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Trauma and the Myth of Evolving Masculinity in Korean National Films

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TRAUMA AND THE MYTH OF EVOLVING MASCULINITY IN KOREAN NATIONAL
FILMS

by

Luisa Hyojin Koo

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

TRAUMA AND THE MYTH OF EVOLVING MASCULINITY IN KOREAN NATIONAL FILMS

by

Luisa Hyojin Koo

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2022
Under the Supervision of Professor Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece

Much more Korean media content is now circulating globally as streaming services allow easier access to various films and shows. In this climate, it seems pertinent to ask what makes a film or TV show marked “Korean” on Netflix inherently Korean. The popular TV show is not fully depicting Korea but representing an exaggerated and aesthetically warped portion. So what makes the show Korean? Such questions are not new, especially for Korean films. A close look at Korean film history indicates that the country’s film industry was particularly preoccupied with the idea of a Korean national identity, especially under Japanese colonialism (1910-1945). In this dissertation, I examine films that portray masculinity as a national myth, including popular blockbusters or films set in modern Korea that have been excluded from or ignored in previous discussions of national cinema that focused on historical content. I argue that Korean national cinema depends upon the myth of masculinity; to be a Korean national film, a film must engage with this myth.

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What makes Korean films Korean?

Nations are communities created not simply by forging certain bonds but by fracturing or disallowing others; not merely by invoking and remembering certain versions of the past, but making sure that others are forgotten or repressed.
Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*

Korean content flooded the market after director Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* won various international film festival awards in 2020. The Netflix series *Squid Game* created by Hwang Dong-hyuk in September 2021 resulted in a real-life competition in Manhattan on October 26 of that year with some of the games seen on the series. Participants from various countries imitated the characters in the popular TV show and played the traditional Korean kids' games to win a round-trip to Korea. The winner of the event, Charles from Queens, stated that he "can't wait to go to Korea and be immersed in its cultural heritage."¹

Much more Korean media content is now circulating globally as streaming services allow easier access to various films and shows. In this climate, it seems pertinent to ask what makes a film or TV show marked "Korean" on Netflix inherently Korean. When Charles from Queens cannot wait to immerse himself in Korean culture, is he aware that he will not see young children playing the games from *Squid Game* because everyone is busy on their smartphones and tablets? The popular TV show is not fully depicting Korea but representing an exaggerated and aesthetically warped portion. So what makes the show Korean? Such questions are not new, especially for Korean films. A close look at Korean film history indicates that the country's film industry was particularly preoccupied with the idea of a Korean national identity, especially under Japanese colonialism (1910-1945).

¹ Jae-Dong Yu, "New Yorkers Play Squid Game," The Dong-a Ilbo, dongA, October 28, 2021, <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20211028/3012499/1>.

The historical context of imperialism and colonialism shapes a national understanding of modern Korea. While many postcolonial texts focus on modern European colonialism, whose colonies and ex-colonies covered 84.6% of the world by 1930s, as the most prevalent and extensive form of colonialism, it is important to remember that colonialism exists in various places and forms outside Europe.² Korean postcolonial identity is even more complicated by the presence of U.S. military rule (1945-8) that followed Japanese colonialism (1910-1945). While the Japanese Other represented a significant villain, the U.S. that followed suit symbolized both the powerful Other and an ally against the Japanese, the North Koreans, and the Russians. Korea, along with many other postcolonial nations, is simultaneously postcolonial (formally or legally independent from its colonizer) and neo-colonial in its economic or cultural dependence.³

Discussing a national identity after colonialism is further complicated by the romanticized notion of a non-existent “pure” self of the past. Frantz Fanon argues that the way to regain dignity for the colonized Black man is to accept one’s multiplicities and contradictions. Thus, it is important to base my work of Korean postcolonial cinema on the multiplicities and contradictions of the colonized, because the urge to detract and demonize the colonizer, Japanese, is apparent in Korean films as well. In fact, the tendency to divide between the colonizer and the colonized creates the myth of masculinity where a justifiable force is necessary to eradicate the villain.⁴

² Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.

³ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 12.

⁴ Other postcolonial scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha agree that there is no “pure” form of the colonized self completely void of influences from the colonizers. Bhabha further theorizes that the act of integrating colonizer’s culture into the postcolonial self is an act of empowerment. He observes colonized people mimic the colonizer’s structural and cultural foundations in the postcolonial state and argues that the mimicry makes the colonizers question their own assumed superiority to the colonized. Colonialism is destabilized through this active mimicry. Such mimicry of infrastructure is evident in many postcolonial countries, including Korea. However, it is interesting to note that credit is given more to “westernization” and general modernization efforts. In Korean history, the West (specifically the U.S.) enter as a symbol of modernization as well as an antithesis of Japan.

Furthermore, Fanon observes how African nations glorified precolonial culture in response to the continued refusal on the colonizers' part to recognize African history as legitimate and valuable. While understanding this impulse to identify with a precolonial past as a new postcolonial identity, Fanon ultimately sees this as problematic because it regards culture as static and unchanging while reinforcing the arbitrary binary between the "civilized" and the "primitive."⁵ The romanticization of precolonial culture aims to restore postcolonial Africa to a non-existent "original" or "authentic" self, and such glamorizing of the past disregards the changing politics in postcolonial contexts. Fanon believes that a national consciousness in the postcolonial nation should recognize both precolonial and colonial histories to account for the lived experiences of the colonized – he is specifically talking about the colonized who have internalized the colonizer's view of the "primitive."⁶ It is important to note that any simple binary opposition between the colonizers and the colonized is an over-generalization, yet an inherent part of colonial discourse. Otherization in colonialism is often based on an assumed "primitivism" or a lack of "civilization."⁷ Racial differences in certain European colonies had functioned as an important signifier of difference, but in the Korean experience it is the lack of racial difference that further complicates the already nebulous line between the colonizer and the colonized.⁸

The binary between the colonizer and the colonized does not allow the postcolonial nation to observe itself as an amalgamation of influences – there is no precolonial self that negates all influences of the colonizer. Fanon identifies the wrong assumption in the strict dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized by arguing that binary-oriented thinking

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 66.

⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 126-128.

⁷ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 91.

⁸ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 95.

leads to two equally problematic self-identities for postcolonial Blacks. He writes that in an attempt to regain dignity after being colonized, the Black person either emulates the white colonizer or turns to a mystical prehistoric past.⁹ Both resolutions are an internalization of colonialism in Fanon's eyes because the colonized self exists only in relation to the colonizer.¹⁰ Fanon emphasizes how the ideal educated and "westernized" Black man is just as much an invention of the colonizers as is the cannibalistic and primitive Black man.

In addition to Fanon's binary, an additional problem with romanticizing a notion of static tradition as a new identity is that it provides a national identity that ignores multiplicities of and conflicts between different groups. Loomba identifies Gayatri Spivak's understanding of a pre-colonial as always influenced by the history of colonialism, and that a pristine form of it that exists separated from the history of colonialism does not exist.¹¹ Such "untainted" understanding of history prior to colonialism is further complicated by the wrongful assumption that all the colonized were oppressed to an equal extent. The reality is much more complex as the ruling class achieve domination not by force or coercion alone, but also by creating subjects who "willingly" submit to being ruled."¹²

For example, Spivak discusses "sati" or widow burning and the British response to this custom — "sati" is allowed only if the widow consents. Spivak asks the loaded question: under the new British law, when the widow agrees to be burnt with her husband, is she choosing out of her own desire or is she bound by a misogynistic set of expectations? In other words, is it possible for the widow to have her own desires of honoring a tradition that is inherently and

⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 16.

¹⁰ Fanon calls this internalization of colonialism "epidermalization" because his focus is on blackness in addition to colonization. In my project, I will be focusing more on the dichotomy between colonizer and the colonized to discuss Korea's historical situation with the Japanese.

¹¹ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 21.

¹² Antonio Gramsci qtd. In Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 30.

implicitly oppressing her? Spivak's dilemma derives from the fact that the widow's consent serves those in power (the patriarch) more than serving the subaltern, but it is also not right (for the British) to simply assume that the widow is incapable of making her own decisions. "Sati" is a precolonial tradition that is "untainted" by the British domination. However, the fact that the tradition is based on the oppression of women is not questioned. Hindu nationalists and British administrators all engaged in debates over the issue, but they were all working within a conceptual order that saw women's burning as part of the Hindu tradition. More importantly, Loomba points out that the debaters saw women as needing representation by men: "As a result, women's own voices could find no representation during the colonial debates on this subject."¹³ In this way, colonial regimes gained consent from certain native groups while excluding others.¹⁴ As Loomba argues it is important to remember such hierarchy within the colonized. Not all the colonized are treated equally.

Colonialism is often based on colonized women's labor, both sexual and economic.¹⁵ Elizabeth Schmidt argues that African chiefs, headmen, and other older men of authority colluded with the European colonizers to maintain some control and power. In her article, Schmidt writes about the creation of "native reserves" that ensured women generated food crops to subsidize male wages while the younger men entered the labor market away from home.¹⁶ At the same time, African chiefs had access to wages that husbands sent to their wives which would not have been available to them if the wives had not remained on the "native reserves" where the chief resided.¹⁷

¹³ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 38.

¹⁴ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 32.

¹⁵ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 145.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Schmidt "Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Colonial State in Zimbabwe" *Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 16, no. 4 (1991): 734.

¹⁷ Schmidt, "Patriarchy," 735.

Gender and race intertwine as women's sexuality and reproductive potential posed a threat to the understanding of race as a mark of distinction for both the colonizers and the colonized:

The fear of cultural and racial pollution prompts the most hysterical dogmas about racial difference and sexual behaviours because it suggests the instability of 'race' as a category. Sexuality is thus a means for the maintenance or erosion of racial difference. Women on both sides of the colonial divide demarcate both the innermost sanctums of race, culture and nation, as well as the porous frontiers through which these are penetrated. Their relationship to colonial discourses is mediated through this double positioning.¹⁸

Such double positioning leads to intense patriarchal oppression in postcolonial countries. The home becomes a metaphor for the nation, and the woman in the domestic sphere symbolizes cultural purity away from the influence of colonizers.¹⁹ Thus, machismo has been manifest in many nationalist movements.²⁰

To control such a threat to both the colonizer and the colonized, shame and obligation are often used against colonized women. Carol Summers argues in her article that British colonizers in Uganda blamed women's sexual behavior for the syphilis outbreak as well as low birthrates in early 1900s.²¹ Women were coerced to go through extremely painful treatments such as intramuscular injection of mercury.²² The slogan "Make nurturers of these savage mothers" represented the image of African women as less than fully human, and such sentiment was reflected in the compulsory examination and treatment programs led by male doctors and assistants.²³ Similarly, Schmidt writes that missionaries and colonial blamed women in

¹⁸ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 135.

¹⁹ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 142.

²⁰ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 139.

²¹ Carol Summers "Intimate Colonialism: The Imperial Production of Reproduction in Uganda, 1907-1925" *Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 16, no. 4 (1991): 789.

²² Summers, "Intimate Colonialism," 791.

²³ Summers, "Intimate Colonialism," 800-801.

Zimbabwe as the source of depravity in African society.²⁴ Native Department officials went as far as to say that “young, able-bodied men were being enticed to stay home to satisfy female sexual desires rather than going to work for the Europeans.”²⁵

Returning to the idea of a postcolonial national identity, a national identity is not a simple resistance against colonialism because experiences of and responses to colonialism are varied and fragmented. In addition, nation-based identity is not completely detached from gender, class, or region-based identities within the nation. Yet the national identity appears unified and dominates other forms of identities because national identity is supposedly based on a “common” national trauma of colonialism. Domination is a recorded historical fact, and such trauma becomes the foundation for a unified national identity – the myth of masculinity. And post-liberation Korean films reflect this myth – a masculinity that promotes men’s subjective experience as complete and thorough. This embedded and underlying myth functions as a national identity and a cultural marker in modern Korea.

More so than an image or representation, the myth functions as a national identity for post-colonial Korea. The myth, as a system of communication, is widespread yet discrete. It is harder to question the problems of the myth of masculinity because the myth itself is elusive yet prevalent. The myth of masculinity is embedded in various forms of media, cultural artifacts, and more. There is no erasing of the historical fact that Korea had been dominated, but the myth provides a narrative of an unbending Korean spirit that had overcome colonialism and will never be dominated by an outsider ever again. In this way, the myth helps form a collective national identity in postcolonial Korea.

²⁴ Schmidt, “Intimate Colonialism,” 737.

²⁵ Schmidt, “Intimate Colonialism,” 737.

The problem with the myth of masculinity is its collapse of national and gender (male) identities into one. In doing so, masculinity disregards women's experience of the colonial trauma – the masculine acts on behalf of women. The myth of masculinity refers to an exaggerated performance of masculinity with a focus on and legitimization of male violence. The origin of the term derives from a 1988 study of male socialization by U.S. psychologists Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins, who observed how masculine behavior is ranked superior to feminine behavior within a group of male subjects. As Mosher and Tomkins note, “macho ideology honors the ‘superior, masculine’ affects and humiliates the displayer of ‘inferior, feminine’ affects. [...] Not just a male, and not just masculine, the macho must be masculine in ideology and action.”²⁶ While machismo simultaneously emphasizes violence among men and the sexualization of women, the myth of masculinity highlights male subjectivity and behavior while neglecting feminine subjects. Women's agency is denied as the myth of masculinity over-emphasizes male experience and aftermath of colonialism while limiting women as objects to be protected by the men. In this dissertation, I will analyze contemporary Korean films (1999-2017) in order to examine the lasting impact of the myth of masculinity starting with Japanese colonialism.

Some existing scholarship on national cinema already considers the correlation between national cinema and identity. For Susan Hayward, cinema “affirms what it reflects, and is affirmed by what it reflects.”²⁷ Therefore, national cinema and the nation cannot be considered separately because national cinema impacts and is impacted by the concept of the nation. Building on Hayward's definition and Benedict Anderson's work on “imagined communities,”

²⁶ Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins, “Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation,” *Journal of Sex Research* 25, no. 1 (1988): 64.

²⁷ Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema 2 ed.* (London: Routledge, 2005), x.

Wimal Dissanayake discusses postcolonial national cinema and the formation of national identity through a unifying myth and the recreation of “imagined communities” in the modern world.²⁸

To study national cinema is thus to examine which myths the nation wants to perpetuate as well as to observe what is excluded from this unified image of the nation. In this way, a national cinema is defined by the national myths that it helps to create and perpetuate.

While most Korean films no longer feature Japanese colonialism directly, the lasting effects of its domination resulted in the national myth of masculinity. This trauma is embedded in the portrayal of Korean identity as male and aggressive. Masculinity is the dominant national myth of Korea because it is a direct response to Japanese domination based on the pre-existing prioritization of masculinity through Confucianism embedded in the culture since early Joseon Dynasty. Similar to other post-colonial films, Korean films portray colonialism as a form of dehumanization. However, due to the focus on male experience and identity, Korean cinema centers around male experience of such dehumanization specifically in the form of emasculation.

Numerous works of scholarship on individual Korean directors and their contribution to national cinema already exist. For example, the “Korean Film Directors” series by Seoul Selection USA Publishing includes books on individual directors such as Lee Chang-dong, Jang Sun-woo, Lee Myung-se, Kang Woo-suk, Bong Joon-ho, Yu Hyun-mok, Im Kwon-taek, Shin Sang-ok, Ryoo Seung-wan, Kim Jee-woon, Im Sang-soo, and others. But even when some volumes are dedicated to an overview of Korean cinema, the chapters focus on individual or “major” directors.²⁹ While research on individual directors is valuable, it does not provide an overarching view of Korean cinema, especially both domestically and internationally.

²⁸ Wimal Dissanayake, *Colonialism & Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), x.

²⁹ One of many examples would be *Sovereign Violence: Ethics and South Korean Cinema in the New Millennium* edited by Steve Choe.

Furthermore, the focus on predominantly male directors fails to consider how national identity interacts with gender in postcolonial Korean society.³⁰

Other works begin to interrogate the relationship between gender and national identity, but with emphasis on male subjectivity. For example, Kyung Hyun Kim examines new Korean cinema and its inherent longing for the rebirth of a strong male subject in *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (2004). While the book entails a critical reading of evolving male subjectivities through films, it does not extend its analysis to female subjectivities. While Kim reads the Korean War and continuing legacy of colonialism as factors that “wrecked and disordered” male subjectivity, his discussion of such national trauma neglects to examine its impact on women.³¹ More importantly, Kim’s scholarship does not problematize the “inherent longing” for the rebirth of a stronger male subject. In fact, at times the author justifies the movement. The focus on male subjectivities in both films and existing scholarship indicates the underlying influence of the myth of masculinity that prioritizes the male experiences of trauma and postcolonial survival.

In this dissertation, I examine films that portray masculinity as a national myth, including popular blockbusters or films set in modern Korea that have been excluded from or ignored in previous discussions of national cinema that focused on historical content. I argue that Korean national cinema depends upon the myth of masculinity; to be a Korean national film, a film must engage with this myth.

Chapter 1 explores national myth and trauma through a brief historical overview of Korean cinema. This chapter focuses on the interrelationship between the trauma of colonization

³⁰ There is one book in the aforementioned “Korean Film Directors” series dedicated to a female film director, Lim Soon-rye.

³¹ Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11-12.

and the myth of masculinity seen through early Korean cinema. The films in chapter cover the early silent films and post-colonial *minjok* films. Chapter 2 examines the correlation between 1997 Asian financial crisis and the perception of the myth of masculinity. I argue that the economic crisis fundamentally reshapes the myth of masculinity to celebrate a masculine that is more communicative and caring rather than all-knowing and authoritarian. The films I discuss in this chapter are transitional films during the Asian financial crisis including *Peppermint Candy* (Dir. Lee Chang-dong, 1999) and *Happy End* (Dir. Jung Ji-woo, 1999). Chapter 3 focuses on a more recent national trauma of Sewol ferry incident in relation to the film *Train to Busan* (2016), the first Korean zombie film that was released in theaters outside Korea. I elaborate on the Koreanness and melodramatic narration in the film. In Chapter 4, I examine what is excluded from the national identity when masculinity is presented as a unifying national myth of Korea, namely, women's subjective experience of trauma.

The first chapter provides a historical overview of Korean cinema, inevitably related to the national trauma of Japanese colonialism. Here, I outline the connection between national myth and national trauma in Korean films, beginning with Na Woon-gyu's *Arirang* (1926), the first film to be identified as *minjok* film, which triggered a sense of ethnic identity for Koreans when the country no longer existed.

The first attempt at a national cinema that celebrates the Korean identity contrasted against the Japanese is *minjok* film. Tae-geun An defines *minjok* films as films that can only be truly understood by Koreans. A *minjok* film not only tells the story of Koreans but is also produced by Koreans. In *100 Years of Korean Film History*, An argues that early films in Korea started out as a direct response against oppressive Japanese colonial rule, which influenced the way art forms were primarily perceived as cultural products. Cultural expression became a way

to rebel against assimilation, functioning as a repository for the oppressed Korean identity. Tae-geun An calls Na's *Arirang* the first *minjok* film, a film that not only appears ethnic but also captures the spirit of Koreans.³²

In the chapter I also address Kim Ki-duk's *Arirang* (2011) and analyze how Kim appropriates the masculine myth in his personal narrative. This autobiographical film centers around Kim's traumatic experience with his earlier film *Dream* (2008). During filming, the lead actress is nearly strangled to death while participating in a hanging scene that Kim demanded. The film portrays the experience as a trauma to Kim as an artist. Because Kim sees himself as an indispensable global artist that contributes to Korean culture, he correlates his personal trauma to the national one by naming his film *Arirang*. The documentary *Arirang* (2011) won an award for best film in Un Certain Regard category from the Cannes Film Festival. Masculinity is so closely embedded in Korean films that a celebrated male director like Kim is ultimately unable to recognize his own appropriation of national trauma.

Chapter Two focuses on the financially or socially powerless patriarchs in the early 2000s due to the Asian financial crisis and the "IMF Crisis" in Korea. Unlike in the beginning of the film history in Korea, now we see unemployed fathers, alcoholic fathers, and fathers who had been cheated on by their wives. These patriarchs have failed to protect their family, and their violence is not justified. Unlike earlier films, Korean films in the 2000s feature fathers who are no longer capable of heading the unit of family. With the Asian financial crisis masculinity rebrands itself to separate from the now-criticized authoritative patriarch.

Films prior to the financial crisis depict heroes as strong father figures who see the big picture and lead his family to prosperity. When the economy crashed, however, all economic

³² Tae-geun An, *100 Years of Korean Film History*, (Seoul: Book Story, 2013), 26.

growth came to an end. Unemployment skyrocketed and the long-repressed critique of the modernizers began to flow freely. The all-knowing and authoritative fathers were suddenly thrown into helplessness. This is the point in which the myth of masculinity separates itself from authoritative patriarchy—films after the financial crisis features authoritative and stubborn patriarchs as villains, and their violence is no longer justified. All-knowing patriarchs are no longer the masculine heroes.

The third chapter focuses on the film *Train to Busan* (Dir. Yeon Sang-ho, 2016). *Train to Busan* critiques the lack of community within modern Korea and provides a vision of a world once again dominated by a threatening Other, the zombies. Here we see a new masculinity – a father that is caring and willing to listen. The new masculine is no longer an all-knowing authoritarian but one that is gentle, kind, and uses violence to protect all that are socially weak. The main character in the film must step up to protect a pregnant woman and his young daughter to ensure a good future for Korea. Although the father dies at the end, it is only after he delivers the woman and his daughter to safety. Masculinity is seen as playing a vital role in ensuring the continued future of Korea. It is also important to mention that *Train* is a response to both the historical trauma of domination and the more recent trauma of Sewol ferry sinking incident. In April 2014, a ferry called Sewol carrying mostly high school students on a school trip sank. With proper procedures, everyone on board could have been rescued, but the combination of the irresponsible captain and crew with untrained marine police resulted in 294 deaths. The film sees a masculine leader as the solution to the tragedy and provides one in the film.

While the film is a call for action for domestic audiences, *Train to Busan* is also an example of a globally successful Korean blockbuster. Korean blockbusters are a localized form of Hollywood blockbuster with high production values and spectacle to generate the most profit.

Starting from the late 1990s, the government invested in the exportation of Korean films to foreign buyers, focusing on reaching audiences in the U.S. This effort to export films is now flourishing with global streaming services such as Netflix.

In chapter 4, I examine films that highlight the problems when the myth of masculinity is accepted without critical inspection. In particular, I analyze the situations of comfort women, sex slaves to Japanese soldiers during colonialism, and *kijich'on* sex workers who worked on U.S. military camptowns. The two films I analyze in-depth are *Spirits' Homecoming* (Dir. Cho Jung-rae, 2016) and *The Bacchus Lady* (Dir. E J-yong, 2016).

I end the chapter with a discussion of an important moment for the myth of masculinity in Korea: the 2012 election when Park Geun-hye became the first female president in Korea. She was different from the former leaders who were referred to as “the nation’s father.” Her election caused the media to emphasize how far Korea had come as a nation to be able to achieve gender equality. What this self-congratulatory laud fails to acknowledge is Park Geun-hye’s status as the daughter of the most famous military dictator, Park Chung-hee. Park Geun-hye’s political history began in her early 20s when she supported her father after the assassination of the First Lady, her mother, in 1974. Her image as a supportive and dutiful daughter is crucial to her victory as the first female president. At the same time, her more “passive” image worked against her in her impeachment as she became the first Korean president to be impeached in 2017.

Conclusion

Examining the myth of masculinity in recent Korean national films is crucial to contextualizing these films. As scholars before me have argued, national cinema formulates and instills a national self-identity. Although Japanese colonialism ended more than seventy years

ago, it impacts Koreans as an open wound still triggering immediate responses of masculinity. I hope to provide a broader definition of Korean national film than limiting national films to historical and traditional content because doing so mistakenly assumes that only precolonial history constitutes Korean culture. Current films do not exist separately from Korean identity and values, even if their contents lack a clear national and historical Other.

Furthermore, when scholars limit the definition of Koreanness to historical content, it leaves no room for discussions of the problems masculinity can cause in modern-day Korea. The myth of masculinity perpetuated by national cinema privileges male subjectivity at the expense of female subjectivity. By examining this exclusion of female subjectivity, I intend for this project to provide a foundation for further studies on female representation in Korea.

Chapter 1 National Trauma, the Myth of Masculinity, and *Arirang*

Na Woon-Gyu's *Arirang* opened in theaters in Japan-dominated Korea in 1926. The film was a success financially, but more importantly, it reflected the desire for a national identity distinct from that of the colonizer. The film made people think about what it means to be Korean in a Japan-dominated Korea. Na Woon-Gyu claimed in an interview after the release and success of *Arirang* that "Korea's inherent spirit is masculine. A collective identity is fierce and courageous, and I wanted to portray that vigor onscreen."³³

Film, similar to many other cultural artifacts, represents both how a nation is perceived and how a nation *wants* to be perceived. The national identity portrayed by film appears unitary and whole. In Korean films, the national identity inspired by the history of Japanese colonialism (1910-1945) is masculine in that it defies domination and uses justifiable violence to defend the self. The masculine national identity is focused on male experience of colonialism, and therefore, leaves little room for female or non-traditional male experiences.

