as important as the disclosure of the truth from the past. Won-gyu assumes personal responsibility to clear Gang's name as a way to ask forgiveness to the innocent people executed by his father. His efforts, however, are obstructed in the denouement. I pay close attention to this scene which distinctly dramatises the effect of trauma on the individual psyche.

After saving the fifth informer Du-ho from the hands of the murderer bent on revenge, Won-gyu and his team escort Du-ho out from the paper mill. Outside, they are confronted by a group of islanders who stop them, trying to take matters into their own hand. In unison, the crowd demands Du-ho's life and Won-gyu cannot stop the frenzied mob. Du-ho meets his fatal end when he is stabbed with sickles and hooks by the angry men. Before Won-gyu's own eyes, miniature carnage is staged where rationality and justice collapse. Just then the ominous blood rain falls from the sky, drenching everyone with collective guilt and madness. The camera takes time to cut back and forth between the scenes of the carnage and Won-gyu's distressed reaction. Recoursing the trope of melodrama through the use of non-diegetic music and expressive close-ups, the film tries to visualise the experience of trauma on the protagonist. The violence increases when the villagers start harming themselves after they have butchered Du-ho. Even Lord Kim, who was not in the crowd, cannot escape the consequence of his action. The camera cuts to his stately room and tilts from the ceiling down to his hanging body. The rain is dripping from the gap in the ceiling and has soiled a stack of books in red, symbolising the fall of a scholarly ideal.

Cutting back to the scene of carnage, the shocked Won-gyu retreats into the mill, and falls down on his knees, with his back facing a wooden wheel. With Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2 starting in the background, Won-gyu enters a

new plane of time, to an interstitial space of past, present, and future. As the camera draws near to his frozen face, the wheel behind him starts to roll and cut to his POV, gradually an image of a working day in the mill fades-in from the empty space in a long shot (FIG. 27). Here the workers are busying themselves to produce quality paper. Cutting back to the reaction shot, an ambiguous yet disenfranchised expression emerges on his face, with the gigantic wheel still turning in the background.

This fantastical scene is pivotal in the understanding of the trauma in *Blood Rain* and I tease out the allegorical meaning by making reference to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin famously explained his notion of the dialectical image by saying:

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation [...]  
For while the relationship of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.<sup>31</sup>

Rejecting a historiography that posits a continuum between past and present, he argues that the illumination of a historical moment is witnessed in 'flashes' from a constellation of events. Taking his cue from Benjamin, Adam Lowenstein points out the dialectical image that is specific to the historical representation in horror cinema, naming it the 'allegorical moment' which is:

A shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined. These registers of space and time are distributed unevenly across the cinematic text, the film's audience, and the historical context.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 462. (N2a3)

<sup>32</sup> Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representations: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 2.

**FIG. 27 The Allegorical Moment: Won-gyu inside the Paper Mill**

With the two quotes in mind, I read the scene inside the paper mill as an allegorical moment where ‘registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted’. In a brief ‘flash’, a meaning emerges from the ‘constellation’ of somewhat confusing images. By not specifying whether the image of the paper mill is purely out of Won-gyu’s imagination or his psychical experience of a dialectical moment, the scene crystallises a moment of past and present, and fantasy and reality. The film textually inscribes the trauma to the figure of Won-gyu whose indecipherable expression signals the excess of history, which eludes verbal articulation and narrative possibility.<sup>33</sup> What Won-gyu witnesses may very well be what the paper mill was, is, and will continue to be. Like the nation Korea lost in the myth of the ‘Miracle on the Han’, made possible by legitimising successive dictatorships while turning a blind eye at injustice, history will flow in the name of progress like the continuously spinning wheel.<sup>34</sup> The scene provides a moment of reflection on Korea’s modern history, where even the most effective and rational investigations cannot confront the magnitude of the explosive legacy of the past.

The film ends with Won-gyu returning to the mainland, mirroring his arrival to the island in the opening scene. Nothing much seems to have changed except for his look of defeat. He checks the wound on his arm, which finally seems to be showing signs of healing. The scientific equipment – the telescope and the autopsy tool, which he associated himself with – is nowhere to be seen. Even his hat (*gat*) that symbolises his status and occupation is missing. He then secretly let go of a crucial piece of evidence, the embroidered letter, that helped him solve the case, into the ocean. He does so as if to detach himself from the only remaining object that

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<sup>33</sup> Maureen Turim, ‘The Trauma of History’, p. 209.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, pp. 309 – 311.

connects him to the island; in effect, Won-gyu who at first conscientiously sought the truth buries the whole incident in the deep waters. Ultimately, it is this framing structure – his journey to and from the island – that sets off the metonymic chain that allows us to trace the allegorical link between the political history and the present context.

The director Kim stated in an interview that *Blood Rain* is a film about ‘the sense of shame’, which is quickly disappearing from Korean society. He added that he wanted to make sure ‘there weren’t any heroes in the film’.<sup>35</sup> Even though he does not make a direct reference to the ‘Settling the Past’ campaign, the textual and contextual resonances are ample as my reading shows. The ‘Settling the Past’ campaign is digging the past for a bright future of the nation, but it may end up compromising everyone. Just as Won-gyu finds himself implicated in the case because of his father, the communal history of the nation will not easily allow anyone to be exempt from the collective responsibility. In this sense, the campaign is a double-edged sword because of the dangers involved in revisiting a traumatic past.

While alluding to the purge, *Blood Rain*, further, examines the destruction of Korean masculinity. From Won-gyu, who is physically wounded, to Lord Kim’s son, In-gwon, who suffers from a phobia of the sea (thalassophobia), the film presents male characters who are unwell in body and mind. The clue here is that Won-gyu and In-gwon hold, both, respect and resentment towards their fathers. In her study on recent Korean horror films, Hwang He Jin finds a pervasive theme of ‘the fathers who discourage their son’. She notes that ‘if we expand this point logically, these violent and two-faced fathers are representational of the masculinity shaped by

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<sup>35</sup> Anon., ‘The Director Talks about *Blood Rain*’, *Cine21*, 502 (17 May 2005)

Korea's modernisation project'.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, both characters are suffering the consequences of the compressed modernity that drove their fathers to turn to injustice and greed. The past, it is revealed, has far greater power on the present than Won-gyu initially presumed it to be, precisely because of this familial and generational link. Haunted by the memory of his father, Won-gyu fails to construct a healthy identity and he remains in the imaginary, signified by his decision to abandon the embroidered letter. In his book, Kim Kyung Hyun argues that the depiction of emasculated and humiliated male subjects in the 1980s Korean New Wave has now given way to new and powerful masculinity seen in more recent Korean blockbusters.<sup>37</sup> *Blood Rain* appears as an antithesis of the spectacular remasculinisation process in Korean cinema at present. Instead of complying with this revised notion of strong masculinity, here the male staggers away defeated in the face of national trauma, weaved inside a narrative of period murder investigation. If *Blood Rain* charts the destruction of masculinity under a patriarchal society while alluding to the purge, the next film in question, *Shadows in the Palace*, bases the narrative in women's histories and the ghost genre.

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<sup>36</sup> He Jin Hwang, 'The Family Narrative Represented in Recent Korean Horror Films: Focusing on the Problem of Memories in *A Tale of Two Sisters* & *The Uninvited*', *Film Studies*, 29 (2006), p. 388.

<sup>37</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*.

### *Shadows in the Palace*

*Shadows in the Palace* is the debut feature of Kim Mi-jeong, who is one of the few woman directors working inside the male-dominated *Chungmuro*. While her female contemporaries hone their skills in family dramas and romantic comedies,<sup>38</sup> Kim took on the challenge of the *sageuk* horror. Such a decision may have partially derived from her experience working on the set of *King and the Clown* as an assistant director. The film did moderately well at the box-office, selling 1.4 million tickets and it gave Kim the Best New Director Award at the Korean Film Awards. The Korean title of *Shadows in the Palace* is *gung-nyeo*, a generic term for palace women. Shin Sang-ok had made a film with the same title in 1972, the abovementioned *A Court Lady*. While *Shadows in the Palace* is not a remake of *A Court Lady*, the film does make reference to the same theme of the ‘obsession with royal bloodline’ seen in *A Court Lady* and other royal court *sageuks*. I come back to this point in the latter half of this section.

During the *Joseon* Yi Dynasty, the royal court housed a few hundred ladies who attended to the royal family and oversaw the general running of the place. Historically, these women usually came from commoner families and entered the palace as young as three. Once there, they received various training, including court manners and language, reading and writing, and the other skills required for their future posts.<sup>39</sup> JaHyun Kim Haboush notes that ‘service in the palace was one of

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<sup>38</sup> These are the female directors working in Korea at the moment: Lee Eon-hee made ...*Ing* (2003) and *Love Exposure/Eokkae Neomeoui Yeonin* (2007) and both are romance dramas. Kim Hee-jung made a family melodrama *13 Year Old Su-ah* (2007). Park Chan-ok is famous for her two films, *Jealousy Is My Middle Name* (2002) and *Paju* (2009). Lim Soon-rye directed a hit sport drama *Forever the Moment* (2007). Other female directors include Jeong Jae-eun, Lee Jeong-hyang, and Byun Young-joo.

<sup>39</sup> JaHyun Kim Haboush, ‘The Vanished Women of Korea’, in *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, ed. by Anne Walthall (Los Angeles: University of



very few salaried professions open to women' in dynastic Korea and the surviving palace literature written by anonymous palace women attest to the level of education they were given. These skilled individuals are modern day career women, who devoted themselves to their daily duties such as delivering mail, cooking, and embroidering silk. As shown in *Shadows*, palace women were bound by two rules: firstly, they were to remain chaste and could not get married, except in the rare cases they were selected as royal consort. Secondly, once they enter the palace, they could not leave the place freely. From the outside, therefore, palace women were viewed both as tragic figures living the life of self-denial and 'figures of fantasy and envy because [of] their nearness to power, [and] their access to the court's pomp and luxury'.<sup>40</sup> Such collective impression alludes to the fact that the actual lives of the palace women were veiled and very little is known about their obscure realities, heightening the curiosity and mystery for an external public. The director, Kim, wanted to address this issue with her film and it was her personal mission to 'remember the lives of those buried in history'.<sup>41</sup> Hence, conducting extensive research on the historical material and archival documents, she wrote the script by herself. In the DVD director's commentary, she shares not only the information concerning the filmmaking but also her extensive knowledge of these traditional women. In all, the film *Shadows in the Palace* uncovers the hidden lives of the palace women, in a bleak tone, unveiling injustice and cruelty in a society structured by control.

In *Shadows*, the murder investigation begins when the corpse of Wollyeong,

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California Press, 2008), p. 293.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>41</sup> *Shadows in the Palace* Production Notes, *Cine21*,  
 <[http://www.cine21.com/Movies/Mov\\_Movie/movie\\_detail.php?s=note&id=21260](http://www.cine21.com/Movies/Mov_Movie/movie_detail.php?s=note&id=21260)>  
 [accessed 1 December 2010]

a personal maid of Royal Consort Hui, is found hanging. Cheon-ryeong, who works in the medical department, realises that this apparent suicide is nothing but a cover-up murder. She also finds out that Wollyeong had recently given birth. While her superiors try to suppress any rumours related to the death, fearing that a scandal may threaten the welfare of the inner court, Cheon-ryeong is determined to uncover the truth. She first suspects that Wollyeong had been impregnated by a member of the royal family when a love letter is found in her room, but later learns that there is an even darker conspiracy surrounding the infant crown prince. Her investigation, without her initially realising it, eventually brings back her own painful memories. She had been seduced six years earlier, resulting in a baby she would have to abandon. Meanwhile, the spirit of Wollyeong rises from her corpse and wreaks havoc inside the palace. Engulfed by a desire for power, the ghost goes on a killing spree. The film ends with an image that clearly shows that the Royal Consort Hui is possessed by the spirit.

Similar to *Blood Rain*, *Shadows* is not so much focused on the unravelling of the murder mystery, as it is concerned with setting a background in which the past can haunt the present. The film opens with an establishing landscape shot of the royal palace under a bright moonlight. But rather than zooming in on the orderly and sumptuous buildings of the place, the camera pans to the right and enters into a dark and dense forest. Effectively, the film is more interested in investigating what is hiding behind the grand façade: a dark space filled with secrets and mysteries. The royal palace, moreover, is a tightly enclosed space brimming with jealousy, conspiracy, and lust for power; even the spatial arrangement of the place is complicit in the silencing of the truth. In one scene, the mute maid Ok-jin is framed for stealing precious gold threads from the workshop and is tortured by her superior. At this exact

moment, the palace matron makes a surprise visit to their working quarter and the women quickly hide the evidence of the torture by locking Ok-jin inside a storage room. They also make sure the doors are tightly closed, lest a woeful cry from the maid should be heard. And with a simple operation of the folding blinds, the room is swiftly transformed into an open space where the maids calmly attend to their embroidery work as if nothing had happened. As a result, the matron has no idea that a horrendous torture had occurred in the room just moments ago. In addition, with strong backlighting, shards of light come through the decorative lattice windows and doors, giving the effect of *noir*-ish Venetian blinds (FIG. 28). The traditional sliding doors offer keyholes where the characters can relish their voyeuristic desires, just as the maid, Jeong-ryeol peeps through the sliding door to watch the royal consummation.

**FIG. 28 The *Noir*-ish Interrogation Room in *Shadows***

Much like *Blood Rain*, *Shadows in the Palace* contains scenes of graphic violence that disturb our senses. If *Blood Rain* presents five execution methods from ancient times, *Shadows* charts a number of medieval torture methods. For instance, the supervisor orders another maid to push sharp needles under Ok-jin's fingernail in

a very gruesome manner. When the palace matron interrogates Cheon-ryeong, she administers *juriteulgi*, a common torture method from the past that involves two wooden rods crossed between tied legs. Cheon-ryeong is then tortured by having her face covered with wet paper, a method that also appears in *Blood Rain*. In the world of *Shadows in the Palace*, stealing is tantamount to getting one's hands chopped off and sexual misconduct means the *guillotine*. The images of pulled fingernails, needles in flesh, slashed necks, and dismembered hands become the symbols of cruelty exacted on these women. Every aspect of the women's lives is under the strict monitoring of the palace matrons. In the yearly initiation ceremony called *Jwiburigeulnyeo* designed to educate the young apprentices, those who have committed a crime are punished in public to set an example. Even the women from the royal family are not free from the hierarchy of power and control. The Queen Mother canes Royal Consort Hui when she finds out that Hui has broken the rules of the inner court. In such a way, the film constructs a small cosmos of an oppressive society, in which the members must live under the constant fear of being accused or condemned. The dimly-lit interrogation room which contains a simple desk and chair resembles the infamous interrogation rooms from the authoritative regimes, famously depicted in *Memories of Murder*, where horrendous tortures and countless deaths have occurred. The iconography of torture is central to the Korean cultural memory and even decodable in a period setting. Appropriately, the tagline of *Shadows in the Palace* reads 'if you want to live, just shut up'. The silenced past, however, eventually explodes, taking the form of a vengeful and malevolent spirit.

Just as Won-gyu in *Blood Rain* possesses an educated mind, Cheon-ryeong is a practitioner of medicine with a keen knowledge of the human body. She examines the dust pattern of the suicide site and the unclenched fist of Wollyeong

and concludes that she had been murdered before being hung from the wooden beam. Cheon-ryeong is also a character with an individual mind, driven by her desire to uncover the truth, even if that means having to don male clothes and trespass into the male-quarter of the palace. Much like Won-gyu whose attempts to solve the murders are discouraged by the townspeople, Cheon-ryeong's investigation is constantly met with opposition by her superiors who try to coerce her into submission. As Won-gyu is distraught upon learning the truth about his father, Cheon-ryeong is reminded of her own painful memories during the investigation; neither character is triumphant in the end. Cheon-ryeong's trauma is glimpsed in several flashbacks, fragmented in nature and incomplete until the whole incident is unveiled at the end of the film. To borrow Mieke Bal's words, the memory resurfaces textually yet it precludes a healing integration.<sup>42</sup> When she is finally given the chance to reveal the truth of Wollyeong's death, a truth she has been relentlessly pursuing, all she can say is 'I've been told to block my ears and remain silent'. It is her guilt of her own infanticide that defeats and compels her to submit to the power structure of the palace; she realises her effort to uncover the truth was futile and even destructive.

The dead Wollyeong is the opposite of the normality and rationality represented by Cheon-ryeong. As a ghost, she is undead; her existence is unexplainable by science. Cheon-ryeong identifies her as a recent mother, after noticing the milk-stained blouse and examining her vagina. In other words, as a mother with milk still flowing from her breasts and a being that transgresses the boundary between the real and unreal, Wollyeong is monstrous and the ultimate

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<sup>42</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Introduction', in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), p. x.

object.<sup>43</sup> As a constant reminder of her material presence, her covered body is left on the examination table, reappearing in subsequent scenes, and anticipating her return as a spirit. The evil spirit eventually emerges in a clichéd manner. While a young apprentice is unaware of the action taking place in the background, the spirit rises up like dark matter and blows out a candle. Taking the form of a shadow, the ghost leaves the body and the room, just before the authorities can burn her physical body

to ash. Now a vengeful spirit, she wanders freely inside the palace to exact her revenge, doing so by possessing the body of her victim. In the scene of the Queen Mother's death, we see for the first time the face of the ghost. With long dark hair and an extremely pale face, Wollyeong at first seems to fit the iconography of traditional female ghosts, frequently seen in classic ghost stories of popular culture like in *A Public Cemetery of*

**FIG. 29 *The Evil Twin*: The Traditional Iconography of a Female Ghost**

*Wolha* or *The Heartland of*

*Myths/Jeonseol-ui Gohyang*, a television period horror that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s. The poster for *The Evil Twin* (Kim Ji-hwan, 2007), a recent *sageuk* horror film, recycles the quintessential image of the feudal female ghost draped in white (FIG. 29). Yet Wollyeong does not appear in the signature female ghost attire, the

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<sup>43</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 9-10.

white *hanbok*. Rather she slips herself into the Queen Mother's embroidered gown. The Queen Mother points to this when she says, 'How dare you try on the garment of the Queen Mother!' This scene underscores the fact that Wollyeong is not just any vengeful ghost but a power-hungry one. The ghost's cultural ancestry, in effect, beckons a study of how the film revises and updates this familiar genre of the *sageuk* tradition.

