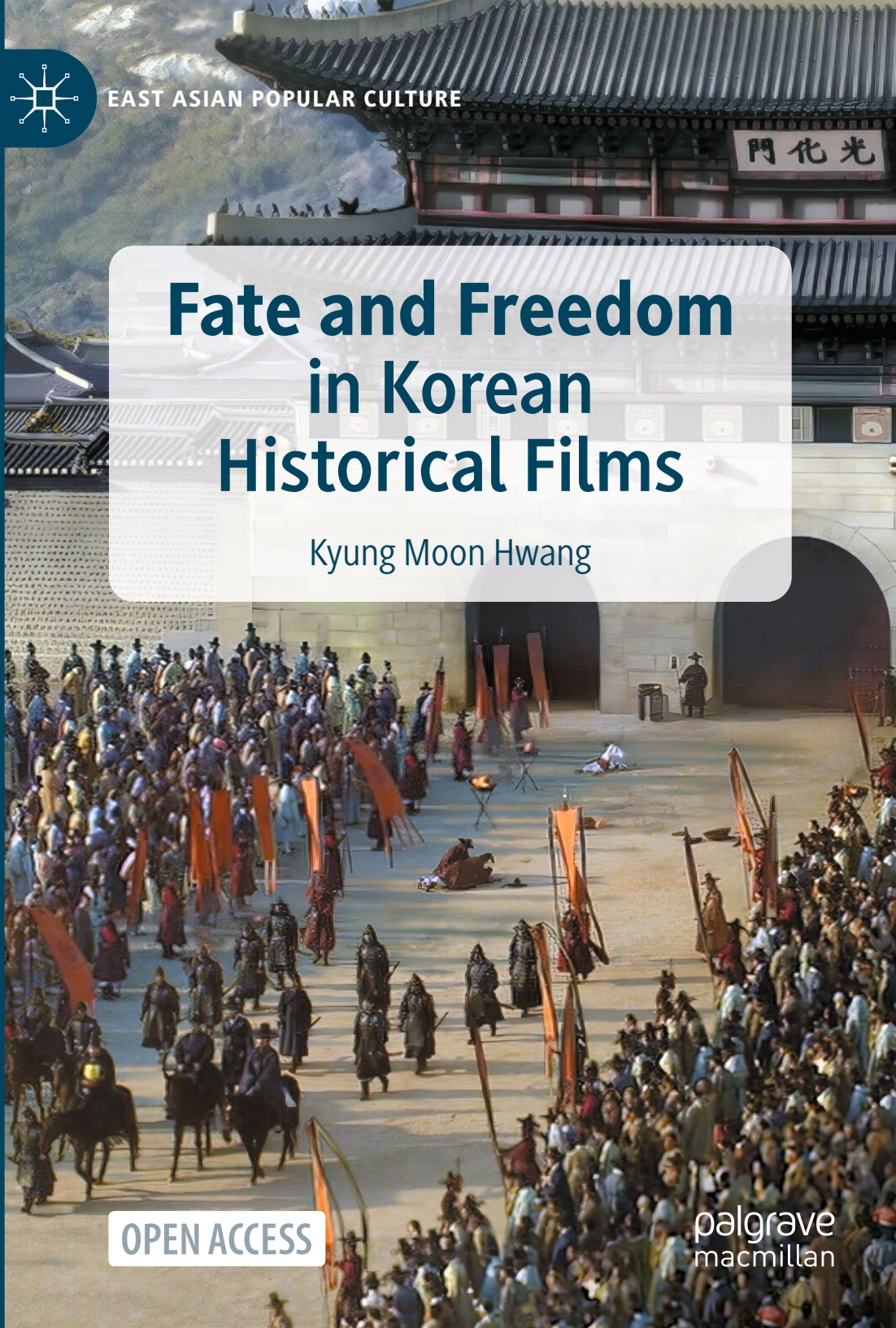
EAST ASIAN POPULAR CULTURE
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Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films
Kyung Moon Hwang
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ISSN 2634-5935 ISSN 2634-5943 (electronic)
East Asian Popular Culture
ISBN 978-3-031-27267-7 ISBN 978-3-031-27268-4 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4

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Preface

How do we *make* our lives meaningful, instead of merely accepting the conditions of our existence? That basic question, when applied to the level of society or nation, also suggests how history shapes both the past and the present. With impressive skill and artistry, many South Korean films have used this connection to examine the people, events, patterns, and lessons of the country's past. Their portrayal of the balance between what Koreans could control through their will and actions, on the one hand, and the larger forces that seem to constrain peoples' agency, on the other, is what this book uncovers and analyses. The overarching motif of "fate and freedom", expressed through symbolism, metaphor, or allegory, appears often as the main message or a sub-theme, and almost always as subtext.

The explosive embrace of South Korean popular culture around the world has been nothing short of extraordinary. Most recently, energetic dance music, K-pop, has driven this trend, but in the early years of the twenty-first century, Korean television series, or K-dramas, took hold, especially in Asia and in Asian diasporic communities. Although the branding of all kinds of South Korean products and practices by adding "K-" to things (K-beauty, K-food, even K-pandemic response) has now become commonplace, the third major component of the cultural triptych has always been cinema. While Korean films have not experienced the enormous mass devotion as music and TV dramas have inside or outside South Korea, one could argue that Korean movies have been even more accomplished. This has been the case, in particular, for those films set in the nation's past.

As a historian of Korea, I have gladly crossed over the threshold towards appreciating the historical value as well as artistic achievement of these filmic dramatisations. To be sure, this can only be done by recognising that these are indeed (fictionalised) depictions—not documentary evidence—that present certain imaginings of the past. But in varying but generally respectable degrees of faithfulness to the evidence and to reasonable understandings of events and figures, for the most part South Korean historical films produced during the so-called *hallyu* ("Korean wave") period, starting in the 1990s, have pursued sincere portrayals of what did and could have taken place. Thus, they also compel stimulating consideration of historical issues and patterns, in addition to providing entertainment, for those interested in Korean history and culture.

Indeed the groundwork for this book was laid in a university course, "Dramatisations of Korean History", that I have taught at two institutions nearly every year since the mid-2010s. The multiple viewings of dozens of films opened my eyes to their impressive production standards, their rich storytelling and captivating acting, and their sophisticated visual symbolism and layering. My task in this book has been to analyse such features and to articulate the manner by which they combine to offer genuine insights into the past, as well as to reflect historical views and contestations in contemporary South Korea. Towards this end, the book undertakes a critical analysis of approximately 80 films, divided into eight chapters organised chronologically in accordance with the films' settings, from the fifteenth century to the early twenty-first.

I wish to thank those students at the University of Southern California and now at The Australian National University whose responses have undoubtedly found their way into the book in some form. Thanks also go to my professional colleagues at both institutions who have given indispensable support, including by contributing to the multiple stages of feedback and review that resulted in this book. I thank too the editorial and production teams at Palgrave Macmillan. And of course, my deep affection and gratitude to family members on three continents, especially Helen and Sejin.

Canberra, Australia
February 2023

Kyung Moon Hwang

Chronology of Korean History

Political Eras

–4th c.	Earliest Polities	
4–7th c.	Three Kingdoms Era (Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla)	
668–918	Unified Silla Kingdom	
918–1392	Goryeo Dynasty	
1392–1897	Joseon Dynasty	
15th to early 16th c.	Early Joseon Era	Chap. 1
1592–1637	Devastating Foreign Invasions	Chap. 2
18th c.	Era of Kings Yeongjo and Jeongjo	Chap. 3
19th c.	Era of Imperialism and Major Uprisings	Chap. 4
1897–1910	Great Korean Empire	Chap. 5
1910–1945	Japanese Colonial Rule	Chap. 5
1945–1953	Liberation, Occupation, Division, Korean War	Chap. 6
1950s–1980s	Civilian and Military Dictatorships in South Korea	Chap. 7
1987–	Democratic South Korea	Chap. 8

Major Events and Periods, Fourteenth to Twenty-First Centuries

1392		Establishment of the Joseon dynasty by Yi Seong-gye	Chap. 1
	1418	Death of third monarch Taejong; start of reign of King Sejong the Great	
	1446	Promulgation of the Korean alphabet by King Sejong the Great	
	1453	Prince Suyang's usurpation of the throne	
	1500s–1510s	Literati purges	
	1592–1598	Japanese invasions	Chap. 2
	1623	"Righteous Restoration" (*Injo Banjeong*) overthrow of King Gwanghae by forces that installed King Injo	
	1627–1637	Manchu invasions	
	1724–1776	Reign of King Yeongjo	Chap. 3
	1762	Execution of Crown Prince Sado	
	1776–1800	Reign of King Jeongjo	
	1801	Rule of Queen Dowager Jeongsun; first Catholic persecution	Chap. 4
	1811–1812	Hong Gyeong-nae rebellion in northwest	
	1862	Major rebellions in the south	
	1866	Final Catholic persecution; French military incursions; "General Sherman" incident	
	1864	Start of reign of King Gojong, rule by his father Prince Regent Heungseon (Daewongun)	
	1876	Treaty of Ganghwa with Japan	
	1882	Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the US; soldiers' uprising; capture of the Daewongun by Chinese	
	1884	Gapsin coup; beginning of Chinese protectorate	
	1894	Donghak Uprising, Gabo Reforms, Sino-Japanese War over Korea	

(*continued*)

(continued)

	1896	End of Gabo Reforms; flight of monarch to Russian legation; start of the Independence Club and *The Independent* newspaper	Chap. 5
1897		Establishment of the Great Korean Empire	
	1899	Forced shutdown of *The Independent* newspaper; construction of first rail line and the Seoul streetcar system	
	1905	Japanese victory in Russo-Japanese War; proclamation of Japanese protectorate	
	1907	Forced abdication of Emperor Gojong; establishment of Japanese domination over Korean government	
	1909	An Jung-geun's assassination of first Japanese Resident-General Ito Hirobumi	
1910		Annexation of Korea by Japan; initiation of Japanese colonial administration by the Government-General of Chosen	
	1910s	"Military Rule" period; colonial land survey	
	1919	March First independence demonstrations; founding in Shanghai of the government in exile, the Republic of Korea	
	1920s–1930s	"Cultural Rule" period in colonial Korea	
	1931	"Manchurian Incident" leading to Japan's establishment of puppet state of Manchukuo	
	1938–1945	Wartime mobilisation during Sino-Japanese and Pacific War; militarised anti-Japanese independence movements inside and outside Korea	
1945		Liberation from Japanese rule; divided military occupation by Allied forces; violent political contestation in both occupation zones	Chap. 6
1948		May elections for Southern government; establishment of separate southern (ROK) and northern (DPRK) states; rebellions and massacres on the south coast and Jeju Island	
1950–1953		The Korean War	

(*continued*)

(continued)

South Korea	1960	Student protests over rigged election; overthrow of President Syngman Rhee; establishment of parliamentary democracy government (Second Republic)	Chap. 7
	1961	*Coup d'etat* led by Park Chung Hee, establishment of ruling military *junta*	
	1963	Park elected civilian president; start of Third Republic	
	1964	Student protests over prospective normalisation of relations with Japan	
	1965	Signing of normalisation treaty with Japan; despatch of troops to Vietnam War	
	Late 1960s	Industrialisation push under Second Five-Year Economic Development Plan; revision of constitution to extend Park's rule	
	1970	Self-immolation protest of labourer Jeon Tae-il; publication of "Five Bandits" poem by Kim Ji-ha; start of New Village Movement	
	1972	Implementation of "Yushin" constitutional dictatorship (Fourth Republic) under Park; North–South Joint Declaration of Peaceful Unification Plan	
	1974	Opening of first subway line in Seoul; killing of Park's wife	
	1979	Major protests against Park's rule in Busan and Masan; assassination of Park by KCIA chief Kim Jae-gyu	
	1980	Gwangju uprising and massacre; start of military dictatorship (Fifth Republic) under Chun Doo-hwan	
	1987	Killing of student in January; mass street demonstrations in June; transition to constitutional democracy; Great Labor Uprising of July; election of former general Roh Tae-woo as first president of the Sixth Republic	

(*continued*)

(continued)

1988	Seoul Olympics	Chap. 8
1992	Election of former dissident Kim Young Sam as president; government campaign touting "Globalisation"	
1995	Dismantling of former colonial headquarters building	
1997	Financial crisis; IMF bailout; election of former dissident Kim Dae Jung as president	
2000	Summit between Kim Dae Jung and Northern leader Kim Jong-Il	
2002	Co-hosting of World Cup; candlelight demonstrations against US military; election of Roh Moo-hyun as president	
2007	Election of Lee Myung-Bak as president	
2009	Suicide of former president Roh; death of former president Kim Dae Jung	
2012	Election of Park Geun-hye, daughter of Park Chung Hee, as president	
2014	Sewol Ferry Disaster	
2016	Corruption scandal surrounding President Park; mass candlelight demonstrations; impeachment of Park by National Assembly	
2017	Removal of Park from power through Constitutional Court ruling; election of Moon Jae-in as president	
2020	COVID-19 pandemic; relative success of counter-measures	

Note on Romanisation

With exceptions for a few well-known individuals, this book uses the Revised System of Romanisation for Korean. In accordance with this system, the common surnames of Lee and Park will be rendered as "Yi" and "Bak", respectively. However, for the sake of minimising distraction, the surnames of "Kim" (for Gim) and "Shin" (for Sin) will be used in their more familiar forms. Korean given names will usually include a hyphen between the two syllables.

In the "Playbill" boxes that open the chapters, the chapter narratives, and appendixes, the official English title of each film as well as the English translation of the Korean title will appear in double quotes, while the original Korean title will be marked in italics.

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Introduction

Towards the end of "The Face Reader", a film set in mid-fifteenth-century Seoul, the character of Prince Suyang, following his bloody usurpation of the throne, shoots an arrow through a young man's chest and blithely says to no one in particular, "I wonder if he knew that his son would die like that? I myself did not know". In mocking contempt, though not completely, he was referring to the victim's father, the "face reader", who had stood next to the victim and whose pretensions of divining a person's fate were suddenly pierced by brute force. Suyang, the historical figure who became King Sejo after this coup, embodies in the film this human potency. He had confidently expressed such a belief and even made the soothsayer concede, under torturous desperation, that Suyang did indeed possess the face of a great king and not that of a monstrous thief, as the face reader had warned earlier.

The second part of Suyang's utterance, however, is just as telling, as it further refines this film's balancing of fate and freedom, a theme that applies to history as to life itself. By revealing that he, too, did not know beforehand that he would shoot the fortune teller's son, he appears to confirm the workings of chance and contingency, of unpredictability or the utter whims of fate, as it were. But Suyang's arrow did not miss its target; he had changed his aim to the face reader's son at the last second, a decision that seems to have surprised even the prince himself. This element of human agency, although often inexplicable and inconclusive, also

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
East Asian Popular Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_1

supports the film's posture that Suyang's actions, however horrible, represent the capacity of individuals—and likewise of communities, societies, and nations—to reshape and redirect the path of destiny, to change fate as it were, not just curse it or cower to its inscrutability. Like death itself, destiny is unavoidable, but the timing, direction, and manner by which one reaches this end are alterable (Image 1).

The prominence of this motif of fate and freedom in settings from the nation's past characterises recent South Korean historical films. Released over the *hallyu* ("Korean wave") era from the mid-1990s until 2020, they have not only carried a common concern with Korean history but also contributed to historical understanding and debate, even controversy, in South Korean society since democratisation in the late 1980s. As such, the balance of fate and freedom—or structure and agency, as well as cyclical and linear history—works as a universalistic concept and a symbol or plot device for illuminating past events, figures, and issues that, in turn, help in understanding Korea today. The presence of the past in the present (and future), as well as the reverse—the constant projection of contemporary concerns into cinematic depictions of the nation's history—marks these films in ways large and small, and the best of the works expansively. "The Face Reader" (*Gwansang* ["Face reading" or "Physiognomy"]; Han Jae-rim, 2013), for example, deploys this theme also to spotlight the injustices suffered by common people, like the eponymous prognosticator or his son, who get entangled in treacherous court politics. Hence, the motivic tension between fate and freedom highlights the inequities of social

Image 1 "I wonder if that man knew his son would die in such a manner". Prince Suyang in "The Face Reader"

standing, including the degree to which one's ancestry or physical traits, such as one's countenance, determined the division of wealth, status, and power.

The force of fate—to be faced, challenged, and overcome—often appears as the grand antagonist in varying forms, depending on the setting and particular plots, characters, themes, and outcomes. Fate, though, always functions as a deeply historical phenomenon, such as the solidification of Korean social practices over the centuries or even its apparent opposite, the sudden intervention of unforeseen but understandable factors. A reversion to fatalism to explain misfortune remains common today in everyday speech, with the use of the word for "fate", *unmyeong* (or sometimes *in-yeon*), allowing room for adjustment and thus something a bit different in nuance from (usually negative) "destiny", or *palja*, though the two terms are often interchangeable, as in English. In these films, however, fatalism rarely reigns supreme, at least not without a fight, and resistance appears as the struggle to exert freedom, whether against political oppression, economic exploitation, foreign intrusions, family, patriarchy, elders and traditions, or even the nation itself. The cruelties of the hereditary social hierarchy, for example, function consistently as this fateful power in films set in the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). In modern settings, such stifling practices often overlap with or reappear as the unjust workings of the Confucian family system, gender and class inequalities, or ethnic tribalism. And representations of fatalistic forces originating from the outside, not surprisingly, reflect the common perception among Koreans that their long collective history has been chronically stricken with foreign invasions and interference. To use an obvious example, in the grandiose dramatisation, "The Admiral" (Chap. 2), of a battle against invaders from Japan in the late sixteenth century, the depicted savagery of the Japanese stands for this structural might—to be repelled, ironically, through the channelling of Korea's natural elements by human will. And in an indelible scene in the Korean War fantasy "Welcome to Dogmakgol" (Chap. 6), fate materialises *out* of nature, as a rampaging wild boar. The human dimension is thus crucial, if only as an agent acting upon the heavenly order, and hence accentuates the distinctly modernistic primacy of people's actions and responsibilities—their freedom to resist, defy, or recast fate—across historical settings. Fate looms over these dramatisations, but so is the awareness that Koreans, for the sake of their selves, families, or communities, have acted to redirect their destinies—though

sometimes in conflicting and even immoral ways—by drawing on their individual resolve, national customs, and cultural legacies.

Not surprisingly, Buddhism, the oldest textual and institutionalised religious-philosophical tradition on the peninsula, suffuses the sense and sentiment of many of these films, and with a compelling consistency, given that, otherwise, Buddhism seldom makes an explicit appearance.[1] Furthermore, neither karmic retribution nor even the striving for escape from suffering takes the lead thematically; rather, it is the cyclical, transitory nature of being, and by extension of social identity and national history, that often centres Buddhism in these films' metaphorical, allegorical, and semiotic frameworks. As expressions of perhaps Korea's most basic and comprehensive cultural heritage, Buddhist cosmology allows the viewer to readily grasp how flashback sequences connect different temporal settings and render later or current circumstances—whether a person, family, society, or nation—as the product of a prior time. It thus makes sense that Buddhistic motifs are so readily deployed by the filmmakers, even subconsciously, in forwarding cinematic dramatisations as vessels for historical thinking and perceptions.

Even without a major role for reincarnation in the story (as in, for example, "Bungee Jumping on Their Own", analysed in Chap. 8), the blending or frequent switching of scenes across time makes use of the distinctive advantages of cinematic storytelling, a tool that Korean filmmakers masterfully deploy. Nearly the entire storyline, minus the opening and closing scenes set in a latter or the present day, can take place as an extended flashback narrative that otherwise proceeds chronologically, as in "YMCA Baseball Team" (Chap. 5), "Taegukgi" (Chap. 6), or "Once in a Summer" (Chap. 7). In other films, such as "The Throne" (Chap. 3) or "The Old Garden" (Chap. 8), the sudden transitioning of scenes across time frames appears continuously and hence further accentuates the sense of historical connectivity and even circularity. And this constant affirmation of the ties between the past and present takes place in a range of temporal settings, from a single 24-hour period, as in "Eternal Empire" or "The Fatal Encounter" (both Chap. 3), to a full half-century, as in "Ode to My Father" (Chap. 8). In still other works, such as "Peppermint Candy" (Chap. 8), innovative constructions of chronology are indispensable to the story and equally potent in demonstrating the historicity of the characters and themes. In all these examples, a sense of cyclical time takes a major role, often integrating differing historical settings or varying chronologies within the same setting, and thus highlights the recurring presence of

Koreans' collective past. In such a way, circular notions of time powerfully modify the overarching dynamic of cumulative and linear progression, especially in films set in the modern era. Temporal mixture thus both re-expresses and reinforces the balance between fate and freedom as a negotiation also between the individual and society.

Hallyu History

It is difficult to overstate the scope and scale of change in South Korean cinema, and indeed South Korean popular culture as a whole, since the 1990s. These developments accompanied and further drove the political liberalisation begun in 1987, the loosening of censorship laws, and the general spirit of open inquiry and expression that blossomed in line with the explosive growth of the moviegoing audience and the rapid improvement of artistic and technical sophistication.[2] One notices especially the precipitous rise in production values, narrative, and acting, and not surprisingly both historical and non-historical feature films resonated with mass audiences at a much higher level than before. South Korean cinema, in sum, helped facilitate popular culture's emergence as a cornerstone to democratisation, which resulted in compelling depictions of past events and characters with greater equanimity and complexity, warts and all. The mid-1990s witnessed the first such expressions of historical consciousness in the new era, though in befitting a transitory phase they also exuded a somewhat traditional feel: *The Taebaek Mountains* (1994, Chap. 6) and *Eternal Empire* (1995, Chap. 3). These works, while epochal in scope and sophisticated in visual symbolism, retained vestiges of the somewhat stilted acting of old and could not yet fully utilise the advances in cinematography and sound that would soon accompany the industry's dramatic development. Starting in the early 2000s, however, historical films, which by then had matured comprehensively in thematic treatments and production values, led the way in accounting for record-setting box office hits in the 2000s[3] and even more so in the 2010s.[4] This book does not contend that the motive of fate and freedom was responsible for such popularity and artistic flowering, but this theme applies to just about all the major historical films released since the turn of the twenty-first century. Timing, in any case, seems to have been key.[5]

For historical films made before the *hallyu* era, it has been difficult to discern a particular thematic trait. In analysing a select sampling of post-war (1953–) historical films set in the colonial and Korean War periods,

Hyangjin Lee suggested in 2000 that they had in common the overriding search for a reckoning between, on the one hand, national political division—a product of recent history—and, on the other hand, cultural unity, a legacy built over a millennium; in any case, the resolution to this dilemma, she found, was usually expressed as familism.[6] This might be the case, but the pre-*hallyu* films also included many with premodern settings as well, however formulaic such movies may have been. Published just a few years later, in 2003, *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination*, while not analysing historical films separately, offered a firmly historical dynamic—nation-building in the form of democratic resistance—as an indispensable framework for the development of South Korean cinema, especially in the late twentieth century.[7] If so, such an impulse could have lain the thematic groundwork for historical films' ensuing concern with fate and freedom. In other words, the democratisation movement writ large across South Korea's short but turbulent history, expressed as a determined struggle against dictatorship as well as other forms of traditional domination, would manifest prominently in film culture and cinematic works. Such an understanding can also account for other commonly identified thematic orientations in pre-*hallyu* era movies, such as the predominance of the sentiment of *han*, an aggrieved sadness that could readily be transposed to the level of national history; the quest for independence from foreign influences and interventions; and of course the overriding concern with people's everyday struggles against oppression, which reflected the search for and triumph of democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s through the framework of the *minjung* or the "masses" ("the people").[8]

These strands appear to have coalesced into a sophisticated combination of streamlined storytelling, realistic characterisation, and ever-increasing production values backed by large corporate studios in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in tandem with blockbusters that helped drive South Korean movie culture as a whole. For historical films, a further notable change came in the frank and iconoclastic revisiting of even the most recent past, whether the Korean War period or the just-ended era of military dictatorship. Hence, this flourishing of the *hallyu* cinema's engagement with national history coincided with the growth of a main target of critical concern: the so-called Park Chung Hee syndrome, or the nostalgia in some social sectors for the former strongman of the 1960s and 1970s that shaded much of politics, or so it seemed. Younger directors of the "democracy generation" ("x86"), who had fought against

authoritarian rule, appear to have made it their mission to express through cinema the progressive understanding of South Korea's past,[9] which eventually became the national historical orthodoxy itself. Just as only a fraction of theatrical films and blockbusters were historical treatments, however, only a portion of the historical films in the new century depicted the most recent eras. The other works took the spirit of more open engagement with the past to offer imaginative retellings of older events and figures, from the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) and even earlier, or, most interestingly, from the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). These films drew meticulously from scholarly findings and documentary sources, sometimes filtered through public understanding, and adhered to the ethos of verisimilitude. Such was demanded by the very high production standards set by *hallyu* films in general, which led to South Korea's movie market becoming one of the few that overturned the domination of Hollywood. Nevertheless, historical accuracy per se was almost never the main objective of these films, and hence, it will not be an overriding concern for this study.

Still, this volume will forego art films that disregarded commercial gain or a mass audience. As such, no works are examined from major directors, Hong Sang-su or Kim Gi-deok, for example, that, while distinctively Korean, are not films set specifically in Korean history. Neither does *Fate and Freedom* consider "period pieces" or "costume dramas" set in a generalised past; instead, the films in this book mean to place the story in a particular historical setting and hence address specific concerns and issues arising therefrom. Most esteemed directors of this *hallyu* period since the mid-1990s, as if undergoing a rite of passage, have made at least one such foray into historical film. These include Park Chan-wook's (Bak Chan-uk) "The Handmaiden" (Chap. 5), set lavishly in the colonial period of the early twentieth century, and Bong Joon-ho's (Jun-ho) "Memories of Murder" (Chap. 7), his second feature, depicting the unsettling juncture of mid-1980s South Korea on the eve of democratisation. On the other hand, a small number of major directors has actually specialised in historical films, notably Kim Han-min and Yi Jun-ik, the former responsible for the biggest box office hit in South Korean movie history, "The Admiral" (Chap. 2), and the latter for probably the greatest oeuvre of historical works, including one of the towering achievements in the genre, "The Throne" (Chap. 3).

Notwithstanding particular patterns and proclivities in these directors' creations, however, this book is not about auteurship. Nor is it technically

a cinema study—for this, there are many accomplished works by professional film scholars, just as there are plentiful online sources of helpful film reviews and other information.[10] Rather, this book seeks to offer an idiosyncratic perspective into both Korean history and Korean movies through a combination of the two. Put another way, *Fate and Freedom* is not an examination of cinema through its historical depictions, but rather a study of historical understanding depicted in cinema, with an emphasis on seeing how films can affect perceptions of history as much as the other way around. Through its thematic structure and chronological ordering (in film settings) of the chapters, the book's narrative forwards particular points of analysis—articulated in the paragraphs, sections, and chapters—that, taken together, all strive to demonstrate the overriding theme of *Fate and Freedom*. Such interpretive framing also requires that some facets of the films that do not advance the analysis or involve historical issues, including main points of the plot if necessary, are given less attention. And in order to facilitate further viewings, very few endings of storylines are revealed in the following pages.

As much as anything, then, the aim is to aid in understanding and appreciating these works' craftsmanship and contributions to perceptions of Korea's past. For this purpose, the book will consistently offer background historical context for its discussion of the films and forward arguments regarding the dramatised portrayals of each major era covered in the individual chapters.[11] In this sense, this is a scholarly book, but its intended audience is not necessarily academia, whether in history or cinema studies, but rather a more general readership whose familiarity with Korean history or film is not necessarily expected. Historical films' scholarly legitimacy and value as representations of the past have been the subject of many studies, often by scholars who are arguing for acceptance of both historical film and its academic consideration to professional colleagues.[12] In order to avoid being distracted by such issues, this book takes for granted that these films in fact can make key contributions, even interventions, in historical discourse and understanding. *Fate and Freedom* also sidesteps consideration of the panoply of production factors and other "behind the scenes" matters, however important they may be, in order to maintain its focus on the filmic text. It thus accepts and indeed celebrates these cinematic treatments, first and foremost, as dramatisations—designed to entertain, to be sure, but also to raise questions, establish historical meaning, and fire up the imagination about what did or could have happened. Even while informed by commercial considerations such as ticket

sales, advertising and product placements, and the draw of movie stars, these works purposefully add to the comprehension, perception, and reconsideration of the past. And in catering to the strong historical consciousness of South Korean moviegoers, the approaches and messaging remain varied while upholding the very high standards of artistic craftsmanship that have characterised recent South Korean popular culture as a whole. This book thus comes from a historian's joining—upon being drawn into—the cresting wave of serious treatment of this cultural space, a sign of intellectual wonderment at Korean cinema's capacity to illuminate, reflect, and shape understandings of the past.

Chapter One. Freedom and Fate in the People and Monarchy: The Early Joseon Era, Fifteenth to Sixteenth Centuries

Playbill

"The King and the Clown" (*Wang ui namja* ["The King's man"]); Yi Jun-ik, 2005

"The King's Letters" (*Narat malssami* ["Our country's language"]); Jo Cheol-hyeon, 2019

"Forbidden Dream" (*Cheonmun: haneul e munneunda* ["Studying the stars: questioning the heavens"]); Heo Jin-ho, 2019

"The Face Reader" (*Gwansang* ["Face reading"]); Han Jae-rim, 2013

"The Treacherous" (*Gansin* ["Wicked officials"]); Min Gyu-dong, 2015

In the closing scene of "The King and the Clown", the two main characters, both jesters, stand precariously over a tightrope in the royal palace grounds and together vow to be born again as minstrels. The film, after having followed them unwittingly infiltrating, disturbing, and suffering the lofty environs of peak privilege, then ends with a still shot of the two as they bounce high off the springy tightrope, in front of the main palace

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_2

Image 1 Ending still shot of "The King and the Clown"

building and, beyond that, an infinitely blue sky (Image 1). Their juxtaposition against these three elements—rope, palace, sky—shows these men's fates literally being thrown up in the air, somewhere between shaky grounds, worldly privilege, and heavenly destiny. This pair of "low-born" entertainers had found that despite their impressive talents and even moments of good fortune, their base hereditary status would become cursed and exploited by the dominant actors in politics and society, starting with a monarch, Yeonsan, who wrestled with his own personal debilitations and demons. In history, this man, ruling at the turn of the sixteenth century, was overthrown for his manifold cruelties and instability, consigned eventually to standing as the worst tyrant of the entire Joseon era.

The Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) would survive King Yeonsan and his bloody reign for another four centuries. But this durable polity's beginnings—from the end of the fourteenth century to the early sixteenth—established a full range of patterns, from the most forward and enlightened to the worst excesses of social and political depravity, that would mark the kingdom, indeed premodern Korea, as a whole. Perhaps not coincidentally, the most tumultuous episodes of this time have drawn some of the most accomplished cinematic treatments, especially those that connect the lives of regular people with those at the other end—the famous and infamous royals and high officials who battled each other in such an expansively fevered pitch that they could not but pull into their toxic corridors

innocents and lower-status Koreans. Such a mismatch, at least, is highlighted by filmic dramatisations that retell the stories of famed figures and events from the early Joseon era through, considerably, characters who did not anticipate or even desire gaining entrance into these stratospheric realms but whose lives and fates were damaged, indeed corrupted, by such brush with privilege. Still, while they embody the sapping struggle for survival in such an environment, they also represent the modernistic spirit of freedom and agency, for both the individual and the nation, in shaping their circumstances.