The focus on male subjectivities in postcolonial cultures is not unique to Korea. For example, in *Empire and Nation* Partha Chatterjee identifies nationalism in postcolonial India as a "feature of the victorious anticolonial struggles" that "creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power."³⁴ In this process, anticolonial nationalism recognizes two distinct spheres: the inner and the outer domains. The outer domain is the material sphere "where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed" and the spiritual or the inner domain is where the nation strives to "preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture."³⁵

³³ Tae-jun Kim, *Arirang Culture of Korea* (Seoul: Pagijong Press, 2011), 34.

³⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 23-27.

³⁵ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 27.

Chatterjee goes onto explain that the inner domain or what is considered “spiritual culture” is strategically mystified to the extent that it becomes the “true self; it is that which is genuinely essential.”³⁶ The spiritual inner domain defended tradition and customs in its glorification of India’s past.³⁷ Home and family were crucial to the tradition as Chatterjee argues that nationalism ideologically divided gender roles more strictly in postcolonial India.

“A new patriarchy that was brought into existence, different from the ‘traditional’ order but also explicitly claiming to be different from the ‘Western’ family. The ‘new woman’ was to be modern, but she would also have to display the signs of national tradition and therefore would be essentially different from the ‘Western’ woman.”³⁸

The postcolonial new woman is modern but traditional – she is aware of modernization efforts that impact infrastructure and systems in India. In fact, she is granted additional opportunities of cultural refinement through education.³⁹ Yet, her own values align with the traditional gender expectations of a patriarchal family structure. She would be different from both men and Western woman in her role as the protector and nurturer in the family, “quite the reverse of the ‘common’ woman who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males.”⁴⁰ The new woman is culturally superior to westernized Indian women and western women who have become less spiritual, less reserved, and less pure in their cultural identities. The new woman is crucial to the postcolonial Indian identity because her expected role preserves what is thought to be inherently Indian.⁴¹ “Indian nationalist discourse of the nineteenth century saw the necessity of fortifying

³⁶ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 121.

³⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 116.

³⁸ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 31.

³⁹ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 129.

⁴⁰ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 127.

⁴¹ Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 129.

the inner spirituality, which was the women's domain, against the colonizer who demonstrated material superiority, the realm of which should have belonged to the Indian male.”⁴²

Similar to postcolonial India, postcolonial Korean identity revolves around the home and the family. This is particularly evident in national films that represent a family as a unified whole. Korean postcolonial identity displaces women's experience of trauma in its prioritization of male experience. Korean masculinity, the postcolonial national identity, is re-masculinization of the male that has been dominated, penetrated, and humiliated through colonialism. Women's experience of domination – especially that of comfort women who were taken by the Japanese army to service men – is not a part of the new identity. Masculinity situates women as objects in need of protection from plunder by the villainous Other. Post-liberation Korean films adapted the trauma of colonization and created a unifying national myth of masculinity—a mythical gender and national stability that focuses on men's subjective experiences as representative of the national trauma.

My research stems from unanswered questions of existing scholarship on Korean cinema in relation to the representations of gender. While male subjectivities have changed throughout the years in film representation, women's representation is singular and limited. There are multiplicities to masculine representations of humiliated men after colonization, protective and authoritative patriarchs, and independent subjects. Men are seen threatened by colonizers, war, financial difficulties, and rapid modernization – and although all the same traumas have existed for women, their subjective experiences are often excluded. A lack of female directors can partially explain such gender inequality in Korean cinema. The main reason I argue is the myth of masculinity.

⁴² Chungmoo Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (London: Routledge, 1997), 15.

A myth is a system of communication.⁴³ Roland Barthes writes that a myth is not one particular object but a form of communication that arises from a historical foundation.⁴⁴ A myth is not restricted to one method of communication, but can be expressed through writings, speech, photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity.⁴⁵ It is an underlying message delivered through various and diverse means to an audience who shares a historical foundation. The historical foundation for the myth of masculinity in Korea is Japanese colonialism. The message of the myth of masculinity is that Korean men are strong enough to protect their country and family, that no outsider will dominate “us” again.

The problem arises because the concept of “us” in the myth is so preoccupied with the male experience and humiliation of colonialism that women are objectified as “something to be protected” or threat. There is no expression of women’s subjective experience of the domination. Women are “doubly colonized by colonizers and by men of the same race. [...] Colonized Korean men not only deny feminine subjectivity but oppress Korean women, to shed their emasculated and infantilized image and prove their masculinity to a degree of exaggeration that may include violence against women.”⁴⁶ Other postcolonial scholars also note the oppression against colonized women. Ania Loomba writes that colonialism intensified patriarchal oppression because men attempted to regain control that they lost in the public sphere within the domestic realm.⁴⁷ The myth, as a system of communication, is more widespread yet discrete. It is harder to question the problems of the myth of masculinity because the myth itself is elusive yet

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition, in a New Translation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 217.

⁴⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 218.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 218.

⁴⁶ Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea,” 14.

⁴⁷ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 142.

prevalent. The myth of masculinity is embedded in various forms of media, cultural artifacts, and more.

Postcolonial identity is inevitably related to colonialism and its impact. To imagine a self-identity that exists without any influences of colonialism would be to misunderstand culture altogether. At the same time, postcolonial identity is impacted by beliefs and structures that existed before the domination. The myth of masculinity combines both pre-colonial and post-colonial male-centric understanding of trauma. Young Korean women who had been kidnapped or tricked into providing sexual services to the Japanese military (referred to as “comfort women”) were silenced in the postcolonial Korea, even in the “most fervent anti-colonial nationalist narratives in Korea” until 1991 when three former comfort women sued the Japanese government.⁴⁸ However, this silencing of female experience of domination has existed before Japanese colonialism. In mid-seventeenth century young Korean women were sent as gifts or tributes to Qing Dynasty in China. When the women managed to escape or come home, they were labeled as “homecoming women” and shunned by their families.⁴⁹ They were often encouraged to commit suicide to rid of their “tainted” bodies. The strict control of women’s body, an ideology of chastity, and the fear of emasculation have combined to form the myth of masculinity.

The myth of masculinity incorporates an often-exaggerated performance of masculinity with a focus on and legitimization of male violence. Early study of masculinity has been connected to the performance of a masculine identity in the absence of a male role model.⁵⁰ This

⁴⁸ Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea,” 13.

⁴⁹ Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea,” 13.

⁵⁰ Allen G. Barclay and D. R. Cusumano, “Testing Masculinity in Boys without Fathers,” *Trans-action*. 5 (1967); John Michael Ingham, “Culture and Personality in a Mexican Village” (Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkley, 1968); Ira Jay Silverman, “Compulsive Masculinity and Delinquency” (Ph.D. thesis, The Ohio State University, 1970).

suggests that the subject needs to perform more masculinity to compensate for the missing influence. In 1988 U.S. psychologists Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins conducted a study of male socialization. They observed that masculine behavior is ranked superior to feminine behavior within a group of male subjects.⁵¹

While masculinity has been generally theorized in psychological contexts, it provides an ideal model for understanding postcolonial Korea; the myth of masculinity is the hegemonic masculinity of South Korea. While the term “machismo” describes men’s relationship to women as sexualized, the term “hegemonic masculinity” focuses more on different masculinities and hierarchy formation than on how women are excluded from this study of masculinities. “Hegemonic masculinity” is similar to the myth of masculinity because it also presents an ideal model of masculinity of a specific time and culture to be the standard against which other masculinities perform. “Hegemonic masculinity” also recognizes that it functions as a “pattern of practice that allow[s] men’s dominance over women to continue” because of its valuing masculine behavior over feminine ones in men.⁵²

However, the term “hegemonic masculinity” does not focus on the heroic portrayal of the ideal man and the infantilization of women, which is crucial to how Korean cinema portrays postcolonial Korea. I am not only examining the dominance of one masculinity over others but also how this particular dominant masculinity is justified and celebrated by becoming a national myth. Postcolonial national identity portrayed by domestic media has to be a unifying one, a myth that reinvents the national self through a reflection of historical trauma and contexts. In postcolonial Korea, masculinity is the myth which creates the self-identity in relation to Japanese

⁵¹ Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins, “Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation,” *Journal of Sex Research* 25 (1988): 64.

⁵² R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19 (2005): 832.

domination. The masculine self in Korean films is a patriotic, justifiably violent, honorable, and protective man. At the other end of the spectrum is the Other that is unpatriotic, selfish, and unnecessarily violent (rapists, plunderers). Portrayed as necessary and patriotic due to the national trauma of colonization, the myth of masculinity suggests a unified national image of an ideal man – a man that would not stand to be dominated by an outsider.

Film History in Korea

Film historians place the beginnings of western cinema at the end of the nineteenth century with the Lumière brothers. In Korea, filmmaking began as a colonial practice during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945). The fraught relationship between Korea and Japan starts long before 1910. One of the earliest and most serious cases of tension is in the 1590s when a Japanese general Toyotomi Hideyoshi slashed and burned through Korea multiple times in order to invade China. Arable lands were destroyed, people murdered, and women violated by Japanese, Chinese, and Korean troops in the chaos.⁵³ China's role is crucial in the Korea-Japan conflict throughout the years as two Sino-Japanese Wars impacted Koreans directly and indirectly.

In addition to its domination by the military, Korea also functioned as a market for Japanese products including films. Japan was already involved in domestic film production by the time of the 1910 annexation of Korea. By 1908, the first film studio was built in Tokyo for Tsunekichi and others to start producing Japanese films. With the annexation of Korea in 1910, more Japanese moved to the Korean peninsula, and some realized the economic and ideological

⁵³ E. Taylor Atkins, *Primitive Selves: Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 16.

potential of films. Japan's export-based economy necessitated a uniquely identifiable Japanese national identity, a model for film distribution that Korea later applied.

Although the focus was on exportation of Japanese films to Korea, the Japanese government also saw the potential for film to displace anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea. As a result, the Japanese Government-General of Korea financed the making of a film to encourage saving money for Koreans. *The Vow Made Below the Moon* (Dir. Yoon Baek-Nam, 1923) is a story of a well-educated youth who wastes his money on drinking and womanizing. When his debt starts accruing, he gambles to make money. Addicted to gambling, he is beaten one night for cheating, and is saved by his fiancé who nurses him back to health. His fiancé's father pays off his debt with the money he had saved over the years, and the young man learns the importance of saving money. Heavy intervention from the Japanese government led to *The Vow* eliding the real sufferings endured by the Koreans. Instead, it became a morality tale that warned Korean youths to restrain from gambling and save the money instead.⁵⁴

Overall, the Japanese government's focus was on both the exportation of Japanese films to Korea and the suppression of anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea, rather than the development of a singularly Korean film industry. Japan instilled multiple film policies to aid the importation and consumption of Japanese films within Korea. One such policy was the "Motion Picture Film Censorship Act" of 1926 that targeted against ideological or nationalistic content in Korean-produced films.⁵⁵ The "Motion Picture Film Censorship Act" of 1926 was in part a direct response to Na Woon-gyu's film *Arirang* (1926), a film that promoted a strong Korean identity

⁵⁴ Chang-Ho Choi and Kang Seul Hong, *Korean Film History: Na Woon-Gyu and Film During Japanese Colonialism*, (Seoul, Ilwol Books, 2003), 53.

⁵⁵ Only in 1954 is a law established that directly benefits the film industry in Korea. "Entrance Tax Exemption and Differential Taxation of Domestic Film Act" of 1954 was designed specifically to encourage more viewers to watch Korean films as well as subsidize the film industry through less tax.

that is distinct from and resistant against the Japanese. The regulation aimed to protect the Japanese film industry as well as firmly establish Korea as a marketplace for Japanese films.⁵⁶

Yet another example of a film policy is the 1939 “Korean Film Decree” that regulated the production and distribution of Korean films that depicted Japanese presence in Korea as anything but positive.

In opposition to Japanese cultural policies of 1930s and ‘40s that denied a distinct Korean identity, Korean films functioned as a form of rebellion and an attempt to materialize and protect a collective identity separate from the Japanese. Film directors refused to collaborate with the Japanese and instead sought creative ways to circumvent the strict policies.

Na’s *Arirang* (1926) is significant in Korean film history because it was the first anti-Japanese film designed to inspire a national identity that is different from the colonizer. It was a film that spoke more personally to the Korean audience because there was a sentiment only oppressed Koreans living in Japan-dominated Korea would sympathize with. Indeed, Korean film historian Tae-geun An calls Na’s *Arirang* the first *minjok* film, a film that not only appears ethnic but also captures the spirit of Koreans.⁵⁷

Na Woon-Gyu and *Minjok* Films

The first movie production company in Korea, Chosun Kinema Corporation, was set up in 1924 in Busan by the Japanese. Busan is a large port city about 200 miles south of the capital city, Seoul. The city was chosen based on access; it was one of the three ports that opened up to the Japanese since the 1876 Treaty of Kanghwa. Chosun Kinema was funded by a group of

⁵⁶ Jun-hyung Cho, “Film Policy During Japanese Colonialism: 1903-1945,” in [A History of Korean Film Policy], ed. Dong-ho Kim (Paju: Nanam Publishing House, 2005), 80.

⁵⁷ Tae-geun An, *100 Years of Korean Film History*, (Seoul: Book Story, 2013), 26.

wealthy Japanese composed of various professionals with little knowledge of film production. Production crews and technicians were also recruited from Japan and they constantly clashed with the Korean actors and ghost directors in the “Korean” films. Chosun Kinema closed after two years but it played a crucial role in creating a network for Korean filmmakers including Na Woon-Gyu.

Coming from an activist background, Na leaned towards militarism in his young age. He joined the army for national independence because he believed Korea needed a strong military of its own to decolonialize from Japan’s military colonial rule.⁵⁸ After spending two years in prison for activism, however, Na turned to education for a different way of liberating Korea. He sought to contribute to the preservation of an inherent Koreanness at the same moment that Japan was trying to assimilate Korea into Japan through cultural imperialism.

Na Woon-Gyu’s *Arirang* was the second film produced by Chosun Kinema. The film was released in Danseongsa Theater in Seoul when theaters in Busan, under stricter rules of Japanese investors, refused to show the film. The Japanese government initially allowed subtle cultural anger to be expressed in early 1920s through *Arirang* because they didn’t expect it to connect back to reality; they thought Koreans would watch *Arirang*, get angry, and then be satisfied with the opportunity to get angry at a fictional world disjointed from reality. *Arirang* would have been heavily censored if it were released during the later years of colonialism, and Na’s subsequent films were all heavily cut to exclude any anti-Japanese insinuation.

Tae-geun An calls Na’s *Arirang* the first *minjok* film and a starting point of a coherent Korean identity through film. The word *minjok* refers to a group of people who have lived in a social community for a long time and share a language and a tradition. *Minjok* is also used

⁵⁸ Choi and Hong, *Korean Film History*, 86.

outside cinematic contexts; for example, the phrase “one *minjok*” was used to describe an uni-cultural Korea for a long time. Yet the term does not always coincide with the boundaries of the nation. Instead, it is closer to “ethnic” than “national.” This distinction was important to Koreans during colonialism when they existed in a land that was no longer “Korea” but “Japan.” The Korean land was no longer home but a stolen land, and as people co-existing in this now-foreign land, Korean people were united in expressing sorrow through the film that spoke to “Koreans.”

Below, I have translated An’s definition of *minjok* films:

A *minjok* film not only appears ethnic but also captures the spirit of Koreans. It can be seen as a film made by Koreans containing sensibilities only Koreans can feel. The prerequisite for a *minjok* film is that it is a story about Korean people made by Koreans. Anti-Japanese films exist as a pillar of *minjok* film. An anti-Japanese film contains the rejection of the Japanese imperialism and its influence.⁵⁹

A *minjok* film is an attempt to identify and maintain the self when the Other oppresses every aspect of national identity including language. During the Japanese occupation, Korean schools were closed, Korean language was restricted in schools and daily lives to varying degrees, and everyone was given Japanese names. The attempts to change all Korean names to Japanese ones around 1939 reversed the earlier decree in 1911 that forbade Koreans from taking Japanese names in an attempt to distinguish between Koreans and Japanese.⁶⁰ Unlike the early years of colonialism, Japan designed new rules to incorporate Korea into Japan under the cultural assimilation agenda during later colonialism. But “just as some politicians in Japan feared, the Name Change Campaign was more effective in promoting nationalist consciousness than in suppressing it.”⁶¹ The Korean language became a tangible symbol of Koreanness for many, and

⁵⁹ An, *100 Years of Korean Film History*, 26.

⁶⁰ Atkins, *Primitive Selves*, 43.

⁶¹ Atkins, *Primitive Selves*, 44.

Na's *Arirang* was popular for its usage of Korean language along with Korean director and actors.

As a *minjok* film, *Arirang* not only appears ethnically Korean with actors and directors from Korea, but also captures the very spirit of Koreans. So Young Kim, Haelin Baek, and Dae Geun Lim identify *Arirang* as a *minjok* film that fuses bitterness with humor, and an anti-Japanese spirit with a melodramatic storyline.⁶² *Arirang* emphasizes the anti-Japanese spirit as necessarily Korean during Japanese colonialism. In other words, Na evokes a Korean identity through resistance to Japan. The film made audiences laugh and cry with the characters, quickly switching tones purposefully to depict the horrors of colonization but also satirizing it. This tonal shift is detectable in many recent Korean films as well, becoming a part of Korean film-making practice and a marker for narration in Korean films. Born of anti-colonial sentiment, Korean films throughout history show the subconscious lasting impact of Japanese domination.

Arirang is now categorized as lost, as the original reel no longer remains intact. It was said to be in the possession of a Japanese individual before the Korean War (1950-53), but none of the original reel has been discovered. The plot of the film is available only through reviews and Na's remake of the original. Named after a folksong by the same title, *Arirang* is set in Korea following the 1919 protest against Japanese occupation. The main character, Yeong-jin, is an insane man who hallucinates and sings throughout the film. One day, a rich farmer's son tries to rape Yeong-jin's sister. Yeong-jin kills him and is taken to prison.

The film cleverly sets up Yeong-jin as an insane character to express anti-Japanese sentiments freely through his mouth. One example is his reoccurring hallucinations about a man and a woman wandering the desert. The man is dressed in white, a color representing the good,

⁶² So Young Kim, Haelin Baek, and Dae Geun Lim, *The History and Future of Korean Films*, (Seoul: Contents House, 2018), 21.

in this film, Koreans. They encounter a rich merchant in black robes that symbolize evil, representing the Japanese. The couple begs for some water. The merchant says he will give the woman the water if she abandons the man for the merchant. The man lunges at the merchant, and eventually kills the merchant.⁶³ The madness and hallucination are used as a metaphor for oppressed Koreans, and it implies that through strong resistance Koreans will defeat the evil Japanese. It would be easy to interpret such message as a moment of solidarity, but to disregard the implied prioritization of male subjectivity would be to over-simplify the intricate correlation between nationalism and gender. The film still reflects masculine views on gender roles and expectations as the man in white is responsible for both himself and the woman. Masculine violence is justified because the rich merchant threatens to take the woman from the man in white. To reiterate, masculinity is not violence against women but a justified violence against the outsider who is trying to harm or take the women away from the masculine man. The woman must be rescued from the merchant because she belongs with—and to—the man in white.

Another example of anti-Japanese sentiment in the film is the song “Arirang” that is featured in the film eight different times.⁶⁴ Since *Arirang* was a silent film, a narrator and a singer accompanied every showing at the theater. The film was not complete until the narrator and the singer worked together. In fact, the explanation behind Yeong-jin’s madness is not included in the script. One of the most popular narrator, Song Dongho, intentionally attributed Yeongjin’s madness to the torture he received from the Japanese. Song could only say the line if there were no Japanese police present in the theater.⁶⁵

⁶³ Choi and Hong, *Korean Film History*, 112.

⁶⁴ Kim, “What is Arirang?” 34.

⁶⁵ Jooyeon Rhee, “Arirang, and the Making of a National Narrative in South and North Korea,” *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 1, no. 1 (2009): 30.

The song that Yeong-jin sings in the film is Na's interpretation of a traditional Korean folksong called "Arirang" that earned popularity as the film *Arirang* became popular. Na's "Arirang" is a sad song designed to evoke the trauma of domination and the gravity of attempting to maintain a cultural identity while under occupation. It is important to note that the traditional song "Arirang" was not a song specifically designed to evoke sadness. Used to express common people's happiness, hardships, love, and loss (hŭi-no-ae-lak), versions varied in pace and tone depending on the area. In some areas, farmers even sang the song as an upbeat harvest song. Yet Na's 1926 film *Arirang* deliberately incorporates a sad and slow melody combined with wistful lyrics to recreate the folk song as a Korean cultural song of anti-Japanese sentiment.⁶⁶

Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo
You are going over the Arirang Hill.
You who are leaving me
Will hurt your feet before you even went ten *li*.

The refrain, "Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo / You are going over Arirang Hill," is followed by different verses. Arirang Hill, a fictional metaphor for hardship, represents Japanese colonialism. The hill obstructs people from getting to the other side, but Koreans will climb and eventually get over the hill. The going over of Arirang Hill represents Koreans' determination to overcome any difficulties.⁶⁷ The historical context combined with the slow tempo that Na chose for the song in his film, the "Arirang" was reinvented in the film as a sad song. The song is heard eight times in total in the film including at the end and audiences cried as they sang the song they knew by heart.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Kim, "What is Arirang?" 22.

⁶⁷ Kim, "What is Arirang?" 47.

⁶⁸ Kim, "What is Arirang?" 34.

Arirang first showed in Dan Sung Sa theater in Seoul. Many narrators remembered the film and picked it to be the best representation of early Korean film.⁶⁹ Thus, *Arirang* was the start of *minjok* film, a film that reinforced a sense of a united identity separate from the Japanese-imposed assimilation and evoked a sense of pride that is only shared by Koreans. Even now, when Korea is divided into North and South, “Arirang” serves as a reminder that both parts of Korea survived the same trauma at the hands of the Japanese.⁷⁰

Other pre-liberation films also called Koreans to action under the oppression of the Japanese, but they did so more discreetly or less effectively due to strict policies that aimed to restrict the preservation of Korean cultural identity. Na’s ingenious idea was to place a story within a story (hallucination) to more subtly hint at the evil of Japanese colonialism.⁷¹ Later directors followed Na’s lead and used metaphors to hide their true intentions of criticizing Japanese colonialism. One example is *Season for Singing* (1930) directed by Ahn Jong-hwa. The film starts with a couple in love in a rural town in Korea. They are both from the working class, representing honest hard-working Koreans. The villain, a wealthy landowner on whose land the woman’s father and the man work, sees the woman and wants her for himself. He threatens the woman’s father that he will kick the father out of his land if he does not make his daughter his concubine. The powerless father has no choice and the woman becomes the landowner’s concubine and moves to the large city of Seoul. The young man comes to Seoul to reveal the landowner’s villainy towards many other working-class young women, and the villain commits suicide in humiliation. The couple return to their rural hometown where they once again see the land, and they both softly start to sing their song of childhood.

⁶⁹ An, *100 Years of Korean Film History*, 22.

⁷⁰ Kim, “What is Arirang?” 15.

⁷¹ Choi and Hong, *Korean Film History*, 135.

Another example is *Tuition* (1940 Dir. Choi In-Gyu and Bang Han-Jun) that appears to depict the Japanese as kind and helpful to the Koreans. In the film, a Japanese schoolteacher sees one student who cannot come to school because he cannot pay the tuition. The teacher visits the boy's home and gives him enough money to pay for his tuition. However, the landlord takes the money for rent, and the boy has to walk to his relative's house to borrow money for the tuition. In depicting this journey directors include long scenes of beautiful scenery of rural Korea that was not included in the original script.

Despite the subtle resistance, the film, based on a Japanese screenplay adapted to Korean by two Korean directors, is openly pro-Japanese in its message. However, the film was never available in Japanese theaters because of the reality it reflected. Korean students are so poor that they have no money to get an education – an education that is a given right and mandatory in Japan. The images of Korea in the film did not align with the Japanese imperial ideologies.

Despite various efforts, *minjok* films did not always go undetected. By law all Korean films had to get approvals from the Japanese government. Japanese censorship edited many pre-liberation Korean films so heavily that the plot did not make sense. A group of directors migrated to Shanghai at the end of 1920s to escape heavy censorship and made openly anti-Japanese films such as *The Soul of Patriotism*⁷² (Dir. Jeong Gi-tak, 1928).⁷³ Although their films were never released in Korea, it was popular with the Chinese audience for anti-Japanese sentiments as well as leftist themes.⁷⁴

Films such as *Field Mouse* (1927 dir. Na Woon-Gyu) and *Jongno* (1933 dir. Yang Chul) are some examples. *Field Mouse* in particular was brutally cut with new subtitles because of

⁷² The film is known as *Aegukhon* in Korean. Only still cuts remain of the film.

⁷³ An, *100 Years of Korean Film History*, 23.

⁷⁴ An, *100 Years of Korean Film History*, 25.

Na's success with *Arirang* the previous year. *Arirang* sparked a sense of national identity that could not be repressed by policies or censorship. Following *Arirang*, *minjok* films urged the nation to unite against the foreign Other by depicting the very trauma onscreen and eliciting emotional responses. Several years immediately following the liberation, Korean films still depicted the national trauma of domination but from the position of a victor, not a mere headstrong victim.