## Revising Female Ghost Horror and Royal Court *Sageuk*

While confronting the traumatic past with a murder investigation as an allegory of the purge, *Shadows in the Palace* borrows many tropes and motifs from the female ghost/*yeogwi* films and the royal court *sageuk*. In her valuable research on Korean horror films, Baek Moon-im concludes that two types of ancient folk stories later influenced the making of the female ghost genre. They are ‘A Tale of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon’ and ‘Arang-type Myth’. In ‘Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon,’ a young girl Jang-hwa throws herself into the river when her stepmother accuses that she is not a virgin. Following her older sister’s death, Hong-ryeon also kills herself by drowning. Afterwards the two ghosts visit the governing officers at night to tell them their sorrowful stories. Unfortunately all men die from the shock of seeing the ghosts. Eventually, a new governor arrives who is brave enough to endure the initial shock; he then clears Jang-hwa’s name by punishing the evil stepmother. The ghosts make their final appearance to show their gratitude and then disappear.<sup>44</sup> Effectively, this type of ghost does not so much desire bloody revenge than to have their story heard by an intercessor. In ‘Arang-type Myths’, on the other hand, the revenge and exorcism motif is more foregrounded. In these stories, women are usually killed under the threat of sexual assault. Returning to the living world as ghosts, they harm not only the perpetrators, but also his family and the innocent public; as a result, the violent and horrific Arang-type ghosts call for an exorcism.<sup>45</sup> In the end, a powerful Buddhist monk reinstates the peace by successfully dispelling them. As Baek notes, these two archetypical ghost stories became the basis of the female ghost horror genre in Korea.

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<sup>44</sup> Moon-im Baek, *The Sound of a Female Scream under the Moon: A History of Korean Horror through Female Ghosts* (Seoul: Chaeksesang, 2008), p. 158.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.



In the female ghost films of the late-1960s, the heroine is either murdered by her plotting in-laws or forced to kill herself in order to guard her chastity. The women, sacrificed for the sake of the Confucian family order, would return in spirit to disrupt the real world. Often their return is motivated by the protection of her children as seen in *A Public Cemetery of Wolha*. These distinctly maternal ghosts did not cause terror as much as they induced the audience's sympathy. Even so, they were all sent back by the end of the film. While evoking the discontent of the brutal sweep of modernisation under the dictatorship, as suggested by Kim Soyoung earlier, these films in the 'fantastic mode' confirm the restoration of patriarchal authority by condemning and eventually controlling the evil females.

Set inside the royal palace, *Shadows in the Palace* positions itself as a ghost film with an added 'royal court *sageuk*' motif. In this sense, Shin Sang-ok's two royal court horrors *One Thousand Year Old Fox* (1969) and *A Ghost Story of the Joseon Dynasty* (1970) are the most immediate generic reference points for *Shadows* from Korean film historiography.<sup>46</sup> Centred in a typical royal court *sageuk* setting, these films are marked by vengeful spirits who harbour an excessive desire for power. In *One Thousand Year Old Fox*, a thousand-year-old fox possesses a military general's wife, Yeohwa, and then tries to harm Queen Jin-seong, a monarch from the ancient *Silla* Dynasty. *A Ghost Story of the Joseon Dynasty* is a reworking of the infamous Yeonsan narrative by grafting in the female ghost motif. The tyrant Yeonsan tries to seduce Yahwa after ordering her husband's death; Yahwa then kills herself and offers her spirit to her cat. Charged with her spirit, the cat eventually enters the royal palace, letting the evil spirit possess Jang Nok-su. Endowed with

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<sup>46</sup> Baek has written on both films in an article titled, 'A Study on Historical Narratives and Horror Film: About Shin Sang-ok's Films', *Minjok Munhaksa Yeongu*, 20 (2002).

feline powers, signified by her superhuman jumps and predilection for raw fish, Nok-su tries to kill Yeonsan. Both films end with the appearance of a Buddhist monk who dispels the spirit.

Just like in traditional royal court drama, it is the obsession for power and the succession of a royal heir that drives the women to such abject cruelty in *Shadows*. Wollyeong is killed by an evil stepmother figure, Sim, who fears that her existence would threaten her power over the crown prince. The ghost, therefore, is motivated primarily by her desire to reclaim her son, as seen in many other female ghost horrors. Another strand of the struggle between in-laws is acutely portrayed in the tension between the Queen Mother and Royal Consort Hui. The presence of the King, one of the few male characters to appear in the film, is diminished in this battle between the females in a domestic setting.<sup>47</sup>

Yet *Shadows in the Palace* is not a typical *sageuk* horror and its similarities with the female ghost genre and the royal court drama end here. Recontextualising existing *sageuk* formulas and conventions, the film updates the horror narrative for the contemporary audience. Firstly, there is neither an intercessory substitute nor a sagacious monk to appease the malevolent spirit of Wollyeong. Even though Cheon-ryeong solves the murder case, the ghost is not satisfied (unlike Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon who disappear afterwards) and freely exacts her own revenge anyway. Instead, the film simulates the relationship between Cheon-ryeong and Wollyeong along a similar character construction as found in recent K-Horrors. Studying *Memento Mori* (Min Gyu-dong & Kim Tae-yong, 1999) and *Unborn but Forgotten* (Im Chang-je, 2002), Baek Moon-im defines the female protagonist in relation to the ghost as a ‘sympathiser’ and ‘double’. She argues:

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<sup>47</sup> He Jin Hwang, ‘The Family Narrative’, p. 378.

The young female protagonist, at first, appears to have no relation to the ghost. As the heroine tries to solve the mystery, she becomes sympathetic to the ghost, and then experiences the trauma of the ghost with her own body [...] in the end, she herself has transformed into a monster.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly Cheon-ryeong is forced to confront her traumatic past when the ghost appears inside the palace. She becomes personally interested in the case because she sees herself in the dead maid. Looking at Wollyeong's body, Cheon-ryeong laments to her superior, 'Why do I feel like I'm lying dead on that table?' The trauma that links both women is their motherhood: Wollyeong having lost the right to raise her child and Cheon-ryeong having killed hers. The unthinkable infanticide makes Cheon-ryeong as monstrous as the ghost. Through such a narrative device, *Shadows* reflects a contemporary horror sensibility within a period setting.

But it is in the ending that *Shadows* most radically departs from the usual female ghost films. By this time, Wollyeong has killed four people who got in her way and has even possessed the Royal Consort Hui. At the funeral ceremony of the Queen Mother, Hui holds the infant prince in her arms and gives a 'knowing' and direct look at the camera. Then the three-tiered, wooden-gates of the palace shut, one by one, sealing the ghost inside the palace walls. There is no symbolic closure of the film, as the ghost will continue to wreak havoc and threaten the succession of the monarchy. The visual motif of 'three shutting doors' deserves special attention as this has been used, in almost the exact way, in another royal court *sageuk*, *Eunuch* (1968).

In *Eunuch*, an aristocratic girl Ja-ok is taken into the royal palace as a concubine against her will. The narrative is framed by tragedy – coercion, castration, miscarriage, murder, rape, and suicide. The King has no redeeming feature and the

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<sup>48</sup> Moon-im Baek, *The Sound of a Female Scream*, p. 269.

palace is ruled by blood-thirsty women. The figuring of space – layered windows, secret passages, and long and confined corridors – depicts the palace as a claustrophobic place, corrupted and perverse (just as in *Shadows*). In the end, Ja-ok murders the King with a small metal pick in bed then kills herself. What is more, the Queen Mother dies of complications after a secret abortion. Upon hearing the news of the King and the Queen Mother's deaths, the Queen orders a violent suppression of the scandal, stating that anyone who divulges the secret will be punished by death. Any eunuch or palace woman who may be aware of the royal deaths is brutally murdered. After Ja-ok's body is taken out from the palace, the heavy-wooden gates firmly shut. This door image is repeated three times. The film's ending is particularly bleak as the Queen Mother's illegitimate pregnancy, the Royal Consort's miscarriage, and the death of an heirless King, threaten the continuation of the royal bloodline. Even so, the monarchy manages to veil the truth by sealing its doors; the function of the doors here is to *protect* the order. However in *Shadows*, the visual motif previously used to safeguard the monarchy now perpetually curses the royal palace. The film lets the evil ghost stand triumphantly inside the palace walls, while holding the token of power, the crown prince.

As such, the film explodes buried secrets and the hidden crimes through the figure of the ghost. The obliterated records of the palace women similarly resurface through the horror narrative. In doing so, it symbolically recuperates the oppressed women's history, so far silenced for the sake of the nation. To borrow Lim's words, the film functions as an 'allegorical frame in which an almost-forgotten history becomes newly meaningful as a kind of haunting or ghostly return'.<sup>49</sup> Just as *Untold*

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<sup>49</sup> Bliss Cua Lim, 'Spectral Times: The Ghost Film as Historical Allegory', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 9.2 (Fall 2001), p. 289.

*Scandal* revises the ‘female subjugation under Confucian ethics’ motif of earlier *sageuk*, *Shadows in the Palace* reworks a number of *sageuk* conventions, including the iconographies and generic motifs, to derive a new meaning from the female ghost narrative. The subversive message contained in the film is recognisable to a contemporary audience, who are familiar with the intertextual referencing and generic trajectory of *sageuk*.

As a work of allegory, the narrative tension of *Shadows in the Palace* acknowledges the process of history writing in Korea. Inside the royal court, Cheon-ryeong is pressurised by her superiors to report the murder as a suicide. This scene offers a moment of reflection on the dominant history, formed through the silencing of truths. Even so, the victors ruling the discourse cannot stand firm against the ‘Purging the Past’ campaign. These beliefs, systems, and structures face total attack as the nation braces itself for an all-out investigation.

## Conclusion

In his study on Post-Korean New Wave films from the mid-1990s, Moon Jae-Cheol notes that Korean cinema in the 1980s suffered a collective amnesia, but since the late 1990s, there is too much to remember.<sup>50</sup> As the ‘Settling the Past’ campaign and other purge movements disrupt official history, Koreans cannot but construct a new memory of the national past. By borrowing the tropes of the horror genre, both films represent the systematic violence detectable in Korea’s history. Accordingly, *Blood Rain* and *Shadows in the Palace* are infused with the pain of remembering the traumatic past. The films demonstrate a complex entanglement of historical memory through the use of flashbacks, non-linear narrative, and horror imageries. Using an allegorical frame, they posit individual characters to tell the narrative of the nation. At the same time, by charting the frustration and defeat on the part of the investigators, these films become a moral tale, warning of the dangers of returning to the past. The two protagonists symbolise the nation, stepping out into a bright future but whose progress is hindered by past disasters. Unfortunately for Won-gyu and Cheon-ryeong, they are not able to recover from the past and their fragmented identity is symbolically captured in the frozen close-up of their faces towards the end of the film. The final question is then, are these films conservative texts proposing that history is better left undisturbed? Perhaps, they are warning against the rash liberalism, where the nation-wide ‘purge’ becomes almost a cult and commodity, pushing people into a frenzied mob, as seen in *Blood Rain*. While offering a space for collective mourning, therefore, the films become a reflective warning of the institutionalised purge.

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<sup>50</sup> Jae-Cheol Moon, ‘Cinematic Memory and Cultural Identity’.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Memory and (Trans-) National Imperatives: Colonial Period Drama

In the final chapter of this thesis, I study the way in which South Korean cinema engages with a more recent legacy of the past: the colonial period. At first, these period dramas appear to lack the temporal distance to the present to qualify as *sageuk*; yet, a critical distance has been reached. This can be witnessed from the ways they visualise colonial Korea in a striking manner, much like historical dramas set in the dynastic era revisit the pre-modern past. As I demonstrate, recent colonial period dramas envision the clash of tradition and modernity by rendering a fascinating cinematic space. Such burgeoning interest in the colonial period is aided by the nationwide decolonisation campaign to ‘purge the past’ and the availability of historical fiction and non-fiction that have helped fuel the public’s interest in one of the nation’s most traumatic episodes. The period itself, therefore, is marked by contradiction in the contemporary public imaginary: regrettable evidence of Korea’s failure to achieve autonomous nationhood and an exotic and exciting place full of consumption possibilities. What, then, are the stakes in reconciling the heightened visual pleasure and the ethics of memory in the colonial period drama? With this question in mind, I examine three films: *Rikidozan: A Hero Extraordinary*, *Blue Swallow*, and *Modern Boy*. These three films are all big-budget period dramas that failed to turn a profit, which obliquely delineates the boundary of the collective historical imagination. Ultimately, the contexts of production and consumption allow us to contemplate the nation’s own ambiguous and conflicting memories of its colonial history.

*Rikidozan: A Hero Extraordinary* is a biopic on Rikidozan/Yeokdosan, a

(North) Korea-born man who became a famous pro-wrestler in post-war Japan. His life in *Rikidozan* is intimately intertwined with the fate of his motherland, even though he himself purports to be ‘of the world’. While engaging with the themes of language, name, and cosmopolitan identity, the film explores the fraught space between post-war Japan and post-colonial Korea through the body of Rikidozan. I also pay attention to the co-production practice between Japan and Korea and examine the possibility of the two nations sharing a national hero.

Another biopic *Blue Swallow* retrieves the life of aviatrix Park Gyeong-won from near oblivion. Despite being discriminated against on account of her ethnicity and gender, Park achieves her dream of flying in Japan. Her plan to return to her homeland, however, is thwarted by her untimely death. The popular discourse surrounding *Blue Swallow* cannot be separated from the renewed interest in the issue of collaboration and the ‘new woman’. In particular, the film examines the gendered remembrance of colonial history circulating in the Korean collective memory.

*Modern Boy* is set in late-colonial Seoul. With the help of high production-values and CGI-assisted period recreation, the film paints a visually stunning picture of the familiar yet exotic capital city. The film invites the audience to sensually experience the times through the material fetishism of one ‘modern boy’, Hae-myeong, who wanders the urban cityscape in search of his love. But as soon as the nationalist dictum enters the text, the allure of the period and the burden of history collide in a violent manner. In the end, the film tries hard to destroy, in an equally spectacular manner, the meticulously recreated film world.

All three films rely heavily on romantic narratives in order to amplify the ‘tension between the intimacies of private life and the field of public action’, a common trope in the historical film that allows the audience to experience history as



an intense and epic drama. Leger Grindon adds that:

the recurring generic figures of the historical fiction film are the romance and the spectacle – the one emphasizing personal experience; the other, public life. Each film negotiates the relations between the individual and society and expresses the balance between personal and the extrapersonal forces through its treatment of the two generic elements.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of these three films, the deployment of a romance narrative is the strategy used to (unsuccessfully) puncture the core of traumatic history. Whether to shape a diasporic North Korean male into a Japanese national hero (*Rikidozan*), smooth out allegations of collaboration (*Blue Swallow*), or motivate a politically-indifferent protagonist into taking up terrorism for the cause of his nation (*Modern Boy*), love becomes the driving force in constructing the personal narrative.

In all, the three films can be situated within the discursive terrain that is currently underway to revisit the colonial era. They are the sites where the contemporary anxiety over and fascination for history can be detected. Before engaging with the films in detail, I start the discussion by presenting the wider cultural discourse on colonial Korea in contemporary popular culture to demonstrate how the three films are part of this general trend.

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<sup>1</sup> Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p. 10.

## Recent Trends in Colonial Representation

A teleplay *Capital Scandal/Gyeongseong Scandal* (KBS2, Jun. – Aug. 2007) set in 1930s Seoul begins with the following voice-over narration: ‘Motherland, the nation, and liberation. Class, revolution, and freedom. Independence, struggle, and terrorism. Such things should be thrown to the dogs!’ With a melancholic accordion playing in the background, the handsome womanizer, Seonwu Wan, and three other men suspiciously walk along the city streets at night until they stop in front a neon sign that reads ‘Paradise’. They carry an air of seriousness and caution, and the tension reaches its peak when they open the door to the building; yet, what is waiting for them inside is a cheerful crowd at a dance hall. The four men join in the fast-tempo swing dance at the moment the voice-over concludes ‘throw them to the dogs!’ The next scene cuts back and forth between the shots of the dance and that of assassinations happening elsewhere, quoting the famous ‘baptism’ scene from *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1974).

The opening sequence of *Capital Scandal* sums up the contemporary imagination of the colonial times that reverberates in film, literature, and television: the protagonist whom the audience is led to identify with harbours little, if any, nationalistic feeling (Seonwu Wan in this case); the period mise-en-scène is meticulously designed and attractive to look at; and the drama pays particular attention to the mundane lives of ordinary people (entertainment existed even then). The last of these points is particularly important. Till now, the colonial era has been engrained in the collective memory as the nation’s darkest and most shameful moment and cinematic representations have not deviated from this formula. For instance, Im Kwon-taek’s *General’s Son* recycles the bleak ‘a nation-under-

occupation' imagery while idolising the life of legendary gangster, Kim Du-han. The tension between stereotypical social types, the admirable resistance fighters and patriotic thugs against the evil Japanese and corrupt collaborators is resolved in violence. Very little is shown about those who remained in-between the ideological divide. In *Capital Scandal*, in contrast, the neon signs, dance parties, flappers, well-dressed men, and general indifference to political ideology, invite the audience into the film world. The colonial setting provides the background for a love triangle (rather a quadrangle) to emerge between a tabloid-reporter, a feisty schoolteacher, a police investigator for the Japanese, and a glamorous *gisaeng* and member of a resistance group. Symptomatic of the turbulent era, where tradition and modernity meshed together, *Capital Scandal* visualises this clash with an eclectic period mise-en-scène. The series hybridises traditional Korean, Japanese, and western motifs in fashion, music, and architecture. Moreover, it also borrows conventions from comedy, action, and drama, together with spy thriller and gangster noir (as seen in the opening sequence). Towards the end, however, a nationalist ideology *enters into* the text, whereby all four characters take part in the liberation movement by assassinating Japanese officials and collaborators at a party. Such narrative closure, safely containing all kinds of subversion and misdemeanor, can be found in almost all the films I discuss in this chapter.

This fresh take on colonial Korea is expressed in a number of film genres including martial arts biopic (*Fighter in the Wind*), medical horror (*Epitaph* [Jeong Sik and Jung Bum-sik, 2007]), spy comedy (*Once Upon a Time* [Jeong Yong-ki, 2007]), Manchurian Western (*The Good, The Bad, the Weird*), detective thriller

(*Private Eye*), and sporting drama (*Y.M.C.A Baseball*).<sup>2</sup> The majority of films foreground the nation's encounter with modernity, signified either by sport (baseball in *Y.M.C.A.*), new technology (airplanes in *Blue Swallow*), or popular media (radio in *Radio Dayz* [Ha Ki-ho, 2008]). Films like *Once Upon a Time* feature morally ambiguous characters whose actions are guided by the acquisition of personal wealth and/or happiness and not national liberation. While the 'Settling the Past' campaign continued the uncompromising investigation into the highly politicised issue of collaboration, these period dramas are invested with the energy of recreating a realistic picture of the past where ordinary people actually lived. What is more, recent colonial period dramas fully commit to the visual demands of the historical genre. They appeal to the audience with a colourful and retro-chic mise-en-scène that includes songs, lifestyles, and set designs. The characters appear in silk dresses adorned with beads and colourfully tailored three-piece suits. It is no coincidence that many films are centred around performers (as seen in *Radio Dayz*, *Once Upon*, and *Modern Boy*), who sing and dance seductively in a smoke-filled jazz club. A period mostly remembered in black and white photography is now brought back to life as primary-coloured spectacles complete with period glamour.

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<sup>2</sup> Manchuria during late-colonial period was a home to Korea's resistance army. The Manchurian western refers to a cycle of films popular from the 1960s that depicted the struggle between the Korean liberationists and the Japanese Imperial Army.