Koreans have long understood this formative era of the Joseon as one dominated by major monarchs, both good and bad, such as Yeonsan. The leading figure in this regard is undoubtedly King Sejong the Great (r. 1418–1450), credited as the inventor of the cherished Korean alphabet and readily accepted as the greatest of all Korean rulers, hence also as King Yeonsan's polar opposite despite being the latter's great-grandfather. Indeed, Sejong's own father, King Taejong, and son, King Sejo, were even more bloodthirsty, usurping the throne from brothers and a teenaged nephew, respectively, while killing scores. The violent ambition of Sejo (as Prince Suyang) drives the film, "The Face Reader" (see the opening of the book's Introduction and below), which like the other works examined in this chapter portrays the balance of fate and freedom through the nexus of politics and the people. And after the raucous reign of King Yeonsan, who has understandably attracted much historical curiosity, the governing order would steadily stabilise over the sixteenth century, at least until the devastating foreign invasions starting in the 1590s (Chap. 2). But for the early fifteenth century, the period of dynastic founding, the crowning personage has been King Sejong the Great, as two recent films demonstrate.

Sejong and the Popular Basis of Cultural Identity

As these things tend to do in South Korea, a pair of films dealing with the same topic or theme appeared in tandem, as if their releases were coordinated to both contrast and reinforce.[13] In 2019, after a long interlude in which King Sejong the Great had been featured often in extended television dramas but not in film, two works appeared in theatres that presented this overly familiar monarch in partnership with a low-status historical figure to pursue revolutionary change in the mid-fifteenth century. That Sejong, the epitome of the sage king, would draw upon the talents of socially shunned and hence secret gems of feudal society in order to realise

his great goals is notable, given that the monarch has generally been given most of the credit for the great accomplishments during his reign. The narrative approach of the two films, then, seems intent on accentuating Sejong's legendary prioritisation of the welfare of common people but also on reiterating the popular basis and hence historical legitimacy of his deeds. The centring of national cultural identity of the time to either the masses or to Buddhism seems overstated, but it's a sign of the appeal of this monarch and the desire to depict his goals as having been hindered by powerful, almost fatalistic forces grounded in longstanding practices of social domination.

An intriguing facet of the continuing fascination with monarchy, including in liberal democracies like present-day South Korea, where the ideals of popular sovereignty have long been normalised—indeed even the stubborn vestiges of inherited privilege continue to arouse widespread revulsion in the country today—is that popular culture serves as a safe zone for celebrity voyeurism into the lives of the rich and famous, in all their regal splendour, from an imagined past. Throwing such a glowing light onto a supposedly gilded age has directed attention most consistently in South Korea to the two monarchs of Sejong, the fourth ruler of the Joseon kingdom, and Jeongjo, from over three centuries later in the eighteenth century (Chap. 3). Given that their standing was based almost solely on the accident of birth, somewhat absurdly these two figures appear as champions of the people's struggle for social liberation against entrenched practitioners of inherited domination and the decay that that entailed. Like mutant superheroes compelled to use their accidental powers for the greater good, these sagacious supermen battle evil customs, perspectives, and structures, which, when displaced to the realm of larger society, constitute forces shaping the nation's fate. In films about King Sejong the Great, the effort to overcome this uncomfortable paradox of a hereditary monarch leading populist endeavours has been to pair him with a representative of the mass of the exploited, demeaned, but valorous common people.

This partner in "Forbidden Dream" (*Cheonmun: haneul e munneunda*, "Studying the stars: questioning the heavens"; Heo Jin-ho, 2019) is the historical figure Jang Yeong-sil, originally a government slave. The story arc takes the viewer across several moments over a 20-year period in the increasingly close relationship between Sejong and Jang, as they struggle together to overcome both scientific and political challenges. Jang's rise to influence, then, represented a test case for the nexus of agency and structure, as suggested in the film's Korean title, "Studying the

stars—Questioning the heavens". The astronomy reference alludes to the real scientific tools that Jang helped devise under the curious king's encouragement, a body of work that brought about fierce resistance, according to the film, from high officials who were aghast at the presence in court of such a low-born individual. The film's treatment of social identity and its connections to political power thus places the high officials and aristocrats in opposition to the joint effort by the monarch and people for a more equitable society, the "Forbidden Dream" of the English title. The subject matter reflecting this ideal is heaven itself or at least its starry night. Numerous shots appear of characters, especially the main pair of King Sejong and Jang Yeong-sil, looking upward and reaching for the stars, even while they are inside or riding in a palanquin. In one nighttime scene of the two in the palace courtyard, they reveal to each other that they like to look up at the sky because they are used to looking down—the king at his subjects, and the slave in kowtowing prostration. While lying down side-by-side to gaze upward, they recognise the heavens as the great unifier, a common source of wonder and origins that ignores earthly differences such as the maximum gap in social standing between the king and the slave. The other memorable scene in this regard is of an incarcerated Jang lying down together with fellow prisoners and looking at the night sky through a hole in the dilapidated jailhouse ceiling (Image 2). The symbolism here is inescapable.

Image 2 Jang Yeong-sil and fellow prisoners looking up at the nighttime sky through a hole in the jail's roof, from "Forbidden Dream"

The heavens, representing a deeper and hence more genuine repository of human essence and fortune, thus stands in contrast to the artificial divisions implanted by men, a metaphysical relationship shown being debated between the high officials and the monarch. Upon hearing again from his ministers about the basic immutability of human beings, especially those of low status, the king immediately takes this cue to highlight a glaring contradiction: "If commoners' nature cannot be changed", he asks, "then why are you officials governing them?" This rejoinder thus tugs at the heart of Confucian ethics—officially the ruling ideology of the Joseon dynasty—which is supposedly premised on the transmutability of people through education and ritual, the point of statecraft itself. Some ministers' self-serving hostility to Jang's reach for the stars, even while recognising his talents and utility, is thus unmasked, revealing deep social prejudice and the protection of hereditary privilege cloaked in faithfulness to a purportedly universal principle.

Another reason for their hostility is just as problematic but very real in the circumstances of the time: the tributary, subordinated diplomatic relationship to the Chinese Ming dynasty, which Jang's activities and the monarch's support for them have endangered. The high officials worry that one of Jang's instruments, an astronomical observatory that would allow Joseon to construct a native calendar reflecting its own geography, has invited anger and warnings from a Ming envoy. This foreign dignitary insists that only the Chinese emperor can carry out such deeds and therefore that the offending designer of the Korean observatory, Jang, should be taken to China as a prisoner. Sejong's nationalist retort to this apparent contradiction seems forced, but it is instructive of the film's aim of condemning the toadying aristocratic interests looking to "serve the great" China (*sadae*). National identity, then, becomes bound to the innovative scientific devices that Jang develops under Sejong's sponsorship, which promise discoveries ("Seoul is an hour faster than Nanjing!") from Koreans' own readings of the sky and hence a more accurate calendar than one based on Chinese star maps. A whole new world of the heavens opens up through this process, a reflection of a whole new Korea on earth. This dualism becomes visualised in an extraordinary scene of Jang creating for his monarch a makeshift planetarium out of a paper screen door and candlelit backlighting, revealing the Big Dipper and showing the pair arriving simultaneously at a recognition of the grand connections (Image 3). Alas, this synchronicity shatters when it appears that Jang, who at first cannot fathom the significance of the alphabet when Sejong introduces it to him,

Image 3 Former slave Jang Yeong-sil showing a makeshift star chart to King Sejong the Great, from "Forbidden Dream"

eventually chooses to sacrifice his own work for the even greater cause of the new script, a concession that the king himself has to make as well.

The same axis of conflict between monarchically driven populism and elite resistance appears in the other recent film on Sejong, "The King's Letters" (*Narat malssami*, "Our country's language"; Jo Cheol-hyeon, 2019). As the title suggests, this story depicts the effort to devise the native Korean script, with the monarch's partner this time being a Buddhist monk, Sinmi, who inspires and then leads the great enterprise. Though not as fulsome in dramatic conflict or as rich in symbolism as "Forbidden Dream", the film exudes a similar look and feel. As suggested by the opening blurb's warning that the film is a dramatisation of one particular theory about how the alphabet came into being, this account forwards that Buddhism, and more specifically, the Buddhist clergy, acted as the creative agent, along with the sagely monarch himself. The scenes include illustrative gatherings of like-minded people—like the monks and Sejong's two youngest sons (including Prince Suyang)—pursuing a scientifically belaboured but socially and culturally unifying process of inventing a national written vernacular. In this way "The King's Letters" is reminiscent of "Malmoe" (Chap. 5), which dramatises the crafting of a standardised dictionary in the 1930s under Japanese occupation through a collectivising creativity.

What is more historically viable is the depiction of Sejong's embrace of other scripts in the great alphabetical chain that stretched across Eurasia, with connecting links to the Mongol and Tibetan scripts and extending back to the Sanskrit of Buddhism's originating heritage. The film's intellectual tracing of this lineage thus constitutes a kind of Buddhist pilgrimage in itself. This in turn not only integrates Korea more firmly into the continental civilisational sphere but re-centres Buddhism in Korean cultural identity through a setting when the Buddhist clergy, stripped of political influence by the early Joseon state and elite, were suppressed into the realm of popular religion catering to the common people. In response to his ministers' hostility to the monks' presence in the court, Sejong responds that the Buddhists, not "you Confucians" who have grabbed political power, have a better feel for the pulse of the people. This implicates Confucianism as the primary culprit behind what Joseon would eventually become, a kingdom run by hereditary elites who dismissed the utility of the alphabet and hence prevented the social progress that surely an embrace of the new script could have engendered, just as it did later in the modern era.

Sights and Sounds of Perilous Grandeur

If Sejong, befitting his legendary standing, served as a conduit for commoners and low-status individuals to engage fruitfully with splendorous power, two very impressive films that feature Sejong's immediate royal descendants present an opposing tale. They highlight the perils for regular people lured into the heights of privilege before being destroyed by them and in the process discovering the connections between fate and freedom that render the latter especially difficult to actualise. Such outcomes also invite interpretive interventions about the history of early Joseon, as well as lessons—like in the films above on King Sejong—about the stifling rigidity of the social structure for anyone who dares to enter and witness, much less overcome, the corridors of power. Hence, while the well-known transgressions committed by particular early Joseon kings are featured, their baneful impact at once reflects and is surpassed by the brutal political climate and accompanying deterioration in the moral order dominated by the entrenched elites. The films' plebeian protagonists thus are tamed, humbled, and deeply scarred by their brief forays into this dangerous realm, just as the country itself seems to have been during this opening era of the Joseon kingdom.

The scarring occurs literally in both of the films examined here, through the disabling of the eyes, which reflects the dangers of seeing too much, whether in the present or the future. Prognostication is indeed the main activity of the title character in "The Face Reader" (*Gwansang* ["Physiognomy", "Face reading", or simply "The Face"]; Han Jae-rim, 2013), who at the start of the film is a widower who lives in penurious exile, along with his younger brother-in-law and son, due to his father having been condemned as a national traitor. The face reader, however, possesses a wondrous capacity to divine peoples' character and thus destiny through their countenance, an insight that eventually overwhelms him in a pivotal scene when he first encounters a chillingly dangerous royal face (Image 4). For while his power of foresight undeniably gains him ever-increasing access to the highest realms of courtly privilege, it also renders him a target and tool for ruthless political intrigue. The intersection of individual skill as freedom and social status as destiny thus becomes the film's overarching motif, to show that striving for something beyond one's assigned station in life can provide a fleeting reward at best, and often the outcome is immeasurably worse. This principle is expressed in the film's denouement, which invokes the metaphor of ephemeral ocean waves, with their ups and downs, obscuring the forceful wind that pushes them. It is thus also a lesson about the workings of national history, of the cyclonic inertia accumulated through social decay, inequality, and exploitation.

Image 4 The title character of "The Face Reader" at the moment he first sees Prince Suyang

The victims in this dynamic, as usual, are the regular people like the clairvoyant face reader, who at first is hired by the madame of a capital brothel, a dilettantish soothsayer herself who, despite her wealth, is still hemmed in by her lowly social standing. As an expert in makeup, she would play a key role later in the storyline in advancing the relationship between facial features—both inherited and crafted—and self-realising destiny. Meanwhile, the face reader's son, a highly intelligent young man with a slight physical disability, seeks to make his own life by escaping the clutches of his tainted family background. He thus serves as an example of the remote possibilities for transcending social constraints. But the main counterpart to the face reader's embodiment of predetermined destiny is a ruthless prince who is suspected by everyone, including his older brother, the ailing King Munjong, of harbouring nasty designs on the throne. This man is Prince Suyang, whose facial scars and unsettling gaze signify his wickedness but also his unavoidable perception by others (Image 5), a bias that he both overcomes and reinforces by indeed brutally overthrowing the next monarch, Munjong's teenaged son King Danjong. Before this inevitable scene arrives, the viewer is introduced to other competing

Image 5 Prince Suyang in "The Face Reader"

characters in court politics, including the most influential official of the time, Kim Jong-seo, who is determined to thwart the evil prince's designs.

They are all involved in the brutal machinations surrounding the issue of royal succession, a source of violence since the start of the Joseon dynasty that defined the kingdom at its birth. The Joseon founder, a general named Yi Seong-gye who took down the Goryeo dynasty in 1392, had indeed lain the foundations for such approaches to political conflict, even though he soon came to decry the behaviour of his progeny who followed his harsh example. In one scene, "The Face Reader" nods to this troubling legacy when referencing the portrait of Yi's son, Yi Bang-won, who killed his brothers to take the throne in 1400—a foreshadowing and rationalising of the coup that was about to come from Bang-won's grandson, Prince Suyang. (Inexplicably and troublingly, as noted above, the sagely King Sejong was the son of the former usurper and the father of the latter.) Appearing also are the famed "Six Martyrs" (*sayuksin*) from the ranks of high officials who gave their lives in righteous opposition to Suyang's takeover, and Han Myeong-hoe, the prince's devious right-hand man, who would play a part also in the next bloody royal succession conflict, as featured in "The King and the Clown" (see below).

To be sure, the portrayal of these figures through fictionalised common people offers a historical judgement on this era and its well-known events. But most of all, "The Face Reader" seeks to raise questions about the interaction between individuals and socio-political structures that drives national history, as well as about the connection between this process and received notions of social morality. In this sense, the physiognomist protagonist is a stand-in for the viewer, observing and being manipulated by powerful figures while under the delusion of agency, but ultimately collapsing in despair in the face of destiny. Rather, the real main character is the ruthless prince, for he is the primary carrier of freedom—freedom for evil deeds, to be sure, but exemplary in taking fate into one's own hands for not only oneself but the country as a whole. During a solitary audience with his nephew, the teenaged monarch Danjong asks Suyang, his uncle, about scuttlebutt, confirmed by the face reader's condemning evaluation of his face, that Suyang seeks to take the throne by force. The prince has to deny this of course, but he also rejects the notion that fate is insurmountable. If his face gives him away as a traitor, he insists, he will exert his full effort to act otherwise. Suyang does indeed change his destiny, but not as a usurper—for this is exactly what he becomes—but rather as someone otherwise heading to a foreordained, socially bound, or even morally

bound end. He will remain unbound, and the force of his will will shatter any attempt to constrain his individual agency, as reinforced by the scene, described at the opening of this book, in which he himself expresses surprise at his power to alter fate. At the other end of the social horizon is the face reader's pitiable son, who, despite his stigmatised family background and physical disability, had shown the potential of individual will and skill by passing the state examination and becoming an upstanding junior official. But in the end, he is killed by Prince Suyang, in a victory of one man's pursuit of personal freedom over another's, but which also shows that one's predetermined social standing does indeed matter.

The visual signalling of fate, or of freedom, by the face is a representation, then, also of the ways people and societies assign value to outward characteristics as reflections of inner character, which often induces the transformation of perception into reality, a social feedback loop resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Here, DNA is destiny as a biological as much as a social construct. The manifestations of this orientation are numerous and have a long tradition in Korea that continues strong today, but of course every society has done this, from equating superficial features with some personal essence to valuing people according to their sex, skin colour, height, parentage, or anything else that lies beyond control. In "The Face Reader", reading faces in the fifteenth century highlights such customs and ponders their determinative historical power. The face also serves as an entry point for deciphering the eyes as an even sharper manifestation of an individual's fixed character. What is more, the eyes can act on their own, reading others' eyes, faces, and fates as well as the truth of larger circumstances. This explains why the powerful worldly figures in the story who recognise the face reader as a threat threaten his eyes, and why his son, an honest seer who detects the underlying structures of corruption and malevolence, suffers blinding as the price for his own insight.

The scaffolding of this abusive system is visualised in periodic shots of the imposing main palace gate (Gwanghwamun), which signals the Kafkaesque posture of standing "before the law" (*vor dem Gesetz*) as a representation of the intimidating enigma that lies behind the walls. Whether shrouded in darkness or clouds of dust, the palace gate (featured on this book's cover) as a symbol of social privilege, political power, and fate itself appears mysterious and dangerous for those common people who stand before it or, worse, enter it. The face reader and his son, both of whom have briefly and separately breached this gateway, suffer eternally

for having attempted such a crossing. In contrast, the man who breaks through the wall of destiny from *within* the palace compound, Prince Suyang, is rewarded, at least in the temporal realm although perhaps not in terms of historical judgement.[14]

The Deranged Monarch as National Morality and Destiny

As with Prince Suyang, who through his coup took the throne as King Sejo, a royal tyrant can serve as a potent vehicle for exploring the ramifications of socio-political power's relationship to historical contingency. When the horrible actions of a monarch, or potential monarch, also stem clearly from madness, the potential avenues of such considerations multiply. The results, in cinematic depiction, can be extraordinary, such as with "The Throne" (Chap. 3), which centres on the relationship between King Yeongjo and his son, the crown prince, in the eighteenth century. For the early Joseon era, the primary figure in this regard was King Yeonsan (r. 1494–1506), a Caligula-like figure who did many wicked things out of depravity but also mental illness. And as a result of the deeds of his grandfather, King Sejo (above), Yeonsan reached the throne as a teenager amid courtly strife and purges, which had earlier victimised several court figures, including his own birth mother. When as king he later discovered, or was led to suspect, the events and people behind these traumatic episodes from his childhood, he took revenge by killing several family members by his own hand. He also did many other awful things, enough to become the first Joseon monarch to be forcibly deposed (the second, Gwanghae, occupies a more ambivalent historical standing—see Chap. 2).

Not surprisingly, the terribly intriguing figure of King Yeonsan has drawn a lot of attention in popular culture, including in films dating back to the 1960s. By far the most memorable and celebrated such dramatisation, however, is "The King and the Clown" (*Wang ui namja* ["The King's man"]; 2005), by director Yi Jun-ik, who later would craft his masterpiece, "The Throne" (Chap. 3), around the equally intriguing and troubled royal figure of Prince Sado of the eighteenth century. "The King and the Clown" also stands as a great film, weaving the Yeonsan story into a multi-layered exploration of the tension between human and heavenly justice, as well as its ramifications for understanding premodern Korean society on moral terms. What better way to go deep in this regard, then,

than through the most famously evil king in Korean history? Still, King Yeonsan, while a major character who is complexly probed, is not the centrepiece; rather, the focus is on a pair of wandering minstrels, wildly skilled gymnasts and jesters who like to mock the pretentiously privileged. As hereditary low-born, indeed "despised" (*cheon-han*) members of the social structure, the clowns are the carriers of motifs and symbols that attack the workings of fate in the social order. Their journey to this discovery, which the audience shares, begins with their flight from a violent predicament in a local setting. They eventually reach Hanyang (Seoul) and find that their brand of entertainment is richly rewarding but also even riskier, and they escape with their lives when the crazy king explodes in laughter at their performance just before they are doomed. They are then brought into the court for the monarch's personal entertainment, which triggers a passionate backlash from high officials aghast at this violation of social (hierarchical) norms, as well as from the king's deliciously wicked concubine, Jang Noksu. The ensuing development of these triangular relationships amid such hostility introduces, in turn, a slew of additional factors into the brewing mixture of themes centred on social morality and just fate.

In the meantime, the king's well-known excesses are depicted as resulting from the psychological scarring of his childhood, to be sure, but also from the mixed signals from his jealous concubine, high officials, received understandings about his duties, and his own growing affection for one of the two jesters, Gong-gil, who happens to possess elegant, indeed feminine traits. Gong-gil's partner, Jang-saeng, responds angrily to this advance, though less out of romantic possessiveness than a sense of fraternal protection and social grievance. When "The King and the Clown" was released to a rousing popular response,[15] commentators noted that this homoerotic element in the film could help break down longstanding social taboos in South Korea, but the film also stood vulnerable to a painful critique from the other side: by associating the evil king's behaviour, even his psychological trauma, with homosexuality, the film actually can reinforce easy prejudices attaching deviancy to sexual orientation.[16]

The self-loathing that the two performers are pressured into can be interpreted along similar lines, although here it has more to do with the unbearably heavy accumulation of social contempt heaped upon them, which is worse while they cavort in the realms of political power than during their previously unprivileged lives. As with the "face reader" and the two low-status individuals who partnered with King Sejong the Great in the films discussed above, the minstrels invite the full brunt of scorn and

bigotry from the courtly elites for deigning to enter their exclusive grounds. This scorn sharpens because the king delights and even joins in the clowns' performative mockery of the ministers through mask dances and skits, although of course his personal vilification of top officials has much graver consequences. So he finds the lowly clowns as useful revealers of the structures of corruption high in the body politic, and he takes advantage of the onsetting unease to settle scores both real and imagined. From the viewers' vantage point, this leads to an obscuring of the moral stakes, as the famously evil king from history is shown defending commoners against the high-minded officials professing to defend the country from the ravages of a tyrant. Even King Yeonsan's well-known clampdown on popular expression, through his forbidding the use of the alphabet for public communication, is given a twist in the film, wherein the script's use by the minstrels plays a role in both storyline and symbolism. Like in the two films about King Sejong above, the alliance between the highest and lowest elements of the social hierarchy serves to highlight the destructive impact of the power holders in between and the injustices of the system as a whole.

The semiotics of the film, too, begins and ends here, and once again the eyes guide the characters and the audience. In "The King and the Clown", however, Jang-saeng's eventual blindness as punishment for seeing too much accentuates his striving for a more meaningful existence, a facilitator for envisioning a utopia as well as a deeper level of reality. The film's ending credits come over a short flashback fantasy scene of the two minstrels frolicking in the mountain meadows, free and happy in the open air of the beautiful countryside as opposed to the confining shadows of the capital, and even joined in imagined performative camaraderie by their troupe from Seoul. Immediately preceding this was the final diegetic scene described in the opening of this chapter, in which Jang-saeng, blinded and facing death but briefly having escaped, and Gong-gil both stand at the foot of the tightrope that had been erected on palace grounds for the king's enjoyment. The shaky tightrope, which throughout the film the clowns navigate masterfully in their performances, now serves more to highlight the inscrutability of destiny. Just before the two take their final bounce off the rope in hurling their lives to inescapable (mis)fortune, they express to each other a desire to return, in their next lives, to their pre-courtly existence as lowly clowns. They had been brutally tossed off this unsullied existence by the lure of outrageous power and privilege, a dynamic symbolised in a later scene in which the angry Yeonsan slings

arrows at an evasively leaping Jang-saeng on the tightrope, as the latter loudly expresses contempt for the mercurial monarch.

Many of these same motifs and symbols for King Yeonsan's stormy reign appear also in "The Treacherous" (*Gansin*—"Wicked officials"; Min Gyu-dong, 2015), a heavily stylised treatment of perhaps the most notorious of this man's many appalling deeds, the organised roundup of thousands of women around the country for his personal harem. Like the king himself, the film ultimately devolves into a self-indulgent bloody mess, with little to say, even with a lot to show, beyond the in-your-face lechery and violence. In the first half of the film, however, appear some intriguing signals of historical themes that, alas, later get lost amid the film's carnage and general loss of direction: As in "The Swordsman", set in the seventeenth century (Chap. 2), the recruitment of women and girls for royal tribute is depicted as having depended on violence, deviousness, and cruelty that paralleled the twentieth-century "comfort women" horrors under Japanese colonial rule.[17] Indeed the two main characters, in addition to the very disturbing and disturbed monarch, are a father-son duo of "evil officials" (the movie's Korean title) whom the film does not know how to characterise aside from showing their insatiable venality. Other motifs include those with social hierarchy implications, as one of the potential maidens is supposedly from the lowest, *baekjeong* class of hereditary butchers—butchering, naturally, is a recurring theme—and, in a disturbing twist, the native alphabet is shown being used to service the crazy king's terrible ends through its appearance in placards posted around the country promoting the roundup of maidens. These potentially fruitful historical angles are obliterated, however, by the film's preoccupation with constructing colourfully elaborate sets and wallowing in salacious preposterousness, a handmaiden to its organisational disarray, but perhaps this in itself serves as a commentary on those times.

The notorious king, Yeonsan, does indeed represent an important feature of the early Joseon dynasty, but as the films examined in this chapter show, a spectrum of monarchical morality represents the popular understanding, and filmic depictions, of this era. In reflecting the very modernist sensibilities eagerly exhibited by *hallyu* historical films, however, these polished dramatisations move far beyond the royal realm even while retelling the familiar tales and legends of famed leaders. Specifically, the pairing of a monarch with lower-status or common people reminds the audience of the wider consequences of the politics of the times. The stifling societal

conventions are shown victimising the populace in general, even when a few representatives of the suffering majority could be shown puncturing the exclusive domains of the elite. These periodic breaches of the sturdy barrier, however, result usually in failure to bring about a correction for the greater good, which furthers a message of the heroic but ultimately unsuccessful pursuit of agency—such as with the depictions of King Sejong the Great's partnership with commoners—or of the fatalism of accumulated constraints winning out in the end. The outcome in either case, then, is a commentary on the power of structured destiny against that of personal will or freedom. This in turn offers a judgement, when displaced to the level of national history, on not only the founding of the Joseon dynasty but also on the basis of Korea's premodern civilisation, as shown also by the films examined in the following chapters.

Chapter Two. Forces of Nature on the Topographies of the Nation: Responses to the Calamitous Foreign Invasions, 1590s–1630s

Playbill

"The Admiral--Roaring Currents" (*Myeongnyang* ["Battle of Myeongnyang"]); Kim Han-min, 2014
"Blades of Blood" (*Gureu-meul beoseonan dal cheoreom* ["Like the moon that sheds the clouds"]); Yi Jun-ik, 2010
"War of the Arrows" (*Choejong byeonggi hwal* ["Archery, the ultimate weapon"]); Kim Han-min, 2011
"Masquerade" (*Gwanghae: wangi doen namja* ["Gwanghae: the man who became king"]); Chu Chang-min, 2012
"The Swordsman" (*Geumgaek*); Choe Jae-hun, 2020
"Warriors of the Dawn" (*Daerip-gun* ["Proxy soldiers"]); Jeong Yun-cheol, 2017
"The Fortress" (*Namhan sanseong* ["Namhan Mountain Fortress"]); Hwang Dong-gyu, 2017

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
East Asian Popular Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_3

On the eve of the ultimate battle in "The Admiral--Roaring Currents", the grand epic of Korea's 1597 naval victory against Japanese invaders, the greatest of Korean military heroes rallies his dispirited sailors with his most widely attributed aphorism: "If we wish to live, we will die! If we wish to die, we will live!" A call to bravery and personal sacrifice, as well as the only remaining, desperate means to withstand the enormous Japanese armada, Admiral Yi Sun-sin seems also to allude to a mysterious mixture of fate and freedom, with equally vital roles for both individual agency—seeking life or death—and an expansively cosmic logic in determining not only one's own destiny but more importantly that of the nation as well. Heaven alone could have consented to the horrific devastation of the Japanese invasions, and heaven alone could now receive the Koreans' appeal and render it into action. But crucially, it took the admiral to channel this cosmic will.

The near half-century period of massive foreign invasions, from 1592 to 1637, was arguably the most decisive and signal moment in Korean history. This experience helped solidify everything from collective identity to the character of the country's premodern era and even of the twentieth century, when the roaring currents of nationalism, shaped substantially by a consciousness of historical victimisation from external forces, framed the meaning of modern change. The 1597 Battle of Myeongnyang, depicted in "The Admiral", led to the end of the Japanese invasions that had launched in 1592 and re-launched earlier in 1597. But soon thereafter, the Manchus to the north arose into a fierce military force that, through two invasions of the peninsula in 1627 and 1636/1637, respectively, further compelled a reconsideration of Koreans' place in the East Asian order, especially after the Manchus later conquered even Ming dynasty China in 1644. As with a few other occasions in Korea's past, but perhaps most acutely, the mounting blows of this period threatened the country's very existence.

It is thus not surprising that cinematic treatments of these two sets of invasions have tended to assign fateful historical significance to them and to layer multiple meanings into what are, on the surface, stylish war epics. That, at least, is the case for two of the main films examined in this chapter, both by the same director, Kim Han-min: "The Admiral", set in 1597, and "War of the Arrows", set in the 1630s. In signalling the centrality of immediate salvation, plentiful symbols of nationhood make appearances, essential qualities that bestow Korea's existential worthiness from the standpoint of heaven's will. And here, the fates summoned for national

survival are exhibited most decisively by the natural phenomena of the homeland. As for the human realm, a notable commonality in these films, in contrast to those in Chap. 1 and especially Chap. 3, is the broader social representation of the main characters. Even with the heightened attention paid to an overthrown monarch, Gwanghae, who fell victim to the political tensions of the invasions era, the films conjure in him an embodiment of the people's concerns and welfare amid unprecedented challenges. For the most part, with one notable exception—"The Fortress", set in a literally besieged court—the primary heroes come from across the social spectrum, from military commanders and ragtag soldiers to commoners and even rebels and social outcasts who, in the place of political leaders, strive to save the day, especially with the help of the natural world. The homeland, with its particular geography, climate, and elements, can be defended by dynamic natural features and forces, but only if channelled by the proper representations of the people. Here, then, the internal *social* topography serves as an emblem and even cause of the external invasions.