In 1945, the Japanese surrendered to the allies, effectively ending Japanese domination over Korea. Post-liberation Korea focused on eradicating the aftermath of Japanese colonialism and restoring "Korean" order. The Korean order, however, was not as unified and coherent as it appeared, especially because the nation was heavily influenced by two contrasting ideologies of the Soviet Union and the United States. The two nations' different ideologies resonated strongly in Korea where two foreign ideas were both presented as modern and anti-Japanese alternatives for a new Korea.

Although liberation films were popular after independence from Japan, Korean filmmakers soon faced the need to rethink what it meant to create Korean films as the market further flourished and audiences began to demand Hollywood entertainment films. Korean postliberation films were considered too didactic, political, and not as entertaining because the primary purpose of postliberation films was to devise a national identity. Different factors impacted the dropping popularity of Korean postliberation films, and one major factor was the influx of U.S. films during American military rule (1945-48). Upon the surrender of Japan, both the Soviet Union and the U.S. each claimed half of the peninsula. The U.S. established a military government and stationed soldiers throughout South Korea. The U.S. military rule (1945-48) recognized films as a "useful medium to gain cultural, economic, and political profits," and saw

Korea as a market.⁷⁵ Thus, the Korean film industry was neglected while the military rule focused on importing Hollywood films to Korea.

During U.S. military rule artists with leftist political ideas were strictly regulated. Dong-ho Kim writes that the policy of the U.S. military rule worked to suppress socialist movement and perpetuate democracy as well as take advantage of the readily available local consumers.⁷⁶ The movement started at the periphery with the opening up of domestic markets. U.S. military rule clashed with the heretofore maintained notion that films operated as containers of the culture, not just as commodities. Throughout U.S. military rule and the Korean War, Korean audiences were exposed to Hollywood entertainment films that fared much better than domestic films that were still heavily political and ideological. Only after the Korean War did South Korea develop its own solutions to reinterpret film as cultural artifacts that still appealed to the public.⁷⁷

At mid-century, tensions arose between North and South Korea, each having formed political alliances with the Soviet Union and the U.S. respectively. In 1950, the North Korean army crossed the 38th parallel marking the division between North and South, and invaded the upper part of South Korea with Soviet tanks and weaponry. The crossing of the 38 parallel marked the beginning of the Korean War, which lasted three years from 1950-1953 and further influenced the film industry. Kim, Baek, and Lim identify “Korean Realism” as a style that flourished during war times. Korean Realism is a combination of archival, newsreel, and drama films that portrayed the impact of the war on individual victims.⁷⁸ Often, the subject of Korean Realism was women on the streets who were swarmed with the chaos of war and the blurring of

⁷⁵ Woo-seok Lee, “Film Policy from Liberation to 1960: 1945-1960,” in *A History of Korean Film Policy*, ed. Dong-ho Kim (Paju: Nanam Publishing House, 2005), 114.

⁷⁶ Lee, “Film Policy from Liberation to 1960,” 115.

⁷⁷ Lee, “Film Policy from Liberation to 1960,” 161.

⁷⁸ Kim, Baek, and Lim, *The History and Future of Korean Films*, 48.

ethics. At the same time entertainment films flourished during a time when audiences demanded an escape from reality. These entertainment films were often based on Hollywood films that were widely available from the previous military rule.

Post-Korean War, the South Korean government focused on supporting the film industry with tax breaks in an attempt to promote Korean film production and consumption starting in 1954.⁷⁹ Korean film production increased from eighteen in 1954 to ninety by 1960.⁸⁰ (158). By 1958, the Korean government provided incentives for exported Korean films and international film festival nominees.⁸¹ Park Chung-hee's military regime (1963-1979) also supported an exportation-based economy through films and other products. Eventually, however, the demand for imported films outweighed the costs of importing and playing them at the theaters. Kim writes that more numbers of Korean films were produced and played at theaters in Korea in the late '60s, but foreign films yielded more profit with more consumers.⁸² Despite the high cost of importing the films, foreign films guaranteed a good return.

After Park's military regime, the Korean film industry moved away from government control and protection to more liberal and competition driven.⁸³ At the same time, the import quota system of 1963 was revoked in 1984, allowing foreign films to freely enter Korean market. Many Korean filmmakers and production companies opposed the distribution centers and formed the Anti-Direct Distribution of U.S. Films Commission in 1988 to condemn the government as anti-nationalist for supporting Hollywood films over domestic ones. The Commission believed in the revival of *minjok* film as a cultural product that promoted independence, democratization,

⁷⁹ Lee, "Film Policy from Liberation to 1960," 158.

⁸⁰ Lee, "Film Policy from Liberation to 1960," 158.

⁸¹ Lee, "Film Policy from Liberation to 1960," 176.

⁸² Ji-yeon Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," in *A History of Korean Film Policy*, ed. Dong-ho Kim (Paju: Nanam Publishing House, 2005), 214.

⁸³ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 259.

and unification. However, the *minjok* film discourse clashed with the Korean marketplace that centered around entertainment films, especially Hollywood ones. Eventually the Commission dissipated as it became clearer that audiences demanded entertainment over political ideology. The opening of the Korean film market thus instigated the shift in focus from insular films influenced by *minjok* films to exportable Korean films. The opening of the market also led to less state regulation and more economic support of the industry as it struggled to compete with the influx of foreign films that were in high demand.

The Korean government placed the key to success for the Korean film industry, along with other industrial sectors, with exportation. Since the early 1960s, national success relied on an economy based on exportation. For the film industry, the ultimate goal was to export to Hollywood since the U.S. film market was seen as essential to reaching a global audience through the American market. In preparation for exportation, the government created an incentive along with policies for international film festival submission policy in the early '80s.⁸⁴

This policy prioritized both industrial success and an inherent national identity that celebrated Korea.⁸⁵ The government attempted to restrict films that portrayed the nation as weak or ineffective from being shown to the audiences outside Korea. In other words, exported films carefully curated and portrayed the image of masculinity. The implied social norm is the myth of masculinity that still reflects the national trauma of domination but focuses on the victory of the Korean masculine strength. The fact remains that Korea was dominated by an Other. However, the Other (necessarily portrayed as a male Other from a Confucian perspective) has been defeated because the Self is even more powerful (and therefore more masculine). With the U.S. as the intended audience, Korea purposefully perpetuated the image of a strong masculine Korea.

⁸⁴ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 231.

⁸⁵ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 233.

Conclusion: Masculinity and Kim Ki-duk's *Arirang* (2011)

National myths are inherently problematic in their refusal to recognize multiplicity in the idea of a nation. Instead of also acknowledging marginalized and non-normative voices, a national myth overrides them and presents a national identity as if it were wholesome and absolute. A national myth functions to homogenize diverse groups that exist within a nation; it poses a unified idea of the nation's experience with trauma. The myth of masculinity in postcolonial Korea overrides non-male experiences and voices of national trauma. Almost a century after Na's *Arirang* in 1926, director Kim Ki-duk named his documentary *Arirang* (2011) appropriating the masculinity that has been embedded in Korean cinema since colonialism. *Arirang* (2011) premiered at 2011 Cannes Film Festival and was named the best film in the section *Un Certain Regard*. Kim Ki-duk's *Arirang* (2011) is one representation of how masculinity appropriates national trauma and recreates a national identity that is focused only on male subjectivity – there is room only for the traumatized male self. The myth of masculinity is so prevalent that Kim fails to recognize that his voice is prioritized at the expense of others who are silenced and underrepresented.

Kim Ki-duk was the first Korean film director to receive an award at an international film festival when, in 2004, *Samaritan Girl* was awarded second-place (Silver Bear) at the Berlin International Festival. The film portrays Kim's signature worldview on women: Madonna vs. whore. A high-school girl prostitutes herself and "heals" the men she sleeps with – she wants to become Basumilda, a prostitute in Indian folklore who sells her body and leads men to the right ways of Buddhism. The young girl's sexuality is key to redeeming the men in this film. In the same year, Kim's *3-Iron* received another second-place award (Silver Lion) at the Venice Film

Festival for best direction. The protagonist in *3-Iron* is a young man who distributes flyers on his expensive motorcycle. He appears well-educated and well-to-do, but he has no stable job or home; he breaks into various empty houses to find shelter at night. One day he finds an abused woman in a house he breaks into, and the two travel together. The young man's actions remind one of reverse colonialism – he breaks into people's houses, but he does not plunder. Instead, he cleans the house, fixes electronics, and rescues a damsel in distress. The stoic young man in *3-Iron* is Kim's masculine hero.

The two earlier films set the stage for Kim's introspective documentary *Arirang* (2011) in which the director elaborates on the two traumatic experiences that have prevented him from producing films for the last three years. The lack of his film production is not only a personal tragedy but also a national loss because he is a great Korean director that has proven himself through international standards. Despite growing popularity, only a handful of Korean directors are recognized in international festivals, and Kim is one of the first and most prominent directors to be recognized.⁸⁶ By naming his documentary *Arirang* Kim equates his personal loss to a national loss because his work represents Korea in the international world. His personal narrative turned national focuses on his subjective experience only.

Arirang (2011) captures Kim's life in the woods from 2008 to 2011. There are two traumas that confine Kim to the woods: a female actor almost dies while filming a hanging scene in *Dream* (2008) and two associates leave Kim to make their own films. He recounts the accident in 2008 and claims that he has been traumatized by the fact that he almost became a murderer for his film. Without referencing the actor by her name or indicating any recognition for her near-

⁸⁶ When Kim made *Arirang* in 2011, no Korean film had won the grand prize at international film festivals. Only in 2019 did *Parasite* (Dir. Bong Joon-ho) win Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival. Bong's win certainly diminishes Kim's lament that Korean film industry is doomed without him.

death experience, Kim's focus is centered on his experience of the incident as well as the lasting repercussions on himself. While it is a debilitating experience for Kim, his emphasis on how the trauma has deprived him of the willpower to produce more great films to be recognized by the international film festivals, and therefore the trauma is a great loss on a national level, is misplaced. In Kim's embodiment of masculinity the male's subjective experience (I almost became a murderer) encompasses the actor's experience (*my* actor almost died), rendering the actor an object to be used and protected. It is not the actor's near-death by hanging that is important, but Kim's failure as the masculine self to protect her and the impact that failure has on Kim, the sole subject.

The second trauma in *Arirang* details the betrayal of one associate director and one producer. Kim's drunk monologue continues to tell the story of the two who each decide to produce films independent of Kim. He sees their independence as an act of "betrayal" and "abandonment" because he occupies the sole position of the masculine self. Internalization of colonial structure and the dichotomy between the masculine Self and the dangerous Other eradicates other subjectivities. Kim has helped the two debut as director and producer respectively, providing his own screenplays and ideas as foundations. When the associate director and producer go their separate ways and start producing films without consulting Kim, the independence is construed as a personal insult, "an affront to [Kim's] pride." The myth of masculinity and the dichotomy between the Self and Other only allows the two men to be an object (belonging to Kim for use and protection) or a threatening Other.

The song "Arirang" is used at several points of the film, one of which appears towards the end when drunk Kim repeats the chorus of the song and cries. The scene evokes sadness

through the sad tunes of “Arirang” as well as the sobbing director. Other scenes use “Chōngsŏn Arirang,” a version of Arirang from Kangwŏn Province.

Kim purports to have come to represent the Korean spirit itself through his art. We are designed to hate the two associates and justify Kim’s violence towards them at the end when he builds a handgun. The two locations shown before off-screen gunshots are heard were the two associates’ actual house and office. They did not find out that Kim was at their doorsteps until after the film was released.⁸⁷ In the last scene, we see Kim pointing the gun at himself. Offscreen we hear a shot and see a series of Kim’s film posters from 1996 onwards. “Chōngsŏn Arirang” plays in the background as the audiences are left to think that none of the wonderful films that Kim has created so far would have existed if Kim had died. The song taken and used by the director in this scene once again evokes a sense of loss on a national level.

The documentary *Arirang* (2011) won an award for best film in the Un Certain Regard category from the Cannes Film Festival. Kim went on to make multiple internationally successful films like *Pieta* (2012), which received the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival. Ultimately Kim is unable to recognize his own appropriation of national trauma, and the perpetuation of masculinity in his films. Korean cinema is known for masculinity to global audiences because the myth functions to erase multiplicities. Male voices dominate the national discourse at the expense of silenced voices – and, worse, the world is celebrating it.

⁸⁷ Eun-joo Nam, “Who was Ki-duk’s Revenge For,” *The Hankyoreh*, September 20, 2012

Chapter 2 Asian Financial Crisis and the Evolving Myth of Masculinity

The myth of masculinity changed with the changing responsibilities and abilities of the patriarch. In early 2000s Korean films begin to feature financially or socially powerless patriarchs – unemployed fathers, alcoholic fathers, cuckolded fathers – during and after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. These patriarchs have failed to protect their family, and their violence is not justified. Unlike earlier films, Korean films in the 2000s feature fathers who are no longer capable of providing financially for the family. With the Asian financial crisis, the myth of masculinity rebrands itself to separate from the now-criticized authoritarian. As the myth of masculinity evolve beyond an authoritative father-figure, post-financial crisis films portray patriarchs as the stubborn and uncompromising villains.

The creation of the myth of masculinity, stemming from the colonial experience, celebrated male violence against a national Other. The myth first intertwined with the image of the patriarch – an all-knowing authoritative father-figure who has the power to look after his family. The masculine patriarch protected the family against the Other, be it the Japanese during and after colonialism or the North Koreans after the Korean War (1950-1953). Liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945 indicated a period of clash between different political ideologies within Korea. Soviet Union troops had occupied northern Korea prior to Japan's defeat, while U.S. troops were occupying southern Korea. With the end of WWII and Japanese colonialism of Korea, Soviet Union and U.S. had agreed to temporarily divide the country to each oversee the parts until Korea had enough infrastructure for sovereignty.⁸⁸ However, neither ideology yielded to the other, and South Korea set up its own sovereignty in 1948, after three years of U.S.

⁸⁸ This is the point from which this dissertation focuses on South Korean cinema because not much is known or recorded on North Korean films. All Korean-language books used in this dissertation were published in South Korea and focuses on South Korean film industry.

military rule. The tension between the two parts of Korea, each fueled by either Soviet Union or U.S. support, culminated in a war between North and South Korea in the summer of 1950.

After the 1953 truce, South Korean government started restoring order, and policies were created to protect the Korean film industry.⁸⁹ Postwar Korea craved entertainment, and film was one of them.⁹⁰ In particular, period pieces flooded the market with the success of *Chunhyangjeon* [Story of Chunhyang] written and directed by Lee Gyu-hwan in 1955. Although the film is based on a traditional folktale that had already been retold in many different forms such as pansori, *Chunhyangjeon* broke the box record with 180,000 people within 2 months of opening.⁹¹

At the same time, the films focused on celebrating responsible fathers that protect the family and see that their family flourishes under his guidance. These films functioned as a means to legitimize Park Chung-hee's military regime through the metaphor of the patriarch that sees over his family (citizens) against the dangerous Other (North Koreans). Even in the '80s, after the assassination of Park, the notion of a masculine went hand-in-hand with the patriarch. Despite the end of Park's era, the symbol of the strong father continued on with a new military leader, Chun Doo-hwan.

Not until the '90s did the myth of masculinity begin to separate from the authoritative patriarch. With the Asian financial crisis, the accelerated pace of modernization in Korea came to a halt. The economic growth that had once provided a sense of pride and identity now left many bewildered. Unemployment skyrocketed, leaving men, conventionally expected to provide economically for their families, powerless and desperate. Films of this decade and the following

⁸⁹ So Young Kim, Haelin Baek, and Dae Geun Lim, *The History and Future of Korean Films*, (Seoul: Contents House, 2018), 49.

⁹⁰ Tae-geun An, *100 Years of Korean Film History*, (Seoul: Book Story, 2013), 56.

⁹¹ Kim, Baek, and Lim, *The History and Future of Korean Films*, 50.

decades start to portray an ineffective patriarch, failing in his own ways but still unwilling to compromise with the new generation.

Masculinity tied to patriarchy leaves no room for people other than the all-knowing father figure. The fall of strong patriarch seemingly opens room for individual desires to materialize distinct from the family unit. However, the myth of masculinity that has resulted from the historical trauma of domination exists beyond patriarchy, recreating masculinity separate from authoritarian father-figures. The financial crisis becomes a turning point in which the myth of masculinity separates itself from the authoritative patriarchal identity. Instead, the unreasonable and aggressive patriarch is posed as the villain whose violence is not justified in the new narratives of post-crisis films.

Park Chung-hee came to power in the 1960s with the main goal of modernizing Korea mainly through economic growth. In the state-controlled economy, the film industry, along with other sectors, expected economic and policy-related governmental support.⁹² In 1961, the film industry, previously located within the Ministry of Culture, was incorporated into the Ministry of Public Information for wider use of pro-regime propaganda films. Park's modernization efforts returned to the idea of a *minjok* or the ethnic group of Koreans; his notion of *minjok* identified (South) Koreans as an anti-Communist group that was separate from North Koreans. Now, *minjok* conveniently excluded North Koreans because they were primarily identified as "communists," not "Koreans." Cultural policies, closely controlled by the government, reflected the *minjok*-centered ideology.⁹³ For example, many films in the '60s were retelling of folklores or historical heroes' journeys.⁹⁴

⁹² Ji-yeon Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," in *A History of Korean Film Policy*, ed. Dong-ho Kim (Paju: Nanam Publishing House, 2005), 189.

⁹³ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 191.

⁹⁴ An, *100 Years of Korean Film History*, 425-429.

It is important to note that the Korean film industry in the 1960s was considered a cultural commodity that the government controlled. Importation and exportation of films were now part of international trade policy. In the '60s the government tried to protect the Korean film market by requiring all directors and producers to be domestics with Korean citizenship.⁹⁵ Requiring Korean citizenship specifically targeted foreign filmmakers in order to prevent them from establishing companies in Korea because foreign films were more popular and profitable at theaters. One interesting incentive to encourage domestic film production was to allow the production company more importation rights to popular Hollywood films if their domestic films received recognition or awards at international festivals.⁹⁶ Producing a good domestic film profited the production company in two ways: international (and domestic) recognition and more rights to import the popular foreign films.

Domestic films in the '60s regularly featured the power struggle between an aging patriarch and the emerging younger male generation portrayed through melodrama. Most conflicts end with an acceptance on the patriarch's part that the new generation has come to power, and that it is time to step down to make room for their sons or sons-in-law.⁹⁷ The new generation then takes over the role of patriarch in the family. This new generation symbolized westernization, modernization, as well as a strengthening of the *minjok*-oriented nation.⁹⁸ In this power transition there is no room for women except certain stereotypical roles of docile wife and caring mother. Westernization in men is intelligence, improvement, and innovation; in women, especially when portrayed as defying or rebelling against the patriarch, it is vulgar, obscene, and

⁹⁵ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 198.

⁹⁶ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 216.

⁹⁷ Seung-ryul Kang, *Family and Society Represented in Korean Films: From Sweet Dream to Boomerang Family*, (Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University Press, 2018), 103.

⁹⁸ Kang, *Family and Society*, 112.

selfish.⁹⁹ Under the myth of masculinity there is no room for women's participation in the new nation-building. The films were used to support Park's military regime and the goal of modernization even at the expense of marginalized social groups such as women, children, and the weak. By the end of '60s and the beginning of '70s, labor movement and democratizers started resisting Park's regime and its propaganda for oppression and marginalization. I will be discussing the clash between the democratizers and the modernizers more in detail in chapter three.

In the '70s, Park had a stricter grasp on how Korean culture was to be represented onscreen. Anti-government sentiments, implied or otherwise, were banned, and many scenes were censored by the cultural department of the government. Naturally some directors opposed the censorship, but the theaters were not allowed to exhibit films not approved by the government. Some directors who spoke against such censorship were imprisoned. Of the films that survived strict censorship, many celebrated Park's regime, often incorporating action-oriented plots popular in Hong Kong cinema. "The movies produced in the early 1970s had no choice but to portray government-directed themes—such as anticommunism, the establishment of national identity, and the rationalization of the Yushin System—in return for government subsidies."¹⁰⁰ The Yushin System had been a new constitution announced in early 1970s. In 1971, Park declared a state of national emergency in regards to the conflict with North Korea. One year later, he suspended the constitution and dissolved legislature to announce Yushin

⁹⁹ Kang, *Family and Society*, 120.

¹⁰⁰ Dal Yong Jin, *Transnational Korean Cinema: Cultural Politics, Film Genres, and Digital Technologies*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 32.

System that ensured Park with both the intermediating functions of the executive, legislative, and judicial powers, as well as state power to determine matters of state affairs.¹⁰¹

The Yushin Constitution recognized the President as the supreme leader who was primarily responsible for both independence and continuity of the State and unification of the fatherland. The presidential power under the Yushin system was understood as that of the supreme leader who had concentrated all political power of the state in the hands of the President himself.”¹⁰²

The Yushin System legitimized Park’s regime as well as allow it absolute control over the country. Without government subsidy, very few films could be made, but without government approval, no films could be distributed.

The cultural policies of the ‘70s aimed to present government-driven *minjok* discourse in a favorable and modern light. In 1972 a detailed cultural policy indicated that a “good” Korean cultural product established the right national history, created new *minjok*-oriented arts, elevated Koreans’ cultural standards through popularization of the arts, and promoted Korean culture through international exchange of culture and arts.¹⁰³ With the last point in particular, Park was intending to transition to an export-oriented economy and continued to use international recognition of Korean films as a license to import profitable foreign films to Korea.

One of the most ambitious yet ultimately unsuccessful projects that the Korean Film Association (now Korean Film Council KOFIC) promoted was state policy films (*kukch’aek yŏnghwa*). The standard for state policy films were based on a 1973 decree on what makes a good Korean film: films that are pro-Park’s regime and its efforts for economic growth; films that establish a *minjok* identity and promote a national character; films that encourage traditional cultural development in rural areas; films that feature industrial workers contributing to

¹⁰¹ Kang Ro Lee, “Bureaucratic-Mobilization Regime: The Yushin System in South Korea, 1972-1979,” *Asian Perspective* 14, no. 2 (1990): 203.

¹⁰² Lee, “Bureaucratic-Mobilization Regime,” 203-4.

¹⁰³ Park, “Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act,” 219.

modernization efforts; and films that emphasize solidarity.¹⁰⁴ The goal of state policy films was to justify Park's militaristic regime and promote the film industry through *chaebols*, a handful of rich companies in Korea that received socioeconomic support from the government. Park's regime aimed to spark a speedy economic growth through the *chaebols*, which in turn focused on industrial modernization with the help of favorable policies from the government. Kyung-Sup Chang identifies the characteristics of chaebol as:

Over-concentration of both corporate ownership and management; merging of ownership and management; over-ambitious 'department-store-style' diversification of business operations; rapid growth orientation (as opposed to stable profit making); excessive reliance on bank loans and concomitant excessive debt ratios; exaggeration of corporate assets on the basis of reciprocal investment among member corporations; aggressive collusion with political and bureaucratic leaders usually through bribing; and despotic control of labor.¹⁰⁵

He argues that the emphasis on *chaebols*, which allowed for the initial rapid economic expansion or compressed modernity as further discussed in chapter three, was also the main cause of the financial disaster.

In Korea, modernization and democratization did not happen all at once; rather, modernization was at first opposed by and subsequently followed by democratization. In the '60s, Park Chung-hee came to power through a military coup and focused on modernization including building an export-oriented economy in the war-torn Korea. Human rights were not a concern for the Park regime, and many were imprisoned or tortured for opposing Park. Park's strict anti-North Korean and pro-U.S. policies also caused some rebellion from pro-North Korean democratizers who saw unification as a long-term goal. Park was assassinated in 1979 by Kim Jae-Gyu, an ex-military general and the director of Korean Central Intelligence Agency who

¹⁰⁴ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 228.

¹⁰⁵ Kyung-Sup Chang, "Compressed Modernity and its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition." *Economy and Society* 28, (1999): 39.

started to question Park's regime. Kim was executed for murder, and thus the tide of political power did not turn over immediately to the democratizers with the assassination of Park.

However, more voices in the public called out for human rights that were sometimes blatantly absent in the economy-centered policies of the government.

In the '80s the government seemingly loosened its grip on film censorship under Chun Doo-hwan's military regime (1980-1988). Moving away from politics and conspicuous propaganda, more films featured romantic relationships between men and women.¹⁰⁶ These films were aimed to provide a momentary relief or entertainment to the citizens and divert their attention away from the current government.¹⁰⁷ One particular example is *Madame Aema* (Dir. Jeong In-Yeop, 1982) that spawned a series of thirteen films between 1982 and 1996.¹⁰⁸ More recently new *Madame Aema 2016* (Dir. Kim Mi-yeon, 2016) released but with little connection to the original series. Although the film features a woman engaged in sex with multiple men while her husband is imprisoned, she ultimately returns to him when he is released. Kang argues that the ending implies that women are still portrayed as sexual objects that respond to male desires.¹⁰⁹ The relaxed censorship on sexuality did not indicate that Chun's military regime was more open than Park's. In fact, anti-government sentiment was still severely censored, even more so in the lead-up to the Seoul Olympics in 1988. In preparation for the Olympics the government increased the cultural sector budget by 3.3 times in 1986, which were invested in the building of large-scale cultural facilities such as National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Seoul Arts Center, and the National Gugak Orchestra.¹¹⁰ Enough money was flowing

¹⁰⁶ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 449.