### *Rikidozan: A Hero Extraordinary*

*Rikidozan: A Hero Extraordinary* is a period biopic that speaks as much about the Japan-Korea relationship as it does about Korea's past. The making of *Rikidozan* intersects with a number of industrial and political contexts, namely the Korean film industry turning its eyes towards foreign markets and the increasingly bilateral cultural exchanges with Japan. I, therefore, begin my discussion by setting the context of the Japan-Korea co-production trend in recent years.

During the first half of the 2000s, the local film industry continued to grow in size; yet, the skyrocketing production costs and the collapse of ancillary markets (such as DVD), especially due to illegal downloading, motivated the industry to expand Korea's share in the greater Asian film market. At this moment, co-production surfaced as one means to bring a transnational dimension into filmmaking. Such a strategy ensures more capital and a wider distribution nets, and therefore, crucially reduces risk. I use the term 'co-production' in a broad sense, that takes form in a number of ways including: the availability of transnational capital, the exchange of actors and crews, the use of language and setting, the choice of production locations, target audience and primary markets, and the trajectory of distribution and circulation. Film collaboration inside Asia with a Korean presence, in my view, has followed two main trends. One is the mythical blockbuster that taps in on intra-regional sensibilities, trying to replicate the international success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, China/HK/Taiwan/USA, 2000).<sup>3</sup> And the other is trendy romantic drama, more often than not *hallyu* star vehicles.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> They are: *Seven Swords* (Tsui Hark, China/HK/South Korea, 2005), *The Promise* (Chen Kaige, China/Korea/USA, 2005), *The Battle of Wits* (Jacob Cheung, China/HK/Japan/Korea, 2006) and *Three Kingdoms: Resurrection of Dragon* (Daniel Lee, China/HK/Korea, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> This includes: *Windstruck* (Kwak Jae-young, HK & Korea, 2004), *Daisy* (Lau Wai-keung,

In recent years, the Japanese film market, which is four times the size of the Korean market, has surfaced as *the* largest export venue for Korean films. The sales to the Japanese market reached nearly 80% of the total export figure in 2005.<sup>5</sup> However, until very recently, 1998, this trade could not have been reciprocated, as Japanese cultural products were banned in South Korea. Moreover, the cultural exchange between the two countries has always depended on volatile political circumstances and contingencies. For example, the first Korean film to be granted permission to shoot inside Japan, *Correspondent in Tokyo* (Kim Soo-yong, 1968) was made just not long after the Japan-Korea Normalisation Treaty of 1965. Similarly, not long after 1988 Seoul Olympics ushered in a new era of cultural diplomacy for Korea, *Aelan* (Lee Hwang-lim, 1989), a film that depicts a love affair between a Korean man and a Japanese woman was released. Finally in 1998, as an outcome of the Korea-Japan summit meeting, did Japanese cultural products start entering Korean borders; this agreement specified a gradual opening of the market in four phases that concluded in 2002.<sup>6</sup>

Korea's decision to open the doors to Japanese culture was motivated by the pursuit of a stronger bilateral economic exchange, designed to benefit both nations in the long term. Yet, such cultural exchange, made possible through an institutional agreement, does not automatically advance reconciliation. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, friction over colonialism and war responsibility still linger in the Korean collective memory and this complicates the economic necessity of remaining close to

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HK/Korea, 2006), *Virgin Snow* (Han Sang-hee, Japan/Korea, 2007), *A Good Rain Knows* (Hur Jin-ho, China/Korea, 2009), and *Sophie's Revenge* (Jin Yimeng, China/Korea, 2009). I add here that there has been collaboration efforts in the auteur-led horror genre, such as omnibus *Three* (HK/Korea/Thailand, 2002) and *Three Extremes* (HK/Japan/Korea, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> Eun-jeong Tae, 'Export of Korean Films in 2005' (KOFIC) download available from <files.kofic.or.kr/eng/publication/1162198078453194048.doc> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>6</sup> Haksoo Yim, 'Cultural Identity and Cultural Policy in South Korea', *The International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 8.1 (2002), pp. 41-42.

its former enemy, even in the globalising world of today. For example, a film that reached the number two spot at the Korean box office in its opening week, *Be With You* (Doi Nobuhiro, Japan, 2004), was taken down from the theatres immediately after the comments made by the Japanese Minister of Education inflamed the on-going Dokdo/Takeshima territory dispute in April 2005.<sup>7</sup> Observing the new trend of Korea-Japan co-productions, Chung Hye Seung and David Scott Diffrient claim that:

[these films] herald a new trend in multinational collaborations, and attest to a growing willingness on the part of South Koreans and Japanese alike to enter into a bilateral trade relationship driven as much by cultural interests as by economic imperatives. The significance of Japanese-Korean co-productions thus lies more in their *symbolic function* as the material embodiment of the two nations' cultural reconciliation than in their commercial appeal.<sup>8</sup> (emphasis mine)

I contend that as in the case of *Be With You* indicates the positive 'cultural' significance of Korea-Japan cinematic exchanges can easily be overturned when confronted by national memory and trauma. Further, the fact that almost none of the Korea-Japan co-productions have made a positive financial impact in *both* nations begs the question on the limitation of such an opportunistic venture. For instance, *Rikidozan: A Hero Extraordinary* and to an extent *Blue Swallow* were designed from the beginning to target the attractive Japanese market. *Rikidozan*, in particular, was an ambitious project in the sense that the film tried to break new ground in the Korea-Japan co-production practice. Even so, these big-budget period pieces flopped at the box-office, allowing us to trace the afterlife of the intertwined histories, traumatic experiences, and cultural nationalism.

*Rikidozan* is directed by Song Hae-sung, who has examined masculinity at

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<sup>7</sup> Su-gyeong Kim, 'Japanese Films inside Korean Film Market', *Cine21* (6 April 2006). More on the comment made by the Japanese minister see Anon., 'Takeshima Japanese, Schools to be Told', *Kyodo News* (20 May 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, 'Interethnic Romance and the Political Reconciliation in *Asako in Ruby Shoes*', in *New Korean Cinema* (2006), p. 204.

the margins and its struggle against harsh realities, from a hoodlum (*Failan*, 2001) to a man on death row (*Maunday Thursday*, 2006). Unlike Kim Ki-duk, who also turns to the theme of troubled masculinity, Song grants a romantic resolution for his low-life protagonists, sublimating love for redemption.<sup>9</sup> From this context, *Rikidozan*, a diasporic man who tried to make a name for himself in the Imperial homeland seems a perfect fit for Song's oeuvre. The executive producer for *Rikidozan*, Tcha Seung-jae, had an equally important role in reviving *Rikidozan* on the screen. He was the former co-head of the production company SidusFNH and was named the most powerful person in the Korean film industry for two consecutive years.<sup>10</sup> A vanguard figure in trans-Asian filmmaking, Tcha produced *Gangster Lessons* (Kim Sang-jin, 1996), a film that was mainly filmed in Japan, featuring Japanese actors and some Japanese dialogue. Later he worked on *One Fine Spring Day* (2001) with the investment secured from the Japanese company Shochiku Films with the participation of Hong Kong-based Applause Pictures. Kawai Shinya, a veteran Japanese producer who had previously worked with director Iwai Shunji, was to act as the other executive producer for *Rikidozan*, overseeing many aspects related to filming in Japan.

The appearance of two high-profile Japanese stars with international recognition – Nakatani Miki (the heroine of the *Ring* series) and Fuji Tatsuya (the star of art house cult *Realm of the Senses*) – further reflects the film's transnational aspirations. The presence of Sol Kyung-goo (playing *Rikidozan*) also needs mentioning as he is considered a bankable actor in Japan, after the critical success of

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<sup>9</sup> On embattled male identity in Kim Ki-duk's films see Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> He was listed at number one spot in both 2006 and 2007 from 'The 50 Most Powerful People in the Korean Film Industry', a survey conducted by *Cine21*. See, Seok Mun (3 May 2007)



*Peppermint Candy*.<sup>11</sup> In the narrative, Rikidozan develops close ties with Mr Kano who aids his dream of becoming a world-class professional wrestler. Through such character compositions, Japan and Korea enter into the public imagination as friends and neighbours and not simply as old enemies.

Despite the film featuring a multi-national main cast, it was mostly filmed on location in Japan, and more importantly, the main language used is Japanese. From the running time of 139 minutes, the total time Korean language is spoken amounts to less than eight minutes. This was a huge risk on the part of the makers, because the Japanese dialogue and reliance on subtitles could alienate Korean viewers. While the use of the Japanese language may be part of the film's pursuit of authenticity, it also reveals the extent to which the desire to penetrate the lucrative Japanese market influenced the decision-making process.

*Rikidozan*, moreover, derives generic and thematic motifs from a number of cinematic cycles found in Japanese cinema. While analysing its generic tropes, Mark Morris notes that this 'noir-ish male melodrama can, in the East Asian market, sound familiar echoes with a variety of more localized genres, such as *rōnin*, *yakuza*, or Chinese martial arts films'.<sup>12</sup> I would add that *Rikidozan* also has resonance with *zainichi* films. *Zainichi* refers to resident Koreans living in Japan, who now form the country's largest ethnic minority. A number of Japanese films have dealt with the thorny issue of the diasporic Koreans and their social standing. David Desser writes on the *burakumin* issue and the 'Korean problem' in Japanese cinema of the 1960s, making reference to Oshima Nagisa's *Death by Hanging* (1968).<sup>13</sup> More recent

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Morris, 'Melodrama, Exorcism, Mimicry: Japan and the Colonial Past in the New Korean Cinema', in *Cultural Studies and Cultural Industries in Northeast Asia: What a Difference a Region Makes*, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> David Desser, *Eros and Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*

examples include *Go* (Yukisada Isao, 2001), *Blood and Bones* (Sai Yoichi, 2004), and *Fly, Daddy, Fly* (Narushima Izuru, 2005). By making reference to the uniquely-Japanese theme – *zainichi* – *Rikidozan*, therefore, places itself within the recognisable intertextual matrix of Japanese cinema.

However, making a biopic of the legendary Japanese pro-wrestler who was in fact Korean posed a great challenge to the makers. Rikidozan/Kim Sin-rak was born on 14 November 1924, in Hamgyeong Province in (now North) Korea then moved to Japan around 1940.<sup>14</sup> He was inducted into a sumo club and achieved a certain level of success.<sup>15</sup> But his biggest fame came after he returned from America in 1952 and introduced pro-wrestling to Japan. With his new identity as the pro-wrestler Rikidozan, he gained phenomenal attention when his first tag team match with Imura against the Sharpe Brothers was aired on public television. In Korea, Rikidozan is remembered as the teacher of Kim Il and Yi Wang-pyo, who after learning pro-wrestling under his tutelage brought the sport to Korea. Even so, his popularity in Korea is nowhere comparable to that in Japan, where there are countless numbers of biographies, television dramas, and films of his life.<sup>16</sup>

In the inside cover of the *Rikidozan* DVD (Korean version), it is stated that ‘even now 80% of Japanese are not aware of the fact that he is Korean’. Emphasising the fact that he was known to suppress his ethnic origin, the film attempts to reclaim a Japanese national hero for a Korean public. Mainly due to the sensitive subject

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(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 147-48.

<sup>14</sup> For more on his life see Muramatsu Tomomi, *Joseon Youth Rikidozan*, trans. by Seok-yun O (Seoul: Book At Books, 2004) and Jeong-dong Kim, ‘A Resolution of Revenge’, in *Korean Modern History inside Japan* (Seoul: Haneulchae, 2001)

<sup>15</sup> Kim acquired Japanese nationality and changed his name to Momota Mitsuhiro, a point that has been left out of the film.

<sup>16</sup> A quick key-word search for ‘Rikidozan’ on the Japanese Amazon website yielded 52 items which ranged from critical biographies to photo catalogues (June 2009). On the other hand, there are about seven books published on his life published in Korea.

matter, the producers struggled to secure investors from the Japanese side. After the script was completed, Tcha and Kawai each agreed to find 50% of the £4.5 million production fund. Yet, no Japanese investors were willing to commit, stalling the production for six months starting from July 2003.<sup>17</sup> In the end, Korea's CJ Entertainment joined in as the main investor. As a result, the funding of this ambitiously transnational film came solely from Korean sources. In the *Guide to Japanese Film Industry & Co-Production*, *Rikidozan* is grouped together with *2009: Lost Memories*, *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, USA, 2003), and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (Clint Eastwood, USA, 2006) as an instance where 'producers, cast and crew from several countries are involved in a film produced by a single country'.<sup>18</sup> This booklet suggests that a less-than-significant input was given by the Japanese-side when making *Rikidozan*, branding the identity of the film as Korean and not a Korea-Japan co-production. As a result, even though the film was originally conceived with transnational ambitions, the finished product ended up being more of a national venture. Even so, the film continues its negotiation of the transnational and national elements at a textual level, through the construction of the male protagonist.

So who is *Rikidozan*, who also went by the name Kim Sin-rak and Momota Mitsuhiro? The different names he was called in his short life attest to the refracted identities of a man who remained at the margins as a Korean living in (post-war) Japan. Throughout his life he longed for full integration into a Japanese masculine identity and his success depended on his ability to adapt to a new environment.

The film opens with an intertitle on a black screen, which states 'this is a filmic reconstruction of facts', cordially asking the audience not to be offended by

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<sup>17</sup> Kim Seon-a, 'Making of *Rikidozan*: From the Producer's Perspective' (unpublished master's dissertation, Chung-Ang University, 2006), p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Anon., *The Guide to Japanese Film Industry & Co-Production* (UNIJAPAN, 2010), p. 70. (emphasis mine)

the fictional elements. The next intertitle states ‘I am lonely, the loneliness that only the strong can feel. Life is a match – Epitaph of Rikidozan’. The second caption seems to subvert the first by asserting its own status ‘as history’ with a direct quotation from the historic person. After a short prologue (which I will return to later), we are taken to ‘New Havana Club’ in Tokyo, 1964, where Rikidozan gets stabbed. Then a long flashback begins only to return to the present moment. The frame structure gives an impression that Rikidozan is personally reflecting back on the significant moments of his life. At the same time, the audience is aware of his imminent death and the film conveys an unshakable sense of doom from the beginning, following the life of a man soon to be dead.

The flashback starts in 1944, Tokyo, where WWII still blazes. Kim (as Rikidozan is initially called) is a low ranking sumo-wrestler constantly bullied by his seniors on account of his Korean roots. But his fortunes change when he meets Mr Kano, a wealthy sumo aficionado. Through his skillful machinations, he attracts Kano’s attention and soon is called in for a meeting with Kano and his sumo master. This scene illustrates how he is literally granted a new name and, with that, a new identity. Three men sit on a traditional *tatami* floor, Kano and the coach on one side and Kim on the other side facing the two men. The master hands him a white envelope containing a paper that reads ‘力道山’ (Rikidozan). While Kano quietly watches, the coach orders Kim, ‘this is the name you must carry for eternity’. A close-up captures the moment he unfolds the letter and accepts the name. In the next scene, as Rikidozan exits the frame, the camera tilts up to show a tablet that reads ‘道—心力’ (Sumo is the Way to Power). The audience with some literacy in *kanji* (Chinese characters) would immediately recognise the two letters ‘道’(way) and

‘力’(strength) and then be reminded of the name ‘Rikidozan’ that shares those two characters (FIG. 30, top two). As such he is born again not only as an official sumo wrestler, but also as a figure that inherits the honour and the tradition attached to the sport. At this stage, however, he has yet to have the full mastery of his invented self.

**FIG. 30 *Rikidozan*: The Inscription of Self**

After being continuously frustrated by the racist operation of the Japanese Sumo Association, Rikidozan encounters pro-wrestling, ‘the sport of the world where one’s country of origin does not matter’. With the help of Kano, he goes to America to hone his skills and make a successful debut. He then returns triumphantly to Japan on a plane. This scene begins with the camera tracking an airhostess. She walks down the aisle then asks a passenger in Japanese ‘Can I help you with anything?’ The camera pans to the right to show Rikidozan who answers ‘Nothing’ in English. The camera here creates a moment of suspense before unveiling Rikidozan, who is wearing a yellow-striped shirt, a gold chain and a fashionable haircut. He seems comfortable with his new westernised self, speaking English and taking a long-distance flight. At her request, he signs his name ‘*Pro-wrestler Rikidozan*’ in her small notebook. The close-up of his handwriting on paper mirrors the earlier scene with Kano (FIG. 30, bottom). By writing his name, he inscribes his identity as his new self and gains full agency over the name Rikidozan. What is more, he exerts dominance over the strictly-Japanese tradition of sumo by becoming an *international* pro-wrestler with his name. Succinctly, the film follows the journey of a man who would continuously reinvent himself throughout his life.

What is interesting here is that this journey begins in his adult life and we are never given the explanation of how Kim came to Japan in the first place. As a biopic *Rikidozan* does not chronicle his formative years extensively, as compared to *Portrait of a Beauty* for instance. The film only makes faint reference to the young Kim Sin-rak and his homeland. I delve further into the issue of his homeland by analysing the brief but important prologue.

The prologue begins with a dark blank screen, which turns into an image of a cold winter night. This establishing shot contains snow-capped mountains; falling

snow, wind, and a barking dog can all be heard in the background. As the camera tilts down, a path that cuts across the screen from top to bottom appears. On that path, a boy with a small bundle on his arm is seen running towards the camera. The sound of his heavy breathing grows louder as an almost inaudible woman's voice calls out 'Sin-rak' from a distance. This proves to be the only moment in which the film comments on Rikidozan's life as Kim Sin-rak in Korea.

Given this, home is nothing more than a disembodied voice and fleeting memory of a place for him. Even so, the reference to his mother in Korea is ample. Early in his sumo career when his colleague suggests he run away, he declines the offer by saying 'besides, I have no place to go. My mother won't be happy to see me like this'. And after vandalising the sumo office, the distraught Rikidozan utters a Korean phrase for the first time, which is '*uri eomeoniga...*(my mother is...)', allowing us to catch a brief glimpse of his longing for his mother. As much as he holds his mother dear in his heart, however, he is also plagued by the memories of his motherland. This is most clearly suggested in the two scenes where he visits his Korean friend Myeong-gil, who owns a restaurant in a slum area populated by Korean migrants. Filmed with a greenish blue tint, the cramped and poor Korean slum conveys a sense of warmth and even happiness. This is a miniature Korea situated inside the modernised Japan. In both visits, Rikidozan engages with the domestic act of eating food while exchanging conversation with his friend. His longing for Korean food and fluency in the language is a marker of his Korean identity, suppressed in other scenes.