Wind and Waves in Defending the Homeland: The Japanese Invasions of the 1590s

Considering the stupendous scale of the destruction and of its historical repercussions, the Japanese invasions actually have received less cinematic coverage than one might expect. As if the enormity of its significance or the multitude of its major details cannot be squeezed into a two-hour format, the treatments have been numerous in television series but relatively few in theatrical releases. The biggest of all blockbusters, "The Admiral" (*Myeongnyang* ["Battle of Myeongnyang"]; Kim Han-min, 2014), seems to compensate for this dearth on its own. That it remains the most popular film in South Korean history, with over 17 million attendances from its run in 2014, should come as little surprise: It focuses on Korea's most familiar military hero in explosive, epic battles, and its moral positioning squarely and steadily taps into the hardest core of nationalist sentiment.[18]

That another film worthy of attention, "Blades of Blood" (*Gureu-meul beoseonan dal cheoreom* ["Like the moon that sheds the clouds"]; Yi Jun-ik, 2010), had none of these traits probably starts to explain why it was not a box office success, despite its stylish fighting sequences and direction from Yi Jun-ik, director of "The King and the Clown" (Chap. 1)

and "The Throne" (Chap. 3). Though set in the beginning of the Japanese invasions, the primary evils are not the Japanese but rather the bumbling King Seonjo and his equally craven ministers, consumed as they are more by factional battles against each other than by the imminent war with Japan. But endangering this political arrangement is a rebellious utopian movement led by a former idealist turned politically ambitious and bloodthirsty swordsman, and the heroic figure who emerges to stop him, a courtesan's illegitimate son (*seoja*)—trained by a hackneyed blind master—seeking vengeance for the swordsman's killing of his father. The inevitable final fight pits the two Koreans against each other on the grounds of the main palace while the capital city, having been abandoned by the cowardly monarch, is ravaged by the musket-toting Japanese soldiers. The concubine's son, the one with the lowly blood who has violently raged against his humiliating birth status his entire life, highlights the film's questioning of the true threat when the answer is supposed to be clear-cut. To the rebel millenarian group, the real enemy is the decrepit political system that proved incapable of protecting the people, while to the illegitimate son it is the entire social and cultural apparatus of hereditary discrimination governing Korean society, down to his own family. The Japanese invasion is merely the backdrop, a coy stand-in for the most urgent problem in late sixteenth-century Korea, indeed a symptom more than the cause of ultimate problems. In representing the fateful forces of cumulative decay, then, the domineering centrality of privileged connections in the Korean moral order rots the government, society, and family and has placed such unseemly figures at the head of the national body. The will of individuals like the peasant soldiers and the concubine's son thus must act as agents of destruction against the longstanding oppressive misappropriation of heaven, including its natural laws. "Like the Moon that Sheds the Clouds", the Korean title of the film as well as the novel on which it is based, refers not just to the Japanese storm but to the struggle to escape the gloomy social reality based on selfish interests and bloodlines.

As a moral problem, such a tension in the relationship between human righteousness, on the one hand, and a natural order seemingly reflecting the will of heaven, on the other hand, has long stymied the search for explanations of epochal historical shifts. Indeed, Koreans have applied this conundrum to the entire series of frightening incursions they have suffered throughout their history. Such an understanding has been accentuated to great effect, for example, in marshalling national consciousness in

the twentieth century, when Korea suffered a barrage of foreign intrusions and a four-decade-long period of Japanese domination. Back in the Goryeo era of the tenth to fourteenth centuries, attacks by the Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongols from the north engendered an outpouring of appeals for heavenly protection, and to demonstrate their faith, Korean Buddhists undertook a years-long project, twice no less, of carving the wooden printing blocks for the Buddhist canon, the *Tripitika Koreana*.

Based on these historical lessons, the Japanese invasion of 1592 should have been better anticipated, especially given the warnings coming from across the waters. Some Korean officials even returned from an audience with the new Japanese unifier, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, in 1590 with alarming reports, which nonetheless were nullified by opposing assurances from an envoy belonging to a rival political faction. Such dysfunction and uncertainty, as sketched in a cartoonish scene from "Blades of Blood", might have led to harmful consequences, including the neglect or weakening of preparations for war. One person who saw more clearly the impending storm was Admiral Yi Sun-sin, who as commander of a provincial naval battalion rushed his ships to the southeastern corner of Joseon, the landing area of the Japanese in the spring of 1592, and soon took to destroying enemy ships off the coast in a famed series of naval battles. These victories prevented a quick turn towards the peninsula's west coast by the Japanese fleet carrying supplies to its armies, but the tens of thousands of marauding invaders on land still ripped through the countryside on their way to the Korean capital of Hanyang (Seoul). The overwhelming fear in the Korean government quickly led the king to scurry to safety up north, abandoning the capital and its residents to fend for themselves. Urgent appeals to the Ming emperor brought forth a large relief army from China, which engaged the Japanese in Pyongyang and forced the retreat of the invaders to the southern coast, where they became ensconced as peace negotiations began in 1593. Over the next few years, this uneasy stalemate reigned while Koreans tried to recover from the devastation and reestablish a sense of normalcy. But Admiral Yi, despite his successful military outcomes against the Japanese, was caught in the factional infighting at court and even incarcerated for insubordination. After Korea's defences again failed following the second, even more destructive Japanese invasion of 1597, the admiral was restored to duty, and he worked together with Chinese allies to fend off the enemy naval forces and limit the Japanese advance into the country's interior. Such military outcomes and Hideyoshi's death in 1598 brought the war to an

end, but as the invaders were retreating in the final battle, Admiral Yi was fatally struck by a bullet.

That Admiral Yi Sun-sin seems to have died so nobly, as if destined to a glorious end, began immediately to shape the narrative of his personal responsibility for the proper outcome, crediting him for overcoming the damage from the enemy's military and his superiors' incompetence. Much of this framing, which would only grow in subsequent eras all the way to the most recent times, was set early in the recovery period by a book, *Record of Reprimands* (*Jingbirok*), penned by his patron Ryu Seong-nyong.[19] Ryu was a high minister in the central government who, in looking back in apparent self-admonishment, instead assigned blame to just about everyone else except for himself and the admiral, whom Ryu endowed with heavenly virtue and skill, a force of nature himself. Despite the author's recognition of the suffering of the people and even the contributions of the Chinese, whom he mostly castigates for their tactical errors and mistreatment of the Koreans, this near-mythical impression of the admiral became a pervasive narrative.

"The Admiral", as the English title suggests, does not sway from this well-trod understanding. The basic storyline is straightforward and familiar to Korean audiences: Facing impossible odds against a massing Japanese armada of hundreds of ships seeking finally to turn the corner of the peninsula towards the west coast, Admiral Yi, with 12 remaining ships, finds a way to overcome the material odds as well as widespread fear among the soldiers and officers, and ultimately even his own. The second half of the film is dedicated to showing the pitched naval battle in the narrow channel between the mainland and Jindo Island, in which the Koreans' superior use of ships and canons helps them overcome the huge odds. But perhaps the most unexpected factor in Admiral Yi's triumph, according to the film's account, was the powerfully whirling currents of the local waters. Indeed, both the film's original Korean title ("Myeongnyang", which alludes to the Myeongnyang Straits as well as the battle) and the official English subtitle ("Roaring Currents") highlight the swirling, turning tides as both a physical and symbolic factor.

In contemplating his strategy and predicament on the eve of the naval battle, Admiral Yi perches atop a cliff overlooking the restless movement of the water beneath, with a wide-angle shot of the ocean juxtaposing the individual with the expansive natural realm, of the Korean with Korean territory (Image 1). More than the land, then, it is the sea that represents the homeland, a principle that Admiral Yi had alluded to

Image 1 Admiral Yi Sun-sin before the decisive battle in "The Admiral"

("Don't think that the land will be any safer!") in the scene in which he uttered his rallying cry about surviving only by seeking to die (at sea). The imposing array of Japanese ships, shown both down from the air and up from beneath the water's surface, underscores the impression that the storming of Korea was an invasion facilitated first and foremost by the waters. But it is also the sea, in scenes in both day and night, that stirs ominously in anticipation of being unleashed and channelled, through human guidance, in defence of Korea. In the extended final battle sequence, the overhead shots of ships jostling with each other and against the currents further accentuate the furiousness of this punitive nature, which swallows up enemy ships and combatants as if condemning them to the depths for their moral transgressions (Image 2). Among his individual heroics, then, Admiral Yi's most important role is as an usherer of fateful nature, the shamanic figure who activates the cosmic instruments of justice.

At the same time, the film also portrays Yi as undergoing an awakening to the components of human agency required to make such an appeal, elements that he might lead but not necessarily constitute. To be sure, the admiral's personal virtue and humanity are highlighted throughout. The film begins with a gruesome scene of his torture while incarcerated, having been victimised by the factionalism and monarchical fickleness at court. But as the commander tells his son later, the politicians and even the king are of secondary significance, not even worth the resentment. Rather, it is the (common) people who are the basis of the nation, he says, and as he

Image 2 The Koreans' command ship surrounded by Japanese ships in "The Admiral"

tells his son at the close of the film in a denouement dialogue, the efforts of the people saved both him and the country, including through their unstinting efforts in the Battle of Myeongnyang: The people themselves determined their collective fate. As the final naval sequence showed, they sacrificed their lives to enable victory, exceeded their reservoirs of stamina and strength in manning the Korean ships, and cheered unstinting encouragement from the shore. Among those showing such support was a mute woman who summoned the capacity to shout warnings, thus representing the hitherto voiceless masses finally being given a chance to roar their faithfulness to the collective. This determination to share the credit, as expressed by the admiral himself no less, feels a bit forced—as he clearly is the nearly super-human character at the centre of the film—but it testifies to the pull of modern populist sentiment as well as of the traditionally transmitted narratives.

One deciding historical factor that, perhaps not surprisingly, was left out of the film, even in passing mention, is the massive aid army sent by the Ming dynasty, which admittedly did not participate in the Battle of Myeongnyang. However, the Chinese did play a key role, maybe a decisive one, in the outcome of the war, something that the film's viewers without knowledge would not suspect. But this might have been just as well, for the Japanese invaders, though realistically portrayed as beset by infighting

and competing interests, are mostly caricatured, with garish makeup and garb magnifying their depicted savagery. Furthermore, and quite unfortunately, the filmmakers decided to use well-known Korean actors to play the enemy commanders—including the rogue "pirate" captain, Kurushima, driven by personal vengeance against Admiral Yi—which results in stilted Japanese dialogue and likely a distracting suspension of belief for the Korean audience.[20] That Japanese actors were not procured for such roles, though this has not been an insurmountable challenge in other Korean films, probably also reflects the delicate historical sensitivities, still in place after more than four centuries, surrounding these epochally devastating events.

Righteousness and Ritual in the Manchu Invasions

Not quite as destructive, at least materially, but just as stunning were the Manchu invasions of the 1620s and 1630s. The second incursion, from late 1636 to early 1637, capped two decades of internal dispute in the Joseon government over how to deal with the Manchus north of the border, who had grown into a formidable fighting force while Joseon and Ming were recovering from the Japan war. As with other "barbarians" to the north throughout the region's history, the emergent Manchus, led by Nurhaci and then his son Hong Taiji, looked to subdue the Koreans before going fully after the big prize of China, which in this case would occur through the Manchu defeat of the Ming dynasty less than a decade later, in 1644. The first Manchu invasion of Korea in 1627 in fact was spurred by the Manchus' growing conflict with Ming, and after the Korean court moved to Ganghwa Island on the west coast to escape the carnage, it was eventually forced to pledge not to intervene on the Chinese side. When the Manchus became convinced later that the Korean court was not abiding by this agreement, they launched another attack in 1636. This second Manchu invasion concluded with the most humiliating episode in Korean historical lore, the ritualised surrender of the Korean monarch, Injo, to the Manchu emperor, Hong Taiji, at a fortress southeast of Seoul to which the court had fled. This searing moment, and in general the wide-ranging repercussions of the Manchu invasions as a whole, has understandably received plentiful attention in dramatisations, especially in television series, but also in novels and films (see below). In addition to the intricacies of the politics of the time, two major historical issues tend to become accentuated by such recreations:

the sharpening of Korean national identity following this episode after the fall of China to the barbarians; and the ongoing restoration in historical judgement of the second Joseon dynasty monarch (after Yeonsan—see Chap. 1) ever to be violently deposed, Gwanghae. This latter current in South Korean scholarship and popular imagination actually connects to the first issue, a reconsideration of the historical relationship to China.

Indeed, in most ways "War of the Arrows" (*Choejong byeonggi hwal* ["Archery, the ultimate weapon"]; 2012), also directed by Kim Han-min but preceding "The Admiral" in release date, is a classic tale of patriotic defenders fighting against both the odds and a fearsome invading enemy. The film's special qualities include the stylish dedication to the bow and arrow, instead of the sword or musket, as the glorified weapon of choice in the heart-pounding chase sequences that drive the movie; the curiously ambiguous indications of Koreans' relationship with the Manchus, whose portrayal is, despite the ferocity, multi-dimensional; and the interesting overlaps between Korea and foreign territory that reflect an intriguing, perhaps more updated notion of the homeland. As in "The Admiral", the natural elements—featured in "War of the Arrows" as the soil, wind, and wildlife that infuse the wilderness, the trees of which also supply the material for the bows and arrows—still play a major role in shaping the Korean people's efforts to repulse the foreigners, but the demarcation is less clear-cut.

Taking place at the start of the second Manchu invasion in 1636, the main backdrop of the story is the devastation visited upon the common people killed or taken into slavery by the conquering northmen. But the film opens with a prelude dating to 1623, at the moment of Korean officials' overthrow of Gwanghae, the monarch condemned for pursuing neutrality between the Ming dynasty and the rising Manchu Qing. An official loyal to Gwanghae is hunted down by the coup forces and, before succumbing, entrusts his teenage son with care over his young sister. The two children successfully flee to survive in hiding, and by the time the film shifts to the main storyline of 1636 in the Gaeseong area just north of Seoul, we find that the older brother, Nam-i, now a young man in his late 20s, working on developing his archery skills but otherwise adrift, while his younger sister, Ja-in, is set to marry a local military official's son. Precisely at this moment the Manchu warriors come rampaging into their town and stampede through her wedding ceremony, killing or capturing the locals, including the newly betrothed couple. But Nam-i evades the

carnage and hence begins his search for Ja-in, who, along with scores of others, is dragged over to Manchuria. Meanwhile Ja-in's groom, among another group of Korean captives, leads a small rebellion against their captors and then helps Nam-i locate the Manchu camp across the border, where they launch an attack to free Ja-in. But this outcome also draws a handful of elite Manchu warriors to hunt for Nam-i through the wilds of Manchuria as he races back towards Korea. The spectacular chase sequences that follow, which take up the latter half of the film, show Nam-i picking off the Manchus one-by-one until a final showdown with the Manchu commander.

This is when the protective natural forces converge a final time, as the wind guides the arrows that pierce the air. It also takes the viewer back to the opening sequence of Nam-i as an adult, hunting in the mountains near his village and calibrating the wind, trees, and even the beasts in learning how to get the arrow to reach its precise destination. Of course, the bow and arrow are themselves a product of that nature, as specific to the homeland as the soil, and the allegory of making adjustments to get an arrow to hit its mark is entwined in this framework. This connection between the people and the land, Koreans and their territory, and more broadly fate and nature—whether featured as the wilderness, the mountains, the rivers, or the creatures—appears most ferociously when, seemingly summoned by a screaming Nam-i as he is surrounded by his pursuers, a tiger intervenes to enact heavenly judgement on the Manchus.

These outsiders, however, are not foreign to the territory, either in historical terms or in the storyline, and the extensive pursuit through the wilderness actually takes place north of the Yalu River, just beyond Joseon Korea's official boundary. Though politically divided over the last four centuries into Korea and Manchuria by two main rivers originating on Mount Baekdu, the topography and climate on both sides are largely identical—a cold, mountainous wooded area teeming with the same wildlife, including the Siberian/Manchurian/Korean tiger, a single species. The human history, too, is jumbled in terms of ethnic divisions, despite the sharpening of Koreans' sense of otherness in relation to various groups of "barbarians" whom they have tried for millennia to make different. This included the period when the Jurchen were organising into the Qing dynasty that threatened and then subdued the Koreans and Chinese in the early to mid-seventeenth century. Such ambiguities come to the fore in little hints in the film as well: as the viewer learns later, the siblings' father, the man killed at the start of the film, had

worked in the northern areas of the country as a Manchu interpreter and had taught his children the Manchu language. And the Manchus, for all their cruelty in dragging captured Koreans off to slavery and even toying with their lives in awful games (a scene at their camp shows Manchu archers using live Koreans for target practice) also include an elite military unit—Nam-i's pursuers—bound by a code of honour and bravery. They in turn are contrasted with the haughty Manchu prince, who, at the camp where the captive Koreans are being held, is stunned but impressed by Ja-in's facility in his language, which might have something to do also with her courage and fight in resisting his advances. The recognition of commonality comes also in a scene in which a Manchu lieutenant, in acknowledging the archery expertise of the Korean bandit (Nam-i) whom they need to hunt down, remarks that "their bow is from the same root as ours". The larger region surrounding the border, in this sense, is common ground for both groups. This could be interpreted as legitimation for the Qing's attempt at forced amalgamation—an effort later repeated by the Japanese in the early twentieth century—as well as for a vision pushed by Korean irredentists who make historical claims on Manchuria based on mythical ancient polities.

This tension between the notion of Korea and Manchuria as distinctive territories and as familiar terrain to both ethnic identities also reflects the ambivalences and even contradictions of other historical themes broached by "War of the Arrows". The longing for the homeland of Joseon, for example, reaches a crescendo at the end of the film as Ja-in and her groom encounter the Yalu River on their arduous return, but this emphasis also is juxtaposed with the reminders of unjust hierarchy, exploitation, and discrimination within Korean society. For example, the debilitating bias in Joseon elite circles against the military, the northern areas, and those associating with the barbarians, such as interpreters like the siblings' father, is marked in the dialogue and storyline in the early part of the film. The two siblings also have had to grow up in hiding because they were officially the tainted offspring of a traitor, but this man had also sacrificed his life to remain loyal to a king, Gwanghae, who tried to break away from the Korean court's blind devotion to China. In modern times such a stance has been the main basis of a rehabilitation effort for this monarch in historical scholarship and popular culture.

Since the film's messaging stresses the heroic actions of regular people representing the nation, the Korean court and monarch make no appearance in "War of the Arrows", but portrayals that further lift the historical

reputation of the deposed monarch Gwanghae have appeared in other films. Into theatres just a year later, for example, came the movie "Masquerade" (*Gwanghae—wang-i doen namja*; Chu Chang-min, 2012), an unhelpful English title compared to the original, "Gwanghae: the Man Who Became King", which refers to the central plot device: that someone actually impersonated this king for a critical stretch of time while the latter was gravely ill from poisoning and thus hidden away in convalescence. Based on a highly imaginative reading of an intriguingly vague passage from 1616 in the dynastic annals, which appears in overlaid text in the film's opening, "Masquerade" features an entertainer snatched into official duty by the king's most trusted advisor, the historical figure Heo Gyun.[21] The imposter gradually becomes acculturated into the role, of course, though with the opposite demeanour of the ailing king, and indeed both he and even those around him not in the know awaken gradually to the possibilities of a genuinely good, caring monarch. Whereas the original Gwanghae is shown as ruthless and temperamental, the substitute is naturally the reverse, including in handling the urgent foreign relations matter facing the court, the rise of the Manchu threat. Amid Joseon's predicament between the Chinese and Manchus, the high officials are shown stubbornly clinging to their ritualised support for the Chinese Ming dynasty, a position that the fake Gwanghae finds both shameful and dangerous.

His scepticism about Koreans' unstinting devotion to China, however, is what survives in the dynastic records, the narrative of which also—in legitimating his overthrow—marks Gwanghae as a tyrant.[22] The film thus tackles this Gwanghae dilemma in historical judgement by suggesting that the terrible king of official history could not have espoused the sagacious policy (in hindsight) of neutrality in the brewing confrontation between the Qing and Ming. Rather, the proper foreign policy stance could only have come from someone showing consistency in character and judgement through his innate compassion—as reflected also in tax policy—and, crucially, his background as an unadulterated common person. As with the films set in the early Joseon era (Chap. 1), the injustices of ascriptive social hierarchy serve as a stand-in for questions of fate and freedom; indeed, "Masquerade" takes its cue in this regard from "The King and the Clown" (Chap. 1) in highlighting the dangers, for people of low social status such as entertainers, of venturing too close to the enticing realms of power. And like the Hollywood comedy "Dave", about a presidential lookalike in the White House, "Masquerade" explores political legitimacy and the

tyranny of the palace, as it were, through the character of an imposter, becoming the more ideal, and hence real, ruler.[23]

No such tact is employed to explain Gwanghae in "The Swordsman" (*Geumgaek*; Choe Jae-hun, 2020), a polished contribution to the lone sword-fighter hostage/revenge sub-genre, set in the period immediately following the Manchu Qing dynasty's conquest of Joseon in 1637. And to cap the cliches, the hero is (going) blind, which of course only heightens his capacity to slice and dice through squads of gun-toting Qing soldiers like a Jedi knight chopping up hapless droids. The historical substance comes rather from a secondary plot line involving King Gwanghae, whom the main character had served previously as a young bodyguard and thereafter fallen into criminal status following the 1623 overthrow. In short flashbacks, Gwanghae appears as a genuinely sage ruler—no imposter needed here—guided in his foreign policy by his overriding concern for the people's welfare. The swordsman character therefore stands as a reminder, 15 years after his master's overthrow, of Gwanghae's original wisdom, as the capital now swarms with Manchu soldiers led by a preening, brutal, but clever Qing prince, as well as with nefarious Korean elites. The latter includes a powerful official who offers to adopt the weakening swordsman's teenage daughter as a means of helping her escape the roundup of Korean females taken to Manchuria as slaves. The girl, having grown up in isolation and poverty due to her father's troubled past, is drawn to this arrangement mostly by promises, in return, of medicine for her father's failing eyes. Korean viewers would immediately recognise the resemblance to the Sim Cheong fable, but more disturbing is the unmistakable allusion to the twentieth-century circumstances in Korea, again under foreign military occupation, when girls were taken as "comfort women" for the Japanese war effort. In encapsulating, however, the film hero's rejection of such social or political structures and of the distillation of his identity down to core loyalties, the swordsman declares that, to him, his child is his country. In short flashbacks, the character of Gwanghae likewise espouses the sentiment that the (common) people are his children.

In another film with an unhelpful English title, "Warriors of the Dawn" (*Daerip-gun* ["Proxy soldiers"]; Jeong Yun-cheol, 2017), a much younger Prince Gwanghae expresses, or learns to embrace, a similar perspective. Set three decades before his 1623 overthrow as monarch, the story takes place mostly in the northern reaches of the peninsula and is ostensibly about a pitiable band of domestic mercenaries forced to undertake military duties

for others in exchange for payment. Victims of terrible misfortune grounded in ascriptive social inequality, about which they speak often, they now find themselves having to protect the crown prince, Gwanghae. This comes after he is sent by his feeble father, King Seonjo, who flees the Japanese invasion of 1592 to the northwestern border area with China, as a hedge to ensure the monarchy's survival. But the film eventually turns into more of a character study of Gwanghae's transformation from a meek, studious teenager discarded by his father to a wise young man who discovers his inner strength and ethical responsibilities as a ruler. In a series of scenes, he comes to recognise the horrible conditions, especially in social exploitation, that have befallen his country and perhaps facilitated the foreigners' incursions, and he seeks to atone and start anew. Most eye-catching is a scene in which Gwanghae sheds monarchical mannerisms to gently dance in front of a crowd of frightened refugees as a way of comforting them, which has the unexpected effect of strengthening their allegiance and affection for him. Gwanghae's awakening even leads to his taking up weapons and engaging the invaders directly. This strains credulity, but the point is to join the ongoing wave of elevating Gwanghae's historical reputation, in this case by dramatising the emergence of his admirable character from earlier times, before he became the reigning monarch who would then fall victim to the ongoing turmoil in Joseon politics.

The monarch who would replace Gwanghae through the 1623 coup, his nephew Injo, occupies the centre in "The Fortress" (*Namhan sanseong* ["Namhan Mountain Fortress"]; Hwang Dong-gyu, 2017). An adaptation of Kim Hun's famed novel of the same name, the story takes place in the winter of 1636–1637, when the Manchus laid a frigid siege on the Korean court holed up in a military base southeast of Seoul. But Gwanghae's spirit is never far from the scene, embodied in the character of Choe Myeong-gil, a high official verbally duelling in impassioned tones with the entire officialdom, but especially with Kim Sang-hyeon, a minister who pleads with King Injo to keep resisting the barbarians. The triangular dialogue between these historical figures, delving into the deepest questions of political responsibility and collective identity, drives the story and shifts in accordance with every new sign of a lost cause. There are also fictionalised characters drawn from among the freezing, decimated, and increasingly cynical common soldiers, as well as a blacksmith signifying resilience, and even a lost little girl, also very symbolic, wandering into the compound while searching for her grandfather. With plentiful reminders

of social injustices playing out in the dynamics among the Koreans collectively under siege—as well as even an interpreter working for the Manchus who had been born a Korean slave—the fortress stands as an enclosed microcosm of Korea as a whole, ultimately succumbing to a force from without that exposes the problems within. As remarked by the "Khan" character, Hong Taiji (son of Nurhaci), who appears somewhat wiser than his Korean counterpart, he did not travel all the way from Manchuria in order to "attack such a small fortress". Rather, the Manchu emperor wants to compel the Koreans, beholden to bigoted delusions and internal fragmentation, to come to their senses and capitulate on their own, which in the end is what happens in both history and the story, but not before some heavy bombardment and slaughter.

The blood red from the butchering of both men and beasts, along with the glow from fires, adds striking dashes of colour to the desolate grey landscape of bleak, ubiquitous malaise. Unlike the other films set in this era, nature, as a representation of fate or heavenly judgement, fails to protect the country, even if it does not necessarily endorse the invasions. The protagonists of "War of the Arrows" and "The Admiral" call natural forces into action, but in "The Fortress", this appeal seems futile. Tellingly, the cowering, clueless minister in charge of defences boasts that he has been consulting with a shaman, as if to mock any such effort to use local knowledge and resources. Instead, nature marks the passage of time and the onset of agony and humiliation, with the bright moon appearing as a signal of Manchu ultimatums and impending doom. The Korean winter, it turns out, cannot help defend the homeland against invaders who also come from the cold. Even the whipping wind works against the Koreans—who now hold the muskets, in contrast to the configuration in "The Swordsman"—as they cannot reload their gunpowder amid the gusts. Most notable is the symbolism of the little girl named "Naru"—meaning "river crossing"—orphaned by her grandfather who had worked as a ferryman but was killed by the pro-resistance official Kim Sang-hyeon. She represents the transit to a future mindset and era that Koreans must undertake, as even Kim himself acknowledges at the end. The dilapidated boats stuck in the ice at the start of the film show Korea frozen in time, just as the ferry boat bobbing in the flowing waters of spring at the film's close, with Naru playing in the lush fields, now stands ready to make the crossing. Perhaps nature was offering another chance.

Given the subsequent history of the country, however, the viewer is left to wonder whether anything fundamentally changed following the harrowing experiences of foreign invasion in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. King Injo, after all—the one put on the throne through the "Righteous Restoration" of 1623 to replace the insufficiently pro-Chinese Gwanghae—in the end did the same thing as his overthrown predecessor, which was to concede to the realities of Manchu power, but only after much more bloodshed and humiliation. And in the realm of Korean society at large, the rigidly hereditary differentiation of privilege and resources, whether measured in political, cultural, or social terms, actually might have tightened in the latter half of the Joseon dynasty, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Historians have also found, however, that these experiences probably sharpened national identity and consciousness, especially among the elites but also among the masses.[24] Interestingly, though, none of the films examined in this chapter highlights such a development. Rather, the cinematic depictions focus on social injustice as the predominant internal challenge that mirrors the severity of the threat from abroad. And here, as if the guardian fates were providing a reprieve to allow Koreans to self-correct, the inviolability of the homeland is expressed most compellingly in natural form, with worthy heroes calling on natural forces to help protect the nation and repel the marauding outsiders. The connection to justice is thus cosmic, but so is the urgency of internal reform, an idea meant to resonate with Korean viewers facing similar questions of national character based on their own, more recent experience of foreign-induced trauma.

Chapter Three. Tracking National Destiny: Prince Sado and the Eighteenth-Century Monarchy

Playbill
"The Throne" (*Sado* ["Prince Sado", or "Thoughts of sadness"]); Yi Jun-ik, 2015
"Eternal Empire" (*Yeongwonhan jeguk*); Bak Jong-won, 1994
"The Fatal Encounter" (*Yeongnin* ["The Monarch's wrath"]); Yi Jae-gyu, 2014
"The Grand Heist" (*Baram gwa hamkke sarajida* ["Gone with the wind"]); Kim Ju-ho, 2012

Near the close of "The Fatal Encounter", set in 1777, an exhausted and bloodied young King Jeongjo, having just survived an assassination attempt only a year into his reign, reveals why he is a marked man: The political forces conspiring against him are the same ones who had manipulated his royal predecessor and grandfather, King Yeongjo, into killing his own son. In order to protect the next monarch (Jeongjo himself) from the same terrible end, Yeongjo had written a secret message in blood revealing this political conspiracy, according to the film's storyline. The conspiracy in question referred to the 1862 execution, through confinement in a rice

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
East Asian Popular Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_4

chest on the grounds of the royal palace, of the crown prince posthumously known as "Sado", who in turn, incredibly, was also the father of Jeongjo himself, Yeongjo's royal successor and grandson. This extraordinary event has taken on a significance in recent cinematic depictions that reverse the longstanding understanding of Sado's transgressions and of what led King Yeongjo to force his son to die in such a shocking manner. In so doing the films have also taken Crown Prince Sado, indeed of the entire eighteenth century, as a repository for the country's destiny, both then and in the many years to come.

After more than three centuries, during which it survived even a calamitous series of foreign invasions (Chap. 2), the Joseon dynasty appears to have arrived at a welcome stability and cultural peak in the eighteenth century, with the long-serving monarchs of this era reflecting a relatively peaceful, mature, enlightened, but also largely stationary dynastic order. Indeed, that this system ultimately did not fundamentally change course, in the larger scheme of things, explains perhaps its durability. But the films set in the eighteenth century, an era of major political and social reforms pursued by authoritative rulers, squarely eye also the powerfully entrenched social structures in implying the cause, meaning, and eventual dampening of such efforts. The focus on great kings, and one notable potential king—Prince Sado—thus reflects a yearning in contemporary South Korea for a venerable political order, a projection of the decidedly traditionalist agency of monarchical absolutism onto contemporary times. In looking back, then, these three figures serve as vessels for tracking the flow of national history, their successes standing as shining examples of progress, their failures or tragedies a reflection of stagnation and decay in Joseon society and polity. In light of the country's outcome thereafter, their personal stories invariably suggest what might have been, had the country's fate not been determined by more deeply ingrained traditions.

"The Throne" and the Burdens of Dynastic Destiny

As with the relatively sparse coverage of the Japanese invasions, the half-century reign of King Yeongjo (1724–1776) might be too big a topic for individual cinematic treatments. Even with a focus on the Sado saga, only expansive television series appear capable of giving due treatment to his reign's evolving, complex mix of court intrigue and attendant themes of social hierarchy, cultural identity, and even gender and family. In the *hallyu* era, only one major theatrical release, "The Throne" (*Sado* ["Thoughts of

sadness" or simply, "Prince Sado"]; Yi Jun-ik, 2016), has ventured into dramatising the Yeongjo era, but this remarkably rich film effectively matches the momentousness of the time in just about every way, even extending the story forward to the end of the eighteenth century, two decades after Yeongjo's passing. This is because the tragic crown prince could be considered the main character, and indeed the film's Korean title is "Sado". Moreover, while the story is centred on the relationship between these two figures, father and son, it is also about the monarchy itself—as suggested by the film's English title—particularly the kingship's signification of core characteristics of the nation. As indicated by the prince's posthumous title, meaning "thoughts [remembrance] of sadness", his adult life and manner of death, while prompting great sorrow and regret, also seem inescapable. Against the combination of mental illness and debilitating structures in the court and larger society, his fate could not be altered, even by the power of the absolute monarch Yeongjo himself, whose inherited role as the king supersedes his hereditary role as a father. The weight of national customs and history is simply too much to bear.