¹⁰⁷ Kang, *Family and Society*, 165.

¹⁰⁸ Kang, *Family and Society*, 162.

¹⁰⁹ Kang, *Family and Society*, 165.

¹¹⁰ Ji-hye Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," in *A History of Korean Film Policy*, ed. Dong-ho Kim (Paju: Nanam Publishing House, 2005), 271.

but content was more closely regulated than ever, censoring any criticism against the government or any negative image of the nation. For example, media did not report on possible anti-U.S. sentiments in the creation of Youth Film Council in 1980 consisted of assistant directors, independent film-makers, film scholars and university film associations.¹¹¹

One crucial change to the Korean film industry came in 1985. South Korea and the U.S. agreed to allow foreign films and distribution companies to set up in Korea beginning in 1987. The U.S. had pressured Korean film markets to open to free trade since the end of '70s.¹¹² According to Jin, "the MPEAA [Motion Picture Export Association of America] acknowledged that Korean cinema would be a big market for Hollywood, because Korean audiences already liked Hollywood movies more than local films. Even during the recession in the domestic film industry, Koreans still went to theaters to watch Hollywood films."¹¹³ The MPEAA soon demanded that U.S. distribution companies be treated equally to domestic ones once they set up in Korea.

The film treaty resulted in policy changes within Korea to help protect and promote the domestic film industry. First, the registration deposit that each registered film production and distribution company had to pay decreased from 700 million won (app. 580,000 USD) to 50 million won (app. 4,000 USD). As a result, more companies could afford to produce and promoted film diversity.¹¹⁴ Moreover, for independent producers the deposit fee decreased from 90% of their total budget to 10%, allowing more independent filmmakers to produce films.¹¹⁵ By 1985, film makers did not have to get approval from the Minister of Culture and Public

¹¹¹ Chan-hui Yeom, *The Birth of Asian Films* (Seoul: Alfabooks, 2013), 30.

¹¹² Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 285.

¹¹³ Jin, *Transnational Korean Cinema*, 32.

¹¹⁴ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 287.

¹¹⁵ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 288.

Information before production.¹¹⁶ These new policies provided a bit of hope during the difficult times for the Korean filmmakers competing with free-flowing Hollywood films.

Another change was the new goal of international recognition. Korean filmmakers of the '80s struggled to gain fame at well-known international film festivals such as Cannes or Venice. *The Hut* (Dir. Lee Doo-yong 1981) was the first to receive recognition by an international film festival. At the Venice Film Festival *The Hut* received the Integrated Social Development Assistance Program (ISDAP) award. Not much is known about ISDAP award, but Korean Film Council (KOFIC) writes that it is equivalent to Special Directing Award.¹¹⁷ The film portrays a woman's vengeance through various genres combined such as melodrama, thriller, and mystery. In 1987, Lim Kwon Taek's *The Surrogate Woman* won numerous accolades at the Asian Film Festival along with a Best Actress Award at Venice Film Festival.¹¹⁸

The following military regime headed by Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993) functioned similarly as the previous one in terms of its policies, focusing on justifying the undemocratic procedures of the oppressive regime. On the surface, Roh's regime focused on investing in cultural institutions and products to increase a sense of national cultural sensibility.¹¹⁹ In reality, however, with diversity and creativity severely repressed, the investments and projects resulted in little more than exhibitions of cultural support.¹²⁰ Politically, content with antagonism towards ally countries, especially the U.S., as well as support of leftist ideology and criticism against Roh's regime were strictly forbidden.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 274.

¹¹⁷ "The Hut (1981)," *Film Directory*, Korean Film Council, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/eng/films/index/filmsView.jsp?movieCd=19800134>.

¹¹⁸ Park, "Film Policy from Establishment to Fourth Revision of Film Act," 452.

¹¹⁹ Ahn calls this a nostalgia for a national culture. "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 291.

¹²⁰ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 293.

¹²¹ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 299.

Beginning in 1988, as per a South Korea-U.S. agreement, Hollywood studios entered the Korean market. Jin describes it thusly:

UIP and 20th Century Fox established their branches in 1988, followed by Warner Bros. (1989), Columbia TriStar (1990), and Buena Vista (1993). Together, they imported a total of 818 foreign films between 1988 and 2001. [...] Proactive neoliberal cultural reforms since the late 1980s have substantially influenced Hollywood's investment in the Korean film industry. As the Korean government, sometimes forced by transnational forces and at other times voluntarily, opened the domestic film market, many transnational corporations—in particular, Hollywood studios—played a key role, including in distribution, production, and exhibition. As discussed, several Hollywood studios established their branches for the direct distribution of their own films, and some of them formed strategic alliances with domestic capitals, including Samsung, to produce films in Korea.¹²²

Market deregulation led to a crisis for the domestic film industry as anticipated by film-makers and distributors. One of the main reasons was the preexisting and overwhelming demand for Hollywood films over domestic ones. Knowing this, many distributors and exhibitors focused on procuring popular Hollywood films to show at the theaters while some directors imitated successful Hollywood film narrative and structure.

“IMF Crisis” and the Fall of the Patriarch

The 1990s became a turning point in the Korean celebration of the “strict but fair” authoritarian. In 1993, Kim Young Sam successfully became the first non-military president in over three decades. For citizens, Kim's campaign success symbolized a start of a truly democratic Korea. Media offered hopeful news of how the peaceful transition of power from Roh to Kim indicated how far Korea had developed in terms of democracy. However, the reality was corruption and continued support for the *chaebols*. The peaceful and democratic transition of power to Kim's regime did not guarantee a actually significant difference in the policies. Kim's

¹²² Jin, *Transnational Korean Cinema*, 34-122.

policies still supported many of familiar non-democratic procedures such as elitism and nepotism.¹²³

The film industry did go through some changes under Kim. While former regimes still saw film mostly as a means to justify their regime and spread propaganda, Kim's regime regarded film as an industry to contribute to economic growth in Korea.¹²⁴ Censorship began relaxing their control over content, and film was newly categorized under the manufacturing industry rather than service industry. In other words, Kim's government actively promoted production of film as a cultural industry rather than a passive marketplace for foreign products.¹²⁵ This major change led to various financial benefits for the film industry such as reducing production costs and easier export of films.

As film was recognized as an industry and not just propaganda, money began to flow in from different areas. In 1994 the KOFIC started loaning up to 200 million won (app. 160 thousand USD) per film.¹²⁶ The loans were not designed to promote cultural diversity or expression, however, but instead to promote film as an industry. The films had to first and foremost sell well as a good industrial product. Only a few companies already established enough could afford the security deposit, and many small productions or individual filmmakers were unable to take advantage of the loans.

Instead, individual filmmakers relied on *chaebols* as more multinational corporations started investing in film as an industrial product. By the mid-1990s, *chaebols* funded the entirety of the budget—full investment meant vertical integration in which the *chaebol* companies would

¹²³ Chang, "Compressed Modernity," 31.

¹²⁴ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 306.

¹²⁵ Jin, *Transnational Korean Cinema*, 35.

¹²⁶ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 309.

manage production and exhibition, often establishing their own entertainment departments.¹²⁷

Most *chaebol* companies dissolved or sold their share in the film business, however, between 1998 and 1999 due to low profits and the impact of the financial crisis in East Asia.¹²⁸

In 1997 many Asian markets showed the long-term signs of housing bubbles and foreign dollar to domestic currency discrepancies. In June, Thailand's baht to the US dollar parity crashed, and Indonesia soon followed. In Korea, the value of Korean won plummeted, causing a chain reaction in its export-heavy economy:

The government defended its value by buying won on the open market with its precious foreign reserves. But those foreign reserves weren't enough. The won went into free-fall. [...] In a country that depends on exporting goods to other countries, a drop in the value of the national currency can be a lethal blow to the stability of the economy.¹²⁹

The unprecedented pace of modernization in Korea ended abruptly. By November, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stepped in.

The IMF and other international financial institutions offered \$58.4 billion to bail Korea out. This amount was not given all at once, but instead divided over time in exchange for structural and economic reforms mandated by the IMF. Of the total proposed amount of \$58.4, the initial plan was for the IMF and other institutions to first provide \$35 billion in small installments. The remaining \$23.4 billion was to be reserved as a "second line of defense that would be made available to Korea by G-7 countries only if the initial amount of \$35 billion contributed by the IMF and other multilateral institutions proved inadequate."¹³⁰ On December 19, after two small installments that failed to invigorate the economy in Korea, the U.S.

¹²⁷ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 323.

¹²⁸ Ahn, "Film Policy after Fifth Film Law Amendment," 324.

¹²⁹ Myung Oak Kim and Sam Jaffe, *The New Korea: An Inside Look at South Korea's Economic Rise*, (New York: AMACOM, 2010), 50.

¹³⁰ Kim Kihwan, "The 1997-98 Korean Financial Crisis: Causes, Policy Response, and Lessons" (presentation, The High-Level Seminar on Crisis Prevention in Emerging Markets, Singapore, July 10-11, 2006), <https://www.imf.org/external/np/seminars/eng/2006/cpem/pdf/kihwan.pdf>, 11.

government intervened on behalf of the Korean government and persuaded the IMF to enter a new round of negotiations. Instead of small installments over time, Korean government asked for larger proportion of the proposed budget.¹³¹ The IMF intervention functioned as a form of economic colonialism.

Kim Kihwan identifies three major triggers that caused the financial crisis in Korea. The U.S. dollar became stronger in comparison to Korean won, leaving the Korean government to use its foreign currency reserves and thus leaving very few reserves.¹³² At the same time, the U.S. dollar to Japanese yen ratio changed significantly when the U.S. dollar gained value, leaving Korea deprived of its competitiveness in exports, the main mode of Korea's economy.¹³³ A significant portion of foreign investment decreased in a few years, shaking the whole economical structure of Korea. Lastly, as *chaebol* groups started experiencing financial difficulty, they relied on the government to bail them out, as they had in the past. However, the neoliberal market principles that the new government employed prevented the government from doing so. Hanbo, Sammi, Jinro, and Kia, among others, declared bankruptcy.¹³⁴ By 1996, "the combined sales by the top thirty *chaebol* groups accounted for almost 48 per cent of South Korea's total output."¹³⁵ Thus, it was not surprising that when *chaebols* were in trouble during the financial crisis. The whole country was in crisis mode. With the *chaebols* responsible for a majority of economic development in Korea going bankrupt, the Korean economy was left bereft.

¹³¹ Kim, "The 1997-98 Korean Financial Crisis," 11.

¹³² Kim, "The 1997-98 Korean Financial Crisis," 10.

¹³³ Kim, "The 1997-98 Korean Financial Crisis," 8.

¹³⁴ Kim, "The 1997-98 Korean Financial Crisis," 10.

¹³⁵ Chang, "Compressed Modernity," 39.

Prior to the IMF Crisis Korea had developed at an alarming rate. Kyung-Sup Chang calls this process of development “compressed modernity.” Compressed modernity refers to the rapid modernization that occurred in Korea after the Korean War (1950-53), “achieving over a mere few decades what took Westerners two or three centuries.”¹³⁶ However, compressed modernity became a source of anxiety in Korea as it became clear that this “miracle” was not sustainable. Compressed modernity describes not only rapid industrial and economic development, but also the anxieties resulting from it: “Compressed modernity became a source of anxiety in Korea as it became clear that this “miracle” of modernity was not sustainable. As the IMF Crisis proved, all that had been “built up in such a hurry turn[ed] out to be [a] highly collapse-prone economic, political and social system.”¹³⁷

One crucial political fracture happened in the clash between modernizers and democratizers. Modernizers supported and benefited from the rapid economic growth, sometimes at the expense of minority groups. When the economic growth came to a halt, advocates for social and political oppression claimed the need to democratize the nation. Democratizers had often been victims of political oppression themselves, including some that had been imprisoned for their lack of support for the military regimes. However, it is important to note that the democratizers were not centered around civilians, but a political ideology.

[The democratizers’] fight for democracy was not intended to give political power into [citizens’] hands. Their career of struggling against military dictators did not develop into an organized capacity for representing civil social forces and interests in institutional politics. These politicians’ conception of political power was very much aristocratic, albeit not too noble, and denying of civil access to it.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Chang, “Compressed Modernity,” 31.

¹³⁷ Chang, “Compressed Modernity,” 31.

¹³⁸ Chang, “Compressed Modernity,” 36.

Democratizers operated under a different ideology, guaranteeing citizens protection from wrongful imprisonment or torture, but they were not dispersing political power to civilians. Democratizers emphasized how voting for them would benefit the citizens who had been oppressed for disagreeing with the past modernizers' regimes, but in fact the votes yielded more benefits for the democratizers themselves who rose to power and replaced the modernizers.

With the IMF crisis and the resulting liberalization of the economy, as well as financial reforms, came an increase of political power on democratizers' part. Up until the late '90s, modernizers had held onto power by displaying results in economic growth and compressed modernity. However, the financial crisis changed the tide of the growth-oriented mindset that prioritized economy over all else. Several factors surrounding the IMF crisis affected the transition of power. One was the loss of faith in the current government of the time. Despite Kim Young-sam being a non-military leader and a symbol of democracy, his policies were clearly non-democratic. The country was not democratic enough, and the people could clearly see it. The second factor was the growing anti-U.S. sentiment in post-IMF crisis Korea.

When the IMF intervened in Korea, the general sentiment was antagonistic even though their loans bailed Korea out. Kim Kihwan identifies two goals for the IMF and other institutions' intervention: (1) to reduce the likelihood of a similar crisis in the future by cleaning up the balance sheets of financial institutions and (2) to evolve a financial system that can best help the nation resume growth with stability.¹³⁹ The IMF initially insisted on high interest rates from bank loans in Korea, but the rates only ushered in further bankruptcy. "Banks, manufacturers, and service-sector companies started failing left and right" while *chaebols* such as Samsung sold parts of its company to stay afloat.¹⁴⁰ Reassessing the situation, the IMF reversed its high interest

¹³⁹ Kim, "The 1997-98 Korean Financial Crisis," 12.

¹⁴⁰ Kim and Jaffe, *The New Korea*, 57.

rates in fall 1998. “The change had almost immediate results, with 1999 turning into a record year, with growth of 10.9 percent. The crisis, finally, was over.”¹⁴¹ The IMF became a symbol of Western interference, especially the U.S., and proved to be a “common enemy” for the Korean citizens to unite against.

Along with an anti-West sentiment came the end of oppressive tyranny as the democratizers argued for a necessary strength to protect the marginalized. Basic human rights became a crucial issue, and the modernizers’ “father knows best” attitude were severely criticized. Films such as *The President’s Barber* (2004 Dir. Lim Chan-sang), *The Old Garden* (2006 Dir. Im Sang-soo), and *1987: When the Day Comes* (2017 Dir. Jang Joon-hwan) portray how the military regime and its modernization agenda attributed to oppressing, torturing, and even murdering anyone who opposed them. It portrays how Korea rapidly modernized at the expense of some people, and democratizers voice a need for a shift of focus onto human rights and democratization.

The films were based on true incidents, and one major historical incident that featured modernizers as brutal was the Gwangju Uprising – also known as Gwangju Democratization Struggle or May 18 – from May 18-27, 1980. On May 18, students from Chonnam University protested the military regime when the government troops blindly fired and killed many. Seeing the brutality, citizens joined the protest and the whole city was up in arms. The exact number of casualties are still unknown to this day as the records have been eradicated. Only after 2000 did films openly address the incident.

The violence at Gwangju in 1980 had been silenced at great length, and it is not until after the end of the military regimes that media discussed the incident. One of the first films that

¹⁴¹ Kim and Jaffe, *The New Korea*, 58.

featured the Gwangju Incident as a source of trauma is *Peppermint Candy* (2000 Dir. Lee Chang-dong). *Peppermint Candy* begins in the spring of 1999 with the main character Yongho standing on the train tracks screaming “I want to go back” as a fast-running train approaches him. The film reverse-traces his life from a young innocent laborer in love to a failed businessman abandoned by his family. In 1979, Yongho is a young man full of hope, working at a factory alongside his first love. He is soon drafted to serve his mandatory military service for three years. In the next sequence, an untrained and confused soldier Yongho accidentally kills a civilian girl while he is at the site of the 1980 Gwangju Massacre. Mortified, he joins the police after his military service to do some good. However, the police resort to torturing people, especially democratizers and those against the oppressive military regime.

In the next chapter of his life, we see that Yongho has become an effective torturer by 1987, earning himself the nickname “Crazy Dog.” He does not hesitate to torture peaceful protestors that demand democracy and basic human rights. In 1994, he has once again transitioned into a different person—he is now a successful businessman. Unlike his outwardly successful demeanor, however, his family is crumbling apart. His wife is cheating on him, and he is cheating on his wife. He is neither loved nor respected by his children. Four years later in 1998, his business goes under during the IMF crisis and he loses everything, which leads into the last sequence and the beginning of the film.

Depicting the 1980 Gwangju Incident as a traumatic moment in the film is possible because the IMF crisis shattered the illusion that sacrificing a certain group of people in the name of everlasting exponential economic growth was a moral good. The “greater cause” that had shallowly justified the modernizers’ cruelty and oppression faltered with the financial crisis. The film *Peppermint Candy* not only identifies the Gwangju Massacre as a crucial historical moment,

but also emphasizes that we cannot greet the new millennium without addressing historical wounds.¹⁴² The Gwangju Incident had been a prime example of how the military regime failed citizens, and the cover-up of the incident only added to the incongruence between a modernizing country and the totalitarian political climate. In *Peppermint Candy*, Yongho is corrupted by the Gwangju Incident when he accidentally kills a girl, and the only way for him to adapt to the brutal world is to take on a new role as a torturer. As the initial victim of the modernizers' regime, Yongho becomes part of the perpetrators. At the beginning of the film he stands on the train tracks facing the train, and the speeding train represents the brutal and non-stop force of modernization and industrialization in Korean history. Yongho is yet another person who had laid the tracks for the train, yet is also hit and annihilated by it at the end.

Post-IMF crisis films from 1999 began to vilify patriarchal aggressors instead of celebrating them. Seung-ryul Kang writes that the IMF crisis crushed the dreams of a strong patriarch leading the family and social structure to eternal growth spurt.¹⁴³ Kang sees the financial crisis as inspiring filmmakers to illustrate less macho, and more unstable, men that symbolize a longing for the strong patriarch to return.¹⁴⁴ But in the decades to come, the existing notions of the patriarch would change from aggressors to protectors when the myth of masculinity separated itself from patriarchy and rebranded to justify its violence. Before examining the new masculine, however, it is important to analyze how films immediately following the financial crisis depict powerless patriarchs turning spiteful.

Happy End (1999 Dir. Jung Ji-woo) is set during the financial crisis when banks start laying off workers. The main character, Min Ki, is a husband and a father who used to work at

¹⁴² Jeong-nam Seo, *21st Century Korean Films from the Perspective of Trauma*, (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2014), 43.

¹⁴³ Kang, *Family and Society*, 177.

¹⁴⁴ Kang, *Family and Society*, 178-9.

the bank but is now unemployed. His wife, Bora, is the director of an English educational institute. Bora begins to feel frustrated at Min Ki for not applying to new jobs but also not helping with the baby. She tells him that if he wants to stay at home, he should be a full-time stay-at-home dad and husband, looking after the baby and the house. Min Ki goes grocery shopping and learns how to cook, often looking out of place but doing his best to adapt to the new situation. Bora continues to find Min Ki's shortcomings with household chores, and she voices her opinions now that she is the sole breadwinner of the house. Humiliated but knowing that he has no other choice, Min Ki continues to look after the baby and take care of the house until one day he discovers that Bora has been cheating on him with a graphic designer named Il-beom. Pushed over the edge, Min Ki murders his wife and frames Il-beom. The film ends with Min Ki taking care of the baby alone.

Happy End signals the separation between the authoritative patriarch and the myth of masculinity. Kang sees *Happy End* as a film with a man who cruelly murders his wife to restore the patriarchal authority.¹⁴⁵ By punishing the wife, Min Ki is attempting to restore order and his own power in the family. However, I argue that the ending of this film is not a restoration but renunciation of the “normal” patriarchal family. Min Ki the patriarch is so powerless that he feels the need to murder his wife, but the murder does not change Min Ki's situation as an unemployed single dad. Blaming the wife is ultimately pointless. It is important to note that although the film frames Min Ki as the main character and a better parent than Bora, his violence is still not justified as a “good” resolution.

Happy End is a film that portrays the shortcomings of the patriarch, and how their violence is no longer justified or celebrated.

¹⁴⁵ Kang, *Family and Society*, 183.

As the economy shut down in response to the monetary crisis at the end of the year, factories and offices were dramatically oversaturated with salaried workers. The IMF demanded that the laws against layoffs, as well as the general cultural tradition of jobs-for-life, end. They did. Unemployment shot up from 2.1 percent in 1996 to 6 percent in 1998. [...] The change was startling to most Koreans. The idea of a bread-winner not being able to find a job was an alien problem for the country, and people weren't sure how to handle it.¹⁴⁶

Although Bora is cheating on Min Ki, we see some scenes that explain, perhaps almost justify, Bora's deviation. Min Ki refuses to communicate with his wife about his financial situation out of pride. He manages to take care of their baby because he has no other choice. Meanwhile, Bora has no issues supporting the family financially as long as she is not expected to do household chores on top of her work. Min Ki doesn't quite understand the situation and calls her "full of it" or drunk on power even though Bora had been managing both reproductive and financial labor until Min Ki lost his job. Contrary to Min Ki, Il-beom is a New Man. He has a steady job adapting to the new technology-oriented world as a web designer, but he also cleans his house and cooks for Bora. Il-beom is depicted as an understanding and responsible man compared to Min Ki. Il-beom is not the new hero, however, because he too falls into the trap of aggression towards Bora. He calls Bora repeatedly and would not take no for an answer. He begins to act possessive, and his actions are not justifiable.

Conclusion

This chapter featured the Asian financial crisis in Korea as a turning point for the myth of masculinity. Leading up to the IMF Crisis, modernizers dominated the political discourse. The military-based regimes used media to legitimize oppression and state-led industrialization until 1993, and the Asian financial crisis has created an opportunity for democratizers to voice the

¹⁴⁶ Kim and Jaffe, *The New Korea*, 55.

dangers of economic prioritization over everything else.¹⁴⁷ The late capitalist idea of perpetual growth combined with quickness in Korea, and those who disagreed with the military regime and its emphasis on economic growth were severely punished. Films prior to the financial crisis celebrate strong all-knowing father-figures who protect their families. In other words, the myth of masculinity fuses with patriarchy and justifies excessive violence against the Other (non-family) as not only necessary but also laudable.

The father-like leader's time came to an end and eventually the economy crashed, however, and the seemingly endless rapid economic growth came to an end. Unemployment skyrocketed and the long-repressed critique of the modernizers began to flow freely. The all-knowing and authoritative fathers were suddenly thrown into helplessness. This is the point in which the myth of masculinity separates itself from patriarchy—films after the financial crisis features authoritative and stubborn patriarchs as villains, and their violence is no longer justified. Authoritative patriarchs are no longer the masculine heroes.

It is important to note that masculinity poses as a necessary and good violence, and its main role is to protect. Prior to the financial crisis, masculinity justified strong patriarchs because some violence and sacrifice led to the ultimate goal of economic growth. As perceptions change, however, so does masculinity. Post-crisis films feature a different masculine, one that poses as a protector of the weak and the oppressed. The new heroes of masculinity separate from patriarchy are violent out of necessity and protect the weak with its powers against tyranny and oppression. Former patriarchs are often portrayed as foils and villains in the face of these newly separated masculine heroes for their stubborn claims to omnipotence and omniscience. Once again, their violence is justified because they are providing protection to those who need it, i.e. women and

¹⁴⁷ Jin, *Transnational Korean Cinema*, 111.

children. In the following chapter, we will take a close look at the new masculinity in *Train to Busan*.

Chapter 3 *Train to Busan*, The New Masculine Patriarch, and the Public Good

On April 16, 2014, the Sewol ferry carrying mostly students from Danwon Highschool on an annual trip sank on its way to Jeju Island, trapping and killing 304 people on board¹⁴⁸. On the day of the school trip, 325 students from Danwon High School boarded the ferry. School trips to the popular island usually involves airplanes over ferries. However, as the ferry industry dwindled because of increasing flights in the early 2000s, the Korean Maritime Administration reached out to the Ministry of Education. At the request of the government, Danwon High students set sail on the Sewol ferry to subsidize the shipping industry.¹⁴⁹

In addition to the students and a few other passengers, the ferry was overloaded with improperly secured cargo to yield a maximum profit for the ferry company. Incheon Port Authority was aware of the violation but nonetheless allowed the ferry to sail.¹⁵⁰ In fact, according to Byung-hee Jo, a professor at Seoul National University Graduate School of Public Health, such profit-over-safety mindset is what allowed Sewol ferry to continue being a passenger ship in 2014. Sewol ferry had been a Japanese passenger ship for 18 years and was officially retired before a Korean company bought it in 2012. Jo argues that Lee Myung-bak's neoliberal deregulation policy extended the ship's service life from 25 to 30 years, justifying the

¹⁴⁸ Five bodies were never found.

¹⁴⁹ Byung-hee Jo, "Questions that Sewol Raises," in *Sewol Ferry Asks Us: The Sociology of Disaster and Public Concern*, (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2015), 29.