On his first visit, Rikidozan asks about the news from Korea, which fatefully revolves around the Korean War. The scene is established with a master shot, where two figures are positioned in the middle. Then Myeong-gil hands him a letter that

came from home. After a quick glance at the letter, Rikidozan immediately goes back to eating. In an unconcerned tone, he then says ‘my mum’s gone’. As the scene progresses, the camera draws closer to him, creating an emotional rise. When his friend asks again, he answers, this time more sincerely, saying ‘my mother has passed away’. The letter that took more than four months to arrive subverts the seemingly casual atmosphere of the scene. By presenting the news of the Korean War and the death of his mother in one scene, the film establishes a link between his mother and the motherland. In this sense, the internal war that tears the Korean peninsula apart is a metaphor for the end of the nation, as Sin-rak knows it. The news from home, therefore, translates to a symbolic severance from his now defunct motherland.

The physical and symbolic death of his mother(land) provides him with the motivation to negotiate his identity outside national boundaries. And this is why Rikidozan becomes instantly attracted to pro-wrestling, ‘the sport of the world’. He visits Myeong-gil once again after he achieves success in the sport. Knocking on the door he whispers, ‘It’s me, Sin-rak’ in Korean; cutting to the inside of the room, Myeong-gil prepares a meal of *bulgogi*, a famous Korean barbecue dish. The room is clearly Japanese, with *tatami* flooring and wooden sliding doors; yet, the distinctly Korean sound of the sizzling *bulgogi* provides the aural accompaniment. Their conversation returns to the topic of home, as Myeong-gil tells him that he has signed the repatriation paper to North Korea. When his friend suggests that he should publicly declare his own ethnic background, he responds:

What did Korea ever do for me? Surely if I had stayed at home, I would have died as cannon fodder. My only choice would have been whether the bullet that would blow up my head was American, Russian or something like that. Perhaps I wouldn’t even have that choice. Japan or Korea? What difference does it make? I am Rikidozan and I belong to



the World.

Here the film makes reference to a culturally significant moment in modern Japan, where more than 700,000 *zainichi* Koreans travelled back to North Korea in the years between 1959 and 1961.<sup>19</sup> This scene uses a historical reference to reveal that Rikidozan's eyes are fixed to the wider world and not moored to any one nation. A number of Korean reviewers found his statement problematic. For instance, Lee Keehyeung argues that this scene makes Rikidozan 'a contradictory and opportunistic person', someone who is 'only concerned with his own survival'. While he has so far mobilised (Japanese) national sentiments to further his career, especially in the scene where he defeats giant American wrestlers, he suddenly declares that he is disinterested in the national discourse. For Lee, this is 'the limitation of a film that recourses back to a biographical life without history'.<sup>20</sup> Lee's complaint sounds even more convincing because Rikidozan's aspiration for a global identity is overturned towards the end of the film. Hospitalised after collapsing at a beach, he suddenly recourses back to the idea of an innocent home, talking about his hometown in Korean language to his Korean student. It seems here, the film underscores that Rikidozan never really let go of his homing instinct.

In my view, there is another reason behind this explicit subscription of cosmopolitanism. In the scene with Myeong-gil, Rikidozan is not merely resisting the idea of having to come clean about his Korean identity; more concretely, he expresses his desire to erase his association with his homeland which is fraught with political strife as the North is now under a communist regime. If he had agreed to the idea of the repatriation now (and publicising his ethnic identity), it could be

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<sup>19</sup> Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, 'Ethnically Marked "Heroes": From Rikidozan to Shunpei in *Blood and Bones*', *Post Script*, 28.2 (Winter-Spring 2009)

<sup>20</sup> Keehyeung Lee, 'On the Politics of Historical Representation', p. 15.

construed as an implicit endorsement of the North Korean state. The film, in fact, is extremely careful in its treatment of Rikidozan's relationship with North Korea. This is particularly so, because in reality he is revered as a national hero in the North much more so than in the South. A well-known anecdote of Rikidozan is that he allegedly sent an expensive Mercedes-Benz, along with a calligraphic message of support to the communist regime on the dictator Kim Il-sung's birthday in 1962. In an article published by a North Korean newspaper, it was stated that 'Kim (Rikidozan) was abducted to Japan, against his will in his youth and years later, just as he was about to return back home, he was killed by the Japanese'.<sup>21</sup> Omitting any information that might tarnish his patriotic image, this article is written instead in a way to confirm his continued loyalty to the North, while exposing the atrocities committed by the Japanese. It goes without saying that North Korea's propagandistic appropriation of Rikidozan is starkly different from how he is remembered in Japan.

To be sure, Rikidozan is positioned at the centre of complicated ideological relations and international politics between the three nations. Because Japan, North Korea, and South Korea all have their stake in remembering this famous man, each country cannot but make his story fit into the national discourse. In light of this, what is revealing is that a South Korean biopic, *Rikidozan*, would rather have its protagonist associated more closely with Japan than with North Korea (hence the scant reference to his life in Korea). Such narrative structuring reminds us of the case of *Hwang Jin Yi*, where elements from the North Korean novel were also circumvented in a strategy to maximise its commercial appeal. Whether this simply suggests that the South Korean film industry is dictated by the triumph of capitalistic

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<sup>21</sup> Anon., 'Rikidozan is a Patriot: A National Hero that Kim Il-sung Favored', *Labour Newspaper* (24 November 1994), p. 3.

ideals and market potential over racial and cultural heritage, is not entirely clear, especially given the popularity of films dealing with North-South relations, like *JSA*. What is clear, though, is that *Rikidozan* shows little resistance in glamorising a protagonist who leaves his native land to chance his luck in his imagined home of Japan and then aspires to establish himself beyond national borders.

One important narrative strategy that the film deploys to avoid further political bargaining is the theme of heterosexual romance. Rikidozan's desire for his homeland is displaced by the figure Aya, who steadfastly waits, supports, and loves him. The caring and gentle Aya counter-balances the ambitious and stubborn Rikidozan and through their romance the audience gets a glimpse of his soft and *human* side. After their fateful meeting inside an air raid shelter, Rikidozan sees Aya again at the Geisha house. There she plays the *samisen* (a traditional musical instrument) for the guests. When he notices her, all other sounds are muted except for the non-diegetic string music; cutting to his POV, Aya's face is illuminated by a soft-focus key light. She continues to play the instrument in slow motion, without realising Rikidozan's gaze. The scene clearly delineates the object of desire, Aya, as an idealised and non-threatening woman who does not return the male gaze.

From then on Aya becomes his emotional support and home, a mere shadow in Rikidozan's life. Isolde Standish writes about the 'popular theme of the *guddo baddo* man (the good, bad man) scenario' in Japanese cinema, where 'the miscreant hero is redeemed by the love of a "good" woman'.<sup>22</sup> By idealising the sacrificial Aya, the film recycles the universal trope of patient femininity. A scene that dramatises this point occurs when Rikidozan informs her about his plan to go to America. He is

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<sup>22</sup> Isolde Standish, *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema: Towards a Political Reading of the 'Tragic Hero'* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 53.

sitting at the table while she prepares dinner; her proximity to the kitchen, whether in their old house or in the new white mansion, assigns her a domestic identity. When the electricity goes out, she searches for the candle in a full shot, perfectly blending with the birch-colour of the kitchen. In a clichéd manner, she lights a candle at the moment where marital tension surges; she is the light of Rikidozan's life. While Rikidozan's fashion styles radically shift over the years, Aya's constant devotion is conveyed through her unchanging choice of clothes.

The film ends with an epilogue of Rikidozan and Aya visiting a shrine where they take a photograph together, thus monumentalising their happiest moment. It is Spring and cherry blossoms are in full bloom. Wearing their best clothes, Rikidozan and Aya pose for a picture, then the camera freezes, imprinting a black and white image on the screen. The picture perpetually captures them, framing the image of Rikidozan within the language of love and devotion that crosses borders. What is more, once his death is announced in a caption, the film reveals that Aya too, died soon afterwards. Inside the film world, it does not matter whether the real Rikidozan was a devoted and repentant husband or not.<sup>23</sup> Such fictionalisation of a historic life overwrites the real Rikidozan's complex love life with a conventional romance narrative. This not only fulfils the formation of a devoted couple but also functions to divert our attention from any ideological tension deriving from his transnational connections. The narrative strategy of *Rikidozan*, in turn, reveals the lingering effects that the complicated post-colonial history of East Asia has on contemporary cultural production. Then how was the film received in both Korea and Japan and what were

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<sup>23</sup> In her memoirs, Rikidozan's official wife Tanaka Keiko suspected that there were at least four other women in his life: an estranged wife back in North Korea, another woman who bore him three children, the geisha, Fumiko, who provided the inspiration for the character of Aya, and a *zainichi* woman. Keiko Tanaka, *My Husband Rikidozan*, trans. by Seong-rye Han (Seoul: Jaeum and Moeum, 2004)

the box-office results?

Korean critics, in general, were generous with regards to the quality of the period aesthetic in *Rikidozan*. It received better reviews than other colonial ‘heroic’ biopics such as *Fighter in the Wind* and *Thomas Ahn Jung-geun* (Seo Se-won, 2004) that recourse back to pronounced nationalistic sentiments.<sup>24</sup> Even so, the film did not perform well at the box-office. What is more, *Rikidozan*, a project with a clear eye on the Japanese market from the start, did not succeed in securing financial nor critical attention in Japan. The release date in Japan was pushed back, possibly due to the fact that the film did not have a successful debut in Korea. Finally Sony Pictures bought the distribution rights and the film went on exhibition in Japanese theatres in March 2006, only after an extensive re-editing and re-dubbing process. In the end, in a year where fifty-two Korean films were shown in Japan, *Rikidozan* did not make it in to the top ten list.<sup>25</sup> Suffice to say the financial gain in Japan was marginal.

The review in *Yomiuri*, a newspaper with the highest circulation in Japan, stated that the film’s portrayal of Rikidozan as a ‘serious and tragic’ figure was ‘unexpected’. In other words, as he is a national hero, the audience would have immediately identified him as a success. It also noted that ‘had it been made by a Japanese director, the film would have looked very different’ and concluded that ‘while Rikidozan is a symbol of economic growth in post-war Japan, this film represented the experience of the Korean people’.<sup>26</sup> The reviewer does not hide his

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<sup>24</sup> Seong-il Jeong, ‘Three Sorrows in *Rikidozan*’, *Monthly Word/Mal* (January 2005), p. 173.

<sup>25</sup> The biggest box-office hit in Japan was the *hallyu* star Choi Ji-woo vehicle *Now and Forever* (Kim Seong-jung, 2006). Also included in the top ten list was *King and the Clown* (7<sup>th</sup> spot) and *Duelist* (10<sup>th</sup> place). See Eun-gyeong Yi and Eun-jeong Tae, ‘2007 Export Status of Korean Film to Japan’ (KOFIC, 24 April 2007)

<sup>26</sup> I thank Nagisa Hikino for finding and translating the two reviews from Japanese websites. Anon., ‘Review of *Rikidozan*’, *Yomiuri Online* (6 March 2006) <<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/entertainment/cinema/review/20060306et04.htm>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

mixed feelings on seeing a Korean film taking liberties with a Japanese national hero. Similarly, a review on *Cinemassimo*, a Japanese website dedicated to cinema, stated that the film ‘shatters the glorious image of a hero of our time’ and instead it presents a man ‘filled with a deep sadness for not having a home or a place to return to’.<sup>27</sup> The fact that both reviews did not comment on the use of Japanese dialogue tells us that the language aspect did not markedly boost the film’s appeal to the Japanese audience (as intended by the makers). As mentioned before, the story of Rikidozan has been told many times before, in books, television programmes, and films in Japan. The lukewarm reception at the Japanese box-office suggests that Song’s *Rikidozan* did not provide a satisfying perspective on his life for the Japanese audience, who are all too well familiar of this historic figure.

Decades after the Liberation and in an era where economic benefits often precede the political concerns of a nation, the historical memory of colonialism and the Cold War still holds its power in the realm of cultural production. Just like the real Rikidozan, who aspired to be a transnational citizen but in fact occupied the liminal space between three nations – Japan, South Korea, and North Korea – the film floated among the nations without being fully welcomed by any. Even so, it presented a model of a colonial period biopic that later films would emulate and distance themselves from. The next film I discuss, *Blue Swallow*, is another colonial period biopic of an expatriate. Released a year after *Rikidozan*, the film sheds light on to the issues of gender, nation, and the collaboration discourse.

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<sup>27</sup> Anon., ‘Review of *Rikidozan*’, *Cinemassimo* (14 December 2006) <<http://cinemassimo.livedoor.biz/archives/50685788.html>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

## *Blue Swallow*

The sophomore feature by Yoon Jong-chan, *Blue Swallow* charts the life of a female aviator Park Gyeong-won (1901–1933). This expensive biopic was just as unlucky as its heroine in real life, encountering a number of obstacles during the long production period, only to perform disastrously at the box-office. While the original idea was first conceived in 1995 by the production company CINEII, Korea Pictures took over the project when the budget continued to rise. It was only in 2003 that the two leads Jang Jin-young (in the role of Gyeong-won) and Kim Joo-hyuck (as Ji-hyeok) were cast and the filming finally began. The location shooting in Japan, China, and America, together with extensive CGI flying scenes pushed the production budget well over £5 million.<sup>28</sup> What is more, *Blue Swallow* became the target of criticism, due to the protagonist's alleged collaboration, even before the film was released. Park had participated in a long-distance flight sponsored by the imperial government and died when her plane crashed. Whether to appreciate her as a 'cheerleader of imperialism' or an ambitious woman setting out to realise her dreams of flying, was hotly debated on the Internet. This kind of publicity, in the end, worked negatively on the film. Released in the same weekend as *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, USA, 2005) and the smash hit *King and the Clown*, the film was listed at only number six at the box office in the opening weekend and sold less than 600,000 admission tickets, sealing its fate as one of the biggest box-office flops of that year. In this section, I pay attention to how *Blue Swallow* moulds the image of Park using the 'new woman' discourse and existing aviatrix personas. Then I discuss the function of the romance

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<sup>28</sup> *Blue Swallow* Production Note, *Cine21*,  
<[http://www.cine21.com/Movies/Mov\\_Movie/movie\\_detail.php?s=note&id=7908](http://www.cine21.com/Movies/Mov_Movie/movie_detail.php?s=note&id=7908)>  
[accessed 1 December 2010]

narrative and demonstrate how the film unintentionally engendered public discourse on collaboration. In all, *Blue Swallow* allows us to examine the gendered remembrance of the colonial history of Korea.

Born in 1901 in the city of Daegu, Park Gyeong-won travelled to Japan after quitting Sin-myeong Girls' School in 1917. Finishing at Yokohama Art and Performance School in 1920, she returned home to briefly work as a nurse. She then left for Japan again with the intention of becoming a pilot; she entered Tachikawa Flight Academy in 1924 and acquired her aviation certificate in 1927.<sup>29</sup> *Blue Swallow* depicts her life in a chronological order, mainly focusing on her time at the aviation school. The prologue shows how young Park's fascination with flying begins; the film opens with a black and white establishing shot of a rural landscape, containing thatched-roof houses, a raised stonewall, and a distant mountain range. The date is 1910, referring to Japan's forceful annexation of Korea into its empire. The camera pans to the right, showing Koreans wailing at the sight of the Japanese troops. Shot in black and white, only the disk of the imperial *Hinomaru* flag is strikingly red. This scene evokes the typical image of the colonial setting – the mechanised march of the uniformed Japanese soldiers carrying rifles, banners, and flags advances when all that the helpless Koreans can do is watch. The sombre and tragic mood, however, is soon usurped by the children who are simply delighted by the spectacle. Among them is young Gyeong-won, who in a voice-over narrates that 'the grown-ups always grieved over the loss of our country but the children loved talking about ninjas'. At this exact moment, the marching Japanese soldiers transform into black-clad ninja fighters carrying different weapons. In effect, the film

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<sup>29</sup> Kojun Takahashi, *The Life of Park Gyeong-won: Korea's First Female Aviator/Tannichi No Ryuko*, trans. by Hak-han Kim (Seoul: Gyeong-wun Publishing House, 2003). Also see Jeong-dong Kim, 'A Woman who Dreamed of the Sky', in *Korean Modern History inside Japan* (Seoul: Haneulchae, 2001)



makes reference to a historical event (the 1910 Annexation), only to erase the historical realities by inserting a fantasy sequence. The scene demonstrates that even though the period is historically grounded, Gyeong-won distances herself from the nationalistic discourse. The prologue provides a causal link to her later actions when she prioritises her personal desire over national sentiment. Not long afterwards, Gyeong-won encounters her 'primal moment' when she sees a gigantic biplane flying in the sky. The screen is suddenly filled with vibrantly saturated colours, discounting the officious tone of the earlier black and white scene. This boisterous girl with a fascination starts dreaming about flying to escape from poverty and her oppressive father. In such a way, the film naturalises her desire to fly and thus provides her with a concrete motivation to travel to Japan.

A fade-out fast forwards time to fifteen years later. The setting is now Tachikawa Flight Academy. A close-up captures the adult Park's beaming face as she holds up her enrollment slip to the school. The peasant girl carrying chopped wood on her back has grown into a modern woman, wearing cropped hair, a trapper hat, and mannish clothing. It is not only her fashion style that has changed. Leaving her feudal home, she looks comfortable inside the urban environment, displaying her physical mobility by riding a bicycle and later driving a taxi. Modern Japan is constructed through a web of electricity poles, neon signs, paved roads, and automobiles, objects that mark a stark contrast from her poverty-stricken homeland. For Park, colonial Japan is not an evil empire but a place of opportunities. The transformation of Gyeong-won, so far, closely follows the typical trajectory of a 'new woman'.

The term 'new woman' (*sinyeoseong*) emerged in the late nineteenth century

in an Anglo-American literary context and reached Korea via Japan.<sup>30</sup> ‘New women’ in Korea came to designate a group of educated and modern women in the 1920s.<sup>31</sup> Modernisation, urbanisation, and the spread of public education opened up a new space in which women could be relieved from their roles as daughter, mother, and wife, and made themselves more visible in all corners of society, at work, in school and on the streets. As Theodore Jun Yoo notes ‘with her bobbed hair, short skirts and air of determination, the “new woman” took center stage during the 1920s, as she sought to redefine Korean female identity’, they were immediately recognisable by their looks.<sup>32</sup> ‘New women’ were modern day trendsetters whose unique fashion style distinguished them from ‘traditional’ women, who held on to the *hanbok*, a chignon, and flat rubber shoes.

Feminist scholar Kwon Insook observes that the main tenets of the new woman movement in Korea were ‘free love’, ‘free marriage’, and ‘the destruction of the dominant feminine chastity ideology’.<sup>33</sup> In a time when the nation’s primary aim was the retrieval of sovereignty, new women and their ideas were seen as a blatant challenge to the nation. Just as Sheila Miyoshi Jager argues that ‘one of the most curious features of early twentieth-century colonial (and semi-colonial) nationalist movements around the world has been its seeming reliance on domestic issues involving women’, new women became easy targets for constant policing and

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<sup>30</sup> In the British imagination ‘the new woman’ is associated with someone ‘educated at Girton College, Cambridge, rode a bicycle, insisted on rational dress, and smoked in public: in short, she rejected the traditional role for women and demanded emancipation’.

‘Introduction’, in *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, Drama of the 1890s*, ed. by Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2001), p. ix.