The buildup to the tragic end of the prince's life is told through an overlaid doomsday clock countdown of his eight days in rice chest confinement, interspersed with a steady offering of flashback scenes that make up the majority of the film's running time. They start with the most recent moment, the crown prince's aborted march to kill (threaten? usurp?) his father while wielding a sword, followed by Yeongjo's scandalous step of condemning his son to death, but through extraordinary means: withering away while boxed up in the middle of the palace courtyard. Only such a solution could legitimate the ascendance of Sado's son as the progeny of a non-traitor. The flashbacks then return to Sado as a precocious little boy whose interests develop in directions beyond those of royal expectations, proclivities that irritate his father, who sours on his son. Succeeding scenes of the crown prince as a young man show him already laden with the cumulative effects of this mistreatment, trying to both please and escape his mercurial father/sovereign while exhibiting increasingly erratic behaviours that culminate in deadly violence towards his servants and others. His wife, Lady Hyegyeong, to whom he was betrothed before he even turned ten years old, witnesses all this while realising that the situation will likely victimise her natal family members as well. (In real life, through her memoirs much later, she would prove an indispensable source of information about her husband's life and death.) Meanwhile, intrigues from one of the factions among the officials constrain the king in his response, even

as they fret over later political repercussions with the ascension of the crown grandson (*seson*), Sado's son. The film's last ten minutes, filled with heart-rending imagery, showcase this son, King Jeongjo, in 1795, the 20th year of his reign and 33 years after his father Sado's death, as he commemorates the 60th birthdays of his parents, one alive and the other long dead.

Death is a dominant theme in the extraordinary symbolism of the film. Many of these motifs actually allude to freedom or escape: Buddhism as a representation of popular religion or spirituality, a haven for the unpretentious crown prince away from the oppression of the palace and family; drawing as a means of expressing creativity and individuality; Sado's dog, which he receives as a pup, signalling his unencumbered happiness; the arrow, which vaults into the vast open air, as Sado admiringly observes in front of his young son; and the rain and water, which seem to provide a purifying cleansing from all the troubles and burdens of the prince's life. Most notable in this regard is the folding fan (*buchae*)—made from Sado's drawing, on the occasion of his own son's birth, of a dragon, the traditional mark of the monarchy—which he clutches while scrunched in his death crate. Sado's unfolding of this folding fan shows him, however belatedly and under increasing hallucination, that he once was free to spread his wings, as it were. Under very different circumstances, this fan is again unfolded by Sado's son three decades later, the doomed prince springing to life, finally, under the loving care of his son, the monarch who revives his memory and resurrects his honour.

Up until this ending sequence, however, such symbols of life and freedom are balanced by the consistently brooding reminders of death and fate, as represented by the coffin and tomb. The casket encased in a grassy mound, a stalwart landmark for Korea's royalty since the beginning of its history, is refashioned in "The Throne" to identify Sado as a dead man walking. He prefers, for example, to lie in a box, from which he pops out suddenly in one ghostly scene, within his Buddhist sanctuary, a cave that itself looks like a mounded tomb. Most inescapably representative of this layering of fatalistic confinement is the dreadful rice chest (*dwiju*) itself, which is covered in clods of grass until it looks like a miniature mounded tomb. Sado is thus shown being buried alive in his grave, as if he were being fitted for his death in a grim rehearsal. Whether as a rice chest or coffin, then, the sarcophagus serves as a sign of life as well, but only insofar as this life is boxed in by fate, indeed from the moment of birth, which for the royal family was the case especially for those in line to the throne.

Each of the three main male characters who fit this category—the grandfather, father, and son—represents a different facet of this particular dynamic, and thus "The Throne" constitutes above all a character study of historical figures in varying circumstances but manifesting the same fatalism. We can begin with the crown prince, Sado, who yearns for freedom and escape from the expectations of his bestowed status, the pressures of which are exponentially greater as the king-in-waiting. He wants to break away from the overbearing ritual and etiquette, but of course most of all he needs to elude his bloodline, as well as the father and royal position that come from it. His ancestry also includes his mother, who, it is noted, was a concubine, a stigma even for a crown prince. In a remarkable scene set in 1762, an intoxicated Sado leads a makeshift parade and ceremony to honour his low-ranking mother's birthday, a foreshadowing parallel to the famed grand procession for him and his own wife later taken by their son, as king, in 1795. Sado finds a receptive repository for his yearning for liberation in the occult of proscribed religion, represented by Buddhist monks and their hideout cave. This sanctuary, which tellingly lies outside the city walls—as Buddhist sites were prohibited in the capital—is nevertheless a precarious place, as if the cycles of existence and hopes for a better return could not withstand the royal destiny prescribed by the long-established political order. Finally, Sado struggles to escape the imprisonment of his mental illness, which the film, as well as historical judgement, suggests was ascribed in more ways than one, with no factor bigger than the kingship itself.

The grand embodiment and agent of these royal pressures, King Yeongjo, Sado's father, is a character of contrasts, just as he appears in the historical records.[25] At once sagacious and strategic, he also exhibits cruelty, pettiness, and fickleness, especially towards his suffering son. Some of this abuse is clearly borne of self-loathing. Like his son, he shows psychological irregularities, with a range of strange behavioural tics, and he probably harbours a disdain for his son's hereditary status as a concubine's child, like he was himself. This mark had endangered his own ascent to the throne in 1724 and continued to trail him with doubts of his political legitimacy,[26] as the film depicts in several scenes. Yeongjo even declares his disdain for his position, although he ended up reigning for over half a century, and at one point he gives up his royal duties to Sado, who very reluctantly takes charge of the court as a young regent. But this turns out to be a sick ruse, as his father hovers over his back and picks at Sado's decisions and utterances. The encapsulation of these cruel ambivalences comes

in a memorable flashback scene of Yeongjo taking his teenaged son through the ancestral shrine (*Jongmyo*) of the Joseon royal line and recalling some of the bloody struggles over succession in the Yi family's long rule, with plentiful instances of royals killing their own family members to gain power. The tableau of golden curtains that mark previous kings' ancestral tablets stretches long down the shrine's corridor, a sign of the kingdom's glorious durability of three-and-a-half centuries, as well as of its old age and accumulating burdens. The king's overriding priority is to sustain this dynastic line, even if it means having to order his son's death to protect his grandson's advancement to the throne. "This is our fate", he despondently concedes to his son, in front of the rice chest as Sado struggles for his last breaths. But Yeongjo could have been speaking to his royal ancestors as well as to his successor, the wailing grandson who would become King Jeongjo.

As a boy of ten in 1762 trying to make sense of the horrific goings on, Jeongjo, too, tries desperately to speak to the caged Sado, his dying father, in a harrowing scene often highlighted in TV dramas. This trauma from childhood could only have been debilitating, but as it turns out, among the three men of the monarchy in "The Throne", Jeongjo comes across as the most sensible, in line with the general historical assessment forming about him (see below). Famously, as noted above, in 1795, the 60th anniversary years of the births of both his parents, Jeongjo led a lavish procession of thousands down to the city of Suwon, to where he moved his father's grave. "The Throne" does not recreate this spectacle, but it does show at the end Jeongjo's visit to his father's (mounded) tomb, where he expresses his sense of guilt over Sado's death. The film closes with the filial king paying homage to his long-suffering mother in a delicate dance of extraordinary poignancy. These reminders of Jeongjo's character parallel his historical standing, as he is generally taken as the last great king and perhaps second only to Sejong (Chap. 1) in the annals of national history. But Jeongjo was overcome in the end by an unexpected early death (age 48), which, according to an account gaining currency, was caused by the constant conspiring against him by entrenched political forces that had also done in his father Sado.

Sado, Jeongjo, and National Regret

The notion of a conspiracy against Crown Prince Sado and indeed against this entire triumvirate of eighteenth-century monarchical figures had circulated since the actual events, but the idea received a huge boost with the publication of a novel, "Eternal Empire" (*Yeongwonhan jeguk*), in the early 1990s by a young writer, Ryu Cheol-jin, who used the pen name Yi In-hwa. The book achieved explosive popularity and was soon made into a film of the same name (Bak Jong-won, 1995) that, while not as engrossing as the book and not quite on the level in production values of the *hallyu* films that came thereafter, featured promising actors such as Kim Myeong-gon, Kim Hye-su, Jo Jae-hyeon, Choe Jong-won, and An Seong-gi, who would later appear as fixtures in South Korean cinema, including in historical films.[27] Together, the novel and film helped to popularise the conspiracy angle and, more importantly, trigger a mass flowering of interest in King Jeongjo, which spurred more historical novels, academic studies, television series, and films such as "The Throne" and the three works that will be analysed in the present section. In fact, all the movies examined in this chapter subscribe at least partially to this revisionist view, even as actual historical scholarship has found little to support it.[28] The appeal of the image of a heroic Jeongjo can be understood as reflecting a popular search for signs that Korea could have pursued an internally driven reform effort resulting in modern changes, had it not been for this monarch's premature death, which coincidentally took place in 1800 and led to the distressed nineteenth century (Chap. 4), culminating in the tragic twentieth. But re-imagining Jeongjo through an inflation of his significance and potential also fits into a longer-term effort in South Korea to reconsider more forthrightly the structural ailments of the Joseon era, indeed of premodern Korea altogether.

This inertia of corruption and contradiction seems to present an insurmountable obstacle in "Eternal Empire", the film adaptation of Yi In-hwa's popular novel. Set in a single day in 1800, shortly before Jeongjo's passing, it is told as an extended flashback by a fictionalised aide to the monarch recalling the events of three decades earlier. This official, named Yi In-mong (recall that the author of the novel is Yi In-hwa), is charged with investigating, with the help of Vice-Minister of Punishments Jeong Yag-yong—the real historical figure better known as Dasan—the suspiciously sudden death of another young aide who had been conducting a secret project for King Jeongjo. The viewer then follows the labyrinth of a

murder mystery that takes Yi through the intricacies of deadly political rivalries mixed with chronic problems—from social discrimination, factionalism, and even Catholicism—but ultimately arising from the Prince Sado scandal. The storyline thus revisits the continuing impact of the previous king, Yeongjo, who supposedly penned, more than a quarter-century earlier, a secret book that details the role of a faction of the "Old Doctrine" (*Noron*) Party's manoeuvring to frame Sado and thus force Yeongjo to sentence him to death. This faction's current leadership is well aware of the dangers of such a revelation, and hence the intricate plot tracks the race between the king and opposing party to procure the book while also unravelling the disturbing connections between this political confrontation and that official's death. It is no less than a showdown over Korea's past that would determine its future.

"Eternal Empire" thus presents King Jeongjo, 24 years into his reign, as finally on the verge of his longstanding quest to implement a comprehensive and unending "renovation" (*yusin*) of his kingdom, which would achieve the "ideal country that we have dreamed of" but required the removal of the entrenched political forces at court. His populist vision of this new society, led by and recognising only the authority of the sagely monarch armed with insights from Catholic science and enlightened advisors like Dasan (who in real life had personal connections to Catholicism—see Chap. 4), tolerates no old resins like hereditary hierarchies. These include of course the parasitic aristocracy and the scourge of slavery, but especially hated by this king is the stifling prejudice against concubines' sons, a bias that had even hounded his father, Sado, and grandfather, Yeongjo, as noted above. Indeed, the aide whose murder had triggered the day's events was himself a concubine's son. The semiotics are stark: The concubine sons and descendants, the legalised bias against whom dated back to the start of the Joseon dynasty,[29] constitute the epitome of unjust fate—although slaves and other "low-born" groups [*cheonmin*] might have disputed this—in a social system based on ascriptive status. The irony of this messaging is also inescapable, as discussed in Chap. 1: a hereditary monarch calling for the abolition of inherited privilege. But the superseding rationale for activist, enlightened royal absolutism seems to appear in a scene when the king articulates his vision, in which he speaks of the recent French Revolution's murderous end while holding a pair of glasses (with lenses and mirrors also operating as main symbols) imported from the West. He admires the technical innovation but wonders how that

same civilisation could have unleashed such mass horror as the killing of the French royalty.

As was made apparent later, the author of the novel "Eternal Empire", Yi In-hwa, probably envisioned in the Jeongjo character a modern, benignly autocratic leader in the mould of Napoleon, who had claimed to be restoring order in France in line with the revolution's ideals. Yi, then, was heralding South Korea's own authoritarian who instituted a "renovation" (*yusin*), Park Chung Hee, a preference made abundantly self-evident in the author's subsequent works, even before his arrest for academic fraud in 2017 put an interesting cap on his intellectual career.[30] Given the rise of populist strongmen around the world and the ongoing controversies surrounding Park Chung Hee, one could have assumed that the scaffolding of the Sado conspiracy theory would have collapsed in line with the revelation of Yi In-hwa's political agenda. But the influence of his novel and the film adaptation from the 1990s had taken hold, with the unveiled original motivation behind "Eternal Empire" mostly disregarded.

This now widely accepted view even guides a semi-farce, "The Grand Heist" (Kim Ju-ho, 2012), the original title for which, tellingly, is the parodic Korean rendering of "Gone with the Wind" (*Baram gwa hamkke sarajida*). It actually is a take on another Hollywood flick, "Ocean's Eleven": a comic caper featuring a motley heist team, formed during the transition to the King Jeongjo era in the late eighteenth century, that targets an illegal ice monopoly run by corrupt aristocrats. These are the same officials of course who had framed Sado and are thus plotting also to block Jeongjo's ascent to the throne, for they fear his reprisals as well as his goals of achieving a classless society. On the other side, each of the 11 members of the righteous thieves squad, in adhering to the parody, offers particular talents that together encompass the emblems of freedom and change that sprinkle the film: science, specialisation, commerce, the West and Catholicism, Qing China, and, somehow, a glowing green orb. Even the great philosopher Dasan joins the group as an eccentric child scientist, the budding genius heralding a new age.

Within this bald mimicry of both a specific foreign film and Korean costume dramas in general, in which every other scene seems to be accompanied by a wink, lie also some historically pertinent themes that craftily cut through the throwaway threading of the film. First is the trope found in some more accomplished dramatisations, from "The Face Reader" (Chap. 1) to "YMCA Baseball Team" (Chap. 5), of social or national unity actualised through the integration of people of various, especially lower,

social backgrounds. In "The Grand Heist", most of the robbery team members come from non-aristocratic, indeed shunned, social status, such as slave or even a courtesan, one of three female team members. The leaders are just as interesting: the historical figures Yi Deung-mu and Yu Deukgong, who would later be appointed by King Jeongjo as two of the "Four Librarians" (*sageomseo*) of concubine descent to staff the monarch's new state agency, the Royal Library (Gyujanggak).[31] True to form, Yi Deung-mu, the protagonist in the film, is depicted as a blithe bibliophile who, in duplicating the Jeongjo situation, struggles to overcome his standing as the scion of a convicted criminal framed by corrupt officials. Yu Deuk-gong, meanwhile, works as a constabulary officer, shunted to a lower-ranking military position due to his being a concubine's son (*seoja*). Through these two main characters, then, concubine descendants serve as emblems of the injustices of inherited status, a fatalistic mark highlighted by the Sado saga and King Jeongjo's reform efforts.

Not concubine's children but young children as a whole carry this allegorical torch in the most intriguing and sophisticated film on Jeongjo, "The Fatal Encounter" (*Yeongnin* ["The Monarch's wrath"]; Yi Jae-gyu, 2014), which like "The Throne" is a more revealing title than the Korean original. The film actually features numerous fatal encounters, including some deadly ones, as well as plentiful symbolism—rain, caves, light, and most of the main characters—and a closing fight sequence that amounts to overkill, as does the over-the-top portrayal of the young Jeongjo as a buff action hero. In many ways "The Fatal Encounter" offers an update on "Eternal Empire", for the main story takes place within a single 24-hour period and seeks resolution through the discovery of a secret book supposedly penned by King Yeongjo.

The film begins with a shot of many dead bodies strewn on palace grounds at the end of this single day, with the remainder of the film showing the day's buildup but also crucial flashback sequences to earlier settings. Like "Masquerade" (Chap. 2), the story crafts an intricate plot out of a single mystifying entry in the dynastic annals (*Sillok*)—this time from the summer of 1777, one year after Jeongjo's ascent to the throne, about possible assassins heard scurrying on the roof.[32] The day begins well before dawn, with the young monarch studying and doing push-ups in his quarters while quizzing his doting chief eunuch, Gapsu, on passages in the Confucian classics. The scene establishes a close, near-fraternal relationship between these two figures and contrasts later with another brotherly bond of Gapsu's, from early childhood, to Eulsu, who turns into a skilled

assassin sent to kill Jeongjo but is blocked by Gapsu at the end of the day. In between, the intricate plot features both historical and fictional characters manoeuvring—or being manoeuvred—into position as the assassination attempt builds. They include Queen Dowager Jeongsun, just a few years older than Jeongjo but formally his grandmother,[33] and her primary nemesis, Lady Hyegyeong, Jeongjo's mother (and Sado's widow). The Queen Dowager is in league with General Gu Seon-bok, who controls most of the military and wants to get rid of Jeongjo, while on the other side is Hong Gug-yeong, a high military official fiercely loyal to the king who wants to get rid of General Gu before it's too late. In addition to Gapsu and Eulsu, the fictional characters include a devious personal attendant to the Queen Dowager; a ten-year-old palace servant girl, Bok-bing, put to use by manipulative adults; and a chilling enslaver and child trafficker who seems by himself to embody all the evils of the land. But more importantly, he represents the stifling scaffolding of social destiny. This odious man had trained both Gapsu and Eulsu, as well as a third character, Wol-hye, a palace maid who becomes Eulsu's love interest, as young children in order to spring them into murderous actions later as adults, like classic Hollywood spies of the Cold War such as the Manchurian candidate.

This compelling connection between adulthood and childhood forwards the film's central motif on the workings of fate, as though spotlighting the popular debate about the balance of nurture and nature in childrearing. The adolescents in the film, likewise, serve not as deterministic figures but rather as vessels for the potential impact of individual agency on the stout structures of social status, political power, and national customs. Two of the enslaved children strategically positioned as adult assassins in the royal palace—Gapsu and Wol-hye—turn against their foreordained task, though in different ways. Even the third formerly captured child, the hardened killer Eulsu, is overcome by personal feelings and appears ready to abandon his assignment. The children also serve as stand-ins for the mass of the exploited and manipulated underclass. As Wol-hye indignantly states, she has observed the powerful in the court do terrible things to common people like her. And the cherubic palace girl in training, Bok-bing, gets manipulated by both sides of the growing confrontation and even turned into an unwitting assassin, just like the three young adults who had begun life trapped in subterranean caves and literally marked as fatal objects. Later in adulthood, however, as they pass each other unknowingly in brief shots, they show how the contingencies of personal encounters can redirect predetermined paths, and among such relationships no

one exerts as much impact as the Jeongjo character himself. Critically, though, "The Fatal Encounter" does not present the sage king as only the source of such destiny-defying influence. In one flashback scene the child Jeongjo, in hiding from the commotion of palace life three years after his father's death, is comforted by his personal eunuch, who is none other than the teenaged, slightly older Gapsu. The mutuality of this long relationship, sturdy in its strength and symbolism, remains the core human dynamic from the film's beginning to its end.[34]

Still, notwithstanding such fruitful layering, unquestionably it is the sage king, early in his reign, who remains the focus of the film, indeed excessively so—not through the character's domination of the storyline but rather through the iconic mythologising of this figure. Whether set in dark interiors or out in broad daylight, in numerous scenes a bright light shines upon and behind Jeongjo, as if he were the great leader in Orwellian propaganda. While probably not done in self-parody, the only plausible explanation for this cinematic heavy-handedness—Jeongjo even appears on a white horse while bathed in sunlight—is to forward the character as approaching religious status, someone whose significance connotes cosmic overtones. Unlike in "Eternal Empire", Catholicism is absent in the storyline, but Jeongjo definitely presents as a Christ figure. Aside perhaps from a wandering eye for potential concubines, he seems to have no flaws, and (as in real life) he is extremely studious, to the point of correcting his assigned teachers during the royal lectures. Indeed, he appears as the purveyor of a new testament to the decrepit original creed of Confucianism, represented by the old, corrupt, stubborn officials mouthing in droning repetition their received understandings. Other signals abound as well. At several moments, Jeongjo's royal robe, shown hanging in a cross configuration, acts as an altar to bowing rows of worshipful palace servants (Image 1), and indeed Wol-hye's specific duty is to look after the king's wardrobe. Also making a major semiotic splash is blood, whether on the sword (in assigning justice) or in the letter (*hyeolseo*) left by King Yeongjo, but most notably as splattered on Jeongjo's white robe at the end of this turbulent day (Image 2). In this scene, Jeongjo appears like a figure in a medieval European painting, fatigued and bloodstained while offering himself in self-abnegation. More to the point, he is the redeemer. At the end of the film, he calmly but firmly informs his grandmother, who had plotted to kill him, that he is willing to grant her forgiveness, just as he had offered redemption to General Gu earlier. But this resuscitation is available only on the intimidating condition, under the threat of a horrible

Image 1 Palace servants bowing before the gown of King Yeongjo in "The Fatal Encounter"

Image 2 An exhausted and bloodied King Jeongjo at the close of "The Fatal Encounter"

outcome, that they submit to him, presumably also in obedience to his revolutionary vision for the country.

Jeongjo actually would not be sacrificed for another quarter-century after this moment, so in maintaining this analogy of trinities, perhaps his father Sado, falsely accused and killed in his early thirties, more aptly fits into the Christ role, with his grandfather Yeongjo acting as a mercurial and demanding Old Testament Yahweh, at least in the way he is portrayed in "The Throne". Knowing how the Joseon governing system functioned as a thicket of longstanding social and political interests, few historians would assign such comprehensive influence to even these long-serving and powerful monarchs, and far less to the tragic crown prince, Sado, whose manner of death admittedly cast a long shadow. These royal figures' cinematic portrayals, then, reflect a general search for indications from Koreans' collective past that suggest a forward-looking, corrective historical path out of the country's debilitating traditions. Given the encrusted social and political structures of this legacy, which functioned as a trapping destiny, the more viable potential outcomes would have come from singularly powerful monarchs. They could have fought to break free from cumulative historical burdens at a time, the eighteenth century, when the country might have taken a turn towards something other than what it would become in the nineteenth century.

Chapter Four. Facing the End of Days: Crises and Potential in the Nineteenth Century

Playbill

"Blood Rain" (*Hyeol ui nu*); Kim Dae-seung, 2005

"The Book of Fish" (*Jasan Eobo* ["Black Mountain's fish species"]); Yi Jun-ik, 2021

"Heung-boo—the Revolutionist" (*Heungbu—Geullo saesang eul bakkun ja* ["Heungbu—the man who changed his world through writing"]); Jo Geun-hyeong, 2017

"The Sound of a Flower" (*Dori hwaga* ["The Song of peach and plum flowers"]); Yi Jong-pil, 2015

"Map Against the World" (*Gosanja: Daedong yeoji-do* ["Kim Jeong-ho: The Great Map of Korea"]); Gang U-seok, 2016

"Feng Shui" (*Myeongdang* ["Fortuitous places"]); Bak Hui-gon, 2018

"Kundo: Age of the Rampant" (*Gundo: Millan ui sidae* ["Gundo: The Age of people's uprisings"]); Yun Jong-bin, 2014

"Chihwaseon" (*Chwihwaseon* ["Drunken painting immortal"]); Im Kwon-taek, 2002

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
East Asian Popular Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_5

Image 1 Yi Won-gyu calling out to his father from the bottom of a well, from "Blood Rain"

In a short scene combining dream and flashback at the midway point of the film, the protagonist of "Blood Rain", Yi Won-gyu, finds himself in the bottom of a well. Although it appears that way at first, he has not fallen into the well but rather was placed there as punishment. As Won-gyu realises that he is trapped, he looks up and calls for mercy to his father, who is closing the well's lid (Image 1). As shown in the remainder of the story, set mostly in 1808, this disturbing paternal presence has determined the life of Won-gyu, now a constabulary officer investigating a series of grisly murders on an isolated island off Korea's west coast, in ways that the son could not have imagined. The familial angle is one of many intriguing strands in this film's skilful foreshadowing of historical emblems from the early nineteenth century that eventually would bring national ruin. The apocalyptic feel comes also from the foreboding mood hovering over the scenes, as suggested by the film's title of "Blood Rain", an image repeatedly visualised by streaky red lines and some gruesome images. Blood also invokes the film's other main symbol, water, and more pointedly the process and effect of falling into water, as in a well. This motion, scenes of which both begin and end the film, is replayed in various forms throughout and underscores the frightful condition of an accursed society plunging into the abyss.

The nineteenth century indeed witnessed both the turbulent demise of the Joseon dynasty and the appearance of unsettling forces in the guise of enlightenment and reform. This era's place in Korean historical lore

likewise continues to be dominated by a consciousness of how the country responded to existential hazards. Feature films set in the 1800s—book-ended by "Blood Rain" (2005), set in the nineteenth century's opening years, and "Chihwaseon" (2002), about a master painter whose difficult life parallels the century's (and dynasty's) end—invariably reflect such a sense of building calamity. Highlighted as fateful drivers of history, understandably, are external threats, but even more prominent are the long-standing societal norms, as well as the immediate crises of rampant corruption and explosive popular revolts. Indeed, a major rebellion erupted in the northwestern region of the peninsula in 1811, and an even bigger conflagration closed the century in 1894. This was the Donghak Uprising, which began in the southwest and spread fiercely enough to unleash political and even geopolitical forces that would soon finish off the Joseon dynasty as well as national sovereignty itself. In the middle of this era, in 1862, came another enormous disturbance in the south-central coast, which, among other things, led to the execution of the founder of the native Donghak religious movement that later drove the mass rebellion of 1894. Such religiously inspired unrest, including from Catholicism, seems both at the time and in cinematic depictions to have captured the broader, indeed eschatological unease emerging from inside and outside the country.

The cinematic treatments of the nineteenth century also allude, however, to potential sources of transformative reform—from religion, populism, popular culture, commerce, and scientific understanding, to the compelling political figure of the Daewongun, the paternal regent of the century's last monarch. As both a reformer and a staunch traditionalist before, during, and long after his reign (1864–1875), he represents the country's ambivalent, ultimately inadequate response to the urgent challenges; likewise, the films depict both his force of will and failures of principle in light of the promises and perils of the time. Part of the ambiguity surrounding the Daewongun comes from his fierce rejection of foreign interaction, especially with the "western barbarians" who had already destabilised China and Japan. Examples of such hostility included his ordering of a major persecution of Catholics in 1866, which resulted in one of the two western incursions on the west coast that year and further deepened the Korean leadership's siege mentality. But in the films set in the nineteenth century, Catholicism usually comes across as less a harbinger of imperialism than a conduit of enlightenment and reform, a challenge to the debilitating domination of Confucian orthodoxy and a model

for other forms of popular religion, including Buddhism and Donghak. The mass appeal of these movements constitutes warnings amid impending cataclysm and heralds a powerful millenarian channelling of apocalyptic signals. Such omens appear clear, with hindsight at least, in these dramatisations of the inexorable movement in the nineteenth century towards a catastrophic end.

Unsettling Openings

As discussed in Chap. 3, for the purposes of historical ordering the death of the reformist monarch Jeongjo in the year 1800 of the western calendar makes it convenient to segregate his reign from the subsequent century of disastrous unrest. According to the now prevailing understanding in South Korea, King Jeongjo was on the cusp of finalising his efforts at implanting a systematic, comprehensive renovation of Joseon state and society, but after his sudden death, the floodgates of festering dysfunction seem to have burst open. Driven by political intrigue during a time when the succeeding monarch, Sunjo, was just a boy, in 1801 the first major persecution of Catholic followers took place, which ensnared people from many walks of life, including the authoritative scholar-official Jeong Yag-yong, or Dasan. As part of a reformist intellectual movement at the time, Dasan had championed fundamental changes in Confucian statecraft and an openness to Catholicism, for it was seen as a source of advanced scientific understanding and social reform.

Two *hallyu*-era films set in these opening years of the nineteenth century attempt to dramatise this anxious but pregnant historical moment, following Jeongjo's death, when the legacy of the great king's teachings and impulses crashed against the enormous inertia of long-entrenched interests. Interestingly, both stories are set on an island. The first work, "Blood Rain" (*Hyeol ui nu*; Kim Dae-seung, 2005), is an intricate, horror-tinted murder mystery set on a materially well-off insular community that in many ways cannot escape the ills ravaging the mainland. The islanders actually thrive on their proto-industrial paper mill that supplies tribute items to the court but also directly to China. The main time frame is 1808, although many flashback sequences also appear, mostly from 1801, during that first major state campaign against Catholicism. In 1808, the main character, Won-gyu, a deputy military investigator, has arrived on the island with his superior in order to investigate an arson fire of a ship that normally carried the paper tribute to the mainland. But upon

disembarking Won-gyu quickly has to shift to finding the perpetrator of a series of elusive, gruesomely precise murders associated with that fire.

The film's narrative sequence thereafter shows that this thick, elaborate mystery, which implicates nearly all the island's inhabitants, actually had begun with a relatively mundane event back in 1801. Through flashbacks, we find a young man, Duho, rescuing a young woman, Soyeon, who had been swept from a rocky shore into the waves. But as Duho revives Soyeon onshore, he is mistakenly perceived as having violated her by her father, a merchant (*gaekju*) named Gang, the paper mill's owner. It turns out that Duho is indeed smitten with Soyeon, after having grown up as an apprentice to the merchant, a forward-looking man who claims to treat people according to their talents instead of their birth status; indeed, Gang had taken in Duho as an orphaned boy. There is a limit to Gang's enlightenment, however, as even after he admits his mistake in having falsely accused Duho of wrongdoing, Gang suggests strongly that any relationship between Duho and his daughter will not be permitted. This apparent hypocrisy and betrayal spark a murderous rage in Duho that triggers a chain of powerfully disquieting historical forces descending over the island, which eventually results in the levying of false charges of Catholicism against Gang and the grisly execution of not just him but his entire family. (The tearing apart of Gang's body while being quartered, visualised through meticulous computer graphics, seems to offer a corporal metonym for Joseon Korea itself, with its pathologies leading to internal fragmentation.[35]) Seven years later, in 1808, the reverberations from this awful event activate the murders that Won-gyu must solve and further prevent. Morally and otherwise, by the end of the story no islander and no historical marker at the time—including Catholicism, with its cult of blood sacrifice for the pursuit of redemption—escapes unscathed.[36] This includes even the main character Won-gyu, the earnestly upright detective who has come to the island to investigate, but also to illuminate and educate.