¹⁵⁰ Yoon-gyung, Lee, "The Foretold Disaster Caused by Neoliberal Deregulation," in *Sinking Sewol, Wrecked Korea*, ed. Jae-jung Seo and Mi-kyung Kim, (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2017), 59.

change with additional profit the ferry would generate.¹⁵¹ In 2014, Lee was already under investigation for corruption after his presidency, and Park Geun-hye of Lee's same conservative party was serving as the President. As the daughter of Park Chung Hee, Park Geun-hye had continued his legacy as a modernizer while Lee had previously emphasized economic growth based on his business acumen. When the Sewol ferry tragedy occurred, many blamed the lack of infrastructure and training that could have prevented such disasters. Of 476 people on board, 304 died, including 250 Danwon High School students.

The Sewol ferry tragedy shocked the nation because it revealed how little concern is given to training and safety as a whole. That lack directly correlated to the death of young victims. Neither the ship crew nor the maritime police were equipped to deal with such accident because they had not been properly trained. More than half of the crew on Sewol were temporary workers, including the captain.¹⁵² The captain was on a one-year contract earning 60% of permanent workers of the same position. It was, therefore, unrealistic to expect a professional conduct when the workers had transient or limited work with no proper training.¹⁵³ The captain of the Sewol ferry told the passengers on the PA to remain seated while he and his crew took the lifeboat to safety. Furthermore, the company that owned Sewol ferry spent the least amount possible on safety trainings, spending a mere 54,000 won (\$490) on a yearly training budget of the entire company.¹⁵⁴

The maritime police did not have the proper diving unit to deploy as the ship was sinking before their eyes, losing what is called the "golden time" to rescue majority of the people on board. While the maritime police were not efficient in the rescue mission itself, the more

¹⁵¹ Jo, "Questions that Sewol Raises," 28.

¹⁵² Lee, "The Foretold Disaster," 69-70.

¹⁵³ Lee, "The Foretold Disaster," 71.

¹⁵⁴ Lee, "The Foretold Disaster," 70.

important problem is that safety and rescues were not prioritized as part of the police duty.¹⁵⁵

The existing maritime police training prioritized protecting the fishing industry from illegal Chinese fishing boats in the west coast over training to save lives.¹⁵⁶ Because the maritime police focused on preventing economic loss, it was not equipped to carry out a rescue mission despite the fact that it is the only agency placed at the coast. As Yul Cho states, “the tragedy at Paengmok Harbor is not an act of terror imposed upon a peaceful and organized country. This incident merely exposed the abundance of irresponsible individual officials working for the prejudiced power system.”¹⁵⁷

As a result of such lack of procedure and safety, young victims were killed, trapped inside the slowly sinking ship. In summer 2017 I visited the Paengmok Harbor where the Sewol ferry had sunk three years earlier. Yellow ribbons, a symbol of the Sewol ferry tragedy, were tied across the railings. Banners lined the sides of the harbor with messages focusing on finding the missing bodies of victims: “Float the Sewol ferry if you have to scoop the entire ocean!” “There are people still in the Sewol ferry. Every last person must return to the arms of their family!” “We will not forget. We are with you.”

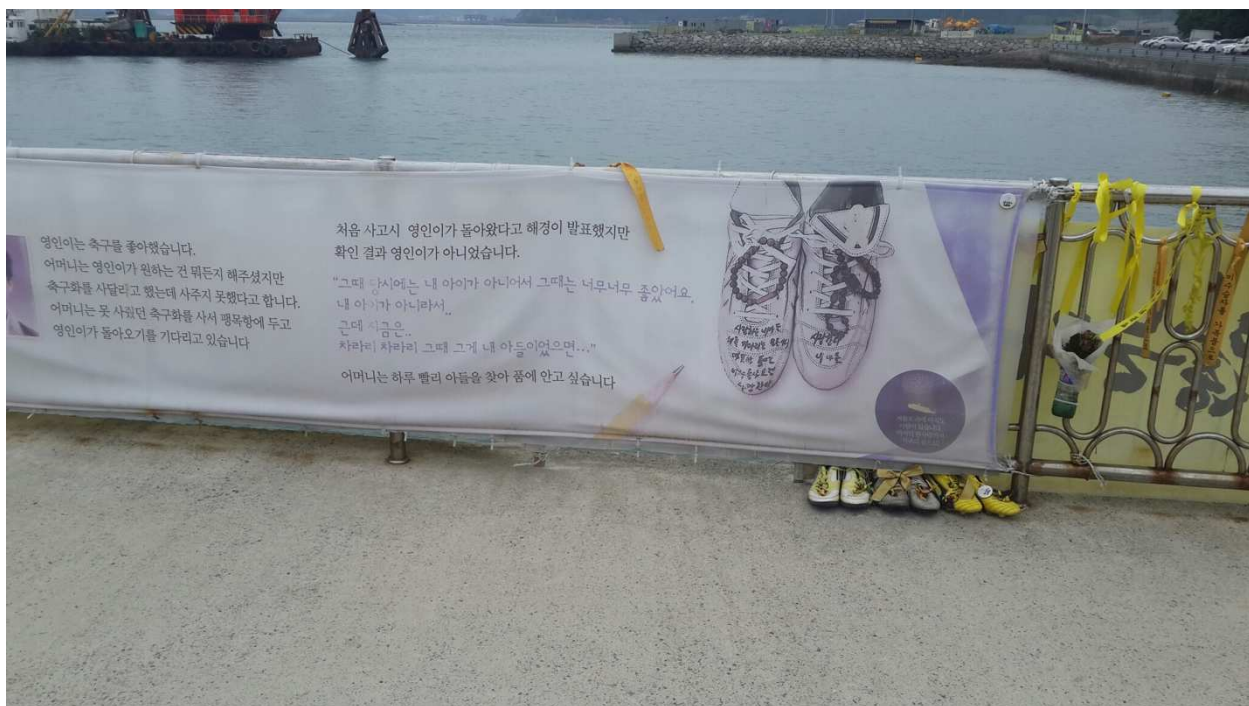
¹⁵⁵ Jo, “Questions that Sewol Raises,” 31.

¹⁵⁶ Jo, “Questions that Sewol Raises,” 41.

¹⁵⁷ Yul Cho, *Silent Sewol*, (Pohang, Hongjin Books, 2014), 78.



One particular banner recounted the story of a mother being unable to purchase a new pair of soccer shoes for her now-missing son. There were three pairs of soccer shoes placed underneath the banner.



Not far from the harbor stood a container set up as a temporary group memorial altar for victims whose bodies had not been found. The banner on one side of the container has drawings of the students safely ensconced in lotus flower with the words “Salvage the truth.” On the other side contrasting this peaceful image is the sinking ferry and the words “Did you forget? 4.16.” Inside the temporary altar, individual pictures of faces lined one wall of the container. On the table in front of the wall of pictures were snacks, flowers, and candles placed by visitors. The smiling faces of young students and several teachers provided a hard contrast against the banners leading up from the harbor to the altar building.



While the victims of the tragedy were framed to be “children,” adults were framed as the source of blame. One popular phrase that captured the national sentiment following the tragedy was “Adults are sorry.”¹⁵⁸ Journalists Dong-il Seo and Jung Soo Hong write how the older generation, blinded by a sense of generational pride at modernizing the country, expressed guilt

¹⁵⁸ Dong-il Seo, “‘Sorry, The Adults are to Blame’...Korea in a State of Helplessness,” The Dong-a Ilbo, DongA, May 1, 2014, <https://www.donga.com/news/Society/article/all/20140501/63188467/1>.

for failing to prevent such a tragedy.¹⁵⁹ The guilt derives from the prioritization of economy and modernization over safety. The sentiment newly tabled the existing political division in Korea: the modernizers and the democratizers.

Hyung-min Joo outlines how the modernization theory, especially that the process of economic growth eventually leads to a successful democratization, is not quite applicable to Korea. Joo argues that the democratization in Korea is not an outcome of the linear process of modernization but due to the agency of an opposing group. Thus, he distinguishes “democratizers” from “modernizers.” Joo writes that “Park Chung-hee and his followers initiated a rapid process of economic development under a dictatorial government, [while] it was the progressive liberals who fought hard against a dictatorship and finally democratized the country.”¹⁶⁰

The main reason for such division was due to the rapid pace of modernization. Since modernization occurred at such a rapid speed in Korea, the modernizers and the democratizers were of the similar generation. Park Chung-hee came to power with a military coup in 1961 and secured a life-term presidency by 1972. Essentially a military state, Park’s regime focused on a strict control over the country. Not yet framed as a “modernizer,” Park was the conservative to the opposing group of progressive liberals: the democratizers who struggled for democracy, state welfare, distribution of wealth, and a closer relationship with North Korea.¹⁶¹

Only after the Asian financial crisis did the conservatives successfully rebrand themselves as the modernizers who made economic growth possible. Joo writes that conservatives lost presidential elections to democrats first in 1997 and then in 2002, during

¹⁵⁹ Seo, “Sorry, The Adults are to Blame.”

¹⁶⁰ Hyung-min Joo, “A Return of ‘the Strong Man’s Daughter’: Modernization, Democratization, and Social Divisions in Korea,” *Japanese journal of Political Science*, 18 no. 2 (2017), 361.

¹⁶¹ Joo, “A Return of the Strong Man’s Daughter,” 366.

which time the 1997 Asian financial crisis wrecked the economy of Korea. Seeing an opportunity, the conservatives rebranded as the modernizers able to rescue the country from current financial disaster.

In response, conservatives popularized a catchy rhetoric of ‘a lost decade’ and made a successful appeal to the people weary of economic hardships. [...] Conservatives skillfully reformulated their image from ‘dictators’ to ‘industrializers’ and ‘modernizers’ who had achieved ‘the miracle of Han’ under Park Chung-hee. As a result, the struggle was no longer portrayed as between dictators and democratizers. Instead, it was described as between those who had built the economy and those who were wrecking it.¹⁶²

Opposing political parties now compete for power with different credentials: modernizers argue that they built the country while the democratizers say they brought democracy.¹⁶³

Modernizers came back into power starting with the election of Lee Myung-bak and continuing onto Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the original modernizer. Park Geun-hye was the president when the Sewol ferry tragedy occurred and democratizers soon framed the tragedy as an example of how modernizers prioritized economy over human lives, ultimately leading to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye and a regime change. Democratizers who had been repressed by the modernizers, listed the tragedy as yet another example of the hidden cost of such fast modernization: human beings. With modernizers in charge, economic success became a standard through which one was judged, and it was prioritized over all else. By assigning “selfish adults” (modernizers) to be the cause of the Sewol ferry incident, the democratizers successfully impeached Park Geun-hye and reseeded power.

As democratizers regained power, the masculine ideal changed from an all-knowing father modeled after Park Chung-hee to a more caring and compassionate man – someone who had been persecuted by the dictator for attempting to ensure basic human rights. As discussed in

¹⁶² Joo, “A Return of the Strong Man’s Daughter,” 369.

¹⁶³ Joo, “A Return of the Strong Man’s Daughter,” 361.

the previous chapter, the Asian Financial Crisis (1997) raises questions against an authoritative father-figure who knows what is best. During the financial crisis the patriarch is no longer able to economically provide for the family, a standard through which the masculine father was established and justified as a protector and provider for his own unit. As a protector, the masculine patriarch's violence was justified as a means to an end. However, as the financial crisis produced helpless fathers who could not provide for their families anymore, films reflected these anxieties through depictions of men threatened by their financially independent wives.

The financial crisis as well as the Sewol ferry incident prompted many to question the over-emphasis on economy and individual success over public good, political participation, and tolerance in modern-day Korea.¹⁶⁴ Instead, the new standard through which masculinity is established is through the notion of public good.

When *Train to Busan* was released in theaters in 2016 as the first feature-length zombie film, many recalled the 2014 Sewol ferry incident. Zombie films have served as means to illuminate different human conditions in real life. The first zombie film as we know them – cannibalistic zombies not under the control of an individual – begins with George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).¹⁶⁵ Romero relocated zombies from Haiti, recreating them to be cannibalistic monsters. When he did, he not only redefined the characteristics of zombies in *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to be cannibalistic, but he also explored the American national trauma of racial inequality (Bishop 2009; Moreman 2010; Shaviro 1993). The film takes place in a rural farmhouse. One striking scene in this film is when the last surviving human Ben, who

¹⁶⁴ Hye-ran Koo, "The Problem is Public Concern," in *Sewol Ferry Asks Us: The Sociology of Disaster and Public Concern*, (Paju: Hanul Academy, 2015), 87.

¹⁶⁵ The first film in which creatures called zombies appear is *White Zombie* (1932). A shaman called the *bokor* can command and control the zombies. These zombies do not consume humans and attack humans only when told by the *bokor*. Before George A. Romero standardized the image of the modern zombies, the fear of zombies derived mainly from the idea of becoming a slave (Dendle 2007; McIntosh 2008; Mogk 2011; Moreman 2010).

happens to be a black man, is shot by rural rednecks who come to “rescue” people from the zombies. After the first film, Romero went onto create his first zombie trilogy including *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985).¹⁶⁶ The universal message in these three zombie movies is that humans can be just as dangerous as zombies, if not more so.

When the genre transitions to Korea, the nature of zombies readily provides means to replace some American social issues with uniquely Korean ones. Steven Shaviro, one of the first zombie scholars, describes zombies as empty vessels without genuine purposeful actions.¹⁶⁷ Zombies are empty in the sense that they are not tied to any cultural background. The origin of cannibalistic zombies are American, but concept of zombies are universal because human life and death is omnipresent.

The zombies in *Train* emphasizes already existing cruelties in our society as well as the need to work together to survive. Killing zombies who look human and used to be human as recently as seconds ago forces the characters to realize that humans have been cruel to each other. When the main character steps on a zombie’s fingers to stay on the ladder, it alludes to the fact that he had been doing so his whole life, stepping on others to get to where he is now. At the same time such self-centered attitudes will not help in the zombie-infested world. The moral of the story is expressed in the main character’s gradual realization that humans must help each other to survive. As film journalist Kim Hyun Min critiques the film, it is rare to find a blockbuster that clearly carries the director’s desire to be a better adult and a part of a better society.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ The second zombie trilogy he wrote and directed were *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). They allude to more contemporary American issues such as capitalism, border patrol, immigration, and online content creation, to name a few.

¹⁶⁷ Steven Shaviro, “Contagious Allegories: George Romero” in *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 85.

¹⁶⁸ “Train to Busan 2016,” *Naver Film*, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://movie.naver.com/movie/bi/mi/point.naver?code=130966#pointExpertTab>.

Director Yeon Sang-ho and *Train to Busan*

Train to Busan (director Yeon Sang-ho) was first released at the Cannes Film Festival on May 13, 2016. It subsequently opened in theaters in South Korea on July 20, 2016, followed by a limited release in the United States in the same month.¹⁶⁹ The film has been referred to as the first successful feature-length Korean zombie film, grossing more than \$99 million worldwide by September 2016.¹⁷⁰ 11.57 million people had been recorded at the theaters domestically.¹⁷¹

Before the release of *Train to Busan*, director Yeon Sang-ho was known for his works of animation. His previous films also focus on social critiques and the problematic structures within Korea. His debut film *King of Pigs* (2011), released to a limited number of theaters, won three awards at Busan Film Festival and was nominated at various international festivals.¹⁷² The film illustrates generational poverty, school bullying, and class conflict.¹⁷³ The plot revolves around two adult men who think back to their time in junior high in the 1980s when they were already “weak” in comparison to the vicious bullies. The classroom functions as a prequel to the society the two men now live in, and their situations have not changed in a meaningful sense.

His subsequent film *The Fake* (2013) deals with pseudo religions and cults. Yeon’s second film was released in 75 theaters as opposed to 25 for *King of Pigs*. *The Fake* also premiered in Toronto International on September 7, 2013.¹⁷⁴ While pseudo religion is a major focus of the film, it also features violent masculinity, the dichotomy between urban and rural

¹⁶⁹ “Train to Busan (2016),” *IMDb*, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5700672/>.

¹⁷⁰ “Train to Busan (2016),” *IMDb*.

¹⁷¹ “Train to Busan 2016,” *Naver Film*.

¹⁷² Sonia Dueñas Mohedas, “Between Independent Cinema and the Blockbuster in South Korea: Yeon Sang-ho’s Films and their Reception in Spain,” *Atalante* 29 (2020): 70.

¹⁷³ Guiljabi, “Director Yeon Sang-ho’s Animation Works Part 1,” *Naver* (blog), February 15, 2018, <https://post.naver.com/viewer/postView.nhn?memberNo=21823208&volumeNo=13073361>.

¹⁷⁴ Mohedas, “Between Independent Cinema and the Blockbuster,” 71.

towns, and poverty in tandem to provide a contextual view of Korean society.¹⁷⁵ Sonia Mohedas argues that this second film consolidated Yeon's international profile.¹⁷⁶

The increased recognition of Yeon's work is clear in the distribution of *Seoul Station* (2016), an animated zombie film that functions as a tandem to the live-action movie *Train to Busan*.¹⁷⁷ *Seoul Station* was released in August and distributed to 440 theaters following the financial success of *Train*.¹⁷⁸ The two movies are not related in terms of characters or content, but they both focus on dysfunctional society even before the zombies. The zombie outbreak in *Seoul Station* is attributed to a large group of homeless people near Seoul Station, a major railway station with both intercity trains and Seoul subway. The particular area has gone through rapid development as evidenced by the Old Seoul Station preserved alongside the newly constructed and expanded station currently in use. At the same time, the area is known for an abundance of homeless people. The film shows a cruel yet widespread attitude towards the homeless in Korea when people refuse to help or even listen to the homeless. A policeman points his gun at two homeless men and one runaway girl even when surrounded by zombies, blaming the homeless for what he understands to be social unrest. Yet the scariest point of the film is that zombies are not why life is miserable for the main characters in the film: the homeless reside near Seoul Station because they have nowhere else to go, while the runaway girl turns to prostitution because she has no other option.

Unlike *Train to Busan*, *Seoul Station* truly embodies Yeon's pessimistic view of Korean society as can be seen by the ending of the animation. One of the few hopeful notes throughout

¹⁷⁵ Guiljabi, "Director Yeon Sang-ho's Animation Works Part 1."

¹⁷⁶ Mohedas, "Between Independent Cinema and the Blockbuster," 71.

¹⁷⁷ Some argue that *Seoul Station* serves as a prequel to *Train to Busan*, but they are more likely to be happening simultaneously. Media in *Train to Busan* repeatedly refers to nation-wide violent protests which coincides with how the zombie outbreak is addressed in *Seoul Station*.

¹⁷⁸ Mohedas, "Between Independent Cinema and the Blockbuster," 71.

the movie is the possible father-daughter reunion. In the last couple minutes of the movie, the runaway girl finally sees her “father” who had been looking for her. It turns out that the man is not her father but the violent pimp she ran away from. Chasing after her in the model house of an expensive new apartment, he expresses frustration at not having access to such homes. Desperation and poverty prevail. No one comes to the girl’s rescue, she dies, turns into a zombie, and violently attacks the pimp.

Released in July, one month earlier than *Seoul Station*, *Train to Busan* opened in 1788 theaters throughout Korea and set the year’s record ticket sales at 11,567,218 tickets.¹⁷⁹ *Train to Busan* was Yeon’s first live-action feature-length film. The majority of *Train* is set on a moving train, a marker of control and speed. A financially successful but emotionally unavailable father Seok Woo takes his daughter Soo-an at her request to his ex-wife’s house in Busan. On the way, they encounter a zombie virus outbreak, stemming from a young female passenger who stumbles onto the train at the last minute with blood pouring down her legs. Seok Woo transforms from a selfish survivor to a helpful asset to the group as he learns the importance of social good throughout the journey. He dies protecting his daughter and a pregnant woman, Sung Gyeong, who safely arrive at Busan where the military have successfully quarantined the city.

Train to Busan entails three major points of interest: the students, different masculinities, and the representation of women in the film. The film problematizes how individual success is prioritized over the public good in modern Korea through the depiction of a high school baseball team that alludes to the Sewol ferry tragedy. The film also suggests a solution through the myth of masculinity: Korea needs more masculine men who can protect the socially weak. In the

¹⁷⁹ Mohedas, “Between Independent Cinema and the Blockbuster,” 71-2.

process of emphasizing the need for more masculinity, however, the film limits the role of women to be “mothers” and “daughters.”

Students in *Train* play an important role in Yeon’s critique of modern Korea where adults to do not hesitate in sacrificing the weak and the young for their own benefit. The students in the film allude to the high school students in the 2014 Sewol tragedy, an occurrence that spotlighted the problems of prioritizing modernization and economic growth over all else. In *Train to Busan*, no high school student survives. Zombies, who do not discriminate, kill most of them but surviving adults also contribute to the deaths, especially when one adult uses a female student as a human shield. Both the students in the film and the young victims of the ferry tragedy are the future generation sacrificed by selfish adults.

The pristine order of the train and its attendants breaks down when the female train attendant encounters patient zero, a young woman with a bite mark on her leg staggering onto the train at the last minute. The female train attendant, immaculately dressed and eager to help, approaches the young woman with concern. The young woman convulses on the floor and the train attendant desperately radios the chief. In the next scene we see the train attendant walking through the compartment with the high school students while the young woman, now zombified, is mounted on her back biting her. Chaos ensues as patient zero attacks other students in the compartment and the female attendant joins her as a zombie. The chief attendant arrives to see the attack and runs away to lock out the contaminated compartment with the students, stating on his radio to the conductor that violence has erupted in the train.

The description of zombie outbreak as violence or protest is a common theme in the film. It also features prominently in *Seoul Station* where the zombie outbreak is described as a violent protest by the homeless. In the animation, the military fire at panicked survivors chased by

zombies. In *Train*, the news media on the train TV screens misreports the zombie attacks as citizens' uprising. The reports of violent and aggressive protestors allude to the protests in Korean history. Numerous democratizers were arrested or imprisoned for protesting the military dictators in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, the state was not afraid to use violence to overpower the protestors. The fear of uprising clearly shows that a seemingly structured and peaceful society is not far from the history of violence and fight for democracy.

The fact that train attendants are the first to contract the zombie virus further adds to the film's homage to the Sewol ferry incident as well as its problematization of Korean society. As violence erupts in the back of the train, the first half of the train, including the first-class cars where the main character sits, is still calm and peaceful. Riding the train to help the passengers, the two attendants become the main source of the zombie virus. The chief attendant who runs away from the students' compartment parallels the Sewol ferry captain who abandoned the ship and the passengers to save himself. The captain and the crew of the Sewol ferry were one of the first to abandon ship and get rescued while the public announcement on the ship repeatedly instructed passengers to stay put. Having been told to sit and wait for rescue, the students on the Sewol ferry were essentially trapped in the ship as it slowly sank while the captain and his crew safely reached the shore. The film more vividly sets the scene of entrapment: the clear window on the compartment door shows students scream and pound on the locked compartment door. Behind them, their friends are attacked, murdered, and turned into zombies. No adult opens the door to let them out.

The number of surviving students dwindle as the film progresses until there are two students left. The two get separated in the commotion: the female student Jin-Hee (Sohee) hides in a zombie-free compartment with other survivors including Yong-suk (Kim Eui-sung), an

authoritative and selfish CEO who insists on locking out everyone outside the compartment in fear of contamination. Yong-guk (Choi Woo-shik), the male student on the baseball team, fights his way along with the main character Seok Woo (Gong Yoo) and others to arrive outside the safe compartment. Yong-guk and others, chased by zombies, try to get into the compartment but Yong-suk refuses to open the door, claiming that one of the survivors could be bitten. Jin-Hee hears Yong-guk's voice and attempts to open the door but other surviving adults, convinced by Yong-suk, start to voice the need to keeping the door locked even though it is clear that this would mean certain death for those outside the compartment.

When Yong-guk manages to slide his arm in the door, Yong-suk and the others try to break Yong-guk's arm to keep the doors locked. When that fails and Seok Woo and the others manage to get into the safe car, the people occupying the compartment berate them to move onto the next compartment so they could lock themselves up again. They are not willing to work together because they do not want to risk any of them lying about being infected. Yong-guk walks on, telling Jin-Hee to stay in the safe compartment but she goes with him. She refuses, saying that the safe compartment is "scarier." Her words emphasize the fact that this zombie-free compartment full of self-centered adults is more terrifying than a possibly zombie-infested rest of the train.

Jin-Hee's words prove to be correct when Yong-suk runs towards her and Yong-guk at the end, chased by a zombie, and throws Jin-Hee to the ground in order to escape the zombie. Yong-suk's sense of entitlement about his own survival at the expense of others causes the end of Jin-Hee's life, and by extension Yong-guk's, as he loses all will to fight and lets Jin-Hee bite him. In this scene Yong-suk is the epitome of selfish adults that cause the death of the innocent. In the next section I discuss more in detail about the stark contrast between the authoritative

patriarch represented by Yong-suk as selfish and uncaring and a new masculine man who protects all the socially weak.