<sup>31</sup> Park notes the influence of Japan in bringing ‘new woman’ to Korea. See Sang Mi Park, ‘The Making of a Cultural Icon for the Japanese Empire: Choe Seung-hui’s US Dance Tours and “New Asian Culture” in the 1930s and 1940s’, *Positions*, 14.3 (Winter 2006)

<sup>32</sup> Theodore Jun Yoo, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor and Health, 1910-1945* (London: University of California Press, 2008), p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Insook Kwon, ‘The New Women’s Movement in 1920s Korea: Rethinking the Relationship between Imperialism and Women’, *Gender and Society*, 10.3 (1998), p. 382.

control by both nationalists and colonialists, who believed that these women had been corrupted by modernity.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the revenge on new women was exacted on account of their sexual promiscuity, excess, and irresponsibility.<sup>35</sup> The media both condemned and capitalised on their salacious sexual exploits, shaping the public imagination of the precursory modern women and their scandalous lifestyle. *Death Song* (1991) which immortalised Yun Sim-deok (1897-1926) is a relatively recent example of how the ‘new woman’ is depicted as a negative signifier. A talented soprano, Yun was the first woman to study singing in Japan with a government scholarship. Yet the film reproduces the dominant discourse of the ‘new woman’ by foregrounding her illicit love affair with a married man. The highlight of Yun’s career in the film is her stunning performance as Madam Butterfly, foreshadowing her fate as a tragic heroine. In the end, she throws herself off an ocean liner with her paramour.<sup>36</sup>

Park Gyeong-won in *Blue Swallow* is similarly sculpted according to the image of the ‘new woman’. Her personal ambition takes her to Japan in the 1920s where she adopts not only a new wardrobe but also a new identity. A sexually emancipated woman, she is driven to achieve her goal even if she has to abandon traditional female duties, such as marriage. While Park undoubtedly fits with the

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<sup>34</sup> Sheila Miyoshi Jager, ‘Woman and the Promise of Modernity: Signs of Love for the Nation in Korea’, *New Literary History*, 29.1 (Winter 1998), p. 123.

<sup>35</sup> Myeong-seon Yi, ‘Sexualisation of Women in the Discourse of New Woman’, *Korean Women Studies*, 19.2 (2003), p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> The film was a great commercial and critical success at the time of release. Jang Mi-hee who played the heroine garnered four best actress awards in Korea and the film earned nine awards from the Grand Bell Film Awards alone. The film’s trailer included the following words:

*Death Song* is the myth of love that is lost. It is the scent of nostalgia. Rather than declaring defeat in dark times, they [the two leads] chose to celebrate death and give victory to love. The film is an unforgettable classical ballad of love.

The trailer available from KMDb:

<[http://www.kmdb.or.kr/movie/mdpreview\\_list.asp?nation=K&p\\_dataid=04484](http://www.kmdb.or.kr/movie/mdpreview_list.asp?nation=K&p_dataid=04484)>

general framework of the new woman, her choice of career distinguishes her from her contemporaries who mostly worked in literary or artistic spheres. As a female aviator, not only does she build-up her body to endure physical toil, but also compete with her male classmates, doubly transgressing the protocols of proper femininity. She swears, drinks, and smokes in public and works with engines and machines. Wearing a boyish bob and no make-up, she also adopts masculine clothing represented by blue jumpsuits, trousers, and a waistcoat.

In her book on women travellers, Sidonne Smith observes that the sky was traditionally viewed as a masculine domain uncontaminated by *the weaker sex*, that is, until women also took up flying at the turn of the last century. She notes how:

Modernist poets and intellectuals [...] fervently embraced this renewed masculinisation of the skies through aerial ascent from Mother Earth [...] The aviator-hero was one potent answer to the crisis of masculinity below.<sup>37</sup>

*Blue Swallow* endows Park Gyeong-won with a convincingly *masculinised* early aviatrix image, just like that of the speed-crazy tomboy Amelia Earhart. In order to acquire that aviatrix body she has to endure hard physical training. In the training sequence, the light harpsichord tune undermines the hardship (sweating and bleeding), creating a rare moment where the strength of a female body is presented as a spectacle in Korea cinema. Just as in *Swiri*, where a North Korean female spy must survive an extreme boot camp in order to start her mission in the South, Park must prove her athletic potential to continue her flight training in *Blue Swallow*. On this Smith notes that:

the age of aviation introduced a new spectacle of femininity. Mastery of this radical mode of mobility shifted the defining logic of identity. Flight

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<sup>37</sup> Sidonne Smith, *Moving Lives: Twentieth-century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 75.

transported the modern woman to a new imaginary domain. Here she could negotiate the constitutive constraints of normative femininity and its discontents through familiarity with modern technology, and with that familiarity she could escape, if only temporarily, from *sessile femininity*.<sup>38</sup> (emphasis mine)

Accordingly, Gyeong-won is always on the move, running, riding a bicycle, driving a taxi, or operating a plane, signifying her resistance to be pinned down and be 'sessile'. Only after completing the physical training can she parade her aerial virility in later flying scenes.

In her first flying scene, the film crosscuts between a close-up of Park's face and the plane in a long shot. The aerial long shots emphasise the solitude and honour involved in the act of flying; there are no clouds against which the speed of the planes can be measured as in *The Aviator* (Martin Scorsese, USA, 2004) where Howard Hughes demands 'Get me some clouds!' While in *The Aviator* the male obsession with speed, airplanes, and motion pictures fuse together, *Blue Swallow* idealises flying as the sign of her triumph over all that oppresses her. When asked by her lover Ji-hyeok why she likes the sky so much, she answers 'when you're up in the sky it doesn't matter whether you're Korean, Japanese, a woman, or a man'. Her words curiously echo Rikidozan's fascination for 'the sport of the world', pro-wrestling. The importance of announcing the fateful choice of career, in such a way, is bolstered by their position as a colonised citizen living in the colonial centre.

Later in the film, she participates in a high-altitude race. The selective focus, manipulation of camera speed, and the dramatic use of music highlight her struggle against turbulence and the lack of air. When she reaches the highest point, the escalating background music comes to a pause and even time seems to have stopped.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

When she successfully lands on the ground and wins the competition, all the spectators – Japanese and Koreans together – enthusiastically cheer for her. Given her idea of flying, such dramatisation of her success extends her personal achievement to the victory against the subjugation of gender as well as race. From then on, however, her passion for flying becomes complicit in the political machinations of the colonial setting.

In constructing the life of Park Gyeong-won on screen, the film does not evade the issue of the collaboration but attempts to rationalise her act through three fictional supporting characters: Jeong-hui, a fellow female Korean student at the flight academy; Kibe, a Japanese aviatrix, a rival and later friend of Park's; and her lover Ji-hyeok, who is accused of terrorism and executed. These characters are crucial in the making of the Park Gyeong-won narrative, functioning as mirrors on which her desires and predicaments are reflected. Kibe, in particular, develops close ties with Park and aids her dream of becoming an aviatrix, in much the same way Mr Kano wholeheartedly supports Rikidozan. In effect, *Blue Swallow* does not overtly rely on anti-Japanese or nationalistic sentiment, instead offers a female camaraderie that overcomes nationality and ethnicity. Both women come to an understanding, unhindered by racial ideology, because they share the dream of flying. But it is in the characterisation of Ji-hyeok, that the narrative strategy of this biopic is most revealing.

Ji-hyeok is the son of a pro-Japanese businessman, deeply disturbed by his father's political alliance. His is a representative image of the emasculated and disillusioned men of the colonial period. Gyeong-won meets him for the first time, when she drives the drunken Ji-hyeok in her taxi. She is at first unaware of his Korean identity because they converse with each other in Japanese. But at their

second meeting, Ji-hyeok starts singing a Korean folk song ‘The Song of Hope’

(*Huimang-ga*):

In this world of trial and suffering, what do you hope for?  
Is wealth and prosperity all you desire?  
As I ponder upon the blue sky and bright moon  
Everything in this world feels like anything but an empty dream.

A popular song from the colonial period, ‘The Song of Hope’ was heard once again in mass demonstrations at university campuses during the *minjung* protests in the 1980s.<sup>39</sup> Philip Drake contemplates on the importance of film music and memory saying:

Musical memory seems to be less specifically tied to space and place than visual images, and more intertwined with issues of *affect and audience response*. Music is able to index popular memory and nostalgia in ways that are specific to the medium, and quite unlike visual forms.<sup>40</sup> (emphasis mine)

*Blue Swallow* ‘index[es] popular memory and nostalgia’ by borrowing a song which has a special place in the cultural memory of contemporary Koreans. To be more specific, by first making reference to the dictatorship era, which is fresher in the memories of the audience, the film sets off an associative chain that evokes a general feeling of oppression and resistance to those who do not have firsthand experience of the colonial times. What is more, music here is used as a national metaphor that summarises the experience of the exiles where their cultural identity is effectively erased under the colonial control, instantly strengthening the bond between Ji-hyeok and Gyeong-won.

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<sup>39</sup> Yi Jun-hui charts the history of this song. ‘Music Column’  
<<http://www.gayo114.com/musicColumn/musicColumnMStoryView.asp?no=21>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>40</sup> Philip Drake, “‘Mortgaged to Music’: New Retro Movies in 1990s Hollywood Cinema”, in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. by Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 185-6.

However, it is when Ji-hyeok returns to Tachikawa as a meteorological officer, that the romance between the two really blossoms. ‘Adagietto’ from Mahler’s Fifth Symphony, a musical piece famously used in Luchino Visconti’s *Death in Venice* (1971) accompanies the scene of their first kiss. The Mahler piece returns as a leitmotif of their love in subsequent scenes. By imposing a well-known piece, the imagery of tragedy, illicit passion, and doomed love encapsulated in *Death in Venice* is transferred to *Blue Swallow*, tinging their love with tragedy from the beginning. The film also utilises clichéd images of romance, such as lovers flying together against the setting sun, a date on a hot summer night amongst fireflies, a romantic getaway to a seaside resort, and lovers playfully making a snowman together.

A romantic and caring man who cannot hold his alcohol, Ji-hyeok is instantly feminised when compared to the independent and strong-willed Gyeong-won. While his lack of masculinity compensates for her lack of femininity, gender expectations clash as Park’s plans for her long-distance flight come closer to realisation. With their Mahler leitmotif playing in the background, Ji-hyeok asks for her hand and she, without much hesitation, turns down the proposal. George Custen concludes that in female biopics often:

The female career is dogged by the conflict between the fulfillment of heterosexual desire through marriage or romance and professional duty. [...] [M]ale version of the career/love conflict has the male star so wrapped up in his career that he is unable to give love. Here, the woman’s problem is different: she cannot help but surrender to love, often at the expense of her talent and her career.<sup>41</sup>

*Blue Swallow* goes against the (Hollywood) female biopic convention by making Gyeong-won the person who is too ‘wrapped up in her career’ to return love. Their relationship dynamic is harnessed by the intertextual reference to another film that

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<sup>41</sup> George Custen, *Bio/Pics*, pp. 103-105.



also features the same two stars as a romantic couple. In *Singles* (Kwon Chil-in, 2003), the 29-year-old Nanan (played by Jang Jin-young) receives a marriage proposal from a desirable stockbroker Su-heon (played by Kim Joo-hyuck). Yet she turns down the offer and instead forms a pseudo-family with her single-mother friend, Dong-mi. Actress Jang's previous screen image in *Singles* – a loyal friend and independent woman who cannot be bought by material comfort – naturalises Gyeong-won's choice of career over love. In retrospect, however, Ji-hyeok's proposal functions as a final reminder of her feminine duties, before the news reporter Kim Sang-su assassinates pro-Japanese Koreans, taking the narrative to a tragic conclusion.

Although a fictional incident, the assassination scene signals the moment in which historical trauma enters into the film world. Ji-hyeok and Gyeong-won are dragged into the torture chamber on suspicion of complicity. From then on, repetitive and explicit tropes of torture under colonial times are recycled. Park is kept without sleep and endures electric shocks, while Ji-hyeok is whipped naked. Nail torture, similar to the one shown in *Shadows in the Palace*, is administered on him. Again Mahler laments the tragic fate of the lovers. The exaggerated grotesqueness of screen violence is necessary because it acts as a pre-emptive punishment for her decision to take part in the imperialistic flight.

Such a narrative turn from romance to violence and gore is the epitome of the normalisation process in *Blue Swallow*. The torture scene immediately shores up the nationalistic divide between the good and evil: the Japanese around her, once thought of as colleagues and friends, suddenly reveal their cruel faces. Even Kibe is engaged in an activity that is distinctly Japanese, by making traditional tea in a *kimono* and then paying homage to an ancestral shrine. The scene at the shrine

unavoidably reminds the Korean viewers of the contested *Yasukuni* shrine visits by Japanese politicians. The belated regret on the part of Park advances the narrative, attenuated gravely by Ji-hyeok's prophetic words 'why do I feel like if we don't get married now, we'll never get the chance'. By placing the proposal scene immediately before the assassination, she is doubly penalised for declining Ji-hyeok's proposal as well as co-operating with the Japanese. After Ji-hyeok's execution, Park consigns to 'leave this shitty place', making the last flight appear more as if it is mediated by her lover's last request than anything else.

Park's historic long-distance flight took place on 7 August 1933. The official title of the flight was the 'Imperial Army's Comfort Communication Flight for Japan-Manchurian Friendship', where she was to fly approx. 3000 km from Japan over to Korea then to finish in the Manchu State. In *Blue Swallow*, Park marches toward the plane in an aviator suit, as the cheering crowd surrounds her. The scene is shot in black and white, reminiscent of the earlier scene where the young Park witnesses the arrival of the marching Japanese soldiers. While the film has so far been accompanied by orchestral melodies, no non-diegetic music is used in this scene. Successive camera flashes capture the moment she waves the Japanese flag from different angles, imprinting a black and white freeze frame on the screen. Observing a number of Korean films from the 1980s that end with a freeze frame, Kim Soyoung notes:

It is hard not to interpret the ubiquity of the freeze-frame in terms of a sense of entrapment, immobility, and eternal suspension, which is the experience of spectators who live with the history of colonization, partition, and an intensive concentration of industrial capitalist development.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Soyoung Kim, 'Modernity in Suspense', p. 307.

In *Blue Swallow*, it is the protagonist Park alone (and not the spectators) who is distinctly ‘trapped’ and ‘immobilized’. The freeze frame, therefore, creates a moment to acknowledge the distance that lies between Park and the audience, allowing no identification. Moreover, the stilled image acts as a historical marker precisely because the best known photograph of Park features her holding the Japanese flag, smiling brightly. While the film conveys a sense of authenticity by summoning up a mediated memory – her photograph – the distance between the actual photograph and the filmic re-enactment is insurmountable because of the faint change in her expression (FIG. 31). In a desperate attempt to tone down her willing participation in the flying project, the film makes Park wear a blank stare, distinctly contrasting with her smile in the actual photograph. The slight difference in the facial expression between the film and photograph, therefore, crystallises a moment of rupture between fact and fiction, and historical responsibility and the limits of filmic representation.

As Park boards the plane, the film returns to an earlier scene in flashback where Ji-hyeok taught her how to feel the direction of the wind. Completely absorbed in the memory of her lover, she stretches out her hand towards the sky, feeling the wind and then talks to herself, ‘let’s go Ji-hyeok’. In such a way, the film irons out any other feelings she might have felt at that moment, such as ambition, fear, commitment, or a sense of achievement, reducing her to a figure who boarded that biplane only thinking about her dead lover. Fifty minutes after take-off her cherished biplane ‘Blue Swallow’ crashed into a mountain due to a heavy storm, thereby ending Park’s short life. In the end, romance catalyses the public’s sympathy to her in order to ease the suspicions of her collaboration. Borrowing Smith’s words, Park crashes to the ground, ‘unable to escape to radical alterity of two spheres’ as an

ambitious aviatrix and a romantic subject.<sup>43</sup>

**FIG. 31 Park Gyeong-won holding the Japanese Flag:  
Actual Photograph (top) vs. Cinematic Reenactment (bottom two)**

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<sup>43</sup> Sidonne Smith, *Moving Lives*, p. 86.

In sum, *Blue Swallow* struggles to explore the moral ambiguities and conflicting desires embodied in the historical figure of Park Gyeong-won. What *Blue Swallow* did generate, though, was a polarised public debate on the issue of collaboration.

How to deal with pro-Japanese collaborators is an extremely sensitive issue in Korea where there is still very little national consensus. Mark Morris offers a realistic view when he says:

Most writers, artists and filmmakers only existed as such to the extent they had been educated, enculturated however reluctantly, and incorporated however marginally into the institutional cultural life of the colony.<sup>44</sup>

While it sounds reasonable to conclude that one needed to cooperate with the powers to some extent in order to advance oneself in the colony, the difference between outright collaboration and requisite compromise is often eschewed in the public discourse. This renews the issue of the ‘unresolved’ purge in the Korean context. Bruce Cumings notes that ‘the absence [...] of any serious removals of Koreans who served the Japanese mean, of course, the perpetuation of the power of a colonized elite in every walk of South Korean life’.<sup>45</sup> It is this continued historical failure to ‘settle the past’ that still haunts the Korea of the present. Chung Youn-tae even argues that ‘it is not an exaggeration to identify the issue of pro-imperial Japanese collaborators as the key to understanding the structure and characteristics of the negative aspects of modernity in Korea’.<sup>46</sup>

Park Gyeong-won was more or less forgotten by the Korean post-colonial

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<sup>44</sup> Mark Morris, ‘Melodrama, Exorcism, Mimicry’, p. 198.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War II: The Roaring of the Cataract 1947-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 234.

<sup>46</sup> Youn-tae Chung, ‘Refracted Modernity and the Issue of Pro-Japanese Collaborators in Korea’, *Korea Journal*, 42.3 (Autumn 2002), p. 20.

memory, echoing the character Jeong-hui's words 'do you really think the world will remember you as Korea's first aviatrix?' until the release of *Blue Swallow*. Therefore when the article 'Who Is Glorifying the Cheergirl of Imperialism?' was posted on the Internet ten days before the film's release exposing Park's collaborationist links, the article became the primary source to learn about and reflect on Park's life.<sup>47</sup> The author Jeong Hye-ju attacked *Blue Swallow* on two accounts: its mis-information on Korea's first female aviator and its attempt to erase Park's collaborative activities.<sup>48</sup> And it was Jeong's second point that really caused a wave of controversy.

Jeong persuasively demonstrated that not only was Park fully aware of the imperial motives behind the long-distance flight but also accelerated the colonial interest by taking part in other war campaigns. In addition, she disclosed evidence of the alleged romantic liaison between Park and Koizumi Matajirō, the Minister of Post and Telecommunications at the time. The author argued that her biplane, *Blue Swallow*, was, in fact, a personal gift from him. She also claimed that instead of carrying the fictional character Ji-hyeok's ashes, she boarded her plane with letters of encouragement to the Imperial Army based in Manchuria.