Such ambiguities and moral open-endedness make "Blood Rain" a compelling representation of the early nineteenth century, indeed of the nineteenth century as a whole. Just about all major historical forces at that time in Korea and over the rest of the century converge compellingly in this island and this story—from factional court politics and the tribute relationship with China to emblems of a new era such as Catholicism, opium, guns, mass consciousness, western science and technology, and, most intriguingly perhaps, capitalism. But they all also have a sinister side, including capitalism, as represented not by Gang the merchant but rather,

following Gang's horrific death after having been falsely accused of Catholic beliefs back in 1801, by his replacement as the paper mill's boss, Kim In-gu. Kim also happens to be the son of the aristocratic senior figure on the island, Kim Chi-seong, the mill's owner. While Gang had treated his workers at the paper mill, and indeed islanders as a whole, with compassion, Kim In-gu views them primarily as pliable, exploitable labour. But In-gu also grapples with the clutches of his own upbringing and longs for freedom, for himself, and for those whom he deeply cares for. Trying to escape the fatalistic confines of a domineering, morally compromised father is something that he has in common with Won-gyu. This in turn becomes embedded in the film's larger exploration of the customary constraints of Korean social structures and mores, on the one hand, and their expression as corruption, abuse, and fear in the political body, on the other.

The "Blood Rain" of the film's title, which coincidentally replicates that of a pioneering Korean novel from the early twentieth century, does not appear in literal form until the end—as an instrument of ghostly, perhaps also heavenly, retribution. But the symbolic meaning of blood rain and a profusion of its visual representations, mostly as gory lines, pervade the film and set the overriding tone. The brightly coloured neo-noir cinematography and the lush orchestral soundtrack, which curiously includes the opening theme of Rachmaninov's second piano concerto, also make for a Hitchcockian thriller. Indeed, featured in the story is a psychological ailment similar to vertigo: a gripping fear of water. Water, usually meant to nourish and cleanse, here acts as a reservoir of danger, evil, death, and rot, reeking of aggrieved spirits and mass crimes. The numerous shots of people and things dropping into water visually reinforce this motif, as does the notion of being trapped in the bottom of a well, a metaphor for being fatalistically confined. Water, however, also provides the boundary and barrier with the mainland, hence serving as a means of escape through its capacity to conceal and dissolve.

This gulf between the mainland and the island, manifested through several "King Kong"-like shots from an approaching boat to a mysteriously forbidden realm, renders the island a microcosm of the territory of Joseon dynasty Korea as a whole. In response to Yi Won-gyu's insistence on applying Confucian values of humanistic treatment on the islanders labouring in the paper mill, an irritated Kim In-gu retorts, "Don't judge everything here according to [your] mainland ways". He says this presumably not only to legitimate his strict disciplining of the mill's workers but also to emphasise the island's separate existence—an idealised world of

advances driven by technology, efficiency, and commerce. But this place, not unlike the Korean peninsula itself, demonstrates also the baneful effects of isolation, as shown by mob behaviours and mentalities wrenched by dread, superstition, and self-interest. A female shaman, who invokes the dead Gang's wrath in one of her ceremonies, supplies comfort but also instigates such group anxiety through her dispensation of charms to ward off the merchant's vengeful spirit. Won-gyu wants to prevent the island's agitation from spilling beyond its shores, but this is anything but straightforward.

Indeed, what Won-gyu discovers painfully is the incapacity of the island to distance itself from the woes besetting the mainland, especially Korea's political troubles. The original military prosecutor sent to the island in 1801, who had levied the false accusations against the merchant Gang, was motivated by a desire to exploit the political persecution of not just Catholics but of members of the Namin ("Southerners") party in court politics at the time. Following the death in 1800 of King Jeongjo and of the hopes for enlightenment and tolerance that his reign had represented (Chap. 3), the most visible victims of this factional fighting was the great scholar Dasan. This happened in the political vacuum of 1801, as if determined by the great king's death and the subsequent lack of a stabilising adult monarch. That year, a secret letter smuggled by the Catholic Hwang Sa-yeong that begged the Chinese court for intervention in Korea was discovered by the government near the border, which provided the impetus to carry out the court's Catholic persecution and a purge of the Namin party. In order to advance his political career, that previous prosecutor had taken advantage of the financial connection between a Namin official named "Jeong"—the same surname as Dasan's—and the merchant Gang by framing the merchant, regardless of its terrible miscarriage of justice.

Meanwhile, In-gu's father Kim Chi-seong presents himself as an aggrieved nobleman who acts like a lord on the island in the absence of real officials, as not even the hereditary clerks, or *hyangni*, reside here. Indeed, Kim complains that despite his stellar background as an aristocratic scholar-official, he gets treated no better than a *hyangni* underling because of the taint of that 1801 episode. But Kim himself had acceded in 1801 to the wicked plans pursued by the earlier prosecutor and his accomplices in framing Gang. Indeed, Kim admits to Won-gyu that he held no sympathy for Gang, because the merchant, with his accumulation of individual wealth and disregard for birth-based status hierarchies, had offended both the natural order of things and even the Joseon state itself. In-gu,

Kim's son and current director of the paper mill, calls attention to the evils of passing down such harmful Confucian values through fateful patrilineal identities, for In-gu himself suffers from this practice. Perhaps In-gu is a secret Catholic, but like Confucianism, Catholicism is also severely stained in the film. Although customarily associated in perceptions of nineteenth-century Korean history with science, equality, and western advances, the portrayal of Catholicism in "Blood Rain", while muted, gets absorbed into the film's spotlight on bloody retribution and the cult of martyrdom (allegorised as chickens getting slaughtered) for the sake of salvation and conciliation.

While adopting many of "Blood Rain's" symbols and set in a similar time and place, "The Book of Fish" (*Jasan Eobo* ["Black Mountain's fish species"]; Yi Jun-ik, 2020) is a far less gruesome and more encouraging complement to the earlier film. From master maker of historical films Yi Jun-ik, "The Book of Fish" is the title of a book about marine life written in exile by Jeong Yak-jeon, one of the three famed Jeong brothers at the turn of the nineteenth century who stood at the centre of the early network of Korean Catholicism. As noted above, far more celebrated than Yak-jeon in this regard was his younger brother Yag-yong, or Dasan, who like the main character was sent into exile instead of being executed for heresy, unlike their middle brother, who refused to recant in any way. Notably, the story begins with an audience between Yak-jeon and King Jeongjo shortly before the latter's untimely death in 1800, in which the monarch, more tolerant than his ministers of the new religion spreading among his subjects, counsels the scholar about the primacy of survival. In addition to adding to the hagiographical treatment of King Jeongjo (Chap. 3), this scene seems to suggest that dying for an ideology (or religion) is of limited value to one's society or country. Such a notion is put to the test when the three brothers are ensnared in the mass persecution of Catholic followers in 1801, and Yak-jeon stops short of insisting on enacting Catholic teachings that go against, among other things, the Confucian ancestral rituals.

Catholicism remains a central theme in the story of Yak-jeon's long exile on a remote island off the southwestern coast. Upon his arrival he encounters colourful villagers and a particularly talented young man, Chang-dae, an expert fisherman who also seems to be the only inhabitant possessing something beyond functional literacy. A concubine's child of a corrupt and powerful local aristocrat on the mainland, Chang-dae strives to imbibe the Confucian classics and even staunchly rebukes Jeong for the

latter's brush with Catholicism. Meanwhile, the aristocratic newcomer to the island grows increasingly curious about Chang-dae's fish, as well as practical matters in general, while living among these salt-of-the-earth islanders. Soon the pair agree to exchange expertise—with the scholar training the young man in the finer points of Confucianism as well as other intellectual pursuits, and Chang-dae teaching Jeong about the fascinating varieties of sea life around the island, enough to inspire the latter to write a book about it.

This partnership of opposites is the motif for demonstrating the stirrings of western-inspired scientific learning and the more comprehensive turn towards practical sciences and knowledge—still only recognised by a very small slice of the learned population—that Catholicism began to inspire. Chang-dae's striving, meanwhile, for the classic Confucian education (ironically, while being inspired by Dasan's writings) seems bound for disappointment once he fulfils his dreams to become a local official, while Yak-jeon's death before completing his Book of Fish symbolises the incomplete, aborted attempt at the time to push for a comprehensive change in the country. The corruption emanating from the aristocratic class and the court, with a dominating Queen Dowager wielding power in the place of a child monarch, is portrayed as a stumbling block. But so is the hold of Confucianism, and specifically Neo-Confucianism (*Seongnihak*), after four centuries as the Joseon dynasty's official creed. Here the finer details in the storyline are worth considering as well, for Yak-jeon's other counterpart-companion is his younger brother Dasan, who is serving his own exile on the fringes of the mainland. Over more than a decade in separated but simultaneous banishment, the two exchange long-distance letters that describe how the younger brother became extraordinarily productive in crafting books—based on his exile experience—that refined Confucian teachings towards the goal of cultivating better (local) officials, while the older brother remained relatively content with his less productive scholarly turn, at least in terms of writing, towards more earthly matters.

The wondrous qualities of motley sea life and their functional service to livelihoods thus serve as metaphors for interest in the people's everyday lives—a true reflection of "practical learning"—as well as in the material realm in general. Panoramic shots of Yak-jeon and other individuals standing against the expanse of nature, whether the sea, the island, or the sky, reinforce this message, as does the plight of commoners in the face of extortionate government officials, especially the *hyangni* clerks to whom

Dasan had directed much of his criticism. These officials thus represent the weight of four centuries of Joseon statecraft that had long entered a stage of decay, reflecting also the degradation of Confucian ideals. Catholic and western teachings can offer a way out of this predicament, Jeong Yak-jeon seems to imply, by presenting a model for preserving the best features of the old teachings while learning new lessons, and even for re-imagining the basis of the social order, an admittedly confronting prospect for traditional Confucian elites.

The Prince Regent and National Destiny

The balance and ambivalence of competing directions, suggesting the surviving possibility of comprehensive renewal even after King Jeongjo's death in 1800, provide the overarching subtext in a group of films set in the mid-nineteenth century. Judgement on the realisation of such promised change, however, is almost uniformly negative, and this process of potential leading to disappointment is unmistakably personified in Prince Heungseon, known also by his official royal title of "Daewongun". The Daewongun came to power through the extraordinary coincidence of the ascent to the throne, at least in name, of a series of four boys over the first seven decades of the century. When these circumstances resulted in his own son (later, King Gojong) becoming monarch in 1864 despite coming from a relatively inert royal lineage, Prince Heungseon exercised supreme power officially as the Prince Regent until the mid-1870s and behind the scenes even thereafter. The cinematic portrayal of this man, however, mostly focuses on the years before his formal takeover, as he is shown pushing reforms in staunch opposition to entrenched courtly forces. Once in power, however, his failure to follow through—in fact, his increasingly reactionary stance—seems to encapsulate the kingdom's inability to correct its fatal course, despite the continuing growth of signs beyond politics that seem to forecast a new era, such as science, Catholicism, populism, and, most interestingly, commerce and mass culture.

The emerging commodification of popular culture is the primary historical undercurrent in a film, set in the 1840s, that actually does not feature the Daewongun: "Heung-boo—the Revolutionist" (*Heungbu—Geullo saesang eul bakkun ja* ["Heungbu—the man who changed his world through writing"]; Jo Geun-hyeong, 2017). This film imaginatively crafts an origins story of the famous folk tale from the time, "Heungbu and Nolbu" (*Heungbu-jeon*), a version of the archetypical fraternal

confrontation morality tale, in which the abused but kind-hearted younger brother, Heungbu, gains triumph in the end. (This outcome is usually taken as an expression of grievance against the prevailing Confucian ethos of primogeniture.) But unlike "Blood Rain", the film struggles in its efforts to draw historical connections, which come across as strained and almost arbitrary. In addition to the folk story, elements of the historical context include the *pansori* singing and mask dance genres; the rising material influences on literature; the disabling political corruption by royal consort families and local rulers; the incessant popular uprisings and their social consequences; and the increasing interest in *Jeonggam-nok*, a book of prophecy that had inspired the 1811–1812 Hong Gyeong-nae rebellion (also alluded to). Even Catholicism is incorporated into the storyline. Many plot holes thus get exposed, and the messaging seems clichéd, despite the intriguing application of the dominant trope of Korean War films (Chap. 6): the separation of siblings and its implications for the balance between fate and freedom. Here, there are actually two pairs of divided brothers, with the Heungbu character, a successful author of pulp fiction, compelled to write a story about not his own sibling situation but rather that of a second fraternal pair, who then become the actual models for the famous folk tale, in this retelling. A simple parable about karma and character is thus transposed to the realm of the debilitating politics of the time, but with the suggested stakes being nothing less than the country's fate.

Similar in context and outlook, at least in dealing with the rise of popular cultural forms, is a film set in the 1860s and 1870s, "The Sound of a Flower" (*Dori hwaga* ["The Song of peach and plum flowers"]; Yi Jong-pil, 2015), which shifts the artistic balance from writing to singing but suffers from an unclear centre of gravity. As the film's title suggests, the story features a pioneering female singer, Jin Chae-seon, of the Korean musical genre of *pansori*, which features usually a solo vocalist accompanied by a drummer. (This orientation in the film was due, undoubtedly, to the emphasis on crafting a lead for the K-pop star Bae Suji, who takes this demanding role.) In the story, the Chae-seon character fulfils the trope of the struggling artist from a disadvantaged background, in this case both of class and gender, who overcomes the odds through diligence, principle, and singular pursuit of her craft. As in "Heung-boo", spotlighted are the two canonical folk tales (and partnering *pansori* works) centred on young female characters—Chunhyang and Sim Cheong, respectively—with Jin

Chae-seon becoming an avatar for both of them. As such, however, the film presents itself substantially as a generic period piece.

Aspects of the film's storyline that could have been much more grounded in the historical circumstances of the mid-nineteenth century include a sub-plot that features Chae-seon's teacher, Shin Jae-hyo, the master systematiser of the *pansori* art form. As a historical figure, however, Shin represented much more than simply the artistic source of the standardisation of *pansori* as a musical genre. Shin was also a local hereditary clerk, or *hyangni*, which as noted in a brief aside in the film meant that his day job was director of personnel (Ibang) for a county government office. The constraints imposed by his subordinated status, albeit one that stood closer to the ruling elite than to the "low-born" (a misrepresentation in the film) or even commoner class, become important to the narrative. And given the popular perception surrounding this hereditary clerkly class, as shown in the other films analysed in this chapter, it is striking that this particular *hyangni* clerk receives a positive portrayal or at least not that of caricature. Indeed, Shin Jae-hyo's contributions to the development of popular culture stemmed directly from official clerkly duties—which centred on tax collection but included just about every facet of local administration—that allowed these figures habitually to measure the pulse of the people.[37] Thus, it was no surprise that a person of such background would become the creative force behind this expression of mass sentiment, just as those of *hyangni* status also helped develop other popular artistic genres such as mask dances and visual arts.

Regrettably, the downplaying of this societal component constitutes a missed opportunity, especially since the plot features Shin's chance encounter with the future royal regent, Prince Heungseon, before the latter would become the Daewongun in the mid-1860s. And here, as with other films set in the nineteenth century, the contrast between these two phases of the Daewongun's impact—before and after taking political power—becomes a key element to the storyline: The Prince Regent helps promote, albeit for somewhat nefarious purposes, the further systematisation of Shin's efforts at developing *pansori* performance and at training his singers, especially that of his female protege. (Unfortunately, this relationship between Shin and his apprentice singer gets laden with an unnecessary and clumsy romantic angle.) As with the lack of consideration for the social, governmental, and indeed artistic significance of the *hyangni* clerks, clearer attention to the cultural implications of the Daewongun's political projects, such as his crackdown on Confucian academies, would have

contributed substantially to the film's historical framing. It also would have allowed a more meaningful depiction of how the conflict between longstanding social practices and emerging popular cultural forms reflected socio-political changes in the nineteenth century.

Along these lines, a more effective dramatisation of the historical context comes from a biopic of the storied geographer Kim Jeong-ho: "Map Against the World" (*Gosanja: Daedong yeoji-do* ["Kim Jeong-ho: The Great Map of Korea"]; Gang U-seok, 2016). By traversing much of the country in the mid-nineteenth century on foot, Kim produced a remarkably detailed and accurate map of Korea, one still considered a major cultural landmark. In presenting his travels as a process of discovering (and claiming) the nation through its territory, the camera follows Kim's journey across numerous lush landscapes, towering peaks such as Mount Baekdu (Image 2), and even the open seas—where Kim encounters Japanese marauders near the Dokdo Islets. Reminiscent of a scene in "Forbidden Dream" (Chap. 1), in which the former slave Jang Yeong-sil lies down next to incarcerated comrades to look up at the starry night, "Map Against the World" shows Kim and a fellow commoner similarly gazing at the heavens, which signals that the natural world, whether land or sky, knows no hierarchies. Such an egalitarian framing comes through also in Kim's explanations for his restless wanderings, such as "On the road, there is no social status, no distinction between high and low", and in his claims that his map will allow "regular people" (*baekseong*) to gain

Image 2 Kim Jeong-ho encountering the "Heavenly Lake" at the top of Mount Baekdu, from "Map Against the World"

greater awareness of their surroundings. To reinforce this message, the storyline creates a connection to the early nineteenth-century Hong Gyeong-nae rebellion, during which Kim's father, a leader in the uprising, perishes because he held an inaccurate map and a faulty compass. In sum, Kim insists, geographical knowledge constitutes awareness of the nation, thus information and understanding cannot remain the preserve of elites but rather must be made available to everyone ("I resolved to make a map that people who need it can always use".).

Naturally such ideals clash with the enforcers of the exploitative and elitist power structure, starting with the Daewongun himself, the main secondary character in the film. The Daewongun's meeting with Kim ends in confrontation precisely because of this difference in outlook. Granted, this is a wholly fictionalised encounter, but the point is to depict the Daewongun as both antagonist and partner, one who seeks reform but who is primarily concerned with amassing power and therefore suspicious of Kim's egalitarian motives. The other source of antagonism is the Andong Kim family of high officials, who represent the corrupt stranglehold on the court by consort families in this era of weak monarchs, a familiar trope in films and tv dramas set in the nineteenth century. The basic plot line of "Map Against the World", then, is the repeated suppression of Kim's ambitions and grand cartographical project by these two political forces. Meanwhile, Kim is joined in sympathetic support by figures such as Shin Heon, a military official who later helped the court negotiate the opening of trade relations with Japan, resulting in the Treaty of Ganghwa in 1876. And just as much as the fiendish consort families, the Daewongun, who actually worked fiercely to curb their abuses, also stands responsible for the Catholic persecutions, which the film, through harrowing scenes, shows victimising both Kim Jeong-ho's love interest and his daughter. Thus, faith in Catholic teachings, much like knowledge and awareness of the nation's physical contours, provides promises as well as pitfalls in this era, with both potential trajectories embodied in the figure of the Daewongun.

In the film "Feng Shui" (*Myeongdang* ["Fortuitous spaces"]; Bak Huigon, 2018), the Daewongun is no longer a supporting character but rather the lead figure. As the (Chinese) term for the film's official English title suggests, the motivic sphere of knowledge is not geography but rather geomancy, an ideology and science with over a millennium of tradition in Korean history. But the story, set in the mid-nineteenth century, is actually a highly dramatised retelling of the rise of Prince Heungseon, before he

would gain political supremacy as the Daewongun. The film suggests that the roots of the Daewongun's grip on politics thereafter, as the country was inundated with threats from both within and without, lay in the 1850s, when Prince Heungseon, a descendant of a relatively inert royal line, cunningly and ruthlessly manoeuvred himself into position to establish his son as the next monarch. Most of all, the prince is portrayed as having recognised and appropriated the connection between, on the one hand, the corrupt politics of consort family domination and, on the other, the grand fatalistic power of geomantic forces.

Heungseon's belief that destiny was attached to a favourable piece of land, especially for burial plots, arises through his friendship with a professional geomancer, who works for the government agency (Gwansanggam) responsible for such matters. In many ways these characters, as well as the larger story, mirror those of the "Face Reader" (Chap. 1), which was set in the fifteenth century. Like in the earlier film (both part of the same trilogy), the story unfolds through a good-natured fortune teller's power of prescience—appropriated by some political actors while targeted by others who see it as a threat—which results in the soothsayer paying a heavy personal price. There is also a madam of a courtesan house, a comic-relief sidekick character, and evil-doers from the realm of the privileged aiming to control the throne, with the stakes reaching the level of the dynasty's survival.[38] While not as engrossing or reaching the level of depth or accomplishment in probing the social hierarchy implications as "The Face Reader", "Feng Shui" does well demonstrate, with the corruption accompanying the takeover of politics by consort families, the severe reach of socio-political exploitation. And in signalling again the prescriptive solution of a strong monarchy as a protector of both the country and the people, "Feng Shui" extends the message, discussed above, of the baneful consequences of the passing of King Jeongjo in the signal year of 1800, just as the troubled nineteenth century began.

Hence the historical subtext of the film, unveiled as it unfolds in the second half, is not just the customary wrangling over royal succession, but the fate of both the Joseon dynasty and the nation's autonomy over the nineteenth century. The discovery of and contestation over "fortuitous spaces", especially for family gravesites, thus represent not just the narrative's main plot point of conflict but, given what would later occur, the struggle for the country's survival. Thus, like the island in "Blood Rain", a prime burial spot serves as a stand-in for Korean territory as a whole. Likewise, Heungseon's turn from defender of the monarchy against the

ravenous consort families to an exploiter of this connection between land and power anticipates the collective downfall to come. His machinations, coming shortly before his son's ascension to the throne, were signalled by his forcible appropriation of an auspicious area occupied by a thousand-year-old Buddhist temple, which in the film he burns down in order to use the grounds for his own father's grave. This benefits him personally, but in the larger scheme of things, the scene of the temple going up in flames forecasts the country's doing the same a few decades later.

End Times of the Late Nineteenth Century

The downfall would eventually arrive in the nineteenth century's closing decades, but the signs, in the hindsight of cinematic recreation, had been there all along, and here the apocalyptic becomes the overriding sense conveyed in two films that metaphorically and otherwise portray the end times, starting with "Kundo: Age of the Rampant" (*Gundo: Millan ui sidae* ["Gundo: The Age of people's uprisings"]; Yun Jong-bin, 2014). A descending sun on the horizon both opens and closes the film, the former instance to relay the grave decay and decrepitness of conditions in the countryside, and the latter to suggest a contrastingly hopeful future as the film's heroes ride off into the sunset. Scenes of horse riding in an open field are the most notable examples of the film's cheekiness with genre, as both the cinematography and music seem to suggest a spaghetti western, one with clear moral lines of conflict and lots of close-ups of facial expressions in decisive moments. But "Kundo" is also very much a tale of class injustice, a film that one imagines could have been made in North Korea. Even here, however, things are not quite what one expects, for the storyline, while drawn from familiar folkloric allegory, also presents compelling digressions from the script, beginning with the antagonist himself, played with extraordinary verve and range by the actor Gang Dong-won.

That character, named Jo Yun, is a spitting replica of the most storied righteous bandit in Korean history, Hong Gil-dong, a real-life figure from the fifteenth century whose fictionalised exploits were immortalised in the late Joseon era through one of the earliest Korean vernacular novels. Countless films and television dramas have portrayed this legendary hero or a contemporary spinoff of him, almost always to use Hong as the everyman fighter for social justice.[39] But in "Kundo", he is the evil enemy. Like Hong Gil-dong, Jo Yun is a concubine's son of a rich and powerful father, who eventually mistreats and abandons his own son for having been born

illegitimate. And like Hong, the burdens and resentments from this stigma lead Jo Yun to take matters into his own hands, as he trains himself to become a swashbuckling fighter and alpha male. In the "Kundo" story, however, he uses his martial skills and fierce determination to become a ruthless landlord and usurer who builds personal power through corruption, exploitation, accumulation, and callous disregard for average people. He is, in short, the budding wicked capitalist of the socialist imaginary, a century before the tycoons of modern-day South Korea.

Aligned against Jo is a collection of ragtag righteous warriors calling themselves "Kundo" (Gundo), who display everything else about Hong Gil-dong's famed group except for Hong himself, particularly through its activities of raiding the rich and corrupt and then redistributing the gains to the poor and exploited. Indeed, a voice-over narration states that these miscreants take themselves as descendants of Hong Gil-dong. Rather than from a single leader, however, the band's leadership comes through collaboration among characters who are all victims of the country's intractable social discrimination, including a Buddhist monk, a courtesan, and a former government interpreter. They are later joined by someone from the lowest of all hereditary social ranks, a butcher named Dolmuchi from the *baekjeong* class of outcasts. After having abandoned his lucrative assignment from Jo Yun to kill one of Jo's family members, Dolmuchi suffers a terrible personal loss and is now set on revenge. Here, his facility with knives serves him well as he prepares for the culminating battle against Jo, who has repeatedly shown himself an unbeatable swordsman.

The second half of the film is preoccupied with running this action-movie buildup towards and presentation of the final fight, but the first part of the film implants intriguing nuggets of the story's historical setting as "the age of the people's uprisings", in line with the film's Korean subtitle. As noted above, the nineteenth century was an era of mammoth revolts, the last of which, in 1894, led directly to the fall of the Joseon dynasty and eventually of national sovereignty itself. The year 1862, supposedly the film's setting, was the year of the great mid-century popular rebellion, known commonly as the Imsul ("1862") Uprisings, which began in the Jinju area along the south-central coast. "Kundo", however, does not allude explicitly to this event and, interestingly, is mostly set in the south-western coast, in Naju, known for its wide swaths of agricultural plains. The Kundo band, meanwhile, is headquartered on the opposite side of Mount Jiri from Jinju, but that is as far as the mid-nineteenth-century geographical contextualisation goes.

This lack of historically connecting detail can leave the messaging somewhat open-ended, or so it seems. As in the "The Face Reader" (Chap. 1), the ostensibly evil antagonist, though in this case completely fictional, can be taken as the carrier of the modern free will, personified in a figure, Jo Yun, who defies his hereditarily determined fate and, through personal skill and determination, crafts his own world. The problem is that he uses this personal freedom to do not good but rather the opposite. Like Kim In-gu in "Blood Rain", Jo even celebrates his vanguard role in the upcoming age in which business, individualism, and self-determination will prevail. Such an attitude is observed with bewilderment by the Kundo fighters themselves, who speak often of fate and wonder how Jo could have turned out this way, given his own personal struggles against prejudice and oppression; they are thus determined to make him "set his fate correctly" in accordance with social justice.

It is doubtful, however, that ambiguity is intended here, for Jo ultimately meets his comeuppance at the hands of the regular people, a decidedly populist outcome. Indeed, the mass-oriented, socialist angle—minus the twentieth-century leadership cult, significantly—also comes to the fore. The Kundo community's home is depicted as an idyllic retreat nestled in the mountains, where food, camaraderie, and cooperation are plentiful. In this sense, the film echoes the communal idealism of "Welcome to Dongmakgol" (Chap. 6), set a century later in the Korean War but released in theatres a decade before "Kundo". The closing shot of Kundo swashbucklers riding into the sunset thus offers an alternative path for the country's modern destiny, in both the determinative period of the mid-nineteenth century and beyond—a path that does not end in catastrophe.

By most accounts, however, the historical trajectory of the latter half of the nineteenth century did indeed end in catastrophe, in a process that directly led to the loss of national autonomy in the opening decade of the twentieth century (Chap. 5). These decades, from the 1860s to 1890s, provide the backdrop for a groundbreaking, celebrated, but ultimately puzzling epic, "Chihwaseon" (*Chwihwaseon* ["Drunken painting immortal"]; 2002), which turned out to be the last box office success from the doyen craftsman of historical films, Im Kwon-taek. A biopic of the painter Jang Seung-eop—and similarly to "The President's Barber" (Chap. 7), which was set in the 1960s and 1970s—"Chihwaseon" positions the protagonist as accidental witness and participant in major episodes of history. In this manner, as "Blood Rain" and "The Book of Fish" did for the earliest years of the nineteenth century, "Chihwaseon" gathers together the

main historical forces converging on this decisive era. The film's portrait of the painter, however, does not resolve easily into an understanding of whether he represents, in such precarious times, the country's fate or something else. Much of this uncertainty stems from the choppy editing that strings together countless short scenes in a way that leaves big plot holes as well as jarring disjunctures and transitions.

This effect might have been intentional but also feels like a result of trying to cover too much ground, which is understandable, given the film's grand purpose of celebrating Korean painting. Such a motive connects Jang to the great artistic legacy of the latter Joseon era, but also portrays him as a tragic figure standing for the debilitation of the late nineteenth century. Thus, he acts as an observer and passerby in the alleyways of Seoul during major putsch attempts in 1882 and 1884, with the latter scene preceded immediately in time by Jang's meeting the radical ringleader of that 1884 coup, Kim Ok-gyun. Jang is introduced to Kim by the artist's mentor throughout the film, a reformist government interpreter (*yeokkwan*) likely based on the historical figure of O Gyeong-seok, who helped guide the early "Enlightenment Party" leaders behind the 1884 takeover attempt. Seoul also is the setting for a later scene, from 1894, when the captured leader of the Donghak Uprising, Jeon Bong-jun, is paraded through the streets (Image 3), and a Japanese admirer of Jang's tells him that only his paintings will remain in the dying dynasty. Jang roams the countryside as well, witnessing major events such as the gruesome aftermath of the Catholic persecution of 1866, and most notably the harrowing spark of the Donghak conflagration in early 1894 (Image 4), as well as its tragic end a half-year later, when the peasants are mowed down by rifle-bearing Japanese troops. Jang's mentor, now in hiding in the countryside, remarks presciently that the recent unrest created an ominous emptiness into which ravenous forces from the outside world entered.

The countryside also is central to the rich visual symbolism, which is obviously a focus, given the film's subject matter. Considering also its release date of 2000, the numerous scenes of the painter walking along or gazing into the diverse expanse of the country's natural surroundings probably helped establish this *hallyu* cinematic convention of using the country's bucolic scenery as the canvas of choice for envisaging national heritage. The focus on backdrop also allows many allusions to Korea's artistic traditions, including the establishment of painting(s) as emblematic of cultural identity. This orientation appears in scenes of artists

Image 3 Jeon Bong-jun, captured leader of the Donghak movement, being paraded through the streets of Seoul in 1894, from "Chihwaseon"

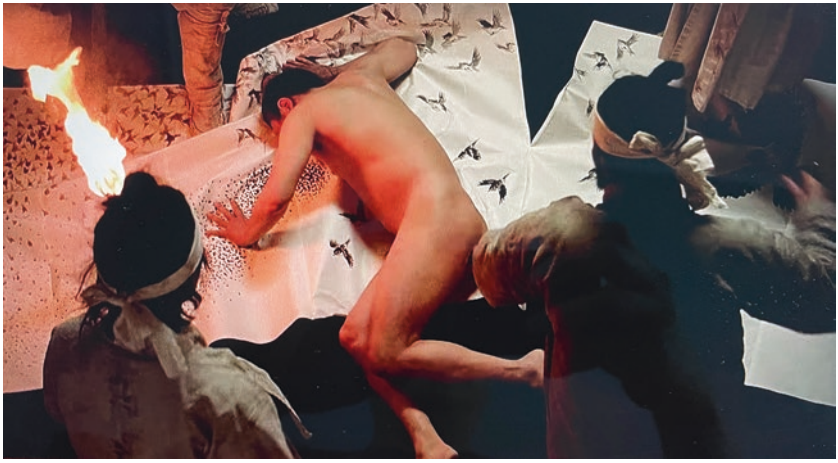

Image 4 The painter Jang Seung-eop caught in the Donghak Uprising of 1894, in "Chihwaseon"

discussing famous painters and their craft and of the recreation of well-known scenes from classic visual artefacts, from plum paintings and landscapes to images of flocking birds and fornicating humans. The bold splash of colours and the thickness of lines seem to suggest Jang's modernist, individualist inclinations of resistance to or digression away from received understanding. Most prominent in these blotches is red colouring, which stands for blood, rebellion, and fire in tandem with shifting thematic emphases in the storyline and appears prominently in the dress of the *gisaeng* courtesans appearing serially in Jang's life. This, too, draws directly from Joseon's graphical traditions, especially the glamorous eighteenth-century paintings of Shin Yun-bok, whose works become recreated in the film as both paintings and scenes.