Adults in the Film and the Myth of Masculinity – Yong-Suk, Seok Woo, and Sang Hwa

As discussed in the previous chapter, the myth of masculinity changes with time and shifting political ideologies. Immediately after Japanese colonialism, the ideal masculine is a powerful leader. Modeled after Park Chung-hee, the myth evolves as an all-knowing patriarch who defends his family and guides them to success. However, the financial crisis and increasing demand for democracy becomes a turning point in which the myth distances itself from an oppressive patriarchy. Films reflect the evolution by casting unreasonable and aggressive patriarchs as villains and juxtaposing them against a new ideal masculine man who protects all that are weak and oppressed. The new masculinity does not claim omnipotence and omniscience but listens to formerly silenced voices. This change does not indicate a change in women's objectification. The new myth of masculinity is still based on a male-centered experience and aftermath of trauma, while women are seen as objects belonging to the men and needing protection.

There are three male characters in *Train to Busan*: the aforementioned Yong-suk, Seok Woo (Gong Yoo), and Sang Hwa (Ma Dong-seok). Yong-suk represents the authoritative and selfish older generation. He introduces himself as the CEO of Stallion Express and relies on his social status to emphasize his importance even as the social order breaks down around him. Yong-suk believes that his success depends solely on his abilities. He sees a homeless man and correlates the man's poverty with personal failure, assuming his status is due to his not trying hard enough. Yong-suk points to the homeless man and tells Soo-an that she will turn out to be

like the homeless man if she does not study hard at school. Moreover, he shoves others at the zombies in order to escape himself. Even when he uses Jin-Hee, a high school student, as a human shield, he justifies himself with the words, “*I need to go*,” implying that he is more important than anyone else. He represents the authoritative patriarch, the old masculine that the myth now abandons for a more up-to-date myth of masculinity that we see in Sang Hwa, a loving husband and a new father-to-be.

Sang Hwa is the morally upright and protective man who cares about not just his wife Sung Gyeong (Jung Yu-mi) and unborn child but also everyone else. He is the new kind of masculine patriarch who guards the bathroom door for his wife and guides everyone to safety in a dire situation. He is violent, but his violence is justified and even celebrated because he uses it to fight zombies and help survivors. Seeing Soo-an about to be attacked by a zombified soldier (and not within reach of her father Seok Woo), Sang Hwa elbows the zombie and fights off another to save her. Sang Hwa and Sung Gyeong grab Soo-an and run to safety. About to lock the door, Sang Hwa sees the homeless man half running and half limping and Seok Woo frozen in fear, and waits for them instead of locking the door right away. His actions that risk his own safety in the interest of helping others contrasts directly to that of Yong-suk’s in the next scene where Yong-suk tries to convince the crew to start the train despite the fact that other survivors are still on the platform. Towards the beginning Seok Woo also resembles Yong-Suk who selfishly focuses on his own comfort and well-being.

The main character Seok Woo goes through a transformation in the film from an authoritative and selfish father to a new version of the masculine ideal who considers other people. In the beginning of the film, Seok Woo is a self-centered man who built his economic success on collecting insider information. He does not have the time to attend his daughter’s

recitals, and he forgets what presents he had gotten her previously. Heading to Busan where he can drop off Soo-an with his ex-wife, Seok Woo's main concern is returning to the office by lunch time.

When the zombies start attacking, Seok Woo's sole concern is his and Soo-an's survival – because Soo-an is *his* daughter. His behavior in the beginning is contrasted with Sang Hwa's who struggles to rescue a woman from a biting zombie. In contrast, Seok Woo quickly walks by as Sang Hwa struggles with the zombie, trying not to get in their way or make eye contact. Once in the first-class compartment where Yong-Suk and the others are, Seok Woo looks back and sees Sung Gyeong and Sang Hwa running towards the compartment, chased by zombies. People scream for Seok Woo to block the door as he is standing closest to the door; Seok Woo sees the couple, hesitates, but shuts the door in Sung Gyeong's face. At that moment, Seok Woo is only interested in looking after himself and his daughter, still governed by the hurried lifestyle that prioritizes productivity and self-interest over communal good.

Seeing Yong-suk talk on the phone about Daejeon Station, Seok Woo calls one of his analysts located in Daejeon to confirm that the station is safe. His contact tells him that anyone who gets to the station will be quarantined by the military, and Seok Woo says, "How about just helping me and my daughter?" and bargains for safety with good insider information. The contact tells Seok Woo to take his daughter and come out the Eastern Square instead of the Main Square. At the station, Seok Woo takes Soo-an to a restricted area of the station without sharing this vital information with the others who get on the escalator to exit the station towards the Main Square. Seok Woo is aware that other people are heading towards military quarantine and other dangers, but he still does not inform anyone else. The escalator slowly descends towards the ground when the passengers realize that the figures in military uniforms outside the station

have been infected. The military that should have protected the citizens becomes a direct threat to the survivors.

Seok Woo starts to change when he sees the social system collapse at Daejeon Station. When Soo-an offers her seat to a grandma towards before they reach Daejeon, Seok Woo criticizes her for not looking after her own interests in such time of chaos. But his understanding of what the right thing to do changes throughout the film. Impacted by both his morally incorruptible daughter and Sang Hwa, who insist on helping everyone because it is the right thing to do, Seok Woo thinks about protecting all survivors. He uses his power and violence to protect those in need even if it does not benefit him personally. Only then does Soo-an recognize Seok Woo as a good person and a good father, not the person she accused of selfishness in the beginning of the film. Seok Woo becomes a new masculine man, distinguishing himself from the villainous and unchanging authoritarian Yong-suk.

By the end of the film, a contrast between Seok Woo and Yong-suk depicts how much Seok Woo has changed. When bitten, Yong-suk is in denial, refusing to take any responsibility or face the situation. Selfish to the end, he repeats that he is scared until he turns and attacks the other characters. In contrast, Seok Woo gets bitten while protecting his daughter and Sung Gyeong. Wasting no time, he checks the brakes of the locomotives before leaping to his death before he can hurt them as a zombie. When the social order that demands productive and selfish workers crumbles, Seok Woo reconnects with humanity even as he changes into a zombie.

The “Woman Problem”: Still Neglected?

By the release of *Train to Busan*, the myth of masculinity had adapted to a changing Korean culture. First, the myth of masculinity celebrates the omnipotent and omniscient patriarch

who fiercely protects his family. This myth that emerges from the trauma of domination dictates that the masculine violence is justified when protecting his “possessions” from outsiders. However, the IMF Crisis triggers a question of what is neglected when modernization and economic gain become prioritized over all else. Because of shifting political winds, the myth has to change to accommodate a new model of masculinity where the patriarch not only protects his own family, but also those who are less powerful. As such, the new myth of masculinity justifies violence as social good. When Sang Hwa and Seok Woo bashes the skulls of zombies to protect their wife and daughter respectively, the violence is wholeheartedly welcomed. On the other hand, when Yong-suk shoves high school students to save himself, his violence is interpreted as selfish, unjust, and evil.

But the myth of masculinity, however updated, still obscures women’s subjectivity. In other words, the new masculine, however morally upright and selfless in his new dedication to the weak, still sees women as weak entities that need his protection. Most notably, in *Train to Busan* there are three female characters: Jin-Hee, the high school student, Sung Gyeong the pregnant woman, and Soo-an. The three are presented as needing protection because they are weak but also valuable – they represent the future generation – and therefore must be protected by the men.

Jin-Hee becomes Yong-guk’s reason for survival as Yong-guk tries to emerge as the masculine man but ultimately fails when Jin-Hee gets bitten. Jin-Hee travels with Yong-guk for the majority of the film. Trapped in an unmoving train, Yong-guk grabs an emergency hammer and attempts to break the glass on the locked door. Jin-Hee stands behind him unable to help. At that moment, Yong-suk runs toward them with a zombie trailing behind him and uses Jin-Hee as a human shield. Yong-guk tries to help Jin-Hee but she is already convulsing on the floor with a

bite mark on her leg. Up until the moment, Yong-guk is eager to escape the situation with Jin-Hee, protecting her from the zombies. But when Jin-Hee is bitten, he appears to lose all interest in survival. Instead of running he holds her until she turns and bites him on the neck. Using the myth of masculinity, I interpret this scene as Yong-guk recognizing his failure to be the masculine man because he failed to protect the girl in his charge. He has failed to protect *his* girl (Jin-Hee) from the external dangers (zombies, Yong-suk) and therefore he has failed to emerge as the masculine.

Sung Gyeong and Soo-an are the two that survive until the end. When Sang Hwa is bitten on his hand, he decides to sacrifice his life so that other survivors including his wife can run to safety at the other end of the compartment. Knowing that he will soon turn into a zombie, he sends everyone running while holding onto the door for a bit longer. One last time he turns to Sung Gyeong and names his unborn daughter. The death is tragic yet also triumphant as he struggles until the very end to ensure that Sung Gyeong and the baby stay alive. Not only did Sang Hwa protect his woman, but he also preserved the next generation in the form of his unborn daughter.

Soo-an's (and Sung Gyeong's) survival is attributed to Seok Woo. When zombified Yong-suk tries to jump on Sung Gyeong and Soo-an, Seok Woo places his hand over Yong-suk's mouth to provide a barrier between them. Throwing zombified Yong-suk off the locomotive he says goodbye to Soo-an and locks himself outside the control room where Soo-an continues to cry. A prolonged sequence ensues with melodramatic background music. Seok Woo also starts crying bitterly, but his cries subside when he remembers holding a newborn Soo-an. Rapidly transforming into a zombie, Seok Woo dies smiling with the image of Soo-an as a baby because

he had done all he could to protect his daughter and Sung Gyeong. He has successfully procreated and protected the next generation.

This scene is often described (and even criticized) for being melodramatic. Such mixing of genres is quite uncommon in Hollywood films. Melodrama, however, remains the predominant narrative mode in Korean cinema.¹⁸⁰ Various genres including action, horror, and others typically include melodramatic scenes to tie the story together. The tradition derives from the Japanese theatrical style called *Shinpa* that focused on melodramatic plots and social critique of the class structure.

Shinpa connotes tragic tales of romance and female suffering, defeatist narratives with inevitably sad endings, designed as quintessential ‘tear jerkers.’ So influential is the melodramatic mode in Korean cinema that its narrative qualities frequently emerge in horror.¹⁸¹

As a precursor to melodrama, Japanese films influenced heavily by *Shinpa* were distributed throughout Korea where consumers preferred the melodramatic narrative. In Japanese film history, *Shinpa* referred to the modern drama as opposed to the *kyūha* or period drama.¹⁸² Influenced by Japanese *Shinpa*, *Shinpa* films in Korea also focused on modern drama and characteristics such as tragic love.¹⁸³ Seo In-sook argues that the use of *Shinpa* films contributed to both the political and ideological control over Korea and aided in establishing Korea as a marketplace for Japanese products.¹⁸⁴ It is, therefore, ironic that modern Korean films are known for combining melodrama with various genres. It raises the question of discrepancy between the visible and violent masculine response to colonialism while incorporating cultural aspects of

¹⁸⁰ Alison Peirse and Daniel Martin, ed. *Korean Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁸¹ Peirse and Martin, *Korean Horror Cinema*, 5.

¹⁸² Chonghwa Chung, “*Shinpa* Films Aimed at the Hearts of Korean Audiences,” *KMDB*, Korean Film Archive, February 24, 2017, <https://www.kmdb.or.kr/story/170/3529>.

¹⁸³ Chung, “*Shinpa* Films.”

¹⁸⁴ In-sook Seo, *Postcolonialism in Korean Films* (Seoul: Geulnurim Publishing Company, 2012), 118.

Japanese film into Korean ones. The phenomenon serves as yet another reminder that culture does not exist in a vacuum – postcolonial culture and identity is undeniably influenced by and intertwined with colonialism.

The melodramatic scene featuring Seok Woo delivers the message that male value derives from protecting the weak. The new myth of masculinity still celebrates male violence as necessary when it is used to protect his home, his women, his objects. In such equation, women are still depicted as “objects” that need to be protected by these men.

Conclusion

Post financial crisis, the masculine is not an authoritative father-figure who knows everything; instead, the new masculine is benevolent and helpful, concerned with not only his own family but also the public good. In the film Yong-suk commands people to lock doors, seemingly knowing what he is talking about. But in the end, he is only concerned about his own survival, and he would gladly sacrifice any number of others for it. The new masculine, Sang Hwa and Seok Woo, sacrifice themselves to protect others, and their violence is justified because they are working for the safety of everyone.

While these new masculine figures save the day, the myth of masculinity perpetuates the same problem as it had before: there is no room for women’s subjective experience. The sole survivors of the film represent reproductive futurity: Soo-an, a female child, and pregnant Sung Gyeong. Although the military government guards the entrance to Busan, ready to shoot any zombies, it immediately stands down to care for Soo-an and Sung Gyeong. Perhaps the government has gone through the same transformation as Seok Woo through the zombie outbreak: care and protection must be prioritized over economic development.

Train to Busan is Yeon's critique of modern Korean culture as well as a fantasy of how the world might be different if there had been more masculine heroes such as Sang Hwa or Seok Woo. In reality, Korean culture supports an extreme competition among individuals for limited resources. Individual success is often prioritized over caring for others or the social good. Recent Korean shows such as *Squid Game* illustrate this volatile and fierce contention. Individuals try to achieve personal growth through stability, especially after the financial crisis during which Koreans experienced firsthand what lack of economic stability can do to individuals. The beautiful tale of how Koreans worked together and overcame the "IMF crisis" is shattered by the aftermath of everyone competing for most stability for themselves.

When the 2014 Sewol ferry tragedy occurred, many Koreans realized the shocking truth: Korea's embrace of neoliberal ideology and overemphasis on economic success has led to a neglect of other important factors such as safety and morality. A ferry captain abandoned the ship and saved himself first; a shipping company overloaded the ferry for additional profit; maritime police wasted precious time for rescuing because they had not trained properly. While these individuals certainly deserve blame and punishment, the Sewol incident is not a direct result of a handful of irresponsible and morally corrupt individuals. The real problem is a structural one in which companies spend the minimum amount of money on non-profitable necessities such as employee training.¹⁸⁵ Banners at the Paengmok Harbor still exist, asking "What did the police do?" or "Why didn't you save my child."¹⁸⁶

Train to Busan is a fantasy of what might have happened if there had been more masculine men at the Paengmok Harbor during the 2014 incident. If men such as Sang Hwa or

¹⁸⁵ Lee, "The Foretold Disaster," 70-71.

¹⁸⁶ These banners are based on a 2017 August visit to the Paengmok Harbor site. The government has designated the temporary outhouse and the banners as national property and is preserving everything. Parts of it have been moved to Gwanghwamun plaza, near the city hall.

Seok Woo had been there, they might have protected the students. They might all be well and alive now. In that sense, the film is both a commentary on the disaster and a form of wish fulfillment. The adults who had failed the high school students have now also found a way to save the next generation, just as it happens at the end of the film. When zombies negate the established social and political structures, it is easier to distinguish what is really important, and that is humans. “People come first,” as the new Korean government slogan states since the 2017 regime change.

Chapter 4 Dangerous Women and the Myth of Masculinity: A Return to the Original National Trauma

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the myth of masculinity and its evolution in Korean films. As I have explained, the myth of masculinity is founded upon a male subjective understanding and recreating of national trauma. In other words, the myth of masculinity focuses on the development of a strong male persona to prevent another national plunder. The problem arises when the myth of masculinity's heavy emphasis on male identity as a national one neglects to consider the female experience and understanding of national trauma. While both men and women experienced colonialism, the myth of masculinity's focus on male subjective experience co-opts women's experience, especially ones of sexual nature, as a part of male trauma. The myth of masculinity urges violence from men because their nation, their houses, and their things have been taken. Women are simply one of these objects that needs masculine protection. Women's experience is submerged within the male trauma.

The myth of masculinity leaves out women's subjectivity, meaning women are seen as objects to be protected by justifiable male violence against outside influence. Such an equation leads to another important question: not all women "want" protection. What happens to those who cannot be protected by the masculine men? One insidious outcome of the prevalence of the myth of masculinity and its disregard for female subjectivity is that women are divided into "acceptable" and "unacceptable" groups to further legitimize the myth.

The "acceptable" women are the ones that fit into the masculine understanding of women as needing male protection. These "good" women are safe from the national Other, sexually and otherwise, because the masculine have used and continues to use necessary violence to protect them. The protection of these women provides a justification for the violence of the masculine men. Such objectification of women is not confined to the myth of masculinity or even the

Korean nation. However, the unique combination of the lasting effects of Confucianism and historical domination in Korea has rendered objectification of women as harmless and even desirable.

On the other hand, the “bad” women are the ones that exist outside male protection – whether by choice or not. In the context of masculinity “bad” women are read as sexually promiscuous. In the context of post-liberation Korea, comfort women – most of whom had been tricked or forced into sex slavery against their will – were silenced because they had been sexually violated by the national Other; here, the Japanese. Their trauma was interpreted as a national humiliation to men under the myth of masculinity because the men were not strong enough to protect *their* women. When Korean society finally acknowledged comfort women in late 1990s, these women were exclusively framed as lost “virgins” and “grandmothers” to imply their willingness to have been “good” women protected by the masculine men. However, the other group of “bad” women – the sex workers at U.S. military camps – did not fit the frame of masculine understanding of women. Therefore, they were promoted as unacceptable and evil despite the fact that they played a significant role in U.S.-Korean relations.

Park Chung-hee’s regime worked to keep the alliance between Korea and the United States. In order to procure the U.S. military’s stay, Park reinforced policies that oppressed the camptown prostitutes, also known as *kijich’on* (military camp *kiji* and village *ch’on* combined to form one word) sex workers, including mandatory check-ups for venereal diseases, frequent re-registration processes, and involuntary penicillin shots. It is important to mention that the U.S. soldiers were not subject to such processes.

Just as the comfort women were a product of Japanese government, the Korean government used the small group of powerless women with no social standing in Korea to

provide “comfort” for the U.S. soldiers and ensure a safe environment for the “good” Korean women and daughters. The phrase “comfort women,” initially referring to women forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese military in the ‘40s, is sometimes used to refer to postcolonial Korean sex workers servicing the U.S. military as well. To avoid confusion, I will employ the term “comfort women” to address victims during Japanese colonialism and *kijich’on* sex workers to refer to post-colonial U.S. military camptown workers. The distinction helps clarify the fundamentally different positions these two groups of women occupy in the popular media and its discourse.

The phrase “comfort woman” (*ianfu*) evokes a sense of victimhood that is specifically related to girlhood. This sense of victimhood is related to the loss of country and agency during the Japanese colonialism. That sense of “no choice” does not extend to people who have to sell sex for livelihood. The victimhood does not extend to the loss of choice through poverty or systemic sexism and therefore *kijich’on* workers are not part of the understanding of victims.

For example, one of the most famous monuments to comfort women during Japanese colonialism, The Statue of Peace, features a teenage girl.¹⁸⁷ The statue was first unveiled on December 4, 2011 to mark former comfort women’s 1000th weekly demonstration in front of the Japanese embassy.¹⁸⁸ The bronze statue features a young girl sitting on a chair, gazing forward with little emotion showing on her face. She has short straight hair and is dressed in traditional Korean attire with bare feet. Behind her is a shadow of an old woman, hinting at the passage of time. The empty chair beside her symbolizes the victims who are no longer here to protest.

¹⁸⁷ In Korean, the statue is named “Girl Statue of Peace” (*pyeonghwaui sonyeosang*), and often referred to simply as “Girl Statue.” It is interesting how its English name “Statue of Peace” leaves out the idea of girlhood which seems to resonate deeply in Korean imagination and understanding of comfort women.

¹⁸⁸ Dongho Chun, “The Battle of Representations: Gazing at the Peace Monument or Comfort Women Statue,” *Positions* 28, no. 2 (2020): 367

Dongho Chun, an Art History scholar, writes that the visual representation of comfort women as a humble young girl successfully evokes a sense of vulnerability, fragility, and gullibility in the viewer.¹⁸⁹ Chun illuminates the sculpting process in his article, stating that the husband-and-wife sculptors worked on the artwork together. He notes that the wife came up with the visualization of comfort women as a young girl in her miniature clay prototype because she envisioned most comfort women being teenagers when they were first recruited.¹⁹⁰ While Chun argues that the sculptor's imagination results from comfort women's own insistence on their physical and mental innocence, I believe that both the imagination and comfort women's perspectives are deeply influenced by the myth of masculinity that dictates ways in which former comfort women are rendered acceptable in popular imagination.

In the first part of this chapter I elaborate on the relationship between the myth of masculinity and the sexuality of women in Korea. Since I have located the beginning of the myth to be in Japanese colonialism, I begin by examining women during the domination. In particular, I focus on some Korean women who were forced to or tricked into servicing the Japanese military as "comfort women." Comfort women, severely mistreated by the Japanese military, continue to suffer even after the liberation under the myth of masculinity that oppresses them and prevents them from voicing their trauma.

The film I analyze for this section is *Spirits' Homecoming* (Dir. Cho Jung-rae 2016), a commercially successful film that engages with the issue of comfort women. The film accentuates the myth of masculinity and its positioning of comfort women as victims: the film

¹⁸⁹ Chun, "The Battle of Representations," 370.

¹⁹⁰ Chun, "The Battle of Representations," 367.

features one former comfort woman in her old age looking back at her youth. But the portrayal lacks the on-going aspects of their trauma including poverty.

In the second part of the chapter I examine U.S. military camptown prostitutes after the Korean War (1950-3). South Korea formed an alliance with the U.S. and U.S. military camps were set up in various locations including Dongducheon, Uijeongbu, Osan, Pyeongtaek, Daegu and other cities. Since the Korean War there are more than twenty thousand US troops permanently stationed in Korea.¹⁹¹ Often the residential and commercial districts surrounding these camptowns known as *kijich'on* have a distinctive neighborhood character from the rest of the city they are located in. Some apartment complexes are reserved exclusively for military personnel and certain restaurants cater to the non-Korean soldiers.

Itaewon, a commercial district within Yongsan District in Seoul, is an example of a former camptown developed initially to accommodate the U.S. military at Yongsan Garrison which closed as of 2019. The majority of the troops have relocated to newly built Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, and the transfer will be complete this year in 2022.¹⁹² The garrison had first been created by the Japanese imperial army during colonialism where the area was not yet fully developed. The area had been a military stronghold for Japanese until 1945 when U.S. 24th Army Corps took over.¹⁹³ The surrounding area progressed as a camptown with restaurants, bars, and entertainment targeted specifically at the soldiers. When Yongsan Garrison first set up in Itaewon, the district initially developed to both entertain and contain the U.S. influence.

¹⁹¹ Elisabeth Schober, "Itaewon's Suspense: Masculinities, Place-making and the US Armed Forces in a Seoul Entertainment District," *Social Anthropology*, 22 no. 1 (2014), 36.

¹⁹² Jenna Gibson, "Korean Cities Urge Expedited Return of U.S. Bases to Local Control," *The Diplomat*, September 26, 2019, <http://lmj99.com/2019/09/korean-cities-urge-expedited-return-of-u-s-bases-to-local-control/>.

¹⁹³ Schober, "Itaewon's Suspense," 40.

Itaewon was exempted from the Anti-Sexual Corruption Law of 1961 that illegalized prostitution because sex work had become one of the biggest industries during the '60s.¹⁹⁴

A complete eradication of the sex industry next to the US bases was clearly neither in the interest of the USA nor of the Korean authorities, with economic calculations playing an important role on the South Korean part: Park Chung-Hee, who had come into power through a coup in 1961, was looking for ways to amass the foreign currency so urgently needed to fuel the devastated economy. The hustling of women to the Americans in neighborhoods such as Itaewon proved a goldmine in this respect.¹⁹⁵

The “hustling” was limited to designated neighborhoods as any sex work in non-military towns was illegal. Ironically, for the rest of the nation, Park Chung-hee emphasized the evils of American, Western, and Japanese things that corroded the national spirit.¹⁹⁶ The U.S. camptowns were a necessary evil that he intended to contain. Such active containment added further stigma to *kijich'on* sex workers who existed between the U.S. soldiers and the “respectable” Korean women.

As Itaewon neighborhood further developed and gentrified, Yongsan District became a part of central Seoul. Since 2004, the Korean government worked with the United States to relocate troops from the heart of the city. Camp Humphreys was built in Pyeongtaek – with Korean government funding 90 percent of the \$11 billion in construction – and the relocation process began in 2018.¹⁹⁷ The visages of camptown still remain in the alleyways of Itaewon including streets unofficially named “Hooker Hill” and “Homo Hill.”¹⁹⁸

The film I discuss in this section is *The Bacchus Lady* (Dir. E J-yong 2016), which more clearly addresses poverty as an issue compared to *Spirits' Homecoming*. The film examines a dire lack of choice for a stigmatized former *kijich'on* sex worker. Rather than examining military

¹⁹⁴ Schober, “Itaewon’s Suspense,” 41.

¹⁹⁵ Schober, “Itaewon’s Suspense,” 41.

¹⁹⁶ Schober, “Itaewon’s Suspense,” 41.

¹⁹⁷ Gibson, “Korean Cities Urge Expedited Return.”

¹⁹⁸ Schober, “Itaewon’s Suspense,” 39.

sex work from a safe distance by rendering it separate from the main character's current being, the film engages with the reality of continued poverty by featuring an active sex worker in her old age.

Comfort Women During Japanese Colonialism

The myth of masculinity leaves little room for female subjectivity because masculine understanding of women as objects leads to an over-generalized categorization of women into socially acceptable and unacceptable groups. Objectification of women within the myth of masculinity assumes that women belong to male subjects, and hence have no desires that exist separately from the male subject. For the masculine subject, women's sexuality becomes a commodity.