Although the film had not been released (the author wrote this article without seeing the film), the allegation of Park Gyeong-won's collaborationist acts was strong enough to tarnish the reputation of the film as a whole. In the context of the article, the film was suspected of tampering with historical facts in order to whitewash her collaborative past and glamorise her achievements. What started then

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<sup>47</sup> Hye-ju Jeong, 'Who Is Glorifying the Cheergirl of Imperialism?', *Ohmynews Online* (19 Dec 2005)  
<[http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/View/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0000299511](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0000299511)>  
[accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>48</sup> Jeong argued that Gwon Gi-ok, who trained at the Chinese military base, achieved her aviation license two years before Park; thus, she is Korea's first female aviator. The first point was soon acknowledged by the makers who corrected the information to 'Park Gyeong-won, the first Korean *civilian* female aviator'.

can only be termed as a nationalistic media frenzy. A Korean film critic, Djuna, rightly observed that ‘people who had not seen the film and who would not have even been aware that a person called Park Gyeong-won existed a few weeks ago, now condemn her as the ultimate evil of the colonial empire’.<sup>49</sup> Less than a week after the article was posted online, ‘Anti-Blue Swallow Café’ opened, leading the boycott campaign against the film.<sup>50</sup> Not only did the website attack Park, but it also exposed the name of other collaborators and their activities.

Kwon Eunsun, in her insightful article, engages with the gendered politics surrounding the ‘Cheergirl’ piece.<sup>51</sup> She points out the sexualised rhetoric in the article, such as ‘the flower of aggressive imperialistic war’ and ‘selling her body and soul to be a cheergirl of Imperial Japan’, phrases that highlight and condemn her femininity. The attack on her sexual liaison with the Japanese politician, similarly, is designed to draw public outrage just as the ‘new women’ were sensationalised due to their love affairs in the 1920s. After some eighty years, the life of Park Gyeong-won is still being evaluated through the frame of a gendered public space.

The extremely nationalistic response to *Blue Swallow* demonstrates that the tangled post-colonial memory is far from settled in Korea. The debates on the Internet embroiled into larger questions concerning the limits of reassessing collaboration, while losing sight of the film itself. Charting the history of collaboration in Korea, Koen De Ceuster claims it:

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<sup>49</sup> Djuna, ‘*Blue Swallow*: Pro/Con’, *Cine21* (10 January 2006) <[http://www.cine21.com/Article/article\\_view.php?mm=005004001&article\\_id=35866](http://www.cine21.com/Article/article_view.php?mm=005004001&article_id=35866)> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>50</sup> It opened on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2005, with 233 members, but has remained dormant since February 2006. See <<http://cafe.daum.net/antichungyeon>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

<sup>51</sup> Eunsun Kwon, ‘A Study on the Relation of Nationalism and Feminism in Representation of “New Women”: Focused on *Blue Swallow*’, *Association of Image & Film Studies*, 11 (2007), pp. 6-8.

is understood as an aberration that is hardly more than a footnote in the history of the nation. [...] The distinction between the core tradition of the resisting Korean nation and the decadent minority of collaborators is not only made obvious by stressing the latter's small number, but also by drawing a sharp line between nationalists and collaborators, who are demonized in the most vivid terms. By blaming a small number, the majority of the population can cast off any sense of responsibility or guilt.<sup>52</sup>

What De Ceuster suggests is that the collaboration discourse is, in itself, historically produced and shaped by the dominant ideology of the time. The nation has sustained its honour by blaming and branding a minority of collaborators for the prolonged enslavement of the nation and once again the complicated collaborationist history is yoked on to an individual, Park Gyeong-won. The hysterical reaction to *Blue Swallow* indicates that even though there has been sustained energy in imagining the colonial past in a new light through popular cultural depictions like *Capital Scandal*, such revisionist and liberal thinking can easily provoke violent reactions when it comes too close to national trauma, such as collaboration. This, in turn, reveals the contours of a traumatic social memory that have not been assimilated or integrated into the overall narrative of the nation.

Park's place in collaboration history becomes even more complicated due to the fact that she belonged to the generation of 'new women'. While trying to recuperate the life and career of Kim Hwallan, the founder of Ehwa University and a pioneering female educator, Kwon Insook argues that a small number of female collaborators were more fiercely condemned, always in specifically sexualised and misogynistic terms. Kwon states:

Remembering Kim Hwallan illustrates how collective memory of a colonial era uses gender for a nationalistic construction in a way that

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<sup>52</sup> Koen De Ceuster, 'The Nation Exorcised: The Historiography of Collaboration in South Korea', *Korean Studies*, 25.2 (2001), p. 47.



silences feminists and interrupts their participation in it. Also, it demonstrates that in colonial politics or, later, in the tense, drawn-out, multigenerational politics of shaping and reshaping the collective memory of colonial rule, the complexity of the dynamic between 'women' and the 'the nation' is too easily erased in people's memory by a brand of nationalist discourse that sweeps colonized women's realities under the rug.<sup>53</sup>

What Kwon ultimately suggests is that the struggle for an independent female identity was a backdrop to the dominant ideology, which was itself built on an implicitly gendered formulation.

The heated public response to *Blue Swallow*, moreover, should be understood in the context of a specifically intense interest in the human legacy of the colonial past. For instance, the 'Institute for Research in Collaborationist Activities' started compiling *The Encyclopaedia of Pro-Japanese Collaborationists in Korea* in 2001. In March 2002, the first list of collaborators, a total of 708 names together with biographical details, was released to the public. In August 2005, just four months prior to the release of *Blue Swallow*, the Institute released another 3,090 names that will be included in the final version of the Encyclopaedia. With each publication came a nationwide controversy that included litigations, social outcries, and public protests. As the case of Park Gyeong-won demonstrates, once labelled pro-Japanese, a person's achievements and honour can be destroyed in an instant. In November 2009, *The Encyclopaedia of Pro-Japanese Collaborationists in Korea* was finally published, containing 4776 names.<sup>54</sup> Ironically, the female aviator Park Gyeong-won is not included in the publication and the book cleared her name, belatedly.

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<sup>53</sup> Insook Kwon, 'Feminists Navigating the Shoals of Nationalism and Collaboration: The Post-Colonial Korean Debate over How to Remember Kim Hwallan', *Frontiers*, 27.1 (2006), p. 40.

<sup>54</sup> Rahn Kim, 'List of Japanese Collaborators Released', *The Korea Times* (29 April 2008) Also see Sang-hun Choe, 'Colonial-Era Dispute Agitates South Koreans', *The New York Times* (4 April 2010)

After Park's death in *Blue Swallow*, Jeong-hui reads Gyeong-won's diary. As we hear Park's voice-over, she is taken back to her home in a fantasy sequence, not dissimilar to the one in the prologue. She looks down from the plane and sees her aged parents and her home. The motherland Korea seems to have preserved its pre-modern serenity, potted with small ponds and harvested fields, a stark contrast to her urban environment in Japan. Colonised Korea as a place untouched by ravaging imperial expansion and accelerated modernisation is purely from her imagination. The fairytale-like scene reinforces the image of Gyeong-won, who only harboured an innocent desire of flying, a motif which is integral not only for her leaving home but also for the narrative of homecoming.

As the end credits roll, a black and white montage sequence begins. It includes an old photograph of the site of the crash, a wooden plaque that bears the name Park Gyeong-won, eroded engravings of a tombstone, and burning incense (FIG. 32). The two stars Kim Joo-hyuck and Jang Jin-young are also seen paying tribute at the grave. Halfway through the montage, a superimposed image of a burning candle appears, where the light only glimmers in colour. The evocative use of colour and the visit to a historical graveyard by cast members is a brief yet direct reference to the final scene in *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 1993) where the survivors of the concentration camp and the actors visit Oskar Schindler's grave in Jerusalem. The presence of her real grave not only provides tangible evidence of her existence, but also helps the audience to enshrine her memory in the burial site. As Andreas Huyssen notes the function of a monument as a 'memorial or commemorative public event', *Blue Swallow* monumentalises the site of her accident

in Japan by making the viewing experience one of a ‘commemorative event’.<sup>55</sup> The presence of a Japanese location, moreover, reiterates the message that she is a tragic heroine who never made it to her homeland.

### **FIG. 32 Commemorating Park Gyeong-won**

In the ‘Cheergirl’ piece, Jeong Hye-ju reported that the Japanese erected a new commemorative stone for her near the site of her fall, replacing the older one in 1981.<sup>56</sup> And as part of the celebration for the Korea-Japan Summit meeting in September 2000, a Korean garden was built in the Japanese town of Atamashi bearing her name.<sup>57</sup> In tandem with the governmental efforts to recuperate lost history, the makers of *Blue Swallow* tried to place her in the collective memory by

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<sup>55</sup> Andreas Huyssen, ‘Monumental Seduction’, in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, p 191.

<sup>56</sup> Hye-ju Jeong, ‘Who Is Glorifying’.

<sup>57</sup> More information on the commemoration of Park Gyeong-won see Kojun Takahashi, *The Life of Park Gyeong-won*, pp. 122-148.

making a biopic. Simultaneously, as a nearly-forgotten figure resurfaced in public discourse, Koreans needed to assess her life in order to label her accordingly either as a heroine or a traitor. The fact that she is already revered in Japan further complicated her smooth induction to Korea. Effectively, the central question once again (like *Rikidozan*) boils down to the issue of ownership – whether it is possible for the coloniser and the colonised to share a heroic figure. In the end, Koreans chose to reject Park and *Blue Swallow*, her fate sealed as a victim of an unreconstructed nationalism in mainstream culture. *Blue Swallow*, therefore, carries a marker of Korea's own ambivalent and complicated attitude to the colonial period.

Now I move on to *Modern Boy*, one of the last colonial period dramas made in the 2000s. Equally ambitious as *Rikidozan* and *Blue Swallow* in terms of the production scale, *Modern Boy* also failed to elicit a positive response from the public, like its predecessors. With all its aesthetic charm, the film struggles to provide a satisfying picture of Seoul in the late 1930s, primarily because the colonial remembrance itself is riddled with ambiguities and contradictions.

## *Modern Boy*

*Modern Boy* is based on an award-winning novel *Die Out or Survive?* which created a sensation when it was published. Yi Ji-min's debut, the book contains a frank and original depiction of Seoul in the late-1930s. Its adaptation *Modern Boy* was the blockbuster event film of the latter half of 2008. Many famous names were attached to the project; the film was backed by the all-powerful producer Kang Woo-suk and directed by Jung Ji-woo, who has critically-acclaimed *Happy End* (1999) to his credit. High-profile actors Kim Hye-soo (*Y.M.C.A. Baseball*) and Park Hae-il (*The Host*) played the two lead characters. Just as *Blue Swallow* promoted its digitised flying sequences, *Modern Boy* heavily marketed the extensive CGI used in resurrecting the old capital city. The film acquired the certificate 12, lower than *Blue Swallow* and *Rikidozan* (both 15) and thereby broadening the spectrum of its potential audience. All these efforts, however, did not pay off at the box-office. Selling only 760,000 tickets, *Modern Boy* fared disastrously in economic terms.<sup>58</sup> This figure is slightly higher than *Blue Swallow* (543,000) but significantly lower than *Rikidozan* (1.38 million).

Set in Seoul 1937, the film charts the adventures of a 'modern boy', Hae-myeong. Educated in Tokyo and now working for the colonial government, Hae-myeong belongs to the privileged class of the late-colonial period. Basking in a comfortable living, he drives a fast car and carries abundant cash, ready to spend it on pretty women. But everything changes when he meets Laura, a nightclub singer and dancer. He wholeheartedly pursues her, but Laura, who also goes by the names Nan-sil and Natasha, remains elusive. What is more, when the lunchbox she prepared

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<sup>58</sup> KOFIC, 'Industry Report: January to December 2008', (30 January 2009)

for him turns out to be a bomb, he is dragged into a web of deceit, mystery, and danger. Later it is revealed that Laura/Nan-sil is a member of a radical resistance group that carries out terrorist acts. Effectively, Hae-myeong's love for Nan-sil costs him his job, his life of comfort, and his friendship with a Japanese prosecutor, Shinsuke. When he finds out about her plan to blow up the war commemoration ceremony, he insists that he do the job. Nan-sil, however, relieves him of the duty by giving him a fake bomb and completes the mission herself. After Nan-sil's death, Hae-myeong joins the independence movement, still remembering her.

With the help of high production-value sets and a CGI-assisted period recreation, the film paints a visually stunning picture of the familiar yet exotic capital city. The film invites the audience to sensually experience the times through the material fetishes of one modern boy, who wanders the urban cityscape in search of love. The mood of the film, however, drastically changes from one of humour and romance to melodrama and tragedy. The nationalist dictum enters the text, signified by Hae-myeong's transformation from a dandy modern boy to a self-sacrificing freedom fighter. The tagline for *Modern Boy* is, 'Can a person's happiness really be separated from the fate of the times?' The obvious answer to this rhetorical question is no. In effect, what the film tries to convey is that individual history and national fate are closely linked, even though Hae-myeong at first does not realise it. The allure of the period and the burden of history, therefore, collide in a violent manner as the film tries hard to destroy, in an equally spectacular manner, the meticulously recreated world. In this section, I analyse the film focusing on three issues: the definition of 'modern boy' and the burgeoning consumer culture; the digitally-aided recreation of Seoul and its architectural history; and the narrative demand for safe closure at the expense of the character Nan-sil.

The title of the film *Modern Boy* derives from a social type prevalent in the mid-1930s Korea. ‘Modern boy’ and ‘modern girl’ emerged a decade after the height of the ‘new women’. Unlike the educated and culturally distinguished generation of the 1920s, modern boys and girls are recognised by their indifference to politics and fascination with material comfort.<sup>59</sup> A telling moment occurs in *Modern Boy* that perfectly encapsulates the social milieu of the time. The partisan Baek scorns Hae-myeong’s father for selling out to Japan after serving his country for years. To this, the father sardonically answers, ‘Do you really think Japan will go down that easy?’ Little did he know that in eight years Japan would be defeated. Even so, his words reflect how ordinary people perceived the political situation of their nation to be at the time. Kwon’s following statement further lends us an insight into the idea of nationhood in the late-colonial period. She states:

The length of occupation itself should serve as a warning flag for any observer tempted to see a Korean colonial and wartime political and cultural landscape characterized merely by exploitation vs. resistance.<sup>60</sup>

After nearly three decades of occupation, the colonial system had reached maturity. The Japanese empire seemed stronger than ever, having declared war against China. The new generation of modern boys and girls, such as Hae-myeong, are naturally inducted into the life of a colonial citizen. The moral dilemma of living under Japanese rule does not plague them as much as the older generations. In effect, they reside in the contingent in-between space of ‘exploitation’ and ‘resistance’, reaping the benefits of colonial modernity. Accordingly, Hae-myeong’s lifestyle, at least as presented in the first half of the film, betrays the proper code of a protagonist living under the colonial rule. He indulges in a life of luxury, even abusing his position at

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<sup>59</sup> Yun Joo Chang, ‘The Formation of “the Modern Generation” from 1920s to 1930s in Korea’, *Hanguk Eonron Hakbo*, 52.5 (October 2008), p. 188.

<sup>60</sup> Kwon Insook, ‘Feminists Navigating the Shoals’, p. 50.

the city planning department for quick cash by feeding his father information on land development.

The opening sequence where Hae-myeong gets ready for work succinctly demonstrates how his identity is defined by the things he owns. After making coffee and toast, he chooses his outfit for the day, browsing through his well-ironed shirts, colourful ties, and expensive shoes. Once he fetches his wallet, watch, and a fedora hat, he admires himself in front of the mirror. He then drives off in his shiny red car through his nice neighbourhood, plotted with well-groomed gardens. Hae-myeong's self-conscious narcissism is almost a caricature yet he remains strangely endearing; it vividly sets him apart from the usual male characters of colonial period drama, such as Ji-hyeok in *Blue Swallow*.

This fast-growing city of Seoul/Gyeongseong nurtures Hae-myeong's consumerist tendencies. Seoul in the 1930s was a consumer's paradise, supplying the modern boys and girls with shops, jazz clubs, restaurants, and cinema theatres. Half a dozen department stores were built in Seoul during the 1920s and 30s, the most famous one being Mitsukoshi Department Store (est. 1930). Subsequently, they attracted customers with their lavish window displays, neon-signs, elevators, and expensive in-store restaurants.<sup>61</sup> The publishing industry also flourished with the rise of fashion and society magazines, such as *Byeolgeongon* established in 1926, all feeding into the commodity culture that propelled the objects of fetishism. Korea's first radio station (Gyeongseong Broadcasting Station) was launched in 1927, providing the Seoulites with tear-jerking romances and advertisements. The desire for consumption, evinced in Hae-myeong's lifestyle, is exactly how the film connects with contemporary audience living in the late-capitalist economy of Korea.

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<sup>61</sup> Yun Joo Chang, 'The Formation of "the Modern Generation"', p. 190.



According to *Modern Boy*, one can enjoy an expensive dinner, just as Hae-myeong, Nan-sil, and her cousin Ogari do in a terraced restaurant at night while admiring the bright Seoul skyline (FIG. 33). In this scene, the main figures occupy the space in the bottom right corner of the screen, while the rest of the space is reserved for the brightly lit buildings; the camera makes sure the best part of the city lights is captured in deep-focus cinematography. Moreover, one might even get into a traffic accident on the roads crammed with cars, rickshaws, bicycles, and trams, just like Ogari nearly does. Such embodied experiences of the reconstructed Seoul allow the audience direct access to the lifestyle of the privileged in colonial times.

**FIG. 33 *Modern Boy*: Fancy Dining in Colonial Seoul**

While examining the modern transportation and city architecture, such as arcades and department stores, Anne Friedberg notes how the ‘mobilised gaze’ of the *flâneur* in late nineteenth century Paris, is transformed into ‘the shopper’s gaze’. ‘Commodified visual mobility,’ she writes, ‘became a global standard of modernity’.<sup>62</sup> Through the character of Hae-myeong, who fully embraces his consumption-oriented lifestyle, the film celebrates the material trappings of spectacular and recognisably modern Korea. The audience’s touristic gaze follows

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<sup>62</sup> Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 2-3.

Hae-myeong who roams about the urban cityscape in search of Nan-sil. Accordingly, the film optimises the visual pleasure by presenting almost fantastic images of the city itself. But before I delve into the process of period recreation in *Modern Boy*, I first raise one point: from where does the motivation to visualise this new colonial era derive?

The production designer, Jo Sang-gyeong, recalled in an interview the time she watched the recently recovered Ahn Jong-hwa's *Crossroads of Youth* (1934), the oldest surviving Korean film at present. She was taken aback by the strikingly modern and magnificent streets featured in the film and realised that the colonial Seoul she knew was, in fact, a 'false construction (*jojak*)'.<sup>63</sup> Using a rather strong word, '*jojak*', which means 'fabrication' in this context, she conveys to us that she and her team tried to dispel that misconception of the colonial past with *Modern Boy*. Interestingly, the period aesthetic of *Modern Boy* is closely related to the discovery of *Crossroads of Youth* as Jo's words touch upon the issue of authenticity, representation, and the colonial period.