The simultaneous attachment to Joseon traditions, on the one hand, and resistance or escape from them, on the other, add to the multiple messaging of the film concerning this period's historical significance. Beyond the real events, the sense of material transformation comes across in the appearance of modern instruments like a magnifying glass or the growing primacy of commercial considerations in creating art. And the trope of the imminent danger in this era is faithfully observed through the mentor character and his circles of associates struggling against the ravages of internal corruption and foreign interference, as most ominously depicted in the suggestive appearances of Chinese and Japanese troops in the Seoul streets. But even the social commentary is neither sturdy nor steadfast. Jang's suffering from discrimination due to his "base" (*cheon-han*) birth background is played up early in the narrative, but later as an established and famed artist he seems not to carry a consciousness of his early struggles, at one point even getting angry at his mentor for suggesting that the painter include more social realism in his works. "L'art pour l'art" becomes his ideological stance, at least until it does not, after he becomes swayed by direct experiences and core loyalties. Jang emerges, then, as a classic genius yearning to break free of convention and the trappings thereof, both artistically and otherwise. But primal cravings for sex and drink, more than experience, seem to fuel his inner drive. What emerges overall, then, is a character who lacks definition or direction, which is characteristic of the film itself and perhaps of this historical period as well.

In the end, Jang's life stands for the idea of ethereal eternity, as indicated by the film's title, which means "Drunken painting immortal". He disappeared to history without a trace, a void that the film fills with a

bewildering ending. Jang Seung-eop's aimless, or restless, incapacity to arrive at a set understanding of his place and principles reflects that of Korea at the time, the film seems to say. If so, this message would be symbolised, towards the end of the story, by his potentially greatest work being set ablaze amid the Donghak Uprising (Image 4), just as the thousand-year-old Buddhist temple was torched at the end of "Feng Shui". Indeed, as a symbol and instrument of fate, fire becomes the closing theme through its determinative but ungraspable force (an alternative English title for the film is "Painted Fire"). It is as if fate, like fire, cannot be controlled in light of its unstable nature; it is capable of producing destruction as much as light, warmth, and uplift. If so, for the purposes of historical understanding, "Chihwaseon" provides a fitting closing judgement on the nineteenth century, filled with visions and omens of cataclysm but also promising hopes, however unrealised, in individual defiance.

Chapter Five. Crafting Independence: Gender, Class, and Reorientation under Colonial Rule, 1896–1945

Playbill
"Assassination" (*Amsal*); Choe Dong-hun, 2015
"Gabi" ("Coffee"); Jang Yun-hyeon, 2012
"YMCA Baseball Team" (*YMCA yagu-dan*); Kim Hyeon-seok, 2002
"Private Eye" (*Geurimja sarin* ["Shadow murders"]); Bak Dae-min, 2009
"A Resistance" (*Hanggeo: Yu Gwan-sun iyagi* ["Resistance: the story of Yu Gwan-sun"]); Jo Min-ho, 2019
"Blue Swallow" (*Cheongyeon*); Yun Jong-chan, 2005
"My Heart" (*Jeong* ["Affection"]); Bae Chang-ho, 2000
"Radio Dayz"; Ha Gi-ho, 2008
"Modern Boy"; Jeong Ji-u, 2008
"The Handmaiden" (*Agassi* [The Countess]); Park Chan-wook, 2016
"Love, Lies" (Hae-eohwa ["Flowers that understand words"]); Bak Heung-sik, 2016
"Spirits' Homecoming" (*Gwihyang* ["Homecoming"]); Jo Jeong-nae, 2016

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_6

"Malmoe: The Secret Mission" (*Malmoi* ["Collecting words"]); Eom Yu-na, 2019
"2009: Lost Memories"; Yi Si-myeong, 2002
"The Tiger" (*Daeho* ["Great tiger"]); Bak Hun-jeong, 2015
"Age of Shadows" (*Miljeong* ["Moles"]); Kim Ji-un, 2016
"Anarchist from the Colony" (*Bak Yeol*); Yi Jun-ik, 2017
"Battleship Island" (*Gunhamdo* ["Hashima Island"]); Ryu Seung-wan, 2017
"The Good, the Bad, and the Weird" (*Joheun nom, nappeun nom, isang-han nom*); Kim Ji-un, 2008

In her new posh home in Seoul in 1933, with Korea now approaching a quarter-century of Japanese colonial rule, the lead character of "Assassination", An Og-yun (played by Gianna Jun), stares at hanging family pictures, then turns and spots the wedding gown prepared for her. This causes her to weep uncontrollably—not out of sentimentality but rather in shock and horror at the realisation of what her life had become, at least potentially. For the dress marks an upcoming marriage to a high-ranking Japanese military officer, and on the walls are images not of herself but of her long-separated identical twin whose identity An has appropriated in order to kill the most notorious Korean collaborator under Japanese occupation, her biological father. While Og-yun was growing up under severe conditions in Manchuria into a fighter for the armed independence struggle, this man had raised her unsuspecting sister in privileged surroundings in Korea while betraying his nation. The plot device of separated twins thus highlights the interaction of nature and nurture in shaping people and perspectives under foreign domination. Indeed, the film, while featuring a range of mostly male "assassins", shares with the best cinematic treatments set in colonial Korea the centring of a female character—and often the pairing of female characters, as is the case with "Assassination"—to signal both the fixity and fluidity of identity, as well as the deeper stakes of resistance and adaptation under Japanese rule.

Unsurprisingly Korea's 35-year experience of colonisation—starting in 1910 with forced annexation into the Japanese empire and ending with Japan's defeat in the Pacific War in 1945—has inspired a rich spectrum of

imaginings by South Korean cinema ever since liberation.[40] This enterprise has served steadily to reinforce imperatives, backed by the prevailing ethos of state and society, that lie close to the heart of contemporary Korean identity but also to question received wisdom by adding more interpretive layers in depicting this period. Granted, the righteous struggle for independence against Japan remains the overarching premise, but the undeniably massive and modern transformations occasioned by colonial rule continue to help expand the notion of independence that arose in response. The *hallyu* films set in the colonial era, indeed even before—during the 15-year period directly preceding annexation in 1910—have thereby applied a full range of cinematic artistry to portraying this crucial part of the nation's recent past.

The result has been remarkable on many levels, starting with the very act, following South Korea's 1987 democratisation, of approaching this period with greater circumspection and sophistication.[41] But the most striking characteristic of films set in the colonial period has been the unmistakable primacy of female characters: contrasting, mirroring, interchangeable, or dual (or duelling) women who elaborate on the meanings of resistance, independence, and freedom in the face of (gendered) fate. These works thus deliberately stand in contrast to the traditional glorification of the vigorous fight against Japan, which nonetheless remains an abundantly recurring element, by focusing on aspirational female protagonists. Such characters struggle against not only foreign occupiers but also the traditional Korean structures and behaviours that the invaders brought into relief. In likely reflecting early twenty-first-century developments in South Korea as much as a pursuit of historical veracity, female agency thus stands against or overcomes the power of social class, patriarchal conventions, and familial expectations that must be fractured or reconfigured amid the dislocations of foreign occupation.

Prelude to the Takeover, 1896–1910

Three films set in the 15-year period leading up to the Japanese annexation of 1910 establish the thematic parameters of the films examined in this chapter as a whole. In "Gabi" (Jang Yoon-hyeon, 2012), a main female character's conflicts of identity result in the reinforcement of national loyalty amid the disruptive onset of imperialistic forces in Korea at the turn of the twentieth century. "Gabi", the circulating Korean rendering of "coffee" at the time, stands for a wide range of demands and

choices in a precarious historical moment. In hindsight, this was the last major chance for Koreans to maintain political autonomy, although the film's story ends in 1897 with the optimistic establishment of the Great Korean Empire, the new polity meant to extend the life of the Joseon dynasty but which fell to Japan in a process finalised in 1910.

Most of the film actually takes place in 1896, after the Korean monarch had fled to the Russian legation in Seoul at the start of the year while under perceived threat from Japanese soldiers and Korean reformists.[42] In 1894, the reformists had inaugurated the comprehensive and systematic Gabo Reforms under the protection of Japanese soldiers, who occupied Seoul that summer in order to confront the Chinese military's own entrance into the country at the behest of a Korean court trying to quell a massive peasant revolt. The rapid progression of these three interlocking events of 1894—the Donghak Uprising of the spring and the Gabo Reforms and outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War that summer—accelerated the dialectics of Korean modernisation under imperialism: the internally driven quest for a more just socio-political order while resisting foreign threats; the adoption of modern Japanese, Chinese, and western models while pursuing systemic reform; and the attempt to preserve Korean autonomy within the East Asian regional order while manoeuvring between threatening external powers. The intensifying interaction with the wider world occasioned by imperialism constituted a double-edged sword that sharpened the impulse for significant internal reform but also threatened the country's independence.

Such is the basic conflict that drives "Gabi" and the development of the film's main character, Danya, the Russianised name of a Korean girl who, two decades before the events of 1896, had been orphaned when her father, a government interpreter, was killed by Japanese assassins while working secretly for a Korean king pursuing ties with the West. As the narrative shifts forward to 1896, this basic configuration of competing foreign interests—Japan versus the West, as represented by Russia—still gnaws at that monarch, Gojong, as he tries to negotiate the survival of both himself and his country while in internal exile within the Russian legation. This predicament symbolises the position of Korea itself as the country attempts to remain intact while menaced by imperialist powers. Meanwhile, the adult Danya and her lover "Illyich", a Korean who had been tasked as a child by Danya's father to protect her, have been living in the wilds of Siberia as swashbuckling bandits without any greater loyalties. But they are captured and separated by the Japanese who are trying to

subvert the Russian empire's increasing reach into East Asia. The pair return to Korea, after Illyich has turned into a Japanese agent, while Danya, unaware of his deal with Japan in exchange for her survival, is recruited to work as a Russian language interpreter. The pair reunite, but it is Danya's increasing interaction with the Korean king that ignites her shift in loyalty away from Illyich—and all that he pursued and represented, including now the ruthless interests of Japan—to the Korean monarch, whom she is later tasked by Illyich to poison (through coffee). Danya's change in outlook is symbolised visually by, among other things, one of the main themes in the film: the stark change in her clothing after she chooses to become a Korean court lady, for a court that was now housed in a Russian building. The Korean king himself changes garb back and forth between the traditional gown and a faux-Kaiser uniform, signalling a modern-day emperor, which appears in a well-known image of him from the time. These opposing directions of transformation reflect the flood of foreign influences in the age of high imperialism, which is represented in the film also by guns and trains, as well as by the enveloping presence and utility of coffee, beloved by the Korean king and expertly brewed by the two lovers. Coffee actually tastes better if left a bit bitter, without much sugar, Danya advises.

The predicaments of national loyalty and identity are embodied also in the other main female character, Sadako, who has forced Illyich into service as a Japanese henchman. The adopted daughter of a Japanese official in Korea, as a Korean girl she had been sold off to a Japanese family and now insists to Illyich, while speaking in Korean, that she is "Japanese to the bone". Sadako thus occupies one end of the spectrum of Korean collaborators, staple characters in the films set in this era, but she is at heart not very different from Danya herself. For both, despite the circumstances of their birth and initial upbringing, events in childhood beyond their control set their life directions. And as adults, their identifications take different turns in reflecting freedom or fate, with Danya choosing to return to the course followed by her father while Sadako further traverses the path from her childhood. That they are female characters increases the stakes and depth of their chosen destinies, as if to further burden their search for agency and perspective with the weight of customary expectations, demands, and constraints. But these limitations demonstrate well the restricted options faced by the country and its government at this time. That the film ends optimistically with the founding of the Great Korean Empire in 1897 reflects the ongoing positive reassessment of that

polity, now viewed increasingly in South Korea as the nation's final desperate attempt at autonomous modernisation in defiance of Japanese designs.

Anti-Japanese resistance stands even more squarely at the centre of "YMCA Baseball Team" (Kim Hyeon-seok, 2002). This comedic tale is set in 1905, when the Japanese military, which had arrived in Korea the previous year to prosecute its war against Russia, coerced and bribed Korean high officials into signing a protectorate treaty that transferred control of government finances and foreign affairs to the Japanese. These are the circumstances in which Korea's first organised baseball team forms and fights—on the playing field, not the battlefield—against a Japanese army team that encroaches upon the Koreans' home turf (Image 1). The allegory thus emerges in many forms, with baseball signalling heaps of bigger things: autonomy and independence, modernity, westernisation, resistance, social reform, and national identity and consciousness. That is a lot to carry for a simple game, but it attests to the skill with which the film manages to endow an ostensibly lighthearted, indeed farcical story—replete with gags such as play-by-play announcing, picture-in-picture shots of the game in progress, and even a musical number—with historical weight. Indeed, in hindsight, all those historical issues were in play at this major turning point at the start of Korea's twentieth century, as the country teetered on the brink of subjugation, and were even heightened once into the period of colonial rule.

Image 1 The Korean baseball team being confronted by Japanese soldiers in "YMCA Baseball Team"

Just as symbolically significant is the main character of Ho-chang, a somewhat thick-headed but endearing young man trying to both escape and meet the expectations of his traditionalist Confucian father. He stumbles upon an American missionary compound and meets there a young woman named Jeong-nim, the daughter of real official Min Yeong-hwan—a character appearing also in "Gabi"—who committed ritual suicide in protest against the protectorate treaty of November 1905. (In the film, his funeral is actually the setting for the funniest scene.) Jeong-nim, having been educated abroad, introduces Ho-chang to baseball. Ho-chang is smitten by the game and, less overtly, by the young woman, and both sources of interest serve as windows to the wonders of (westernising) modern change. After some feigned disinterest, he agrees to join the new baseball team organised by the YMCA, which draws young Koreans from a full range of social identities, from a dishevelled man of slave background to his polar opposite, a haughty aristocratic type. They include also the son of one of the high-ranking cabinet ministers condemned for giving away the country in 1905. This young man's own opposite is an independence activist who had studied in Japan and, on a fateful day while practising with the team, encounters a buddy from school days in Tokyo now serving as a Japanese military officer. The friend, who proposes to play a friendly game of baseball, also happens to be the son of the Japanese military overlord, newly arrived to impose Japanese power and quash Koreans' hopes of keeping their autonomy.

This array of forces raises the historical stakes until the predictable final matchup between the Japanese army team and the YMCA team, but the ending is deliberately stripped of any gravitas beyond the token rallying cry of Korean resistance. Instead, the real appeal of "YMCA Baseball Team" comes from its visual and narrative signals that, among other things, foretell—both historically and in films—a dominant motif of the succeeding period of colonial rule as well: the popular formation of modern national identity. One component of this effort is a solidifying sense of common cause against an urgent threat, while another is taking this moment as an opportunity not only to drive out the invaders but to undertake fundamental internal social reform. The challenge is to discern the beneficial elements of modern change—represented by the streetcars, street lights, and bicycles, all impressively recreated for the background sets of Seoul—and integrating them into a renewed Korean existence that is nonetheless established on a traditional basis. This heritage is denoted by items as wide-ranging as Buddhist stupas, the medallion carried by

former secret royal inspectors (*amhaeng eosa*), and the graceful crane, the pose of which Ho-chang adopts in order to improve his batting stance. Learning how to swing a bat is the metaphor for the great challenge facing Ho-chang and indeed all Koreans, for the flying baseball, like adaptation to the modern world, is a fast, curving, elusive target. For this, the brief appearance of western missionaries and the prominence of their game in the story serve as a counterweight to the imposing source of much of the foreign influence at the time, Japan. As one of the team members notes, the Japanese began playing the imported game three decades before the Koreans. Like modernity, however, the Koreans can not only catch up but surpass their rivals. In reality, of course, this was a more complicated matter.

In "Private Eye" (*Geurimja sarin* ["Shadow murders"]; Bak Dae-min, 2009), the messiness of a Korea undergoing conquest—as well as the potential of the modern world, in the form of science and deduction, to attenuate such an unsettling process—provides the setting for another theme of the succeeding colonial era: the decaying, indeed already rotten Korean elite. The setting of 1909 (exactly a century before the film's release year) is meticulously recreated, though not always faithfully.[43] Two years earlier in 1907, the Japanese effectively had taken control over the Korean government through the forced abdication of the monarch and the establishment of Japanese veto powers over Korean government decisions and appointments. And one year later came the formal annexation of 1910. In the year 1909 the Korean independence fighter, An Jung-geun, gunned down the first Japanese overlord of the protectorate, Ito Hirobumi, an assassination that likely accelerated the process towards outright annexation less than a year later. This formal takeover merged the Japanese protectorate administration with the preceding Korean government, which since 1907 had already been dominated by reliably pro-Japanese officials anyway. Such a political context allows the film to highlight one of the seediest features of a Korean polity heading towards the cliff: the exploitation and abuse practised by those pursuing the ugly collusion of the Korean elite with the conquering Japanese. Those now wielding power among both the Japanese rulers and their Korean collaborators come together to jointly engage in heinously decadent practices as a means of exploiting and promoting this degenerate decline.

On the surface, however, "Private Eye" is an un-agitating neo-noir murder mystery, with the eponymous detective teaming up with both a young medical student and a budding female scientist to solve the "shadow

killings" of two high-placed men. What this trio uncovers are Korea's messy entanglements with rapid material change and abuses of privilege that serve as allegories for the country's (formally the "Korean Empire's") deterioration and attendant loss of autonomy. The Independence Gate, originally established in 1897, the year of the Great Korean Empire's birth, in order to rally Koreans' determination to forge an autonomous modernity, makes an appearance for all the wrong reasons, now standing in an empty field devoid of any signs of activity, a marker of the fading cause (Image 2). Elsewhere, what replaces the gate and all that it represents are the distracting lures of opium and a traveling circus, the troupe for which brings together, as with the YMCA baseball team, a motley collection of people of lower social standing. Here, though, they are abused by, in order to divert attention away from, the connivance of corrupt Korean power holders selling out the country. Also appearing, as it does in "Assassination", is the plot device of twins and the accompanying issue of separate but parallel historical paths, but this is one of several underdeveloped and unclear subplots, as is the connection to the annexation that would immediately come the next year in 1910. Indeed, the film stays relatively silent about these realities, eliding the issues of national recovery or even overt resistance, and instead shining a spotlight on the underbelly of Korean society while only hinting at avenues for hope.

Image 2 The detective and his assistant looking at the neglected Independence Gate in a weedy field, from "Private Eye"

Countering Women for Independence

The choice between Japan and the West, dependency and autonomy, and tradition and modernity was anything but a duality, as the lead-up to the annexation of 1910 demonstrated and as the subsequent colonial experience further proved. In portraying these complications, however, the films set in the colonial period often revert to dichotomies, albeit in a crafty way—by presenting the precarious existence of Koreans beholden to and resisting fate through the dualities of female leads. Whether in featuring or implying a contrasting opposite or in pairing individual females, the partnering of women characters stands as an unmistakable thematic core, as if to underscore the greater fluidity, impact, and stakes of the fate-freedom balance in the experience of modern change under colonialism. And at times such a countering juxtaposition is expressed, as in "Gabi" (above) or "Modern Boy" and "The Handmaiden" (below), as an act of disguising and hence of interchangeability, a means to subvert and flatten patriarchal and other hierarchies.

This general rule for the most accomplished *hallyu* films set in the colonial period is actually reinforced by perhaps the most notable exception, "A Resistance" (*Hanggeo: Yu Gwan-sun iyagi* ["Resistance: The story of Yu Gwan-sun"]; Jo Min-ho, 2019), a biopic of the celebrated independence activist and martyred teenaged student Yu Gwan-sun. Here, the only duality is an implied transformation from a curious and increasingly assertive school girl (the brief scenes of which are shown in colour) to Yu's life in captivity for organising locals in her hometown during the March First 1919 mass uprisings against colonial rule. She was jailed for a year thereafter before dying, and most of the film takes place in that time of incarceration, which is presented in black and white in order to convey the stark realities of that experience for her and her female cellmates. Inspired by Yu's brave defiance, they are shown determined to act collectively, including by mimicking the mass public demonstrations as they trundle in sync in their cramped cell to keep their minds and bodies from rotting. However, despite the insights provided by cellmates from various corners of the country, including a *gisaeng* courtesan and even an expectant mother, the focus is firmly on reinforcing the heroic image of Yu in the face of terrible trials.

In unmistakable opposition to such a conventionally hagiographical portrait stands another biopic, "Blue Swallow" (*Cheongyeon*; Yun Jong-chan, 2005), in which the heroine, Bak Gyeong-won (Jpn. "Boku

Keigen"), is anything but an independence activist and indeed almost the reverse: in the 1920s and 1930s, as the first Korean female pilot, she resists all forms of attachment, including national identity, and hence pursues her life goals in the colonial metropole of Japan, where almost the entire story is set. In hindsight, then, controversy surrounding this film was almost inevitable and indeed arose even before its release, which probably explains its box office failure.[44] But "Blue Swallow"—the name of Bak's plane—presents an intriguing anti-hero, most of all through an insistently individualistic character who rejects all customary expectations and predetermined outcomes in order to actualise her agency, even if this leads to self-destruction. In the scope of audience expectations, she comes across as a feminist role model but also as a pro-Japanese collaborator, depending on the relative weight of various indicators from the story and on the semiotics, which is powerful in its visual punch.

The two primary symbols are the airplane—or flying in general—and the sun. Many of the thrilling aerial scenes juxtapose the two objects, showing Bak's biplane in the air against a backdrop that includes the blazing sun. At times it appears she is flying too close, evoking Icarus (Image 3), and at other times she encounters cloudy visibility as an overcasting omen. But mostly the open air, along with the sun that illuminates it, is her comfort zone, where she can enjoy pure freedom and take flight from the restrictions imposed by her impoverished upbringing in Korea, by her Korean ethnicity in Japan, and most of all, by her gender. While a talented student at a Tokyo-area flight school, a love interest appears in the form of

Image 3 Bak Gyeong-won's plane in "Blue Swallow"

Image 4 Korean aviator Bak Gyeong-won peering at the horizon in "Blue Swallow"

a Korean officer in the Japanese military who is also the son of a collaborator, but this character, Ji-hyeok, who rejects everything his father represents, does the most to distract or question Bak's resolute quest. Such a shift is signalled by the appearance of the sun into scenes of the pair together, and Bak herself is shown looking at the fireball in the sky with a creeping sense of doubt even while resisting the urge to settle down (Image 4). The unresolved question is whether the sun should be associated more with the sky and airplanes, and hence of Bak's quest for self-fulfilment, or with Japan, the self-labelled "land of the rising sun", and in turn whether Japan also represents true freedom. Certainly, in both historical terms and the film's presentation, the Korea of her time could not have offered Bak such opportunities.

An extension of this ambiguity comes from whether the viewer or the Bak character finds that the political circumstances of the time inhibit her pursuits or accommodate them. The character herself appears apolitical to a fault, as if purposefully disregarding the impact of colonial hegemony even while being surrounded and constantly prodded by it. As the opening sequences illustrate, the Japanese takeover had instilled a passion for flying and provided her the chance to pursue it, but it also complicated and eventually grounded her ultimate ambitions, clouding her vision with the lure of something more ominous than what she could discern. Such

forces pulling her in opposing directions are embodied in two countering female characters. One is a young woman from Korea who aspires, like Gyeong-won, to overcome hardship by learning to fly and thereby unwittingly becoming a romantic rival. The other is a Japanese pilot who becomes a rival in the air but turns into a sympathetic partner who helps Gyeong-won navigate the emerging political obstacles. Indeed, the sudden and violent intrusion of real-world conflicts into Gyeong-won's detached life as a budding aviator shakes her into a realisation that she cannot escape the larger forces around her. In the end, after discovering that any attempt to return to an embrace of her Korean identity would prove fruitless, she accepts an attachment to Japanese power as an inescapable element of her (now tempered) search for freedom. By the end of the film, as a fantasy sequence suggests, her dreams of reaching for the open skies had always included a darkening foreboding. Indeed the beginning of the film shows her as a girl running in an open field, enthralled by a plane flying overhead and chasing it towards the sun (Image 5). But the

Image 5 Bak Gyeong-won, as a child, chasing a plane heading towards the sun, from "Blue Swallow"

machine is also spewing dark smoke. Her independence would always come at a price, although it is not clear how aware Bak is of this trade-off and, if so, whether she accepts it. As an allegory for Koreans' colonial condition, this would prove as instructive as any other.

If "Blue Swallow" presents a lead female character who actively rejects the burden of human attachments, and more so that of the family, one of the most distinctive and moving films of Korean cinema, "My Heart" (*Jeong* ["Affection"]; Bae Chang-ho, 2000), engages with the theme of female independence during the colonial period in a decidedly different way. Indeed, on the surface, everything about the film contrasts with "Blue Swallow": "My Heart" remains mostly set in the Korean hinterlands, about as far away from Tokyo as possible, and offers only hints at the political circumstances; modern technology makes almost no appearance in the main story, except for important glimpses of a camera and phonograph, and a reference to a movie showing; its main character, Suni, while literate and trained in traditional medicine—a key point—is anything but urbane; and while the pilot Gyeong-won of "Blue Swallow" regards her personal relationships with wariness, Suni embraces human attachment in all its forms, as suggested by the film's title. But at its heart the film also celebrates individual female agency over structured destiny, and while it doesn't reject norms, as the aviator Bak character does, "My Heart" is a feminist take on the debilitating duo of patriarchy and social convention, particularly as they pertain to marriage and family. For this, the film employs that most striking motif in the historical films set in the colonial era, the pairing and mirroring of female characters to forward both the storyline and symbolism of true independence.

The achievement of autonomy comes through three episodes of Suni's life, which map a journey of self-discovery and unfolding of personhood. The two transition scenes between the main episodes, enveloped in remarkably evocative background music, feature her walking on a path out of darkness and into a bright, lush scene of the Korean countryside, foretelling enlightenment and growth. But the process through which Suni achieves this growth is also fraught with challenges and tragedy, situations that she adjusts to with ever-greater awareness of her familial affections, though reconfigured, and through the crafting of more fulfilling partnerships as a means of breaking the bonds of her bestowed circumstances. To highlight this point, the main storyline begins with her arranged marriage as a mid-teen to a bratty boy who is even younger, and Suni's early realisation of what this ultimately means establishes her character as one who

seeks firm but practical solutions to unfair life through tools of individual agency. These include her passion for reading, which provides her comforting escape and even hope, and her "affection" or "heart", which is consistent but flexible enough to fit changing needs.

The first test of her capacity for compassion comes a few years later—though still in the film's first episode—when her husband returns home from boarding school. Now a dashing young man, he comes armed with cosmopolitan tastes and a "modern girl" as his openly attached mistress. In an extraordinary scene that reverses the perspective of the colonial-period literary trope of the modern man having to choose between a traditional wife and his educated "new woman" lover, Suni reacts with predictable resentment, even anger, upon being confronted with this stunning revelation. But in a sign that she is not interested in accepting her lot or even in fighting it, she soon sympathises with her husband and especially her counterpart and presumed rival, the young lady who, unlike Suni, received schooling and got to choose her partner. But just like Suni, she remains trapped by patriarchal convention, unable to fully exercise her choice. So Suni chooses to retreat, not as capitulation but rather as an act of emancipation for both women. Suni's other female counterpart in the first episode comes in the form of her tyrannical mother-in-law, who treats Suni mercilessly in full embodiment of the fatalistic cycles of familial abuse. This stern figure, to whom Suni had slavishly devoted herself, actually softens her stance after learning of her son's plans with his concubine, but Suni does not fall for this ruse and beats a further retreat, this time out of her conjugal compound.

A second spouse, of sorts, is featured in the second episode, but this man, a lovably clumsy romantic but a skilled potter, is not just a replacement husband in Suni's next life stage. After she accepts his preposterously traditional expression of his fondness for her, she takes an equal position, if not command, in this pairing. Just as importantly, she develops a genuine affection for him as a partner of choice, free of domination and exploitation, an idyllic scenario reinforced by expansive shots of the beautiful landscape backed by an equally lustrous soundtrack. This is why his death in an accident while securing a gift for her—a makeup canister, a potent symbol that crosses the film's second and third episodes—is so poignant and heartbreaking. But in the larger scheme of things this turn constitutes also the next challenge to Suni's quest for family in a nontraditional sense, one based on freedom and compassion amid hardship.

The hardship envelopes her in the opening of the third episode, as Suni, like many other Koreans, scrounges for food and other life necessities during presumably the wartime mobilisation of the early 1940s. Into this situation comes a young woman, Bong-nyeo, who together with her infant boy stumbles onto Suni's homestead while fleeing her enslaving husband. Suni takes her in, and this pairing furthers the trajectory of Suni's preceding partnership in that she now takes the clearly senior role, this time as the main provider and caretaker. But Bong-nyeo plays her cooperative part as well, and when she uses the makeup canister to engage in a desperate act to secure material sustenance for this new family, neither Suni nor the viewer is struck by revulsion but rather a realisation that, once again, Suni adjusts to her circumstances. She responds out of not loathing or judgement but rather a maternal, sisterly, indeed spousal affection for both the young woman and her baby. Suni's next role as the boy's doting second mother then finalises her lifelong journey for an existence and family of genuine liberation. That this life course takes place during the colonial period is never a major element of the narrative, but as with the brief hints of the temporal context, the physical setting of Korea's countryside facilitates a feeling that, more than the political situation, the impulses of the modern, even in the hinterlands, fuel emancipation.

As for the urban areas of colonial Korea, the transformations were more apparent, particularly during the so-called Cultural Rule period beginning in the early 1920s, resulting in a freer atmosphere of association and bountiful expressions of cultural and national identity. The cities, especially the capital but also the growing population centres of Busan and Pyongyang as well as other new metropolitan and harbour areas, provided cauldrons for the growing mix of modernity and ethnicity, fuelled by the technologies of the mass media such as newspapers. The airways are the main medium for the film "Radio Dayz" (Ha Gi-ho, 2008), which dramatises through comedy the birth of Korean-language radio programming and its accompanying social, economic, and cultural developments of the 1930s. What is also taken less than seriously, though definitively portrayed, are the political facets of this setting, including resistance to Japanese colonial rule, a glorified effort that is nonetheless somewhat ridiculed and, at best, receives a token nod through tickling depictions of bumbling independence fighters. Led by someone who looks like the patriotic martyr An Jung-geun, they start by trying to infiltrate the radio programming but end up being absorbed into the consumerist culture that the radio exploits and further unleashes.