Immediately following the liberation, women who had experienced sexual violence, especially at the hands of a national Other, were encouraged to stay quiet to "protect" not only themselves but also their families. At the same time, national discourse actively discouraged the discussion of comfort women:

National discourses excluded issues that called attention to the humiliation on the national level, and the issue of comfort women was a typical example. When first attempts were made to publicize comfort women governmental and male responses were consistent. They considered the attempt an act that refreshed national disgrace, a traitorous deed. The reaction is based on the idea that women's bodies belong to the patriarch, and that the violation of these objects by an Other disgraces the patriarch.¹⁹⁹

The treachery was women choosing to discuss the trauma from a subjective position. To reiterate, the myth of masculinity assumes men to be the subjects while women are objectified. Therefore, the victims of comfort stations function as a reminder of the humiliation of

¹⁹⁹ Moonim Baek, *Female Wailings Below the Moon: Reading Korean Film History through Female Ghosts* (Seoul: Chaeksesang, 2008), 79.

domination under masculinity. The main focus of shame for the masculine is the humiliation that the male self feels when a stronger subject (Japan) takes his object (women) by force. With this focus in mind under the myth of masculinity, the women's subjective experiences become tales of national disgrace. Contrary to the goal of masculinity which aims to conceal the trauma, the discussion of felt trauma from women exposes the open wound. Under the myth of masculinity, these women, victims of violation, exist as objects that once needed protection (naïve virgins and grandmothers) who now remind the masculine how they failed in the past.

Given this role that comfort women play, it is not surprising that the issue of military comfort women came to light only when a survivor came forward decades later. Kim Hak-Soon was only able to publicly describe her experience at the Council for the Issue of Comfort Stations of Korean Women's Associations United in 1991. Her statement alarmed the Korean government that had ignored the issue of Japanese military sex slavery in various negotiations with the Japanese government including the Korea-Japan bilateral treaty in 1965.²⁰⁰ The Korean government eventually acquiesced to providing a monthly welfare allowance for the former comfort women.²⁰¹

There are multiple reasons why the issue of comfort women did not come to light until almost 50 years after the colonialism. On an individual level, Kim felt that she could now talk since her husband and children died. In Asian culture, one is not only bringing shame to oneself when sharing about potentially embarrassing experiences, but this shame is taken on collectively

²⁰⁰ In fact, after signing the bilateral treaty with Japan in 1965, Korea encouraged sex tourism for Japanese men. Officially named *kisaeng* tourism during which a professional entertainer in traditional Korean costumes danced and chatted with the customer, *kisaeng* tourism became popular among mostly male Japanese visitors. According to Sarah Soh, "by the end of the [1960s], the state began to see foreign-currency-earning prostitutes as an important human resource in its national economic development" (307).

²⁰¹ Sylvia S. J. Friedman *Silenced No More: Voices of Comfort Women* (Toronto: Freedom Publishers, 2015), 49.

as a family unit.²⁰² Without a family that would suffer over her past experiences, Kim felt free to voice her “shameful” experience as a victim. It was very difficult for former comfort women to speak up about their experiences. Many felt the pressure from their own families and relatives to not talk about the “shameful” experiences lest they bring shame on the whole family. One former comfort woman Kim Soon-Duk recalls how she was too ashamed to return to her family even after she arrived back in Korea. She did not reveal her experiences to her common-law husband and only came forward three months after his death.²⁰³ Another woman, Kim Hak-Soon, took legal action against the Japanese government after both her husband and her children died.²⁰⁴

There are two major reasons stated for the “need” of comfort stations during the Japanese colonialism: to stop the spread of venereal disease and prevent the rape of local women. After colonialism, these exact reasons are stated to establish brothels in U.S. military camps stationed in Korea. Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a Japanese history scholar, recounts the establishment of comfort stations by the Japanese military government, arguing that the Japanese military comfort stations established in Shanghai in 1931 were planned based on the Japanese army’s experience of Siberia from 1918 to 1922. Yoshiaki claims that the documentation suggest that many soldiers who returned from Siberia were infected with sexually transmitted diseases from the local brothels. He writes that “the Japanese army would not allow troops to use civilian brothels in order to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. It considered the creation of comfort stations managed by the army to be a suitable alternative.”²⁰⁵ The problem, according to Yoshiaki, was that the comfort stations did not prevent the spread of diseases because while

²⁰² Friedman, *Silenced No More*, 51.

²⁰³ Friedman, *Silenced No More*, 15.

²⁰⁴ Friedman, *Silenced No More*, 50.

²⁰⁵ Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 69.

comfort women were regularly tested by the army doctors, military personnel were not subjected to scrutiny or follow-up tests.²⁰⁶ The testing was a form of oppression and sexual shaming for the women, and did little to actually prevent the spread of diseases.

The second reason stated for the “need” for comfort stations was to prevent the rape of local women. Many local women in various areas of China were raped by the soldiers occupying or passing through, and the Japanese set up comfort stations in fear of civilian revolt:

With the goal of preventing rapes, we find that there were no occupied areas in which rapes stopped. [...] The introduction of comfort station system did little to prevent rapes from occurring. The comfort station system was a system of officially recognized sexual violence that victimized particular women and trampled upon their human rights. (Yoshiaki 66)

The comfort station system was created partly with the intention of preventing rapes of local women – not for the local women’s sake but to protect the Japanese army.

Comfort women consisted of many nationalities, even Japanese; the key difference was that there were stricter regulations to abide by when recruiting Japanese comfort women.

Yoshiaki notes that Japanese comfort women were limited to sex workers over the age of twenty-one.²⁰⁷ In one rounding up of women Yoshiaki notes that “while all of the Japanese were working as prostitutes, all of the Korean girls are said to have been tricked into going along” (Yoshiaki 102). To the Japanese army, Korean girls and Japanese sex workers were equally expendable for their “comfort.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women*, 72.

²⁰⁷ Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women*, 100.

²⁰⁸ I want to clarify here that I am not arguing that Japanese women were treated justly or fairly by their government. Elyssa Faison writes that Japanese understanding of citizenship focused on men’s rights as household heads, political participants, and military forces. She explains that Japanese women had little to no access to the same rights, and their values were limited to the role of supportive wife and mother. Faison argues that Japanese women were burdened with the task of raising obedient and patriotic imperial subjects, and that such gender norms were imposed in Korea as well during the cultural assimilation initiative. (28)

One of the reasons why so many Korean girls were tricked into becoming comfort women is due to the oppression they already experienced from their families in Korea. While most girls were from poorer families, even girls from well-to-do families were lured by the prospect of education and independence. Rampant gender discrimination against women often limited girls from getting formal education. They were frequently denied opportunities to earn skills to support themselves and agents took advantage of these girls' feelings of oppression.²⁰⁹

Other girls were kidnapped and provided necessary documents by the local police. Because the government was directly involved with the military processes, the local law enforcement easily and quickly complied with the military needs:

First, consulates in each region of China conveyed the request of the army units in their jurisdictions to the Foreign Ministry. The Foreign Ministry would then send these requests on to the Overseas Affairs Ministry, which would inform the Government-General of Korea. From the Government-General, these requests would be passed down to police departments and then on to provincial governors and police chiefs.²¹⁰

The process involved different sectors of the government, contrary to Japan's formal claim that the military was not responsible in the running of individual brothels.

Japan's claim implied both that the Japanese government was not responsible for the comfort women and that most, if not all, comfort women were willing sex workers. The response from the Korean government did not help the former comfort women either; the women were made to feel shame for what had been done to them and forced to keep silent. In a structure that mirrors the masculine, the women were doubly bound by colonial law and nationalist sentiment.

Former comfort women were not provided for by the government until the mid-1990s, and even then, they lived in poverty. Furthermore, many did not get support from their families because they never returned to them after colonialism ended. One survivor, Hwang Geum-Joo,

²⁰⁹ Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women*, 105.

²¹⁰ Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women*, 114.

confessed that she did not try to find her family or tell anyone what happened due to shame.²¹¹

Although many including Hwang were able to come forward after Kim Hak-Soon's public interview, the issue is far from resolved. Even when politicians recognized the issue and made public promises, they were not always prioritized. Hwang recalls how former President Kim Dae Jung, elected in 1998, had promised to resolve the comfort women issue. "That Kim Dae Jung... he promised that the first thing he would do as president was to resolve the comfort women issue. That son of a bitch didn't do anything. I had lunch with him. He promised."²¹² Many former comfort women still live in neglect and poverty.

Eventually, the Korean government started subsidizing housing as well as providing a limited amount of social benefits for former comfort women in 1993, almost five decades after the liberation:

In total, two hundred twelve elderly women in Korea have contacted the hotline, but according to activists, there are many more that have chosen to remain silent. This triggered the Korean government, which had been silent on Japanese military sex slavery, even during the negotiations with the Japanese government for the Korea-Japan bilateral treaty in 1965 that settled war issues, to eventually begin giving these women a monthly welfare allowance.²¹³

After the early 2000s, comfort women had become an open social issue. Today, Koreans generally acknowledge the fact that comfort women are victims and that the Japanese government during colonialism is directly responsible for their abuse. However, the former sex slaves are desexualized to serve as a symbol of loss for the masculine. The comfort women in media are depicted only as innocent young girls or "grandmothers" that are removed from sexuality or desire to render them "acceptable" for the masculine understanding of women as needing protection.

²¹¹ Friedman, *Silenced No More*, 83.

²¹² Friedman, *Silenced No More*, 81-2.

²¹³ Friedman, *Silenced No More*, 49.

Films and Representation of Comfort Women

The historical context of comfort women renders the topic important yet difficult to depict in films. The myth of masculinity adds to the general reluctance to acknowledge comfort women's experiences during colonialism because it indicates how Korean men have failed to protect *their* women from the Japanese. As a result, comfort women in media are typically depicted only as young girls or old women, both desexualized.

One particular example I want to discuss is the film *Spirits' Homecoming* (Dir. Cho Jung-rae 2016). Produced by JO Entertainment that focuses on traditional Korean content often based on history and distributed by Connect Pictures that specializes in art films, *Spirits' Homecoming* was able to finish filming through crowd funding. More than 75 thousand people funded around \$960,000 USD and popular phrases used to promote the film included "A film that Korean citizens made."²¹⁴ Despite the implied pride at how far Korean society has come to be able to discuss such matters in a film that was available at theaters, not everyone perceived the film as a positive change. Song Gyeongwon, a Korean film journalist for *Cine21*, writes, and I translate, that the film has merits for revisiting fading voices of the old comfort women. However, he argues that the trauma should be dealt in a more delicate and thorough manner instead of oversimplifying it by incorporating unnecessary settings, excessive spectacle, and binary perspectives to create dramatic tension in the film.²¹⁵ Song recognizes that this film is a good

²¹⁴ Siwoo Jung, "Spirits' Homecoming that Deals with Comfort Women, Completed with the Support of More than 70,000 Citizens, Opens on February 24," *Ten Asia*, Ten Asia, January 19, 2016, <https://tenasia.hankyung.com/topic/article/2016011928094>.

²¹⁵ Gyeongwon Song, "Disappointing because Necessary. Nevertheless," *Spirits' Homecoming Naver Films*, Naver, accessed April 4, 2022, <https://movie.naver.com/movie/bi/mi/point.naver?code=135843>.

start, but we ultimately need more films on this subject matter to justly represent the voices that had been silenced for so long.

The film alternates between the “now” in the late 1990s and the “past” in the 1940s. In the present, an unnamed older woman who makes traditional Korean clothes (*hanbok*) encounters a young rape victim residing at her friend’s house. The friend is a shaman and the young girl, who is psychically gifted, starts communicating with the spirits of the dead people. The hanbok maker reminisces about the 1940s where a fourteen-year-old girl named Jung-min plays in the woods. Her family is very poor but loves their only daughter. One day, Japanese soldiers take her from her home to a comfort station, leaving her parents wailing helplessly in the background. The film focuses heavily on the terror of the girl’s experience at the comfort station along with many other young girls. Audiences assume that Jung-min is the hanbok maker in the present, until back in the present the hanbok maker and the young rape victim visit the village that Jung-min grew up in. The young rape victim channeled the spirit of Jung-min, and in a twist the audiences find out that the hanbok maker is Jung-min’s friend (a background character during the flashback portion of the film) and that Jung-min died back in the comfort station. The two characters’ spirits reunite through the young girl acting as a vessel, and both girls are finally able to “return” home.

The film is deservedly celebrated for tackling the difficult issue of comfort women based on actual accounts of survivors. Despite its attempt, the film has some problematic aspects that overlook the problems of poverty that prevail long after colonialism. The film’s use of Korean shamanistic ritual (*gut*) implies that comfort women’s experiences are interchangeable. Additionally, the film focuses solely on innocence of the fictional victims, failing to examine the comfort women issue as a separate and on-going subjective experience of women.

The use of a shaman ritual to resolve the conflict at the end of the film is problematic because it oversimplifies the issue. First, it presents comfort women's experiences as unitary and interchangeable. Through the ritual the audience learns that the hanbok-maker is not Jung-min but her friend, but the narrative does not change significantly because the hanbok-maker was also at the comfort station with Jung-min. Neither the hanbok-maker's parents nor home life is featured in the film, but it is implied that Jung-min's happy and peaceful life with her parents prior to being taken by the Japanese soldiers pertains to most other girls at the comfort station. This view is contradictory to many different accounts of former comfort women who have varying narratives of why and how they became comfort women. Some were sold by their parents while others volunteered, tricked into thinking that it was an opportunity to get an education. Still others were looking for jobs to support their large families. Not all comfort women had been happy and protected before the Japanese came along.

Furthermore, the Korean shamanistic ritual presents a self-Orientalized image of Korea as static and incapable of change. Rituals are not a prevalent way of resolving conflict in modern Korea. Yet, the ritual plays a significant role in the film as a mystical resolution of the suffering for the two girls, Jung-min and the hanbok maker. The ritual unburdens the hanbok maker of survivor's guilt because Jung-min's spirit has been delivered back to her hometown through the ritual. Two different film journalists, Yoon Hyeji and Hwang Jinmi, describe the ritual in the film as *ssitgimgut*, a specific ritual that cleanses the dead person's soul so that they can safely move on to the netherworld.²¹⁶ The verb *ssitgida* means to wash. The implication is that the hatred and sorrow that had been holding Jung-min's spirit back is "washed away" through the ritual because the hanbok maker reconciles with Jung-min's spirit. While the idea nicely ends the

²¹⁶ Song, "Disappointing because Necessary."

film, reality is nowhere near as simple or easy. Former comfort women still protest the Japanese in front of the Japanese embassy in Korea because the Japanese government refuses to acknowledge comfort women's experiences as war crimes. The Korean government provides the bare minimum for these women, and only after the issue could no longer be silenced. Some groups of Koreans criticize former comfort women as willing sex workers and protest for the Peace Statue to be torn down for misrepresentation.²¹⁷ While the film presents a beautiful moment of self-reflection and acceptance, it completely overlooks the real-life impacts of colonialism. The former comfort women are still living in poverty. No matter how emotional the reconciliation between the two fictional characters is, it does not address the fact that some survivors still live in shame and exile in real life.

The film also greatly emphasizes the innocence of young girls. One of the phrases promoting the film was “What sent the young girls to hell?” Such emphasis reflects the ways in which the survivors are framed as “grandmothers” (*halmŏni*) as a collective term to address them. Soh critiques in her book on comfort women that:

What the common usage of the fictive kinship term “grandmother” for comfort women survivors achieves paralinguistically is their social relocation and reclassification into gendered but sexually inactive beings, highlighting their current status of being twice removed generationally from the period of ordeals that their bodies—cast as sexual commodities—endured during their adolescence and/or young adulthood. The cultural symbolism of the term “grandmother” conveniently erases the actual feminine sexuality of former comfort women, whose suffering was rooted in the very exploitation and violation of their youthful sexual bodies. Their personal identity as individuals, which had been obliterated under the euphemism *ianfu* [comfort women], is once again masked under the term *halmŏni*, albeit with the good intention of expressing respect.²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Jung-ho Kim, “‘Comfort Women Scam, Remove the Statue of a Girl’ Far-right Protesters in Chuncheon,” *Gangwon Provincial Daily*, Kangwon Provincial Daily, March 11, 2022, <https://www.kado.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=1116981>.

²¹⁸ C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 123-4.

The use of the term “grandmother” aims to build a bond between the current generation and the survivors, as in, “they could be any of our grandmothers.” Yet it also effectively desexualizes the surviving women. Under the myth of masculinity that neglects women’s subjectivity, the removal of sexuality effectively reinforces the notion that women’s sexuality (especially virginity) is something to be protected – and once the masculine “fails” to protect it, it has no place in the discourse. The general public initially rejected the term “sex slave” because the idea of women in abject slavery hurt Koreans’ self-esteem and national pride.²¹⁹ As Soh states, the “causes of surviving victims’ lifelong sufferings are often more complex and divergent than the nationalistic and transnational discourse of Japan’s comfort women phenomenon would suggest” (59-60).²²⁰ The Korean media is not fully engaging with the lasting impacts of comfort women issue when representing comfort women mostly as young girls of the past.

It is interesting to consider the contrast between the commercially successful *Spirits’ Homecoming* with the 1995 documentary *The Murmuring* by director Byeon Young-joo.²²¹ *The Murmuring* features former comfort women living in poverty. They protest in front of the city hall for the Korean and Japanese government to recognize comfort women as an official issue—and they feel a diverse range of emotions from empowerment to embarrassment. One survivor claims that she had to protest despite the shame because Japan is claiming that this didn’t happen when she is a victim and a witness. It was not governmental support or social welfare, but a

²¹⁹ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 119-120.

²²⁰ Soh writes in her book that “masculinist sexual culture” in colonial Korea and imperial Japan is the foundation of the comfort women discourse. While it is true that Japanese colonialism effectively objectified women as sex objects, the subsequent attitude from post-liberal Korea is much more complex than a simple objectification of women and women’s sexuality. The myth of masculinity that seeps into the culture and national discourse dictates that women need protection. Survivors of Japanese sex slavery represent the past when women were not sufficiently protected – a pre-mythical history that encourages masculinity to be more violent.

²²¹ Director Cho Jung-rae also released a part documentary *Spirits’ Homecoming, Unfinished Story* in 2017, one year after the release of *Spirits’ Homecoming*. The film juxtaposes the fictional film with interviews from former comfort women. However, the part documentary does not fully address the real-life issues and instead functions more as an additional material for the fictional film.

fellow former comfort woman, Kim Hak-sun, that helped her come forward. For these women, the past is not magically resolved through a shaman or a spirit but is an ongoing issue that affects their daily lives. While it is important to feature the issue of comfort women in more films, it is also important to remind people that this issue is an ongoing struggle for the survivors.

Comfort women are a direct result of Japanese domination. Yet discrimination against women had existed within Korean social structures even before the domination. That is why many young girls were lured by the promises of education and jobs, and that is why many comfort women chose to stay behind in a foreign land rather than return to their home country and families.²²² The myth of masculinity dictates that comfort women are once-innocent bodies that have been stolen by the national Other and uses the image to justify violence and aggression of the masculine to protect such bodies. Such understanding removes these women from subjecthood once again. Furthermore, the myth of masculinity dictates that if a woman rejects protection from a man, they are “bad,” and *kijich'on* sex workers were labeled as “bad” women for daring to support themselves and their families.

***Kijich'on* Sex Workers**

After the liberation in 1945, the U.S.-(South)Korean alliance became an important part of the newly forming economy in Korea. Continuing its presence from the 3-year U.S. military rule from 1945 to 1948, the U.S. established military camps in various locations in South Korea. During the first stages of U.S. military occupation, groups of women followed U.S. forces offering to do laundry, run errands, or offer sex in exchange for money or other goods.²²³

²²² Friedman, *Silenced No More*, 41.

²²³ Katherine H.S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 27.

Prostitution has been illegal in the U.S. military, but in practice women's sexual service has been viewed as an integral part of controlling the soldiers' sexual desires to contribute to military efficiency. For reasons of national security and economic growth, military prostitution in U.S. camp-towns has been tacitly accepted by the Korean government, despite domestic prostitution being illegal since 1948.²²⁴

By 1955, the troops were permanently set up, forming U.S. military camptowns known as *kijich'on* concentrating in the Paju area. Soh writes that Koreans coined new terms such as *yang-galbo* (Western whore) and, more euphemistically, *yang-gongju* (Western princess) to refer to Korean women who performed sex work for the American military.²²⁵ U.S. camptowns became an important source of income for post-war Korea. It is estimated that the troops contributed 25% of Korea's GNP in the 1960s.²²⁶

The U.S.-Korean alliance was especially important to Park Chung-hee who came to power after a military coup in 1961 and acted as the president of Korea until his assassination in 1979. Park Chung-hee's regime focused on economic growth in Korea as well as military protection from the U.S., and military bases became one of the major revenues in the early '60s. Military towns or *kijich'on* were set up with specifically U.S.-catered restaurants, bars, and prostitution.²²⁷

As U.S. military presence supported economic growth in Korea, the Korean government supported the maintenance of the camptowns. *Kijich'on* amenities were open exclusively to U.S. soldiers. One such support was "Clean-Up Process" that required regular tests from camptown sex workers in an attempt to reduce venereal disease rates in U.S. soldiers in Korea. The motivation for these tests were fundamentally for the health and comfort of U.S. servicemen, not

²²⁴ Na-Young Lee, "Negotiating the Boundaries of Nation, Christianity, and Gender: The Korean Women's Movement Against Military Prostitution," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 17, no. 1 (2011): 34.

²²⁵ Soh, *The Comfort Women*, 294.

²²⁶ Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 44.

²²⁷ Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 27.

the safety of women.²²⁸ If suspected of diseases, the women were forcefully taken to detention facilities where they were inspected and given penicillin shots provided by the U.S. military.²²⁹ Many women suffered long-term effects, overdosed, or even died.²³⁰ The women had no choice if they wanted to keep working, and they had to keep working to support themselves and even their families:

The great majority of women who enter *kijich'on* prostitution have already experienced severe deprivation and abuse – poverty, rape, repeated beatings by lovers or husbands. The camp followers of the war era lived off their bodies and fed their family members with their earnings. [...] Poverty, together with low class status, has remained the primary reason for women's entry into camp-town prostitution from the 1950s to the mid-1980s.²³¹

The women were already victimized and ostracized before they joined the camptowns, and they were further marginalized afterwards. What does this say about women's worth determined by a masculine social structure? Moon writes that *kijich'on* prostitutes were sacrificed in the name of national wealth and stability. These women became readily available to a masculine society because they were already considered “ruined” through their record of divorce, rape, sex and pregnancy out of wedlock.²³² Furthermore, racial and cultural homogeneity has dominated the Korean understanding of identity, and those who connect with national outsiders were viewed with skepticism.²³³ The *kijich'on* sex workers represent a national “shame,” reminding the rest of Korea how weak their country is in relation to the U.S. even after the colonialism.

Moon writes that “The South Korean government's priorities for state-building, national security, and economic development, over any concern for the social welfare of women and/or

²²⁸ Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 39.

²²⁹ Tim Shorrock, “Welcome to the Monkey House: Confronting the Ugly Legacy of Military Prostitution in South Korea,” *The New Republic*, December 2, 2019 <https://newrepublic.com/article/155707/united-states-military-prostitution-south-korea-monkey-house>.

²³⁰ Shorrock, “Welcome to the Monkey House.”

²³¹ Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 22.

²³² Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 3.

²³³ Lee, “Negotiating the Boundaries,” 34.

the moral order of society, have determined policies regarding prostitution.”²³⁴ For example, economic stability was prioritized over *kijich'on* sex workers' rights. Even though Korea was no longer under Japanese rule, the *kijich'on* sex workers felt burdened with keeping the U.S. soldiers happy while in Korea.²³⁵ Despite the *kijich'on* sex workers' hope that Korean sovereignty was a hope and promise that they would be abused no longer, they saw that the Korean government prioritized local business and U.S. relations over them.²³⁶ A former *kijich'on* sex worker who identified herself only as “Kim” (63 years-old) claimed that in the 22 years she had worked in the military camps since 1961, Korean government officials visited monthly to say to the group “You are all patriots for comforting the G.I.s and earning U.S. dollars. Without you the village virgins and ladies would all be raped. Our country will be peaceful only if you are servicing the U.S. soldiers well.”²³⁷ The necessity of these women did not help elevate their status or help them secure a means of supporting themselves other than sex work.

Films and Representation of Kijich'on Sex Workers

Under the myth of masculinity, women's sexuality is restricted and controlled because women are objectified. As discourse around comfort women illustrates, women are first desexualized in order to be rendered “acceptable.” *Kijich'on* sex workers are examples of how sexualized women are marked “unacceptable” and vilified. Even when films engage earnestly with the issue, the clash with the myth of masculinity's understanding of women as objects impact the representation of *kijich'on* women.

²³⁴ Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 41.

²³⁵ Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 155.

²³⁶ Moon, *Sex Among Allies* 157-8.

²³⁷ Jinwoo Joo, “Yang Gongju 50 Years of Wailing, the Illegitimate Child of June 25,” *Sisa Journal*, Sisa Journal, July 29, 2003, <https://www.sisajournal.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=79606>.