One of the main projects of the Korean Film Archive (KOFA) in recent years has been the archival preservation and retrieval of the national cinematic heritage of the colonial period. The search took place in the archives of China, Japan, Taiwan, and Russia and its fruits have been made available to the public in four DVD collections. 'The Past Unearthed: Films from the 1930s' DVD box-set includes the narrative fiction *Sweet Dream* (Yang Ju-nam, 1936), a film that was discovered in China in 2006. *Sweet Dream* was considered the oldest surviving Korean film until *Crossroads of Youth* appeared and added two years to the record. The recovery of

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<sup>63</sup> Hye-jeong Yun, Interview with Production Designer Jo Sang-gyeong, *Design*, 10 (2008) [[http://www.bookrail.co.kr/contents/magazine\\_view.asp?sid=M&cid=-&arid=144779](http://www.bookrail.co.kr/contents/magazine_view.asp?sid=M&cid=-&arid=144779)] [accessed 1 December 2010]

*Crossroads*, therefore, was a moment of great celebration and KOFA organised a handful of public screenings accompanied by new live music and *byeonsa*'s animated narration. These screenings gave new audiences an access to an authentic experience of a recovered silent film. KOFA's effort to restore cinematic memory had far-reaching effects on the whole film industry as seen from Jo's comments. The restored colonial films are as close to an indexical history as is possible, and are therefore a priceless historical source for making films about those bygone times. In effect, the black and white moving images in *Crossroads* carry a mark of authority and unparalleled authenticity, enough to make previous representations pale in comparison.

*Modern Boy* certainly stands at the pinnacle of historical representation in the *sageuk* of the 2000s. Therefore, how the film approaches the task of reviving the past deserves special attention. The first step in bringing 1930s Seoul back to life started with finding the right background sets. For this, the director Jung even visited the sets of *Lust, Caution* in Shanghai to measure its potential.<sup>64</sup> In the end, he decided on an open film studio in the rural city of Hapcheon in Korea. From there, the film relied extensively on digitised visual effects to recreate the past. Philip Rosen describes 'digital encoding' in cinema as 'embodying a historic break in the nature of media and representation, a kind of technological sea change in the production and procession of meanings'.<sup>65</sup> Almost all films made now make use of image control and manipulation provided by digital technology during the different production stages. The developments in computer-assisted images in historical productions in particular, have completely transformed the understanding of

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<sup>64</sup> Personal interview director Jung (30 January 2010)

<sup>65</sup> Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 302.

authenticity, realism and, ultimately, history. What is important here is that a viewers' shrewd knowledge of all-pervasive digital compositions (i.e. I know what I'm seeing is actually not real), results in 'a qualitatively new self-consciousness about history' in cinema, as Vivian Sobchack argues.<sup>66</sup> This point is especially relevant for colonial period films because the early twentieth century is still within living memory (compared to the dynastic era) and the audience has a better idea of what the times were like. In this sense, the point here is not that digitally reconstructed and fascinating images of the past merely impose a new memory of the *bleak* colonial past; rather, they offer the viewer a space for negotiation and contemplation drawing on existing intertextual representations so that the audience can arrive at a specific historical meaning.

*Modern Boy* does exactly this through painstaking computer-assisted period recreation. The film's emphasis lies on the construction of an authentic cityscape, so much so that the director Jung claimed, 'the city of Seoul/Gyeongseong is an important character in the film'<sup>67</sup>. By commemorating the landmark sites of Seoul through careful CG images, the film charts the architectural history of the city. Aided by the DVD bonus features that document this process, the film engages in a dialogue with the audience on the issue of visual perception and historical understanding. For instance, the fact that the film broke grounds on the usage of blue screens is a significant point. The digital technology allowed *Modern Boy* to achieve a level of historical authenticity unmatched by any other colonial period dramas. Even so the audience is not confused by the digitally reanimated images; rather, tracing the historical changes of past architectural landmarks is where the viewing

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<sup>66</sup> Vivian Sobchack, 'Introduction', in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. by Vivian Sobchack (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> DVD commentary

pleasure lies. Through its exploration of historical sites, therefore, the film is able to construct and inscribe a new kind of visual memory on the colonial past.

The film announces its fascination with the period from the very beginning. The title sequence starts with the clicking sound of a film reel. Then a small square screen appears within the frame playing a black and white documentary clip, shot in Seoul. The grainy images accompany a gramophone, playing ‘When You and I were Young, Maggie’. Seoul’s important landmarks are introduced in the clip, including Seoul Train Station, Mitsukoshi Department Store, Myeongdong Cathedral, Sungnye Gate, and the Japanese General-Government Building. In-between the images of the historic sites, there are shots of the residential areas, trams under city lights, typically Korean thatched-roof houses, and people dressed in traditional clothes. Seoul shows her hybrid face, embodying both glamorous modernity and age-old traditions. This short introduction ends with a map of Seoul. Colour then bleeds on to the screen and the sound is amplified, as the screen stretches to 2.35:1 Anamorphic Widescreen; finally, the title ‘Modern Boy’ appears.

All of the buildings that feature in this clip have important narrative functions in the film. The documentary images, as a result, later serve as indexical data by which the audience can measure the authenticity of the CGI reconstructions. Effectively, a number of postcard-like establishing shots of Seoul appear in the film and these places are carefully selected for their historical significance as well as their contemporary resonance. While these national iconographies look fresh and new in the film, their experience of history over the last eighty years has been markedly different. The public perception of these material sites, in particular, has shifted and

been manipulated according to the post-colonial nation building process.<sup>68</sup> Here, I discuss three sites – Sungnye Gate, Seoul Station, and the Japanese General-Government Building – in detail, examining what kind of symbolic function they carry in Korea at present. In fact, the landscape shots of these sites appear very early in the film, one following the other in succession. Hae-myeong has been introduced already but has not spoken a word yet; in other words, the story has not really begun. Just as *Untold Scandal* invites the audience into the luxurious life of the aristocrats through the costumes and period décor (such as the fish soup), *Modern Boy* first turns its attention to the architecture and cityscape to transport the viewer back in time.

I start with the Sungnye Gate. On his way to pick up Shinsuke from the train station, Hae-myeong passes by this famous landmark. Seoul's old city gate, better known by its other name Namdaemun/South Gate, was built in the late fourteenth century and has been honoured as National Treasure Number One of South Korea. But in February 2008, an arsonist set fire to it, severely damaging this historic building. The images of the flaming and later burnt Sungnye Gate circulated in the media as a kind of 'traumatic event', delivering a sense of shock to the collective consciousness (FIG. 34). Since then, the structure has been encased in heavy scaffolding, printed with a drawing of what it used to look like. The director Jung stated in the DVD commentary that the original plan was to use the East Gate/Dongdaemun but after the fire, he decided to honour the Sungnye Gate in his film instead.<sup>69</sup> In the film, the building stands in its former glory. The sun is shining bright and the colour palette in the mise-en-scène is equally luminous. The

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<sup>68</sup> Koen De Ceuster, 'The Changing Nature of National Icons in the Seoul Landscape', *The Review of Korean Studies*, 3.2 (2000), p. 76.

<sup>69</sup> Director's commentary, DVD extra features.

appearance of the ‘pristine’ gate evokes a Freudian uncanny effect. This means, the building is at once familiar yet strangely exotic because the gate as it appears in the film does not exist anymore.

**FIG. 34 The Uncanny Revival of the Sungnye Gate**

Past the Sungnye Gate, Hae-myeong soon arrives at the Seoul Station Building. Commissioned by the Japanese and opened in 1925, this monumental landmark functioned as the transportation hub of the colony. Calling it ‘a preeminent nation of rails’, Bruce Cumings discusses how Japan rapidly extended the railways

into Korea and Manchuria, facilitating the structure of colonies while imposing a selfless-image as ‘a progressive modernizer’.<sup>70</sup> Needless to say, the strategic importance of the Seoul Station for the colonial government was immense. This historically significant building, however, was made redundant in 2004 when a new station building opened next door. For a while the site was abandoned and occupied by the homeless. The decision on how to make use of this contested space was only settled in 2007, when the authorities reached the conclusion that it should be transformed into a cultural centre.<sup>71</sup> The old station building, therefore, is very much alive in the minds of contemporary Koreans. In *Modern Boy*, the building stands on an empty land unfettered by the skyscrapers that surround it now. Instead of attracting homeless people to the premise, the place is bustling with Japanese tourists, merchants, rickshaw drivers, and a group of schoolgirls on an outing (FIG. 35).

**FIG. 35 The Seoul Station Building in *Modern Boy***

Another symbol of the colonial rule, the Japanese General-Government Building/*Joseon Chongdokbu*, was not as lucky as the Seoul Station. The headquarter

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<sup>70</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of Korean War I*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> Gi-hun Bak, ‘Old Seoul Station is in Transformation’, *Seoul Culture Today* (17 July 2010)



of the colonial government, this site, of the three buildings I have discussed, features the most prominently in the film, as both Hae-myeong and Shinsuke work here. Designed by a German architect and taking ten years to build (completed in 1926), it stood inside the grounds of the Gyeongbok Palace. A number of royal palaces were demolished to make space for this grandiose monument, much to the chagrin of the Koreans. It goes without saying that it became the most contested historical site after Liberation. Standing with an imposing force at the heart of Seoul, this then state-of-the-art building had running hot water, central heating, and expensive marble walls.<sup>72</sup> In the post-colonial era, it served as the seat of the first government of the Republic of Korea, mainly because administrative facilities were largely lacking.<sup>73</sup> Its name was conveniently changed to the Capitol Building/*Jungangcheong* to dispel any colonial association. After being heavily bombed during the Korean War, the building was restored and used as the National Museum until it was demolished in 1995. The desire to relinquish the symbolic Japanese rule was so strong that the historians' cries to preserve the heritage, even those with negative connotations, were not heard and the building was eventually dismantled. Only the emerald-coloured copper dome survives, and is stored in the Independence Memorial Hall. The convoluted history of this colonial edifice is testament to the complicated history of modern Korean.

*Modern Boy* takes great pains to resurrect this neo-classical edifice that no longer exists. The film allows the audience to glimpse the decorated ceilings, arched corridors, Shinsuke's opulent office, and even the notorious torture rooms. Thirteen years after the demolition, the meticulous reconstruction delivers a sense of growing

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<sup>72</sup> Koen De Ceuster, 'The Changing Nature of National Icons', p. 91.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p 96.

nostalgia for the site (FIG. 36).

**FIG. 36 The Digitally Recreated Japanese General-Government Building:  
War Commemoration Ceremony**

The modern buildings, new transportation system, and booming commodity culture in *Modern Boy* are appealing to watch; however, they could be read as evidence that Japanese occupation was not strictly destructive to the nation Korea. The fresh and detailed historical reconstruction, in turn, works towards the *unlearning* of the colonial past as the nation's most bleak and tragic moment. In other words, dominant memory and national discourse may become the 'fabrication', if we refer back to Jo, whereas the glamorous visualisation of Seoul becomes the so-far-hidden *truth*. The digitally enhanced period mise-en-scène, therefore, poses as a great dilemma in the narrative trajectory of *Modern Boy*.

The film attempts to balance out the fascination for and attraction to the colonial past through the characterisation of Nan-sil. As Hae-myeong draws nearer to her, his beautiful and politically indifferent world slowly breaks down and she acts as the catalyst to transform him. The introduction of Nan-sil/Laura happens after Hae-myeong joins Shinsuke on their tour of Seoul. A paper delivery boy shouts 'Special

issue! A war has broke out!’ referring to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. After the camera frames the cover of the newspaper, it moves away to capture Hae-myeong in his car and a vertical wipe pushes the screen downwards to the underground level of the ‘Culture Club’. Any political tension in the outside world is literally pushed away from the screen, enclosing the narrative in a smoke-filled club, undisturbed by the chaos above. Here the two men take a seat upstairs to watch the performance by ‘Laura and the Modern Boys’. The soft-key light creates a languid and decadent atmosphere, enhancing Laura’s glamorous and mysterious image. Laura is a *femme fatale*, an independence fighter, jazz singer, and a female-spy combined; she is a composite image of a number of female screen stars from the early twentieth century. While her bob hairstyle makes her look like the splitting image of Lulu in *Pandora’s Box* (Georg Wilhelm Pabst, Germany, 1929), her singing reminds us of Lola Lola’s performance in *The Blue Angel* (Josef von Sternberg, Germany, 1930). Just as Prof. Rath lusts over Lola Lola, Hae-myeong is instantly captivated by Laura’s sensual moves. Through a pair of opera glasses, Hae-myeong watches her dance to a quick-beat swing music and then sing a Japanese jazz number. From the above sequence at least, one gets the impression that 1930s Seoul was living its own Jazz Age, with quasi-flappers living at their own frantic speed, roaming the ever-changing landscape of burgeoning modernity in Seoul.

Things get complicated, however, when it is revealed that Laura has different names and roles. Because her looks are deceiving, Hae-myeong is only able to locate the real Nan-sil by following her singing voice. Her voice, therefore, is an important aural motif in *Modern Boy*. If the modern cityscape engages the audience visually, the music keeps the tension alive aurally. The songs that Nan-sil sings were carefully selected, according to music director Lee Jae-jin, as reinterpretations of

1930s numbers that also suit contemporary taste.<sup>74</sup> An affective evocation of the past is rendered through the eclectic choice of music. For instance, Nan-sil does a cover of the American big-band jazz number ‘Why Don’t You Do Right’, famously sung by Peggy Lee in the 1940s and ‘Midnight Dejavu’ written by the Japanese jazz duo, Ego Wrappin’, in the 2000s. But the most interesting choice of music is ‘Cold Winter Stream/Gaeyeoul’. The piece is based on a poem written by Kim Sowol in 1922, the music was added later in 1964, and singer Jeong Mi-jo had a hit with the song in 1972. Nan-sil sings the song, rearranged to give it a distinctive Japanese *enka*-like feel, in both Korean and Japanese. She sings the Japanese version behind the stage, providing the voice for the popular Japanese singer Ishida Ryoko. As already pointed out by Yi Yeong-je, this scene creates a rupture or an inversion of the ‘colonial mimicry’ suggested by Homi K. Bhabha, as here it is not the colonised who mimics the voice of the coloniser, but the coloniser (Ishida Ryoko) can perform only by borrowing the voice of the colonised (Nan-sil).<sup>75</sup> As a result, in the scene where the audio system breaks down during the performance at the war commemoration ceremony, the lip-synching Ishida literally stands on the stage without a voice, momentarily blurring the hierarchy between the coloniser and the colonised. While self-consciously humorous and reflective at times, the narrative of *Modern Boy* eventually moves toward the ‘conversion’ story of Hae-myeong.

After the lunchbox explosion incident, Hae-myeong returns home to find his house empty. Nan-sil and the independence group had ransacked the place and all his cherished objects have disappeared, including his tailored suits, hats, and shoes. To a modern boy, defined by the material goods he possesses, such robbery is tantamount

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<sup>74</sup> Byeong-jin Gang, ‘Music Director Lee Jae-jin Talks about *Modern Boy*’, *Cine21* (20 June 2008)

<sup>75</sup> Yeong-je Yi, ‘The Ruined Suit of a Modern Boy’, *Cine21*, 674 (21 October 2008), p 106. Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 121-131.

to the symbolic theft of his identity. During his search for Nan-sil, he accidentally comes across his belongings, such as the leather shoes, custom-made trousers, and expensive watch. The assault on Hae-myeong's self is epitomised in the scene when he slips in cow manure in his pink-coloured three-piece suit. The attractive image of a modern boy once admired by schoolgirls at the Seoul Station is instantly defiled. These narrative moments make way for Hae-myeong's transformation; he does so by first posing as Terror Park, Nan-sil's alleged husband and explosives expert.

Hae-myeong, as Terror Park, attends the ceremony wearing a tailcoat, which he thinks is inlaid with explosives. Drenched in sweat, he walks slowly towards the podium where the Japanese dignitaries are sitting. He pulls the trigger, but only a miniscule Korean flag is pulled out. Confounded, Hae-myeong starts waving the flimsy flag. The tension reaches its climax yet it erupts in humour. This image is particularly striking, when thinking back to the controversy created by the picture of Park Gyeong-won holding of the Japanese flag. Because Hae-myeong did not embark on this grand mission with lofty and selfless ideas, this scene, moreover, seems to suggest a new way of imagining nationalism and the independence movement in colonial period dramas. It is even more subversive in the sense that it may turn the deeds of past martyrs, such as Yun Bong-gil who threw a bomb at the War Victory Ceremony in Shanghai in 1932, as something also absurd and incidental.

But from then on, the film heads for a safer narrative closure and any subversion seems to dissipate during the drawn-out scene of Nan-sil's martyrdom. In Yi Ji-min's novel, Hae-myeong, still in his tuxedo and top hat, hesitates for a moment whether to attend the ceremony or not. In the end, he takes the tram that travels in the opposite direction to the ceremony. He remains a true modern boy, who does not want to ruin his beautiful garments. This detachment from a nationalistic

message is what Yi's novel was praised for at the time of its publication. The film, however, diverges greatly from the source novel by making Nan-sil blow up the General-Government Building. The abrupt interpellation of nationalistic ideology, in effect, comes at the expense of the character Nan-sil. The film does not make a convincing case as to why a talented performer and independence fighter like Nan-sil has to end her life in such a dramatic way, except to awaken Hae-myeong's moral and national consciousness. After she kills herself, Hae-myeong joins the radical liberationist resistance, as a way to *remember* her and follow her cause.

When I asked the director Jung about his reasons for changing the ending, he answered:

I saw how *Rikidozan* and *Blue Swallow* suffered at the box office. The directors Song and Yoon both went to my film school. So I knew the troubles they went through well. I thought hard about how to connect with the audience, striking a chord with their understanding of the colonial past. But even the writer Yi Ji-min warned me I'll get into trouble if I stick with the novel's ending. Looking back, perhaps I should have been more daring. Even so, what I learned from all this is that we (Koreans) have extremely ambivalent and contradictory feelings to our history. So there is just no way of making a film that pleases everyone.<sup>76</sup>

The predicament that Jung faced when making *Modern Boy* points to the dilemma at the heart of colonial period dramas. Clearly there is an interest in revisiting the period and delivering something new, especially helped by the wealth of available archival materials, including *Crossroads*. With that, the audiences have responded positively, to a certain degree, to this fresh take on the past, through the cultural consumption of films, novels, and television dramas that depict the period. Yet the risks are too high as the collective memory is still disturbed by national trauma; as a result, even the slightest provocation may result in a public uproar, as seen in the

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<sup>76</sup> Personal interview with director Jung (30 January 2010)

case of *Blue Swallow*. Exactly why *Modern Boy* failed to gain public consent is a difficult question to answer. Whatever the reasons may be, the film became another cautionary tale for the investors and film producers. No colonial period drama has been made since then, except for a detective mystery *A Private Eye* in 2009. The all-too-brief fervour for revisioning early twentieth century Korea on screen has come to an end, for now.