Such a backdrop also engenders the film's equally witty exploration of modern human agency, and in this regard the notion of "ad-libbing" takes centre stage as a concept and plot device. The radio station's serialised live soap opera—like the story episodes appearing in the newspapers of the period—becomes a popular hit but is soon beset by unruliness among the actors in the play. This colourful cast of characters from a variety of backgrounds takes turns to eventually pile on uproariously in digressing from the script. In keeping with the film's parodying tone, the frustrated scriptwriter is a replica of a famous real author at the time, Bak Taewon,[45] although he is depicted as a somewhat ridiculous figure. More ominously, the direction of the radio play is appropriated by the devious designs of the colonial regime, which wants to use the programme to promote the upcoming Japanese war in the Asian mainland. The ethno-national interests represented by these two script sources can hardly control what eventually happens, however. Neither can the spirit of resistance espoused by the leader of the "revolutionary" independence fighters, who offers some of the funniest moments as the resourceful sound effects guy for the programme. Rather, the storyline of the radio drama, along with that of the film, follows a course directed by popular response and other commercial imperatives such as advertising, which crescendo into a morass of uncontrollable modern growth in urban colonial Korea until the ending becomes rather devoid of meaning.

Actually, within the radio play's diegesis the ending could be forwarding a message, although the viewer would have difficulty taking this seriously, much less deciphering its substance. In this scenario the main male character who—in mimicking the heroic position, as noted above, from a well-known trope of Korean novels at the time—has been stuck in a love triangle between a suave, cosmopolitan modern girl, and a more traditional, down-to-earth female. The purpose of juxtaposing these two countering women, who reflect their respective characters in the film, seems to be an effort to align more closely with Korean collectivity under colonial rule, but the viewer probably cannot be sure. Indeed, nearly everything about the film instils a wariness of taking anything seriously, which might have been the point after all. But in showcasing the capacity of digital animation for painting the Seoul surroundings of the day, "Radio Dayz" seems wanting to insert playful ridiculing of both the received impressions of modernising Koreans' resistance and the role of cultural formations in that process.

Though with fewer literary allusions, "Modern Boy" (Jeong Ji-u, 2008), which was released the same year as "Radio Dayz", improves the computerised recreation of 1930s Seoul while dramatically increasing the layering of gendered meanings of the urban setting. A richly creative, dazzling adaptation of an impressive debut novel by author Yi Ji-min, "Modern Boy" is somewhat misnamed, though understandably, since the narrative perspective is mostly that of the male protagonist, not of the main character as a whole, "Laura".[46] She actually goes by several different names, as she functions as a slippery object of love, lust, identity, and meaning for the leading man. And he ironically is named "Hae-myeong" ("clarity" or "understanding") even though, despite constantly being on the chase, he never seems to grasp her, at least in the figurative sense. Indeed, Laura is a mistress of disguise—it helps that one of her day jobs is a seamstress—always changing her appearance and identity to suit her role as a likely nationalist heroine, but the viewer can be forgiven for feeling confused. Her grand destiny seems at once sturdy and carefully planned but also vulnerable to intrusions, especially from her pursuing paramour Hae-myeong. Regardless, despite the appearance of a minor but symbolically crucial countering woman character, a Japanese lip-syncer, mostly it is Laura's many disguises and attendant personalities that forward her multiple female potentialities, all working towards a common end as a "modern girl" in colonised Seoul.[47]

Hae-myeong, the titular "modern boy", is shown at the start of the film attending to his grooming and general self-satisfaction as a hedonistic, middling bureaucrat in the colonial government. At a jazz club, however, he becomes bewitched and immediately falls for a sexy singer and dancer, who turns out to be Laura. Maybe he is being set up by his friend, Shinsuke, a prosecutor for the Japanese empire and old buddy from Japan, but Hae-myeong immediately launches his great quest for the girl, who appears to give in to his overtures. But she also runs away on more than one occasion. Hae-myeong's repeated search for Laura can be taken as the general framing of the film's storyline, but the ones pulling the strings are Japanese colonial power, as represented by Shinsuke as well as the impending war, and Laura, who counters such colonial domination in all her guises. For the rotating lives she leads in public—as a dancer, singer, tailor—are all masquerades for her quest for true liberation. It turns out that she is also a secret freedom fighter against Japanese rule, and her skills in imitation, as well as physical resemblance (she is tall) to Hae-myeong, facilitate the interchangeability of not only her female identities but also her gender as

well. To forward this point, Laura appears at several times androgynously, including in donning a potent jacket at the end. Meanwhile, Hae-myeong, who even takes her place on the dance stage at one point, is feminised if not emasculated, wearing a pink suit with the coiffed hair of a classic Korean beauty while smeared in cow dung in one of his early ventures to find her. When he does, he fights with her by grabbing her hair and biting her, as Laura accuses him of being nothing more than a traitorous dirtbag.

The integration of gender with nationalism is both disquieting and multifaceted, with the male standing for the selfish pursuit of material interests at the expense of the collective. Laura, meanwhile, seems to represent the genuine Korean nation itself or a vision of the nation currently lost but seeking restoration. Hae-myeong's confused yearning and search for her thus replicates the colonial condition of privileged or educated Koreans, indeed all Koreans under colonial rule, who seek a substantive life true to their core identity but finding the process, and the ultimate target itself, bewildering and elusive. Laura is seeking something as well—to be sure, a means to strengthen the independence movement, but beyond that, also something that reflects her female subjectivity in negotiation or contestation with the tandem of patriarchal and colonial demands. For this, she deploys surprisingly powerful tools at her disposal, including her beauty, her talents in dancing and especially singing, her tailoring skills, and her alluring object-hood for Hae-myeong, which she exploits but in so doing also reels from inner conflict. To successfully negotiate these tugging forces hence seems impossible, as suggested in the original novel's rhetorical title, "How can one, even though destroyed, not die but rather live?" (*Mang hageona jukji anko sal su itkenni*).

It appears an alternative solution to this quandary is offered by the extraordinary film by Park Chan-wook (Bak Chan-uk), "The Handmaiden" (*Agassi* ["The Countess"]; 2016), which constitutes a definitive centring of female subjectivity, through partnering and pairing, in dramatising the response to colonisation. This starts with the film's title itself, which in Korean ("Agassi") points to not the handmaiden but rather her female counterpart, the countess. Such mirroring also reflects this film's glaring self-referencing, which actually produces such a visual and semiotic fluency that it might seem excessive: a celebration of feminine agency as a counter to the perverted mix of patriarchal and political domination, "The Handmaiden" is fixated on giving the viewer a sense of peeping into intimate realms while showing the characters busy doing the same; more about sex than class or nation, it can appear that the film, under an

accomplished male director's meticulous gaze, veers into self-indulgence; and, while all the four main characters are imposters—three of the four are born Korean but straining to become more Japanese, while the fourth wants the reverse—they are all played by Korean actors trying to pass as flawlessly bilingual. The story is actually based on a novel set in Victorian England, "Fingersmith" by Sara Waters,[48] with the book's title referencing, at an opening level, a pickpocket.

An unmistakable sense of thievery indeed pervades the story and backdrop, and the film is a character study of posers, engaged in everything from petty theft to the grand larceny of colonialism, though mostly in between. All four characters want to escape fates drawn by the circumstances of their birth and especially their upbringing. The countess, named Hideko, is the lone "Japanese" figure. She has been raised as an orphan in her uncle's enormous compound in colonial Korea, a house of horrors that literally encages and serves as the unsettling setting for much of the film. Into her adult life comes Suk-hui, a Korean raised in an orphanage that trains in the arts of snatching and swindling, who is drawn by the promise of a major windfall from easy pickings. She is recruited to this con job by "Count Fujiwara", by birth the son of a servant from Jeju Island and a shaman but who—also through an orphaned upbringing—has learned to pass himself into supposed standing as a (materially deprived) Japanese nobleman. An irresistibly dashing and handsome fellow, he now wants to finagle his way into marriage with the countess through an intricate scheme, which includes bringing Suk-hui into the countess's compound as her new handmaiden. The only main character not brought up as an orphan, apparently, is Hideko's uncle, Kozuki, a bibliophilic forger originally from a Korean interpreters' family who manoeuvred into position, during the process of the Japanese takeover, to gain control over a literal gold mine in the peninsula's northeast.[49] Kozuki, a collaborator, is naturally repulsive in other ways as well, including through his designs on marrying his niece by marriage, Hideko, for her inherited wealth. He had strictly raised her in the compound to act as a dramatiser of (heterosexual) erotica in order to sell his books to well-attired men leering at her while she performed staged readings. As he continues to confine and pimp the countess into her adulthood, she is driven by desperation to escape.

Japan as a whole, or at least Japan's imperialist presence in Korea, thus acts as a fraudulent, perverse, but also versatile regulator of individual destinies, a decadent source of aliens in the Koreans' homeland and the generator of tricksters who attach themselves to colonial rule as a means of

forging social ascendance. The many motifs that forward this impression are insistent, including drawing as a useful skill for deceiving through reproduction, Kozuki's profession as a reproducer and forger of pornographic books, shots of shoes and ships as tools for freedom—as opposed to the train as a vehicle for destiny—and most of all, the countless scenes of characters appearing through mirrors. In addition to accentuating the power of hidden surveillance, as shown in the sliding doors of Japanese-style buildings, these reflected images offer glimpses of introspection, fantasy, and hope for venturing off the predestined path. As for the overbearing presence of fate itself, it surrounds and literally hangs over the scene in numerous shots of corridors—as in "The Throne" (Chap. 3)—whether indoors in long enclosed hallways or outdoors in canopies or impossibly steep stairs. Most menacing is a giant cherry tree in the compound just outside the house, a looming presence that beckons Hideko, who expresses a "wish never to have been born", towards the ultimate escape.

What allows Hideko to consider other means of liberation is her newly aroused sexuality, maturing as an instrument of defiance in the face of fate, especially those ends determined by the marriage of patriarchy and sex. Marriage itself, along with heterosexual sex, is shown as little more than the institutionalised expression of male domination and hence also in league with, if not the origin of, other structures of abuse, such as the family and colonialism. More than national loyalty or even social hierarchy, however, the film's thematic concern is with freedom from gendered conventions through the exploration and actualisation of female same-sex intimacy. As a form of resistance, then, this emancipatory act can allegorise the opposition to Japanese hegemony in all its forms—although, again, the main target is patriarchy in all its forms. The pervasive act of grifting, therefore, also drives the main transition episodes between the three parts of the story, shown through different narrative angles, wherein double-crossing then turns into triple-crossing. This latter switcheroo scene also helps carry the film's underlying theme of the interchangeability and mirroring of the two female characters, which produces role reversals that drive the plot all the way to the end but also a sense of doubling, of two halves aligned to forge a more powerful unity. In the most generously nationalist reading, this can suggest an allied response to Japanese imperialism. More likely it forwards the subversive possibility of the grand emancipation of the individual against traditional collectives and their shackles, a passage to the "distant harbour" that Suk-hui dreams of (and eventually reaches). This quest for true liberation is smoothened by the stuff of

female sexuality, as illustrated by animated performances of homoerotic intimacy meticulously composed to show the interchangeability of two bodies through a dissipation of distinction.

What results is an image of mirrored halves of a single entity, which add to the endless visual cues of sexualised identity. The theme of partnering through interchange appears consistently in the colour scheme, for example, especially in the outfits of the two women when shown together, with Hideko usually wearing white in contrast to Suk-hui's darker garb—except, importantly, in the most private settings. In such scenes, the acts of nourishing and gratifying, as well as repulsing and poisoning, through the breast further complicate the film's commentary on the balance between nature and nurture, as noted above. Spoons and chopsticks, cords and ropes, balls and chains, fruit and wine, and bells and whips also add to the litany of sexual signals. And most persistent of all is the focus on fingers, instruments not just for pickpocketing but also for buttoning and unbuttoning suffocating bodices, for interlocking in love and passion, and for pleasuring, including through relief from pain. By contrast, fingers and hands appear also as wicked tools, gloved to hurt and deceive but also ringed to denote the trappings of patriarchal marriage and family. Like knives, fingers on the hands of rakish males do not fulfil but rather thrust and stab, and hence, such digits might as well be discarded. The struggle against colonial rule would be pointless, the film seems to say, without the holistic rejection of an even sturdier and scarier mode of domination.

War and Armed Resistance

Understandably such considerations of patriarchy or much of anything else take a back seat in the films set in the final, most difficult period of colonial rule, that of the wartime mobilisation, which began after Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and escalated considerably after Japan's invasion of China in 1937. In Korea, the mostly traumatic memories from this experience, from the early 1940s, eventually stood as the default impression of the colonial era as a whole, a representation of stifling, terrible fate. Understandably, then, the spirit and workings of national consciousness and active resistance, especially through the armed independence movement, are emphasised as the modernist pursuit of liberation. Still, these works utilise some of the same motivic devices that characterise other films set in the colonial period examined above, including the conspicuous centrality of female subjectivity and paired female characters.

This is the case, for example, in a story that actually ends with the 1945 liberation, "Love, Lies" (*Hae-eohwa* ["Flowers that understand words"]; Bak Heung-sik, 2016). Though on one level this lavishly colourful film is a melodrama of a romantic triangle riven by jealousy, ambition, rivalry, and treachery, it also explores the painful complications, bound by shared destinies as well as individual choices, of the war period, of the colonial experience as a whole, and of their aftermath. The main narrative is an extended flashback bookended by the latter-day (1990s) South Korea a half-century later, and it begins with a brief moment in the 1930s that provides the background of the two main characters as girls. They meet in the *Gwonbeon*, a training academy and talent agency for the modernised *gisaeng* courtesans in late-colonial Seoul, who are still bound by expectations of sexual service as well as artistic performances. Soyul is already the star pupil as an adolescent, having received her talents from her mother, who herself had gained fame as a courtesan singer—in other words, Soyul was headed into this profession in a way similar to the hereditary paths of premodern times. At the Gwonbeon she eventually meets and befriends Yeon-hui, who is sold to the academy by her abusive father to cover a debt.

As the film shifts to the pair as young adults, they are inseparable best friends in 1940s wartime Seoul, but about to be torn apart by love interests intermixed with the terrible demands of war mobilisation. Like twins, they are also nearly interchangeable, so close are they personally and in appearance as well as in their common underprivileged background. But they diverge through fateful catalysts that turn them into rivals. Yeon-hui, it turns out—the one not bound by her ancestry into this role—becomes the more talented singer, at least for the modernised "trot" style of songs coming into form. Hence, Yeon-hui experiences far greater success in the emerging commercial market of sound recordings, while Soyul, more suited for the high-minded singing style of traditional songs, represents the Korea unable to adapt to modern demands. The shifting of the sentiments of Soyul's fiancée, a songwriter with designs of using his music for a patriotic cause, turns into a tragedy through the intrusion of collusion with Japanese power, producing a parable regarding the untidy, durably painful colonial remnants in South Korea's history thereafter. Such temporal and historical connections, as with fate in films such as "Gabi" and many others examined in upcoming chapters, are symbolised by the train and railroad tracks, which also seem to signal a distinction between love and sex, and between love (and lies) as determined by luck and by choice. Flowers serve this purpose as well; they refer to the euphemism of the

times for courtesans—hence the film's Korean title, "Flowers that understand words"—and are shown being plucked by the hand of fate upon coming into full bloom.

The most searing exploration of the connection between females and (national) fate under war mobilisation understandably appears in the cinematic treatments of the most publicised and controversial wartime atrocity, the so-called "comfort women" sexual trafficking system. The available evidence shows that the scale of the network of military brothels reached enormous proportions in following the Japanese army's invasions of various parts of northeast and southeast Asia during the Pacific War of 1937–1945. Likewise, multiple forms of the operation of the brothels corresponded to different ways the women and girls found themselves in these wretched circumstances. Still, most of the victims, likely numbering in the thousands if not tens of thousands, appear to have been Korean. Two films released around the same time approached this very difficult subject in similar ways, starting with the pairings of female characters both in the historical context of the war and across historical time.

The present chapter will analyse one of these two works, "Spirits' Homecoming" (*Gwihyang* ["Homecoming"]; Jo Jeong-nae, 2016). As in the other film, "Snowy Road", there are two countering relationships for the main character, Jeong-min: the first being her friendship with another teenaged girl, Yeong-hui, in 1943, the setting of the flashback story; and the second the pairing with Jeong-min's spiritual reincarnation through a young shaman girl in 1990s South Korea, when the comfort women's accounts first gained mass public attention. Jeong-min and Yeong-hui had met, following abduction from their respective families, in a rail car to Manchuria, where they suffered the horrors of a "comfort station", forced to serve imperial soldiers while also trying to escape death. The latter backdrop of the 1990s begins with an elderly Yeong-hui, now living a subdued life alone after having hidden the details of her wartime experience. One day she is aroused by disturbing stirrings and visits her friend, an elderly shaman, who introduces Yeong-hui to a girl, Eun-gyeong. Eun-gyeong is recovering from her own trauma, and as a young shaman, she serves as the medium between the two settings and hence between the original two friends from a half-century earlier. Through its capacity to conjure the spiritual journeys of individuals, shamanism becomes the channel for the reinforcement of Koreans' cultural identity as well as of the notion of a homeland (hence the film's title) in opposition to the scarring foreignness of Japanese rule or of the distant Manchurian setting.

A spiritual return, not just that of a physical body, serves as a metaphor for personal healing but also for historical and national healing in order to overcome the trauma of the wartime and colonial experiences. As Eun-gyeong remarks when touching an amulet—a potent symbol of protection and healing in the narrative—she sees "butterflies and soldiers". This utterance refers to the spirits of both the girls from the 1940s and of the Japanese soldiers who are visualised as chilling, lingering ghosts, menacing reminders of the unfinished business of overcoming colonisation and war.

The soldiers appearing in Eun-gyeong's vision also could refer to the Manchurian-based independence fighters who intervene in a critical scene. The utility of the Manchurian setting for establishing the contrast between home and away, as was seen in films set in earlier eras such "War of the Arrows" (Chap. 2), becomes prevalent in the films set in the colonial period and especially in the final, wartime mobilisation years. As with "Spirits' Homecoming", the coverage of armed, violent resistance, whether organised or not, against Japanese rule is *de riguer* in many of these films, even when, as in "Radio Dayz", the heroism of the independence movement is playfully de-fanged. These are *Korean* films, after all, and as such they must give at least a nod to this lofty narrative at the heart of Korean historical consciousness. One of the few exceptions to this rule is "My Heart", analysed above, which is indeed exceptional in many ways. Another is "Malmoe: The Secret Mission" (*Malmoi* ["Collecting words"]; Eom Yu-na, 2019), which dramatises the persecution and arrest, in 1942, of leaders of the Korean Language Society who attempted to compile and publish an authoritative, standardised dictionary. Along with the customary scenes of suppression and (sneaky) resistance, the plot revolves around the surveying of local dialects, with scholars and lay persons from around Korea contributing their particular versions of common words. This process thus serves up an allegory for the coalescing of national identity and the sense of common cause amid the wartime government suppression of Korean identity through, among other measures, restricting the use of the Korean language in public settings. Even here, however, the short flashes of violence remind the viewer of the inherent dangers in such a setting and hence glorify the sacrifices of the anti-colonial struggle.

Almost all other films that portray Korean resistance are far more explicit about the heroic opposition amid oppression. We can begin by noting that even into the *hallyu* era of the turn of the twenty-first century, multiple cinematic depictions of An Jung-geun and his assassination of the

Japanese overlord Ito Hirobumi a century earlier, in 1909, have been produced. Perhaps the most distinctive is "2009: Lost Memories" (Yi Si-myeong, 2002), based on an alternative history novel by Bok Geo-il, "Epitaph", which uses a time-machine plot device to dramatise how An's act awakened and sustained the Koreans' spirit of struggle. While the notion of parallel or counterfactual history is interestingly shown, however, the logic is a bit convoluted, given that, in the main story, Korea not only became colonised by Japan in the year following the 1909 assassination but indeed remains colonised at the turn of the twenty-first century. More believable is a film that grounds Korean nationhood in its most prominent folkloric symbol from the animal world, the Korean tiger, which was hunted into extinction in the early twentieth century. In "The Tiger" (*Daeho* ["Great tiger"]; Bak Hun-jeong, 2015), set mostly in the 1920s, a legendarily ferocious one-eyed beast and a famed Korean hunter tasked to kill it seem to stand for the common fight against foreign rule, as represented by swarming colonial soldiers joining the hunt. But their existence perhaps stands also for the lost cause of independence or the impossible position of Koreans under Japanese domination. Although difficult to discern, the computer-rendered tiger (revered as the "mountain lord" [*san'gun-nim*] by the locals) exhibits human qualities of judgement and wrath and thereby seems to function as the fierce guardian of Korean cultural identity, with its lair atop Mt. Jiri even drawing from the Korean origins myth.

Also set in the 1920s is "Age of Shadows" (*Miljeong* ["Moles"]; Kim Ji-un, 2016), a spy thriller backgrounded mostly in Seoul and a bit in Shanghai, with the two locales connected by a story of independence fighters trying to smuggle explosives into the peninsula from their base in China. Not surprisingly, Shanghai, given its loose political jurisdictions and its hosting of the leading Korean provisional government at the time, presents an inviting countering locale to occupied Korea, as shown in "Assassination" and "The Handmaiden" as well. In "Age of Shadows", the sense of movement is constant, through the many appearances of vehicles in motion—bicycles, rickshaws, automobiles, trucks, and especially trains—as well as the frequent close-ups of feet: dead, alive, dismembered, and often under severe duress. The idea, apparently, is that one's loyalties and perspectives, especially those of the main character, a Korean police official in the colonial government dispatched to Shanghai to nab independence activists, can be turned through appeals to underlying ethnic bonds. He seems, however, moved mostly by his weakness to alcohol. The

backdrops in sight and sound are colourfully elaborate, as is the violence, including excruciating torture scenes, which seem to reinforce the main objective in this highly publicised and touted film: to pound into viewers' heads reminders of Japanese brutality and the patriotic struggle against it, a fetishisation of bloody suffering as if it were a passion tale. With little to no depth to the characters or even the story, everything about the film's outer form, from the Shanghai exile for the Korean independence movement to the malleability and mobility of Korean sentiments, comes straight from the cinematic playbook.

The Shanghai connection plays a role even in a film set wholly in Japan, "Anarchist from the Colony" (*Bak Yeol*; Yi Jun-ik, 2017). Neither this English title nor the original Korean one, "Bak Yeol", accurately reflects the storyline and thematic focus, however, as the biopic is of both the eponymous Korean and his Japanese lover, Kaneko Fumiko, indeed of their small group of mostly Korean anarchist/socialist revolutionaries in Tokyo in the 1920s. Somewhat like "The Fortress" (Chap. 2), set in the Manchu siege of the seventeenth century, "Anarchist from the Colony", while surrounded by threats of violence, is more about vocalising ideas. It features extended close-ups of dialogue—between the two primary characters, between them and their comrades and representatives, and among the political forces in Japan persecuting them. In the narrative, the couple, soon after having met, are caught in the terrible vigilante massacres of Koreans after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, which provides the Japanese government reason for prosecuting them for high treason. Bak and Kaneko are shown engaged in resistance not through arms but rather through their public calls for tearing down the Japanese emperor system—indeed, by force if necessary—in pursuit of absolute equality. The courtroom scenes showcase the two characters' systematic analysis of the link between Japan's imperial house and its imperialism in the conquest of Korea and in the dehumanisation of the Korean people, both within the colony and in Japan. Thus, even as practitioners of a radical individualism of equality, including gender equality, their defiance in the face of a near-certain death sentence finds resolution in an embrace of Korean traditional values and identity. Given that the film was made by an accomplished Korean director for a Korean audience, such an outcome is understandable.

This is the case also for another story set in Japan, the much-anticipated "Battleship Island" (*Gunhamdo* ["Hashima Island"]; Ryu Seung-wan, 2017), directed by a well-established hit maker and, at the time of release,

starring probably South Korea's most high-profile movie star, Hwang Jeong-min (of "Ode to My Father", covered in Chap. 7). Set in the closing months of the war in 1945 on an insular coal mining complex in the waters off Nagasaki, "Battleship Island" features Korean forced labourers, as well as enslaved females (including an adolescent) working as "comfort women", trapped in horrific conditions, the grit and grime of which form the overarching backdrop. This hellacious framework later takes a somewhat preposterous turn towards a savagely frenzied but slickly staged war flick, when a desperate escape attempt by the Koreans, led by a secret independence fighter, itself becomes an all-out gun battle between the Koreans and the Japanese (as well as their Korean collaborators). The closing scene—among the many impressively staged, stunning visuals in the film—shows survivors witnessing the mushroom cloud of the Nagasaki atomic bomb billowing on the horizon. Here, then, instead of the metropolitan Tokyo of "Anarchist from the Colony", a cramped, inescapably harsh island serves as a stand-in for Koreans' colonised condition, if not for Korea itself, within the Japanese imperium. Such films set in Japan take the fight to the metropole, as it were, in depicting the expansive reach of Koreans' victimisation from and resistance to colonial rule.

More than Japan or China, however, Manchuria—as already suggested in the films discussed above—has been the most alluring foreign setting for films set in the colonial period. The region, which was over twice the size of the Korean peninsula and controlled by Japan partially before 1931 and more thoroughly, though not completely, afterwards, became somewhat of a wild frontier for Koreans seeking work, migration, or armed struggle. Koreans who used Manchuria as a base for fighting Japan have been bestowed with hyper-heroic credentials, drawn from and further reinforcing the romanticised image of Manchuria as a place of adventure and glory, even wealth, in a way that the Korean homeland at the time could not have been. As Jinsoo An has shown, these "Manchurian action films" have a long pedigree in post-liberation South Korea and, particularly in the works from the 1960s, borrowed elements from Hollywood westerns to shift agency to the individual pursuit of riches, often in disregarding and even flouting the broader nationalist imperatives.[50]

Perhaps the most interesting, indeed wild presentation of Manchuria in the colonial period has been "The Good, the Bad, and the Weird" (*Joheun nom, nappeun nom, isanghan nom*; Kim Ji-un, 2008). This updated Korean sendup on the spaghetti western, by the same director who later made "Age of Shadows", goes beyond its cheeky name to picture Manchuria as

an untamed northern border land of bandits, outcasts, and their pursuers, and hence as a displacement for Korea, although the three title characters cannot escape the homeland's pull entirely. Traces of the customary treatment of the fight against Japan feel more like token obligations in this action-parody, for the characters also seem to take turns dismissing the independence struggle. And as with classic Hollywood westerns, the vast empty space—vividly shot and painted—is itself an intervening character, on par with the colourful humans. So is the railroad, that symbol of fate, heading towards the endless horizon that often holds the setting sun, and targeted by competing sides looking to either destroy or seize it. They are all seeking riches and power, as revealed by a supposed treasure map meant perhaps to serve as the inscrutable blueprint for national recovery and meaning, or just simply as the source of funds for various thieves, including the Japanese military.

A final work linking Manchuria and armed resistance, along with collaboration, social reform, and female agency—the primary themes and motifs of films set in the Japanese occupation period thus far analysed in this chapter—is the very impressive and entertaining "Assassination" (*Amsal*; Choe Dong-hun, 2015). While cloaked in a blockbusting nationalist action flick, the film throws into relief the workings of structure and agency in national identity and hence also in national history. In this sense, the ostensible subject matter of the armed independence movement serves as more of a convenient backdrop, although importantly real historical figures play key roles, headed by Kim Gu and Kim Won-bong, leaders of independence organisations based in China starting in the 1920s. Most of the story takes place in 1933, in alignment with the real events in 1932 of Korean operatives carrying out strikes against Japanese leaders in Shanghai and Tokyo, respectively.[51] But the story also extends to 1949, the post-liberation period in South Korea, and begins with a long prelude set in 1911, with the attempted assassination of the first Japanese Governor-General of colonial Korea, Terauchi Masatake. The dramatisation of this event introduces the primary plot device and some main characters, including the central figure of An Og-yun, whose surname probably alludes to the independence fighter An Jung-geun, as discussed above. In 1911, An is an infant—born, tellingly, in 1910, the year of annexation—who becomes separated from her twin sister through the killing of their mother by their father, a sniggering quisling named Gang In-guk who is seeking Japanese favours.

When the story jumps to 1933, An, having grown up in Manchuria surrounded by Korean freedom fighters, is a sharpshooter tasked with traveling to Shanghai to join a mission that will then head to Korea to kill both a ruthless Japanese military commander and Gang In-guk, now a very wealthy industrialist supplying the Japanese war machine. An is actually being set up by Yeom Seok-jin, who had been captured in 1911 while trying to kill the Japanese overlord—as well as to protect the baby An, interestingly—and has now turned into a spy and hired gun for the Japanese. In Shanghai An encounters another Korean assassin, the famed "Hawaii Pistol". Yeom pays him handsomely to kill An's team of three, which includes a military man named "Machine Gun". All these figures make their way, via train, to Seoul, where An discovers, after having tried to assassinate him, that Gang In-guk is her long-lost biological father. It also turns out that the Hawaii Pistol—the epitome of the killer for money and hence the opposing character model to An, a killer for the cause of her nation's freedom—had himself been orphaned in a way. This common background and a small debt to her from Shanghai lead to his hesitation in carrying out the lucrative job of eliminating An, whom the Hawaii Pistol's humorous sidekick calls "Three Thousand Dollars" in reference to her bounty. The most interesting and important counterpart to An is her long-lost identical twin, Mitsuko, a Japanese name alluding to the opulent department store, Mitsukoshi, which is lavishly presented amid the bustling urban backdrop of Seoul at the time. Having grown up as Gang In-guk's very pampered daughter, Mitsuko's next step is to enter a "marriage of many gains" to the cruel son of the Japanese military commander, Kawabuchi.

The pivotal scene then—in which An breaks down in horror upon seeing Mitsuko's family pictures on the wall and, to top it off, Mitsuko's chilling wedding dress—distils the film's main takeaway: this easily could have been An's own life, if not for the randomness of her being taken in one carriage at that pivotal moment in 1911 while her sister was taken in another carriage, that of their murdered mother. (In 1933 Seoul as well, when Mitsuko first spots An, An is boarding a streetcar carriage.) An had thus escaped the destiny of her sister, one of material privilege and psychological ease but also moral obliviousness and fatal subservience to the depraved strivings of the distasteful Gang, their common biological father. By contrast, An had grown up in sparse and perilous surroundings with friends and family of no blood connection, but of course, the audience is directed to immediately identify with An's loathing and disgust at that

emotional moment of discovery. This question of what constitutes a dignified, secure source of identity, including especially the difference between biological and societal upbringing, thus parallels the question of what lies at the heart of one's identification: the individual, the family, or the larger collectivities of community or nation. This in turn triggers thinking about how much one's ordering of these components is by choice and how much by fate.

Naturally, due to this film's setting, such personal issues are transposed to the level of national history under foreign occupation. To characters like An and her genetic father, it seems heredity, including their mutual biological bond, has no bearing on their notions of family: Nurture wins handily over nature. Indeed, the film appears to hail the freedom to resist, in An's character, the demands of inherited destiny and familial loyalty, or to completely disregard them in favour of worldly gain, as shown by the freelancer Hawaii Pistol, the traitor Gang, and the turncoat Yeom. As suggested by Hee-seung Lee in her analysis of colonial-setting films appearing in the 2010s, these works seem to reflect an early twenty-first century's heightened awareness of the agency, across a widening spectrum, held by Korean historical actors living under colonial rule.[52] Such logic can easily be extended to doubt the basis of their national consciousness as well: Why should these characters and, indeed, the audience assume moral imperatives of national identification as endowed with deeper value, a more bedrock basis of one's existence, just because of the geographical and political contexts of one's birth? If this too can be questioned, then so can conventional grounds for both patriotic and treasonous behaviour, and in turn also the implications for one's view of Korea's colonial experience and the independence movement.