The Bacchus Lady (Dir. E J-yong 2016) was one of the economically successful domestic films that dealt with the issue of *kijich'on* sex workers and the lasting impacts of prostitution. Although the film effectively engages with class issues, its stance on the subject of sex workers wavers towards the end of the film. Film journalist for *Magazine M* Na Won Jung writes that the film begins with a distanced look at the world that exploits So-young but turns melodramatic with the themes of old age and death; while an interesting idea with great actors, the unsolved contradictions make the audience uncomfortable at times.²³⁸ Similarly, film journalist Kim Hyun Min states that the film seems a bit over-simplified in positioning a woman's tragic life in modern Korean history as a sublime object of aesthetic pleasure.²³⁹ Despite these shortcomings, the film consciously examines *kijich'on* sex work in the context of poverty.²⁴⁰

The Bacchus Lady begins with a 65-year-old So-young visiting a gynecologist with gonorrhea. So-young is a former *kijich'on* sex worker who now works as a "Bacchus Lady," an elderly sex worker who walks the streets looking for clients. She carries several small bottles of Bacchus, a caffeinated energy drink sold in Korea, and approaches potential clients with them. At the hospital, So-young sees a young woman from the Philippines who accuses the Korean doctor of abandoning her and their son. The gynecologist, now married with three kids in Korea, denies knowing the young woman and calls security. So-young finds a Kopino boy chased by the security guard and rescues him. The film later reveals that So-young had a son with an American soldier and gave the baby up for adoption when the soldier abandoned them. As So-young continues her life as a sex worker, she encounters one of her former clients now in a care facility

²³⁸ "The Bacchus Lady 2016," *Naver Film*, accessed April 4, 2022, <https://movie.naver.com/movie/bi/mi/point.naver?code=146508#pointExpertTab>.

²³⁹ "The Bacchus Lady 2016," <https://movie.naver.com/movie/bi/mi/point.naver?code=146508#pointExpertTab>.

²⁴⁰ I have translated both of these critiques from Korean to English.

unable to move. He begs So-young to help him die, and after some consideration she does. Two more of her johns convince her to aid their suicide, and she gets caught by the police. Heading to imprisonment, So-young comments that she won't have to work for food anymore since she is going to jail. She dies in prison and no one comes to collect her remains.

One reason why men treat So-young poorly is because she is seen as already corrupted. She can be used in whatever way because she cannot be in a more dire situation. She has already hit rock bottom having been someone who once "opened her legs for the Yankees" and now at 65 is still "a bitch who sells her body," both phrases used by different characters in the film to describe So-young. The film illustrates the double-bind that Amy Lee and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee discuss in their article:

Once a Korean woman entered camp-town prostitution, it would be extremely difficult for her to marry a Korean man and return to the mainstream society. The camp-town prostitutes were called 'foreign princesses' (*yanggongju*) by Koreans, a derogatory term implying that prostitutes were selling their bodies to advance themselves into American materialism at the expense of Korean traditional values of chastity and virginity. The only option would be to remain a prostitute or to become a military bride.²⁴¹

Economically and sexually exploited, the label of *kijich'on* sex worker leaves So-young with very few options. She "chooses" to remain a prostitute because there are few other viable ways for her to support herself.

The men use So-young not only for her body but also for emotional release and selfish gains. Her former client uses So-young as a witness to his suicide. Even though he can "no longer have sex," he invites So-young to a fancy hotel room after an extravagant dinner at a restaurant. Expecting to service him, So-young tries to initiate but he stops her, explaining once again that he cannot perform sexual acts. Instead, he grabs a bottle of sleeping pills and poison,

²⁴¹ Amy Lee and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Korean Military Brides in New York," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 3 (2007): 460.

convincing her to stay with him so that he doesn't have to die alone. Handing her one sleeping pill he explains that they will both go to sleep, and she will wake up in the morning whereas he will not. Surprised and upset, So-young has no time to react as the man quickly swallows his handful of pills and encourages So-young to take her sleeping pill. Even though he leaves her some money (around \$1000) and a letter, he ultimately does not consider So-young's feelings or future. So-young is eventually caught on the hotel camera and falsely accused of murdering a client for a meager sum of \$1000 which he withdrew from his bank account earlier.

A young male documentary maker follows So-young around calling her *halmōni* (grandma) and begging her to help him make his film about *kijich'on* women. There is a correlation between the treatment of comfort women during the Japanese colonialism and of *kijich'on* sex workers, where being respectful means obscuring the female sexuality of these women. Even though So-young is still active as a sex worker, the documentary maker tries to remove So-young's sexuality as a supposed act of respect. He also steers the conversation to emphasize So-young's victimhood – she never wanted to be a sex worker but once she worked in the military camps, there was no other choice for her. So-young repeatedly rejects the term “grandmother.” She also emphasizes that she worked to support herself her whole life, and while she agrees that there were not many choices for her after the military camp, she states that she is not ashamed of feeding herself in a world where no one will look out for her.

So-young sees herself in the Filipino woman who is shunned by the Korean doctor who cuts all contact with the woman once he returns to Korea. When there is a brief mention of Steve, a young black soldier who lived with So-young and had a child in Korea decades ago, So-young claims that she doesn't know if he is alive or dead. Steve may have been one of the soldiers who did not have any intention of making permanent commitments to his local “wife” during his time

in Korea. Margo Okazawa writes that many U.S. soldiers entered “marriages” of convenience to satisfy their needs during their stay, only to abandon it all when they have to return to their “real” lives in America.²⁴²

The arrangement between a visiting foreigner and a local “wife” is reminiscent of the “Madam Butterfly” narrative. The story has many different versions but the most famous rendition is Giacomo Puccini’s 1904 opera *Madama Butterfly*, based on John Luther Long’s short story *Madame Butterfly* (1898) that he based on Pierre Loti’s novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887).²⁴³ In the “Madam Butterfly” narrative, a Western man weds a local woman, has a child, and leaves her promising to return, all the while never taking the wedding ceremony seriously because it is “foreign” to him. Believing his empty promise, the local woman rejects all other suitors only to find that the man has married someone else from his country. In an attempt to ensure a better future for her mixed-race child, she kills herself so that the man and his new wife will take the baby back to their country. In this fantasy written by white men, the local woman sees her sacrifice as necessary for her child and recognizes the new wife to be more suitable for the man. She never blames that man for deceiving her or not honoring their own marriage.

In *The Bacchus Lady*, the Filipino woman believes that the Korean doctor would come back for her and their son. The doctor impregnates and abandons the young Filipino woman just as Steve did to So-young. Unlike the Filipino woman, So-young chose to give her baby up for adoption to America. She says that she will go to hell for what she had done, to abandon a baby not even 1 year old. As in the Butterfly narrative, regret and guilt is for So-young alone to bear.

²⁴² Margo Okazawa-Rey, “Amerasian Children in GI Town: A Legacy of US Militarism in South Korea,” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 3, no. 1 (1997).

²⁴³ More recently, the musical “Miss Saigon” by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil adapts elements from “Madama Butterfly” to set the stage in Vietnam. The musical depicts a love story between an American G.I. and a Vietnamese woman.

Conclusion

Exploitation of women's labor happens at multiple levels: at one end of the spectrum are the socially outcasted *kijich'on* sex workers who are labeled "bad" women but necessary for the U.S.-Korean military alliance. On the other end of the spectrum is Park Geun-hye, the "good" daughter of Park Chung-hee who acted as the stand-in first lady after the assassination of her mother in 1974 until the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979. In 2012, Korea elected Park Geun-hye as its first female president. She served as president from 2013 until she was impeached in 2017. The emergence of the first national female leader marked a notable moment in Korea. Jay Chang Joon Kim, a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from California, commented that "South Korea produced a female leader before Japan, China, or even United States could. Korea shocked the world with our development of democracy in the political realm."²⁴⁴ Claiming that no Korean woman had been a leader since the ninth century, one journalist pointed out that "Park bec[ame] the most powerful figure in a country where many women earn less than men and are trapped in low-paying jobs despite first-class educations."²⁴⁵ The first female president sparked Korean media speculation about a future of strong and powerful women.

Some used the example of the first female president as hard evidence that there is no more gender discrimination in Korea. Only radical women were still "feminists" in this world where women could achieve the most (political) power if they just tried. Media and politicians

²⁴⁴ Jay Chang Joon Kim, "A Female President that Precedes U.S., Japan, and China," *New Daily*, New Daily, December 29, 2012, <http://www.newdaily.co.kr/site/data/html/2012/12/28/2012122800135.html>.

²⁴⁵ Min-sik Yoon, "South Korea's 1st Woman Leader Vows New N. Korea Effort," *The Korea Herald*, Herald Corporation, December 20, 2012, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20121220000501&ACE_SEARCH=1.

celebrated the female president as proof that there is equal opportunity based only on merit. But the election of one female president masked the still-existing gender-based discrimination in Korea.

Despite media speculation about the dawning of a new era of gender equality with the inauguration of Park Geun-hye, the fact remains that Park's image is still closer to a good daughter to her father than an independent woman. In Korea, daughters typically live with their parents until they get married. After marriage, they become a member of her husband's family, as well as a crucial part of her own nuclear family as a wife and mother. There is a popular idiom that states "a married daughter is no better than a stranger." Park is not simply a female politician but the daughter of the famous leader who has a past of serving the said father well through her supportive role.

Park Geun-hye's political career is a real-life example of the impact of the myth of masculinity in Korea. It is important to note Park Geun-hye's support of her father's regime which created policies that further objectified women for the economic and military security of the nation. Returning from a study program in France, Park Geun-hye worked as a stand-in first lady to her father in 1974. Still in her early 20s, unmarried, and desexualized, Park Geun-hye did not challenge her father's masculinity. Instead, she served as a good supportive daughter to her father, doing her duties for the nation as an image of obedience and subservience.

Park Geun-hye continued to employ the image of a "good" daughter/woman in her own political campaign that culminated in the presidential election of 2012. Her background as the "good" daughter of Park Chung-hee with conservative values and the ongoing image of an

unmarried daughter serving the country was appealing to a large portion of her supporter base.²⁴⁶

Although Park Geun-hye's gender was highly emphasized when the media described her as the "first female president," Park's family history and her role as a "good" daughter became a crucial part of her narrative. Closely following the election, different media mentioned the connection between Park Geun-hye's status as an unmarried woman and her dedication to remaining a "good" daughter to her father: "She has created an image as a selfless daughter of Korea, never married, then a successful female lawmaker in a male-dominated political world."²⁴⁷

The myth of masculinity renders women as valuable only in relation to the male, as can be seen in film and Park's impeachment and imprisonment. This focus on male subjectivity is often shared in post-colonial nations:

A post-colonial nation has a particularly ambivalent relationship with its history, simultaneously accepting and negating it, so has the symbolic location of women in the nation. Women are therefore seen as an embodiment of the shameful national history which has to be negated or forgotten or of the past to which the nation should return, invoking nostalgia without history or memory of the precolonial. [...] While women symbolically represent the nation's past and future as ideological boundary markers, emblems of the nation and signifiers of national difference, they are also recruited by nationalist leaders to serve in militant anti-colonial movements and wars, as cheap laborers, warriors, and faithful wives and/or mothers. And, despite their multiple roles, women are often excluded from the rights of enfranchised citizenship, retaining an "object" rather than a "subject" position in the nation.²⁴⁸

Subjective experiences of women are necessary to reclaim female subjectivity in opposition to the masculine understanding of female sexuality. However, with media forms, most specifically through film, the recounting of experiences becomes more difficult. Film is not a simple

²⁴⁶ Little difference between Park and Moon in 2012 election; Park had "liberal" ideas in mind – so focus on legacies; Park represented her father's ideologies and didn't apologize for them – liberals don't want to posthumously honor Park's dictatorship (Joo 372).

²⁴⁷ Yoon, "South Korea's 1st Woman Leader."

²⁴⁸ Lee, "Negotiating the Boundaries," 36-7.

narrative but an amalgamation of plot, culture, politics, and unseen biases. Even when women are represented on screen, it does not mean the film provides a space for subjective recounting.

Epilogue

The outcome of 2012 election heavily influenced the media. For the film industry, there were two notable responses immediately following the 2012 election. Between 2012 and 2017, more female directors produced works featuring strong female subjects that defied masculine understanding of femininity. Rather than playing the role of a dutiful wife, girlfriend, or daughter in need of protection, the characters in these films refuse traditional roles within the family and prove to be psychologically stronger than the male main characters.

Another trend was masculine narrative that returned to the original trauma of domination. The history of domination triggers the national myth of masculinity—Korea must be masculine to overcome the Japanese Other. These films portray Japanese domination from the male subjective experience to show masculine resistance against the Japanese, often through violence. In these films, the masculine male is celebrated for defeating the greater evil, the Japanese Other. As the country celebrates a “new” and different era of gender equality with the first female president, these films re-establish the need for the myth of masculinity that necessarily focuses on a masculine self.

The first group of films incorporates a focus on female desire that is seemingly separate from the patriarch. This shift of focus does not necessarily mean that women act as main characters; on the contrary, many films feature male main character to emphasize the gap between what a man expects from a woman under the myth of masculinity and how female subjectivity defies such expectations. Both *Helpless* (Dir. Byeon Young-joo, 2012) and *Bluebeard* (Dir. Lee Su-yeon, 2017) present male main characters that construct their own understandings of the world under the influence of the myth of masculinity. These male characters assume that their female counterparts share their desires, conform to traditional

familial roles, and need protection. However, the female characters are given their own voices by the directors to have their own desires and motivations, and they prove to be much stronger than their male counterparts.

Helpless (2012) is a film that shows how female desire can be limitless and untethered to the masculine and their understanding of femininity as necessarily weak and in need of protection. *Helpless* begins with Moon-ho (Sun-Kyun Lee) and Seon-yeong (Min-hee Kim) in a car on the way to see Moon-ho's parents in Andong. Andong is 119 miles southeast of Seoul, and the capital of Gyeongsang Province. Andong is known for its conservatism and a history of producing many Confucian scholars. The fact that Moon-ho's parents reside in Andong signals to the viewers who know the history of Andong that Seon-yeong is expected to abide by strict and traditional gender roles.

Yet, the film starts subverting both Moon-ho's and the audience's expectations from the beginning. Seon-yeong disappears from the expressway rest area on the way to Moon-ho's parents' house. Moon-ho immediately assumes kidnapping because he cannot believe that Seon-yeong would disappear of her free will, especially when getting his parents' approval is so important for their upcoming wedding. But as he investigates, he realizes that Seon-yeong has murdered a woman in the past and assumed her identity to escape from her father's debt. Moon-ho realizes that he does not know anything about the woman he was going to marry, including her name. When he gets a phone call from Seon-yeong, he coaxes her to tell him everything, saying that he will help her. When she does not speak, he yells at her, "Who are you?" The Seon-yeong that exists beyond his help is a stranger, an unknown, a threat. About to be exposed for who she really is, she abandons the persona of Seon-yeong and all that Moon-ho promises her such as a family and stability, and tries to murder another woman to steal her identity. Seon-

yeong's utmost desire is to be happy by detaching herself from her father and her old life—she might love Moon-ho, but her desire for her own happiness means that she can abandon Moon-ho at any moment if he gets in the way.

This film shows a potential female subjectivity that has its own experiences and motivations. Seon-yeong murders a woman not out of spite but because she wants to be happy. The murder is calculated and impersonal. There is no inherent “female sentiment.” Moon-ho sees her as needing protection, but she does not depend on her fiancé or any other man in the past or in the present. She is responsible for herself, capable of defending herself, and looking for her own happiness. While I'm not arguing that *Helpless* is directly related to the 2012 election, I believe that it imagines a new possibility for a female subjectivity that is envisioned outside the masculine understanding of women as objects. These new-found subjective women defy male understanding of women based on the myth of masculinity—an understanding that treats women as needing protection from men and exist only within social family units. In the film, Seon-yeong simply refuses to be the victim that her father and the debt-collectors assign her.

Director Byeon Young-joo is known for her focus on the intersectionality between gender and race/ethnicity. *Helpless* is loosely based on a novel *All She was Worth* by a Japanese author Miyabe Miyuki. In the original novel the fiancé gives up looking for the woman, and it is the detective cousin that finds the missing woman in the end. One of the main focuses in the original novel is the credit-based economy in Japan and how it impacts young people. While the original novel emphasizes individual credit card usage, Byeon shifts the focus to family influence on a young woman. In the film, Seon-yeong's father's debt is the main source of conflict and the motivation for Seon-yeong to abandon her own identity.

In *Helpless* the male character is left baffled at the recognition that he (or her love for him) is not the most important motivator. The film *Bluebeard* (Dir. Lee Su-yeon, 2017) features a male character who cannot cope with reality and instead recreates his world through a masculine understanding of femininity. The film begins with a young doctor Seung-hoon (Jin-Woong Cho) struggling to adapt to his new life in a small city. The new city contrasts Seung-hoon's life in Gangnam District in Seoul—Gangnam is one of the most rich and popular areas in Seoul. The new hospital he works at is much smaller and his house is on the second floor of an old-fashioned butcher shop, which is run by his landlord. One night, Seung-hoon finds a woman's head in a plastic bag in the butcher shop and panicked Seung-hoon steals the head and puts in his own freezer. When his wife goes missing shortly after visiting him, he suspects the landlord and works together with a retired detective to find more evidence. In the end it is revealed that Seung-hoon is the one who murdered a woman and kept her head in the freezer, and that he had been an unreliable narrator. The audiences see various scenes that have previously been represented through Seung-hoon's eyes, and it becomes clear that Seung-hoon had been recreating himself as a stronger man than he really was.

Addicted to propofol used during endoscopy and suffering from hallucinations and guilt, Seung-hoon concocts a new story to invent a masculine self that is not addicted to drugs, coping with the stress of his failed business, and not physically tormented by loan sharks. Unable to cope with the fact that his wife left him because of his drug habits, Seung-hoon reimagines his wife to be mentally unstable—her instability caused him to leave her instead. When beaten by loan sharks who find him in the new city, he imagines his landlord's biracial son beaten up by school bullies instead. It is easier for Seung-hoon to imagine other people around him as weak than to acknowledge his own weakness.

It is important to note that I am not arguing that all female directors' works successfully or even consciously promote female subjectivity. In films that focus on women's desires within a family structure, it is often still difficult to distinguish between an individual desire and a desire that has been created by the patriarchal family structure. However, it is a start to see some cracks in the clear-cut understanding of women as weak and sharing men's desires in the masculine rendering of the world.

When faced with the incomprehensible female leader, some male directors returned to the original national trauma of Japanese domination to re-envision the male-centered experience of the trauma. *The Tiger: An Old Hunter's Tale* (Dir. Park Hoon-jung, 2015) is an example of male subjectivity and successful resistance against the Japanese Other. The return to the original trauma shows the emphasis on the need for the myth of the masculine to persist. By reimagining the Japanese Other, a common enemy for all Koreans, the masculine can once again safely assume the position of the protector of his family, including the women.

The Tiger: an Old Hunter's Tale is set in 1925 Japanese-occupied Korea. In the Japanese ministry filled with various stuffed animals including several tigers sits the Japanese minister. He wants the last Korean tiger, Mountain Lord, that lives in Mountain Jiri and had banned all non-authorized hunting of tigers. Unsatisfied with the progress, he reprimands his second-in-command. The second-in-command, a native Korean who believes himself to be Japanese and therefore superior, is eager to prove his loyalty to the army. He hires a team of Korean tiger hunters and they manage to catch Mountain Lord's wife and cub. The team tries to lure Mountain Lord using his cub's body but the tiger proves to be smarter. The team leader visits the best hunter, the main character who has given up hunting after shooting his wife by accident not long after the first scene, but he refuses to get involved working for the Japanese ministry. When

his only son, sixteen-year-old boy who followed the hunting team in curiosity, dies from Mountain Lord's attack, the hunter goes on his own hunt for Mountain Lord. The hunter and the hunting group backed up by Japanese soldiers separately chase the tiger—the hunter for revenge, the team to get favorable treatment from the Japanese ministry. The hunter mortally wounds the tiger and purposefully lures him to the edge of the cliff. The two fall off a cliff so that their bodies will not be found by the Japanese, and Mountain Lord will not be another stuffed Korean tiger in the ministry.

In this film, Japan functions as an evil force that seeps into the Korean characters to a different degree while Mountain Lord represents the purest Korean spirit. The second-in-command is almost drenched in evil; he rejects his Korean “origin” and thinks he is superior to other Koreans because he is more Japanese than them. He not only earns his living off of the Japanese but feels pride in becoming one of them. Then, there is the hunting team. They are not openly supportive of the Japanese, yet they comply because they make their living off of the Japanese. Ultimately the team supports the Japanese soldiers ruin Mountain Jiri in an attempt to capture Mountain Lord. The team leader is willing to sell off Mountain Lord, the purest form of Korean spirit and the king of the mountain, to the Japanese minister to be stuffed and displayed as the last Korean tiger conquered.

The main character is not actively helping the Japanese or earning his living through them. He finds things from the mountain to sell. He has some respect for the tiger and refuses to help the Japanese capture Mountain Lord. But that is the extent of his resistance. He tells his son that he is not an independence activist, and therefore his son has nothing to worry about. The Japanese minister mentions fierce Korean rebels hiding in Mountain Jiri who cut up Japanese soldiers into pieces, and the main character is much more passive compared to them.

Mountain Lord, the last Korean tiger in Mountain Jiri that is coveted by the Japanese minister, represents the purest form of Korean resistance to the evil of the Japanese. Symbolically, tigers are the national animal of Korea. From the beginning, the Japanese minister is discussing his desire to eradicate Korean tigers, killing them and displaying them at the Japanese ministry immobile, helpless, and contained. One man comments that without Mountain Lord, wolves and boars will take over the mountain—the wolves and boars symbolize the Japanese. The tiger is a necessary force to obtain peace in the mountains, just as masculinity and violence is necessary to face the Japanese intruders.

The main character kills Mountain Lord's mom and his own wife. Mountain Lord becomes more fierce as a result, and the hunter gives up hunting. He resumes hunting when (1) Mountain Lord kills his only son and (2) the Japanese soldiers flood the area to capture Mountain Lord. The main character is necessarily violent—to almost protect the Korean spirit (both the tiger and himself, or his hunting skills) from going into the hands of the Japanese. He hunts only when the Japanese soldiers set up dynamites to destroy the entire forest and try to get rid of all the places the Mountain Lord can hide. Both the main character and the Mountain Lord gets their families killed. The main character shoots his own wife while chasing Mountain Lord, and the hunting team kills Mountain Lord's wife and son. The team leader tries to lure Mountain Lord with his own son, just as he later tries to lure the main character by recruiting Seok to the hunting team. None of the men's families get any choice—Seok and his mom are assumed to follow the main character's feelings towards the Japanese. When Seok betrays that and joins the hunting team, he is punished.

Purposefully excluded from these narratives are women's experience of the trauma. In the wake of liberation, women's experience of Japanese colonialism, especially that of comfort

women, was strictly regulated. The films that newly imagine Japanese colonialism return the emphasis to male subjectivity in response to the male Other, leaving no room for female subjectivity.

One last film I would like to mention as possibly exposing the harms perpetrated by the myth of masculinity in Korean film industry is *The Pregnant Tree and the Goblin* (Dir. Dong-Ryung Kim, Gyeong-tae Park, 2019). The film, half-fantasy and half-documentary, initially released at 45 Seoul Independent Film Festival in 2019. The two directors and the main actor each received Executive Special Awards.²⁴⁹ The film subsequently released in a handful of theaters in Seoul starting on January 27, 2022. Unfortunately, I have no direct access to the film that is only available on Korean streaming websites that limit services to domestic viewers. A film critic HyeYoung Cho writes a brief summary of the film:

The main character, In-sun Park, is a former kijich'on sex worker. Her story had been told and retold by media and scholars according to their own readings and understanding of the situation. This film helps Park tell her own story through her own methods and genre. Park's life had been out of her control, but she is determined to choose her own death. For former kijich'on sex workers, even their deaths had often become a mere spectacle. Park faces the messengers of death with an iron will to dictate on her own terms. [...] [At the end of the film] facing death, Park laughs. The laugh is neither loud nor silent. It is unclear who is laughing or where the laughter is coming from. [...] The laughter is the anger of the minority against the authority and the system.²⁵⁰

The film discusses the formerly silenced topic of kijich'on sex workers, and it is providing some space for the former sex worker, In-sun Park, to express some of her emotions. I am not under the illusion that Park had full control of the narrative of the film. However, I do believe that the directors are more aware of representing Park's story because they work with her and her subjective experiences rather than employing a stereotype or media image. Park had been one of

²⁴⁹ "The Pregnant Tree and the Goblin," *KMDB*, Korean Film Archive, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.kmdb.or.kr/db/kor/detail/movie/K/21539#>.

²⁵⁰ HyeYoung Cho, "The Sound of Laughter that Tears through a Life that has Become a Spectacle," *KMDB*, Korean Film Archive, December 17, 2021, <https://www.kmdb.or.kr/story/418/6229>.

the three women in the two directors' 2012 documentary *Tour of Duty*, in which two former kijich'on sex workers and a biracial woman living in military camptown were featured. Park's return to the 2019 film suggests to me that the directors were responsive in the retelling of her story. Perhaps with more films and film directors that question the myth of masculinity and its understanding and portrayal of women, more discussions will open up about the problems of incorporating a sense of justified male violence as a national identity.

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