After Nan-sil blows off the magnificent General-Government Building, a ghostly mist surrounds the body of the site. Torn Japanese flags, soot-covered walls, broken light bulbs in the background mark the sign of its destruction. The camera lingers in a long-shot at this eerie last image of the monument. Just as the building was beautifully reconstructed with the aid of CGI, the destruction of that world is equally spectacular. Even so, the cinematic re-enactment of the historic demolition is not enough to exorcise the ghosts that still haunt Korea to this day. The building itself is gone but the legacy still remains in the minds of Koreans. And what the digital recreation in *Modern Boy* confirms is its ever-resonant power.

## Conclusion

Giving the example of *Swiri*, Chris Berry observes that the success of a Korean blockbuster depends on how the film emulates Hollywood while maintaining local elements, especially the ‘national division’ theme.<sup>77</sup> Taking her cue from Berry, Choi Jinhee speculates that futuristic Sci-fi blockbusters such as *Yesterday* (Chong Yunsu, 2002) and *Resurrection of the Little Match Girl* (Jang Sun-woo, 2002) failed to recoup the cost because they did not incorporate ‘specific historical references’.<sup>78</sup> Yet the devastating box-office results of the three blockbuster-scale colonial period dramas discussed in this chapter complicate the established correlation between the blockbuster genre and locality, when that local theme is grounded on trauma. The different ways in which the three films engage with history suggest that cinematic representations of the colonial past are discursive and not formulaic.

*Rikidozan*, *Blue Swallow*, and *Modern Boy* are progressive in the sense that they unearth something new about the times: about where Koreans could achieve success in the colonial centre and where the colonised could lead a life of comfort via the burgeoning modernity. Pierre Nora notes that the shifts in contemporary attitudes to memory are one ‘from the historical to the remembered and from the remembered to the commemorative’.<sup>79</sup> Memory in all three films works in this sense, presenting the colonial period as something to be commemorated and consumed, by incorporating historic persons and historic sites. Yet the memory of the colonial past circulating in the Korean popular imagination eludes simplification. While the film

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<sup>77</sup> Chris Berry, “‘What’s Big About the Big Film?’: ‘De-Westernizing’ the Blockbuster in Korea and China”, in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. by Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 225-226.

<sup>78</sup> Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, p. 35

<sup>79</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 626.



industry hopes to capitalise on a renewed interest in the period, the audience is willing to be entertained by the authentic historical representations and untold stories. Ultimately, the nation desires to prove that the traumatic past is but a past chapter in Korea's history. Yet these desires and motivations do not always interact, or to be more precise, connect with each other. And the site of dissolution or collapse is where the trauma of history lies.

## CONCLUSION

In ‘South Korean Historical Drama: Gender, Nation and the Heritage Industry’, I aimed to account for the strong performance of the historical genre in the South Korean cinema of the 2000s. Deploying multiple approaches to the cinematic cycle, that is still ongoing, I examined how the issues and emotions captured in the *sageuk* texts have struck a chord with the nation, reviving the genre once again. Through the lens of history and heritage, as well as nation and culture, I demonstrated how different agents are working together to commodify the ideas and images of the past. As Mieke Bal notes, ‘the interaction between present and past [...] is, however, the product of *collective agency* rather than the result of psychic or historical accident’<sup>1</sup>, attention has been paid to the ways where different aspirations and conflicting tensions are revealed and ‘performed’ in the palpable *sageuk* boom. Therefore I tried to delineate the relationship between the film industry, the government, and the consumer; the interaction amongst these three groups enhanced the on-going process of negotiation and the struggle for harmony in the realm of visual histories.

While the film industry adopted the market logic of OSMU, the government strategically nurtured the culture content industry to craft a new style of marketable and exportable local products. Attracted by historical productions with a contemporary sensibility, the audience responded to the capitalistic nostalgia by actively participating in the cultural consumption. In other words, industrial motivation, state policy, and popular demand worked together in propelling the historical drive. Studying four sub-cycles of recent historical drama – fusion *sageuk*,

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<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal, *Acts of Memory*, p. vii. (emphasis mine)

the biopic, heritage horror, and the colonial period drama – I demonstrated how these films hinge upon bifurcating and contradictory attitudes toward the past, resulting in contingent and contesting historical discourses that the films themselves manifest. In particular, new *sageuk* is a site that exemplifies the possibilities and limitations of the dynamic between ideological influence and financial orientation.

While underscoring the historical significance of the genre, I paid attention to the way gender is treated in new *sageuk*. In particular, I discussed the construction of different versions of masculinity and femininity in a period setting, by examining the ‘feudal women under oppression’ motif, the cross-dressing romance narrative, allegorical horror films, and gendered colonial period biopics. The re-imagining of contemporary female identity in the costume drama was also appraised, together with the conservative and predictable discourse of gender that circulates in the national imagination.

The outlook for *sageuk*, from the view point of 2011, does not look particularly bright. Lee Joon-ik’s much anticipated period action *Blades of Blood* (2010) barely recouped its cost and no news of big-budget *sageuk* films planned for release this year is making the headlines, which makes one wonder if this ‘intermittent’ genre may have become dormant again. Even so, the social impact of the current *sageuk* boom is definitely tangible.

For instance, when KOFA’s Korean Film Museum opened in May 2008, two *sageuk*-related exhibitions welcomed the visitors to the venue.<sup>2</sup> ‘The Space of *Sageuk*: the Space of Imagination’, featured a reconstruction of Madam Jo’s room from *Untold Scandal*, original sketches of the paper mill from *Blood Rain*, and actual

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<sup>2</sup> See, Korean Film Museum, <<http://www.koreafilm.or.kr/museum/exhibition2/space.asp>> and <<http://www.koreafilm.or.kr/museum/exhibition2/memory.asp>> [accessed 1 December 2010]

period décor that appeared in *Forbidden Quest*. The other exhibition concerned Yeonsan films, starting with Shin Sang-ok's Yeonsan diptych, and concluding with *King and the Clown*. This suggests that not only did the curators of Korea's first film museum acknowledge the current popularity of *sageuk*, they also elevated the genre's status to a privileged place in the history of Korean cinema by organising these particular exhibitions.

In addition, the grand master Im Kwon-taek started making his 101<sup>st</sup> film, *Scooping up the Moonlight*, in 2009.<sup>3</sup> Reuniting with Kang Soo-yeon, who played the surrogate mother in his famous 1986 film, Im makes his way into digital filmmaking. Produced by Jeonju International Film Festival, the film is of special interest, as it deals with a protagonist who researches the traditional methods of making Korean paper (*hanji*). One of the six components of the HanStyle project, designated by the government, *hanji*, has now been picked up by Im as the next example of national heritage (like *pansori*) to be immortalised on the cinema screen. Needless to say, this is a well-orchestrated project that amplifies the cultural prestige and the economic potential of Korean paper, thereby accelerating the heritage commodity cycle. These two examples indicate the wider cultural configuration of cinema, heritage, and nation.

In all, social reality, national concerns, and historical curiosity are taken up as narrative and visual arcs of the new *sageuk*. Realised through the cross-promotion of heritage in different media, the historical genre revisits and rewrites history by embracing hybridity, articulating itself as a commercial and relevant cultural text, while serving disparate audiences.

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<sup>3</sup> Hyo-won Lee, 'Director Im Kwon-taek Brings 101<sup>st</sup> Film', *The Korea Times* (1 December 2009)



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*Memento Mori/Yeogo Gwoedam 2* [여고괴담 두번째 이야기] (Min Gyu-dong &

Kim Tae-yong, 1999)

*Memories of Murder/Salin-ui Chueok* [살인의 추억] (Bong Joon-ho, 2003)

*Modern Boy* [모던 보이] (Jung Ji-woo, 2008)

*Mountain Strawberries/Santtalgi* [산딸기] (Kim Su-hyeong, 1982) plural

*Mr. Gam's Victory/Superstar Gamsayong* [슈퍼스타 감사용] (Kim Jong-hyun, 2004)

*Mulberry Tree/Ppong* [뽕] (Lee Doo-yong, 1986)

*My Dear Keumhong/Geumhong-a Geumhong-a* [금홍아 금홍아] (Kim Yu-jin, 1995)

*My Wife Got Married/Anaega Gyeolhanhaetda* [아내가 결혼했다] (Chong Yunsu, 2008)

*Myong-ja Akiko Sonia* [명자 아끼고 소냐] (Lee Jang-ho, 1992)

*Nolbu Heungbu* [놀부 흥부] (Kim Jo-seong, 1925)

*Nongae* [논개] (Yun Bong-chun, 1956)

*Non Gae, the Gisaeng* [논개] (Lee Hyoung-pyo, 1972)

*Now and Forever/Yeolliji* [연리지] (Kim Seong-jung, 2006)

*Nowhere to Hide/Injeong Sajeong bolgeot-eopda* [인정사정 볼 것 없다] (Lee Myung-se, 1999)

*Old Boy* [올드 보이] (Park Chan-wook, 2003)

*Once Upon a Time* [원스 어 폰 어 타임] (Jeong Yong-ki, 2007)

*Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield/Hwangsanbeol* [황산벌] (Lee Joon-ik, 2003)

*One Fine Spring Day/Bomnaleun ganda* [봄날은 간다] (Hur Jin-ho, 2001)

*One Thousand Year Old Fox/Cheon-nyeonho* [천년호] (Shin Sang-ok, 1969)

*Peppermint Candy/Bakha Satang* [박하사탕] (Lee Chang-dong, 1999)

*Portrait of a Beauty/Mi-in-do* [미인도] (Jeon Yun-su, 2008)

*Prince Hodong and Princess Nakrang/Wangja Hodong-gwa Nakrang Gong-ju* [왕자 호동과 낙랑공주] (Kim So-dong, 1956)

*Prince in Yam Clothes/Ma-ui Taeja* [마의 태자] (Jeon Chang-keun, 1956)

*Prince Yeonsan/Yeonsangun* [연산군] (Shin Sang-ok, 1962)

*Prince Yeonsangun/Yeonsangun* [연산군] (Lee Hyeok-su, 1987)

*Prince Yeonsan's Life/Yeonsan-ilgi* [연산일기] (Im Kwon-taek, 1987)

*Princess Seonhwa/Seonghwa Gongju* [선화공주] (Choe Sung-kwan, 1957)

*Qin Shu Huangdi and the Great Wall of China/Jinsihwangjewa Mallijangseong* [진  
시황제와 만리장성] (Gwon Yeong-sun, 1962)

*Queen Dowager In-mok/Inmok Daebi* [인목대비] (Ahn Hyun-chul, 1962)

*Queen Jinseong/Jinseong Yeowang* [진성여왕] (Ha Han-soo, 1964)

*Radio Dayz* [라디오 데이즈] (Ha Ki-ho, 2008)

*Red Gate of Tragedy/Biryeon-ui Hongsalmun* [비련의 홍살문] (Byun Jang-ho,  
1978)

*Resurrection of the Little Match Girl/Seongnyang-pari Sonyeo-ui Jaerim* [성냥팔이  
소녀의 재림] (Jang Sun-woo, 2002)

*Rikidozan: A Hero Extraordinary/Yeokdosan* [역도산] (Song Hae-sung, 2004)

*Romantic Warriors/Nangman Jagek* [낭만자객] (Youn JK, 2003)

*Sabangji* [사방지] (Song Kyung-sik, 1988)

*Scholar Yul-gok and His Mother Sin Saimdang* [율곡과 신사임당] (Jung Jin-woo,  
1978)

*Scooping up the Moonlight/Dalbit Gireo-oligi* [달빛 길어올리기] (Im Kwon-taek,  
2011)

*Sejong the Great/Sejongdaewang* [세종대왕] (Ahn Hyun-chul, 1964)

*Seong Chunhyang* [성춘향] (Shin Sang-ok 1961)

*Seong Chunhyang/Seong Chunhyangjeon* [성춘향전] (Park Tae-won, 1976)

*Seong Chunhyang* [성춘향] (Han Sang-hun, 1987)

*Seong Chunhyang from Seoul/Hanyang-eseo on Seong Chunhyang* [한양에서 온  
성춘향] (Lee Dong-hun, 1963)

*Seopyeonje* [서편제] (Im Kwon-taek, 1993)

*Shadowless Sword/Muyeong Geom* [무영검] (Kim Young-jun, 2005)

*Shadows in the Palace/Gung-nyeo* (Kim Mi-jeong, 2007)

*Silmido* [실미도] (Kang Woo-suk, 2003)

*Singles* [싱글즈] (Kwon Chil-in, 2003)

*Soldiers of Heaven/Cheon gun* [천군] (Min Jun-gi, 2005)

*Spinning the Tales of Cruelty Towards Women/Mulryeya Mulryeya* [여인잔혹사 물레야 물레야] (Lee Doo-yong, 1983)

*Spy Girl/Geunyeo-reul Moreu-myeon Gancheob* [그녀를 모르면 간첩] (Park Han-jun, 2004)

*Surrogate Mother/Ssibaji* [씨받이] (Im Kwon-taek, 1986)

*Sweet Dream/Mimong* [미몽] (Yang Ju-nam, 1936)

*Swiri* [쉬리] (Kang Je-kyu, 1999)

*Sword in the Moon/Cheongpung Myeongwol* [청풍명월] (Kim Eui-suk, 2003)

*Taegeukgi* [태극기] (Kang Je-kyu, 2004)

*Ten Years in Political Power/Simnyeon Sedo* [십년세도] (Im Kwon-taek, 1964)

*The Accidental Gangster and the Mistaken Courtesan/1724 Gibangnandong Sageon* [1724 기방난동 사건] (Yeo Kyun-dong, 2008)

*The Divine Weapon/Singijeon* [신기전] (Kim Yu-jin, 2008)

*The Duelist/Hyeongsu* [형사] (Lee Myung-se, 2005)

*The General's Son/Jang-gun-ui Adeul* [장군의 아들] (Im Kwon-taek, 1990)

*The Good, The Bad, and the Weird/Joeun Nom, Nappun Nom, E-sanghan Nom* [좋은 놈, 나쁜 놈, 이상한 놈] (Kim Ji-woon, 2008)

*The Host/Gwoemul* [괴물] (Bong Joon-ho, 2006)

*The Hut/Pimak* [피막] (Lee Doo-yong, 1981)

*The Legend of Evil Lake/Cheon-nyeonho* [천년호] (Lee Kwang-hoon, 2003)

*The Life of Deviated Chun-Hyang/Talseon Chunhyangjeon* [탈선 춘향전] (Lee Gyeong-chun, 1960)

*The Love Story of Chunhyang/Chunhyangjeon* [춘향전] (Hong Seong-ki, 1960)

*The Love Story of Juliet/Seong Chunhyangdyeon* [성춘향뎐] (Andy Kim, 1999)

*The Old Garden/Oredwoen Jeongwon* [오래된 정원] (Im Sang-soo, 2006)

*The President's Barber/Hyojadong Ibalsa* [효자동 이발사] (Lim Chan-sang, 2004)

*The President's Last Bang/Geuttae Geusaramdeul* [그때 그 사람들] (Im Sang-soo, 2005)

*The Servant/Bangjaeon* [방자전] (Kim Dae-woo, 2010)

*The Song under Moonlight/Wolha-ui Sami-ingog* [월하의 사미인곡] (Park Yun-gyo,

1985)

- The Spy/Gancheob Yi Cheoljin* [간첩 리철진] (Jang Jin, 1999)
- The Story of Chunhyang/Chunhyangjeon* [춘향전] (Hayakawa Kosu, 1923)
- The Story of Chunhyang/Chunhyangjeon* [춘향전] (Lee Myeong-u, 1935)
- The Story of Chunhyang/Chunhyangjeon* [춘향전] (Ahn Jong-hwa, 1958)
- The Story of Chunhyang/Chunhyangjeon* [춘향전] (Lee Seong-gu, 1971)
- The Story of Great Chunhyang/Daechunhyangjeon* [대춘향전] (Kim Hyang, 1957)
- The Story of Hong Gil-dong: The Sequel/Hong-gildongjeon Hupyeon* [홍길동전: 후편] (Lee Myeong-u, 1936)
- The Story of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon/Janghwa Hong-ryeonjeon* [장화홍련전] (Hong Gae-myeong, 1936)
- The Story of Lady Sukyeong/Sukyeong nangjaejeon* [숙영낭자전] (Lee Gyeong-son, 1928)
- The Story of Sim Cheong/Simcheongjeon* [심청전] (Lee Gyeong-son, 1925)
- The Story of Simcheong/Simcheongjeon* [심청전] (An Seok-yeong, 1937).
- The Story of Woon-yeong/Unyeongjeon* [운영전] (Yun Baek-nam, 1925)
- The Sword with No Name/Bulkkotcheoreom Nabichereom* [불꽃처럼 나비처럼] (Kim Yong-gyun, 2009)
- The Tale of Legendary Libido/Garujigi* [가루지기] (Shin Han-sol, 2008)
- The Tripitaka Koreana/Hogug Palmandaejanggyeong* [호국 팔만대장경] (Jang Il-ho, 1978)
- The Way of Hwarang/Hwarangdo* [화랑도] (Jang Il-ho, 1962)
- The Wedding Day/Sijibganeun Nal* [시집가는 날] (Lee Byung-il, 1956)
- The Youth/Jeolmeun Geudeul* [젊은 그들] (Shin Sang-ok, 1955)
- Thomas Ahn Jung-geun* [도마 안중근] (Seo Se-won, 2004)
- Three Days of Their Reign/Sam-il Cheonha* [삼일천하] (Shin Sang-ok, 1973)
- Correspondent in Tokyo/Donggyeong Teugpawon* [동경 특파원] (Kim Soo-yong, 1968)
- Tyrant Yeonsan/Pokgun Yeonsan* [폭군연산] (Shin Sang-ok, 1962)
- Unborn but Forgotten/Hayanbang* [하얀방] (Im Chang-je, 2002)

*Undercover Agent Park Mun-su/Eosa Park Mun-su* [어사 박문수] (Lee Gyu-woong, 1962)

*Untold Scandal/Seukaendeul: Joseon Namyeo Sangnyul-jia* [스캔들] (E J-yong, 2003)

*Wang-geon the Great/Taejo Wang Geon* [태조 왕건] (Choe In-hyeon, 1970)

*Welcome to Dongmakgol* [웰컴 투 동막골] (Park Gwang-hyun, 2005)

*Whispering Corridors/Yeogogwoedam* [여고괴담] (Park Ki-hyung, 1998)

*Women of Yi Dynasty/Ijoyeoin Janhoksa* [이조여인잔혹사] (Shin Sang-ok, 1969)

*Yesterday* [에스터데이] (Chong Yunsu, 2002)

*Yi Seong-gye King Taejo/Taejo Yi Seong-gye* [태조 이성계] (Choe In-hyeon, 1965)

*Yi Sun-sin, the Great Admiral/Seong-ung Yi Sunsin* [성웅 이순신] (Lee Gyu-woong, 1971)

*Y.M.C.A Baseball* [YMCA 야구단] (Kim Hyun-seok, 2002)