Such considerations are further extended in "Assassination's" long epilogue, when the setting shifts forward to 1949, four years after liberation. Yeom, now a police commander in the nascent South Korean government, is being investigated and tried for "anti-national" behaviour from the colonial period that had killed so many patriotic resistors. In reflecting the actual outcome of these trials of the most notoriously pro-Japanese figures, which the new regime of Syngman Rhee violently disbanded, Yeom is set free due to the sudden murder of the key witness, but not before passionately presenting in court the common refrains of such men in these aborted trials: that he actually acted out of concern for the Korean people; that he made great sacrifices for their genuine liberation; that he had no choice. Later, he also insists that he did not believe Korea would

be liberated, that in effect its fate was set. Of course, this reasonably accurate utterance does not amount to legitimate justification in the film's moral framing, for Yeom should have chosen correctly anyway, just as An and the overlooked independence fighters did. While she occupies the steady moral centre, however, the various other assassins all present realistically alternative choices and accompanying destinies. And in reflecting the most intriguingly common thematic device of the films set in the colonial period, the most compelling contrast comes from Mitsuko, like her twin a quintessentially female representation of fateful turns in Korea's colonial past as well as that past's unshakable presence thereafter.

Chapter Six. Hope Amid Unrelenting Carnage: National Division and the Korean War, 1945–1953

Playbill

"Welcome to Dongmakgol" (*Welkeom tu dongmakgol*); Bak Gwang-hyeon, 2005
"The Taebaek Mountains" (*Taebaek sanmaek*); Im Kwon-taek, 1994
"Jiseul" ("Potatoes"); O Myeol, 2013
"Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War" (*Taegeukgi hwinallimyeo* ["Raising the Korean flag"]); Gang Je-gyu, 2004
"A Little Pond" (*Jageun yeonmot*); Yi Sang-u, 2008
"Operation Chromite" (*Incheon sangnyuk jakjeon* ["The Inchon Landing"]); Yi Jae-han, 2016
"A Melody to Remember" (*Oppa saenggak* ["Thinking of (a sister's) older brother"]); Yi Han, 2016
"Swing Kids" (*Seuwing kijeu*); Gang Hyeong-cheol, 2018
"The Last Witness" (*Heuksuseon* ["Black narcissus (flower)"]); Bae Chang-ho, 2001
"The Front Line" (*Gojijeon* ["Battle for the high ground"]); Jang Hun, 2011
"The Piper" (*Sonnim* ["The Guest"]); Kim Gwang-tae, 2015
"Spring in My Hometown" (*Areumdaun sijeol* ["A Beautiful time"]); Yi Gwang-mo, 1998

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
East Asian Popular Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_7

In perhaps the most memorable scene from the unforgettable "Welcome to Dongmakgol", a mammoth wild boar suddenly rampages through a mountainside potato patch and terrorises villagers going about their work. Quick teamwork by a band of North Korean, South Korean, and American soldiers, who had separately entered this isolated community of Dongmakgol in the early stages of the Korean War, leads to the heroic killing of the fearsome beast, which then becomes devoured by the men that night. Within the symbolistic realm of the film, the boar, as an agent of destruction if not savagery and division, can represent a variety of threats, from modernity, the outside world, and American imperialism to nature, history, or indeed fate. But in the end, the animal suffices to stand for that which encompasses all those dangers: the Korean War itself. The scene thus well encapsulates the film while being set apart cinematically, with its slow-motion, three-dimensional highlighting (Image 1), which allows it to function as a fantasy within the larger fantasy that is "Welcome to Dongmakgol".

Strikingly, "Welcome to Dongmakgol" is one of two distinctly fantastic Korean War films released over the *hallyu* era, with the other being the newer and equally remarkable "Swing Kids". The recent appearance of two such works says a lot about the continuing, comprehensive, and exhaustive (and exhausting) presence of the Korean War up to the present day. Counting just those treatments from South Korea alone, over 20 films set in the Korean War have been released in theatres over the *hallyu*

Image 1 Young North Korean soldier Taekgi chased by a wild boar, from "Welcome to Dongmakgol"

era since the mid-1990s, with each attempting to capture a new interpretive angle or to highlight a particular, perhaps overlooked, feature, incident, or figure.[53] They all have striven to join the growing list of box office hits—what Hyangjin Lee calls "division blockbusters" and We-jung Yi simply "Korean War blockbusters"[54]—that depict anew the origins and ongoing impact of that historical event of utmost importance. This prolific growth of Korean War cinema has thus occupied what Youngmin Choe describes as "a continuum across the popular South Korean filmic imagination, an increasingly complex depiction of national division and reunification".[55] The mega-crowd pleaser "Taegukgi" (2004), for example, while offering a conventionally epic and perhaps risk-free (albeit very violent) run-through of the war while deploying traditional motifs and themes,[56] muddles the customary moral picture in its storyline. Another release, "Operation Chromite" (2016), actually reinforces the received Manichean understanding from South Korea's authoritarian past, but even this film's relatively simplistic narrative gets couched in a full-blown Hollywood-style action movie; and just as importantly, it expresses the standpoint of the ageing but still clamorous generations that directly experienced the war in one form or another.

Such an extensive range of Korean War films, in terms of both memory politics and popular perception, thus reflects the continuing development of the conflict's meaning and impact in South Korea. Still, the biggest divide in historical perspective, regarding the war's ties to the onset and solidification of national division(s), appears firmly set, however skewed towards one side: As in the academic disputes and popular discourse revealed in political and generational differences, the balance has long tilted towards viewing the war, including the South Korean side's actions, more complexly and often very critically.[57] Furthermore, a major split appears between those Korean War films that view the war in its international context and those that insist—to the point of removing the foreign presence in their depictions—on its basic character as a civil war, one caused and fought by Koreans. This explains why the most consistent allegory in the storylines involves brothers or siblings caught up and separated in what was, at heart, a fratricidal conflict with roots dating back years, decades, or longer. The axis of fate dominated by the dark cloud of war thus hovers over the axis of blood ties represented by the family, which in turn lays bare the severed nation. These two frameworks overlap considerably, but they also clash when, as Koreans become swept up by the overwhelming power of destruction, individual characters seek to realise something of redemptive value amid the carnage.

Geographies of the Civil War

Not surprisingly, Korean War films tend to highlight the physical contours of the nation under contestation and frame the story with markers in the landscape: mountains and hills, valleys, islands, or seasonal changes. Unlike in the cinematic treatments of Koreans' defence of their country against foreign invaders, as discussed in Chaps. 2 and 5, in Korean War cinema the territorial and natural features of the peninsula serve as the shared basis of contestation over which side—North or South, communists or capitalists—can claim the moral as well as geographical high ground. Here, too, however, the storylines focus on the human dimension of familial and communal relations, with the trope of separated siblings signifying most readily the tragedy of national division.

This motif is unmistakably at the heart of the earliest-released film examined in this book, "The Taebaek Mountains" (1994), still the best-known cinematic depiction of the turbulent 1945–1950 interregnum between the end of Japanese colonial rule and the start of the Korean War. At the start of this immensely decisive period, the victorious American and Soviet forces of World War II, having decided to divide their occupation of the peninsula, haphazardly entered Korea in late summer of 1945. As they did so, the two occupying armies promptly began to cultivate friendly governing orders that formally took form three years later, in 1948, as South and North Korea, respectively. Unlike the closing episode from 1949 in "Assassination" (Chap. 5), which pointedly connects the post- to pre-liberation periods in order to highlight the nearly insurmountable challenges of decolonisation, in "The Taebaek Mountains", the turbulent formation of South Korea provides a bloody prelude, preview, and connection to the subsequent Korean War.

Based on the best-selling multi-volume novel of the same name by Jo Jeong-nae, the film's title refers to the geological spine of the Korean peninsula that runs from the northeastern tip down to the southern coastal areas, where at one point it becomes Mt. Jiri. The area surrounding Mt. Jiri, the setting of the film both physically and symbolically, was one of the main sites of leftist guerrilla activity in this period. The story is fictionalised—interestingly, by using the name of an actual town in the vicinity, Beolgyo—but it begins with the real communist-led uprising against the newly established Southern state in October of 1948. This was known as the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion, in reference to the two main towns captured by leftist insurgents before they were chased back up to the

mountains. Thereafter Mt. Jiri serves in the storyline as the base from where these guerrillas recruit more partisans and battle landlords, the rightist local constabulary, and the South Korean army until the eruption of the Korean War in the summer of 1950. The mountain thus stands for the territory of Korea itself, with the higher elevation areas serving as a retreat for communist forces, and the lower reaches home to the anti-communists.

Multiple characters and relationships—originally all drawn from the locality but eventually joined, decisively and jarringly, by the Southern and Northern armies—are swept into the increasingly vicious back-and-forth between the two sides, a preview of what was to come in the ensuing civil war. This dynamic allegorises the destructive intervention of ideological contestations, together with their accompanying political and military forces. Such forces trigger, inflame, inflate, and radicalise towards horrific violence the localised disputes based originally, according to the film, on the class division of landlord and peasant engendered by Japanese colonial rule. However powerful these tensions were, however, the story suggests that they could have been contained if not for the intervention of the rigidly institutionalised "centres", the South Korean and North Korean states recently formalised in the summer of 1948. Both of these internalised external forces make their way into this town of Beolgyo. The South Korean politicians and right-wing thugs, with their cruel cynicism and disregard for local particularities and sentiments, are eventually matched, even outdone, by the conquering North Korean army that arrives in July 1950, just after the start of the Korean War, to bring an end to the story. Actually, the film concludes with the sudden and vandalising retreat of the Northern army and the disillusioned local communist guerrillas in September of 1950. They leave behind a devastated town, countryside, and population with no one to turn to aside from a surviving local shaman who, in personifying the persistence of Korean cultural identity, continues to carry out her rituals for the departed.

The shaman also contrasts sharply with the foreignness of the divisive ideologies, and perhaps of even the political brutality and modern weaponry, which pressed Koreans to commit horrible acts on each other, even before the Korean War formally began. This reality is visualised geographically, over the opening credits, as an enormous flock of swallows in the mountains that sways in tandem, then suddenly changes directions as if pushed around by the whimsical shifts of a natural or heavenly force.[58] War itself is this force of fate, however, and its material origins are most acutely

signalled, in this case, by the landed basis of class conflict, which drives the inclinations and grievances weaponised by those wielding both ideals and hatred. Regular people simply have little choice but to choose a side. The many characters in "The Taebaek Mountains" represent this dynamic in their own ways, but they are all encapsulated by the estranged brothers at the centre of the storyline: the older, educated Sang-jin, who leads the local communist guerrillas, and his under-educated and brutish younger sibling Sang-beom, who carries a thick regional accent, a professed loathing of communism, and a murderous resentment of his big brother. But even such a terrible blood feud can be overcome, the film suggests, if, like the shaman, the warring sides return to their grounding in local communities and national traditions. This stance is perhaps represented by the third main character, a middling mediator attacked by all the warring parties. But he is largely irrelevant in the face of the determined forces instigating bloody revenge and summary justice, as demonstrated all too well by the two brothers and their partisans in the throes of ferocious recrimination. They are shorn of not only their humanity but even their will by the domineering war.

This sense of unrelenting, inexorable brutality pervades another film depicting the months just before the formal outbreak of the Korean War, "Jiseul" ("Potatoes"; O Myeol, 2012), set in late 1948 in the snowy winter of Jeju Island, where earlier in the year—on April 3, 1948—a rebellion began against the nascent constabulary sent from Seoul. By the end of 1948, the South Korean armed forces, backed by the US military that still remained in an advisory role despite the Southern government's inauguration in August, were undertaking a terrifying punitive operation across the island. This campaign would eventually result in the indiscriminate killing of tens of thousands of residents. The most awful event of a cascading wave of viciousness that preceded the outright outbreak of the Korean War in June of 1950, the Jeju Island massacre—known simply as "4–3" in Korean—epitomised the prewar moment when the post-liberation occupation's violent politics descended in full force over the newly established Republic of Korea, sweeping up communities into the building conflagration leading to civil war. Jeju Island, in the furthest corner of South Korean territory, served as a detached but all-too-proximate cauldron upon which the fiercely anti-communist Southern state would unleash its monstrous might.

The sense of an island as a separated space that traps its residents, which helps conceptualise the murderous dynamics of the event,[59] appears in this

black-and-white film's opening shot looking down from a plane flying above the clouds. (This actually mimics a notorious propaganda film of the time from the US army that touted its suppression of communist rebels.) However, this motif does not appear again in "Jiseul"; rather, the dominant geographies are the high plateaus surrounding Mt. Halla, which contain the claustrophobic caves to which many islanders fled to hide from the soldiers sent on their predatory scorched-earth campaign. Given these grim realities, the scenes of barbarity are actually tempered, however shockingly suggestive, and instead, many visuals appear of the inseparable connection between the (is)land and its people, as represented especially by the life-sustaining potatoes from the film's title. Potatoes in a pot or basket are replicated in numerous shots of desperate villagers crammed into a cave or foxhole, of scattered skulls and brassware, and most arrestingly of the boulders that make up the distinctive walls surrounding Jeju Island houses. Another main agricultural staple, the Jeju black hog, also appears several times, usually as a carcass carried and cooked in a pot to signal the islanders themselves being hunted down and ravaged like animals. In place of a distinct plot or dominant characters, the white/greyish background of blanketing snow, as well as of smoke, fulfils the dominant tone of fear and foreboding—for the desperate villagers wandering how to survive amid wartime misery before the oncoming war, and for the viewer anticipating the extension of these horrors in the months to come.

In taking up this temporal progression, the film "Taegukgi" (Yun Je-gyun, 2004) follows two brothers from the outbreak of the Korean War, in June 1950, to some time in the middle. The signs of fraternal conflict are even more starkly presented than in "Taebaek Mountains", tracking the degradation into hateful confrontation of such a relationship in line with the course of the conflict itself. In "Taegukgi", it is the older brother, Jin-tae, who is less educated and changes the most, showing how war, and especially civil war, unwittingly can fill empty vessels with steely hatred and beastly savagery. Jin-tae, working as an itinerant cobbler in Seoul when the film begins, epitomises the wayfaring openness implied by shoes, while a sturdy pen signifies his younger brother Jin-seok, a student bound for university and upward mobility. Both everyday items also reinforce the elemental bond between the brothers and thus represent the steadfast unity of the nation that aspires, against the odds, to peaceful coexistence with a threatening modern world.

This world storms into their placid lives in Seoul on the morning of June 25, 1950, the date of North Korea's invasion. The two brothers

hurriedly gather their widowed and mute mother, along with Jin-tae's fiancé and her younger siblings, to join the flood of refugees streaming south, just ahead of the advancing Northern army. Soon, however, both brothers are violently drafted into the South's forces, and thereafter the film tracks them as the front moves down, then back up the peninsula, before it moves down again to the middle, all in line with the sudden turns in fortune between the sides. The first half of the film covers mostly the vicious combat of the shifting front suffered by the brothers before transitioning to scenes of Jin-tae's fiancé getting caught in the horrific retributions that ravaged localities, including Seoul, after they changed possession. From the suffocating heat of the Naktong River battles in the summer of 1950 to the bitter cold later that year in the north, the landscape changes dramatically, but the atrocities committed by all sides have a terrible uniformity to them, as if scenic variety were being decimated by a singular giant storm.

The inescapable heaviness of this presence makes for a typically frightful war film, backed by shattering music, loads of fighting sequences, and large-scale stagings of battles, but the epic feel comes even more from the film's ambition to show all the intricate manifestations of the war's brutality. Unavoidable in this regard is the lesson that not only is war hell, but the Korean War was a special hell inflicted by Koreans on their own. As shown by Jin-tae, whose loyalties switch more than once, the formal sides almost did not matter, for the ideological and political justifications paled in comparison to war itself soon becoming the overwhelming, self-enclosed rationale for Koreans savagely killing each other. Furthermore, although in reality the main turning points in the conflict came at the behest of foreign interventions—the South Koreans joined and led by the US-led UN forces, and the North Koreans by the Chinese "volunteer" army—hardly any foreigners appear in "Taegukgi", notwithstanding its expansive canvas. Two conspicuous exceptions prove this rule: a (computer-generated) swarm of countless thousands of faceless Chinese soldiers crossing over the snowy boundary into the peninsula in November 1950, and flying American warplanes, which had made a brief appearance also in "Taebaek Mountains".

These American planes, among the earliest jet fighters used in combat, feature prominently also in a film that appeared not long after "Taegukgi" but with far less fanfare and box office success, despite its impressive array of accomplished actors: "A Little Pond" (*Jaegeun yeonmot*; Yi Sang-u, 2008). The title of the film is that of a folk song by

master singer-songwriter Kim Min-ki (Min-gi), an instrumental version of which plays over the ending credits, and whose nature-bound lyrics can easily be taken as a parable of the Korean War. An actual small pond figures in the film's deployment of visuals drawn from the sweeping landscape, which like in so many other *hallyu*-era Korean movies represents national identity. This time, however, the beautiful countryside, in both summer and fall, is usually foregrounded by a long string of peripatetic members of a single village who are heading southwards as refugees. Set in late July of 1950, a month after the outbreak of the war as US and South Korean forces were still in retreat, the film depicts the killings committed by American soldiers who suspected Northern soldiers hiding among the villagers. Towards the end of the film, this horrific mistake is visualised by clustered shell casings of spent machine gun fire on a hill overlooking the rail underpass where the Koreans had been gathered while being shot, a mimicking of the scenes of villagers huddling in their move southwards.

The juxtaposition of a lone, small community against the American military borrows considerably from the groundbreaking Korean War film from 1998, "Spring in My Hometown" (see below). Without a main character, the protagonist is the entire group of villagers, or indeed the village itself, standing for the nation as a whole. Also like the earlier film, "A Little Pond" highlights the village's children, who are shown singing together—a motif revisited by "A Melody to Remember" (below)—at both the beginning and end of the film in real and fantasy sequences, respectively, that evoke innocence and communal joy. Another fantasy sequence, appearing twice, is an oddly disquieting superimposition of a mother whale swimming with her calf. This animation seems to signal the generational stakes of this horrible event, whether the Nogeun-ri massacre, the cluster of such killings in the early stages of the war, or the entire Korean War itself. And towards the end of the story comes an appearance of a North Korean child soldier discovering, among the bodies, a surviving child of the gunfire, with the two of them staring at each other in stunned silence, wondering what comes next. For both, the prime antagonist, in borrowing again from "Spring in My Hometown", is the American military, whose rampaging vehicles rumble through winding dirt paths and streams. In doing so, these machines completely disregard the specifically Korean environment (as symbolised here by a sacred boulder) on their campaign to take command over the villagers' life setting, which is

represented by, among other things, a swimming hole, the "little pond" of the film's title.

Like the village, then, the pond, too, stands for Korea, and this sense of territoriality accentuates the American role as the prime aggressor. Early in the story, the locals are told to evacuate their homes immediately and head south, for their village would soon be the staging ground for a US military operation. The non-Korean man issuing these frightening instructions, while riding in an American jeep, shouts in Japanese (he is either Japanese-American or Japanese). This is a practical solution to the communication barrier but also a reminder of the historical connections between the just-concluded period of Japanese rule and the immediately subsequent experience of yet another foreign occupation. The villagers hurriedly pack up and throw everything onto their A-frames, but in their trek southwards they are repeatedly and menacingly told by American soldiers to get off the road, which was being commandeered for military purposes. They are thereby herded like animals onto the hills above or the streams and tunnels below, before eventually being stuck on railroad tracks and railway underpasses, where they are bombed indiscriminately by American planes and machine-gunned into oblivion. The film also portrays American soldiers themselves as victims, especially of faceless commanders ordering the massacre, while inter-titles quote such an order to kill anyone, including refugees, who passes a certain combat boundary. The overriding message, however, undoubtedly places culpability on the US.

In explicit contrast is "Operation Chromite" (*Incheon sangnyuk jakjeon* [The Inchon Landing]; Yi Jae-han, 2016), the latest cinematic dramatisation of the Inchon Landing of mid-September of 1950, which took place less than two months after the Nogeun-ri massacre. Though focused on the Korean characters and combatants, "Operation Chromite" unmistakably features as its near-cosmic force the will and wisdom of the US, represented by the dogged personality of General Douglas MacArthur. Played ham-handedly into caricature by the Hollywood revenge action star Liam Neeson, the MacArthur character comes across as an omniscient Zeus manipulating lesser gods to deliver his bolt of salvation to the South Koreans. While the playground is the earthly battlefield of Inchon, the source of intervention is the heavens, controlled by the determinant of the world order that is the US. This signification appears in the multiple shots of both the sky, sometimes with a rising sun that probably alludes to MacArthur, and American bombing. The latter motif takes on a very different valuation in "Welcome to Dongmakgol" (see below), but in

"Operation Chromite" it reiterates that the modern mechanisms of fate, in meting justice, descend from the heavens.[60]

In this manner the film, with all its slick production values, feels like a more traditionally straightforward South Korean understanding of the war. Even with a fuller depiction of some North Korean characters and the intriguing cameo of Kim Il Sung engaged in dialogue, North Koreans are mostly shown being mowed down as cannon fodder in rousing, explosive action. Meanwhile, the death of each member of a South Korean commando unit working to secure an Inchon beachhead (Wolmi Island) is dragged out melodramatically with concerns over loved ones, as if North Koreans had no such familial attachments. If any historical film over the *hallyu* era explicitly represents the conservative view of modern Korean history, one shared by probably the majority of the oldest generations, it is this portrayal of the South Korean role as one of patriotic sacrifice under the Manichean guidance of paternal America. For both partners in this alliance, Inchon stands for (South) Korea itself, and its (re-)conquest foretells ultimate victory—if not in the Korean War, then certainly in the long game of history. That in hindsight the Inchon Landing might have fed a disastrous delusion that unnecessarily extended the war over the long term is almost inconsequential,[61] for most of all, the film seems to proclaim, it rescued South Korea from communism and allowed the country to flower into what it is today.

Fantastical, Sheltered Communities of Nationhood

In the above scenario, then, Inchon, befitting its historical status as the gateway port to the capital, represents a Korea that welcomes and indeed thrives off the foreign (or at least American) presence. Needless to say, this has not been a preferred depiction for recent Korean War films, given the increasing recognition of the Cold War's intrusion into the peninsula as the main cause of national division. Rather, as opposed to "Operation Chromite", other films establish certain settings—a mountain village, an orphanage, and even a POW camp—as fleetingly protective sites away from external dangers. In this way these works present the nation attempting to stay safely separated from the commotions and daggers originating from the outside, if not from the entire modern world itself. The Korean War thus serves allegorically as a great struggle for the soul of the nation, which alas largely fails to remain independent and whole. This bleaker

view of the conflict's impact and outcome, however, also contains the strains of a possible escape from the unrelenting fatalism of the war.

The transformative power of rustic, primal simplicity, for example, seems to point towards such a solution in "Welcome to Dongmakgol", set in a paradisiac community, Dongmakgol, so isolated in the high mountains that the villagers hardly know of modern change, much less the Korean War. Everyone therein seems blissfully unaware of what is going on outside their commune, with little need for anything, including formal schooling, beyond what is necessary for sustaining life a little bit above subsistence level. This naive purity, along with its secure ignorance, is embodied in a cheerful, unknowing, innocent girl named Yeo-il, who is the first to spot a damaged American fighter plane falling from the sky as the film opens. This initial intrusion by the Korean War marks the beginning of the end of this village's peaceful existence, but before the altering of the community's destiny takes its full course, Dongmakgol and its values exert a life-affirming effect on six outsiders, all soldiers who hobble into the village. The crashed American pilot, "Captain Smith", is soon joined by three North Korean survivors of a firefight, as well as two South Korean deserters.

The fantastical distinctiveness, indeed strangeness, of this village, with its quirky basic material culture and matching cheery ethos, also returns the visitors to their elemental character as people (and as Koreans), in stark opposition to their assigned duties as killers. Upon being introduced to each other by the cluelessly friendly residents, the two groups of Korean soldiers immediately draw their guns into an absurd Mexican standoff in which they hold villagers hostage between them. This lasts until, after a few weary hours, the hostages start to walk off this ridiculous scene in order to return to everyday life. That begins also the thaw between the soldiers, including Captain Smith, who embraces a familial identification with the village that becomes important later in the story. In the meantime, the relationship between the two sets of Korean fighters becomes increasingly fraternal through common experiences of rural life, including the joint effort to bring down that ravaging boar. The villagers don't eat meat, but furtively all the soldiers later that night consume the big pig, which they, with some comic difficulty, pass through their systems the next day. This amounts to another facet of the ongoing purification through bonding, which leads less to character transformation as much as to an awakening, including recognition of the real enemy. By the time the puncturing of their obviously protective shell comes, the soldiers have

completely reoriented their priorities and are keen to sacrifice themselves as a united force to defend the village.

The biggest enemy is war itself and its ambitions of fatalistic power, a force whose terrible manifestations come from all directions. The viewer might actually detect a pro-Northern stance, given the (justifiable) fear of outsiders expressed by some residents, or even a paean to communistic values, as expressed by the village headman to a question about the key to his "great leadership": "You just have to feed them a lot". But the question comes from the Northern commander who uses the familiar North Korean adjective for the leader, "widaehan" ("great"), which appears as a mocking wink if anything. Furthermore, North Korean soldiers, including the larger unit that was decimated at the start of the film, are not spared a realistically brutal depiction, and indeed some scenes reveal the exploitation of the Northern soldiers by their own leaders. Still, the clearest agent of this evil power is the US military,[62] and there is little subtlety in the film about this, notwithstanding the Captain Smith character who undergoes a righteous makeover and joins the good guys. What results is a cascade of caricatures, some embarrassing acting, and laughable English-language dialogue straight out of a 1950s comic book, with a John Wayne character ordering an American-led attack on the village. ("They will not hesitate to kill us violently, so let's be prepared to land on the ground with our rifles firing … May the Lord be with you all".) Unlike some of the South Korean assistants in this retaliatory strike force, the Americans show no capacity for self-awareness or moral considerations, and indeed, in their robotic aggression they ape the ghastly portrayals of them in North Korean propaganda.

While it is doubtful that this cringeworthy depiction was done in the spirit of self-parody, far more sophisticated representations of the US do also appear, especially as part of a magical repertoire of visual symbolism that pervades the film. In opposition to "Operation Chromite", for example, American planes do not materialise as a cosmic source of heavenly justice, but as part of a moralistic configuration of objects descending from the sky (Image 2). The US rains down devastation through paratroopers and indiscriminate bombing, and this contrasts with other things that drift down from above, including popcorn blown into existence by a grenade—the film's version of turning lemons into lemonade—and butterfly swarms that disrupt the destructive intent of planes and parachutes. The wondrousness of the community is indicated by creepy grinning totems along the wooded path leading to the village: protective guardians

Image 2 American bombs being dropped on Korean soldiers in "Welcome to Dongmakgol"

that, one surmises, are supposed to scare away outsiders. Most notable is the signification of clothing. The soldiers, including the tall American pilot Captain Smith, shed their combat uniforms and endearingly don the villagers' outfits after the boar episode, which marks the middle and turning point of the film. The viewer, however, also sees several subtle shots of intermingled grey (Northern) and green (Southern) army uniforms, whether worn or hanging on a laundry line, to show the integration of the two sides. Indeed, whereas the soldiers at the start find it difficult to explain to villagers (and each other) why Koreans were fighting each other, later in the story the matter becomes moot, both because it is hard to fathom and because such superficial loyalties are sublimated by the common goal of defending the village.

The village must be protected because it is the pristine version of Korea, uncorrupted by nefarious interests from an external realm that now includes the internal others. The original intruders, after having undergone purification in the village, must now sacrifice themselves to preserve its ideals and spirit if not its treasured isolation, even if this means turning against established loyalties and understandings. Appearing in the early years of the twenty-first century, during a surge in the reconsideration of South Korean history, expressed sometimes as anti-Americanism, "Welcome to Dongmakgol" reflected a widening public sentiment already made apparent in films such as "Spring in My Hometown" (1998, below).

The externally induced turmoil of modern Korean history made fantasies of pure national autonomy understandable, but the trope of a sheltered community separated from the fatalism of war found cinematic expression in other ways as well. "A Melody to Remember" (*Oppa saenggak* ["Thinking of (a sister's) older brother"]; Yi Han, 2016), for example, is grounded in the true story of a harshly real phenomenon: the tens of thousands of children orphaned by the Korean War, only a fraction of whom found refuge in institutions that sprouted eventually into a major international industry.[63] The film is set in a makeshift orphanage in Busan, the gritty capital of South Korea during the war, and here both the home and its children's choir serve as the repository of unsullied and undivided (national) community, one ringing with hope. The heart-warming, beautiful music sung by the children gives voice to their longing for peace and unity, in stark contrast to manufactured propaganda songs, the singing of which actually leads to death in the story. The choir overcomes such cynicism through the achievement of harmony, as discovered, for example, by two boys from the same village whose fathers had effectively killed each other. As suggested by the Korean title of the film, "Thinking of [a sister's] older brother", the main characters embody the central trope of Korean War films, that of the forced separation of siblings. And like their counterparts in "The Fatal Encounter" (Chap. 3), "Assassination" (Chap. 5), or "Spring in My Hometown" (below), these child characters prompt thinking about the natural as well as social and familial factors determining the life of an individual, a family, and/or a people. The orphanage offers not necessarily a clean slate but rather a shelter in which children can maintain a modicum of innocence and accord by acting in concert.

For beyond this choir and orphanage in "A Melody to Remember" lies an unsavoury world of vengeful politics and terrible fates run by adults: a hook-handed man, led to criminality through his own victimisation, who controls the shantytown originally holding the children and their labour; his western-suited boss who represents capitalist exploiters and the wickedly privileged; and even (references to) the South Korean president Syngman Rhee, who is aped hilariously by the maimed man. The precariousness of keeping the orphanage separate from this unpleasant realm comes from its haphazard placement next to a POW camp, an outbreak at which plays an important part in the story. The grave connection between national division and civil war, on the one hand, and the fragile boundary between peace and savagery, on the other, could hardly be clearer.

Another prison camp, indeed the largest and most notorious one, underscores this reality both physically and metaphorically in the semi-fantastical but wholly visceral "Swing Kids", a visual and symbolic *tour-de-force*. The US-run Geoje Island POW camp, which housed tens of thousands of captured North Koreans and Chinese and even some South Koreans, serves as both a cauldron for the war's murderous divisions and a generator of dreams and freedom. The latter is realised by dancing, which on the surface seems absurd, but as an expression of desires and aspirations as well as ultimate limits, dance gets magically interwoven into an intricate story very much anchored in the savage circumstances of the prison compound and in turn of the Korean War itself. Unlike Dongmakgol village or the Busan orphanage, then, the POW camp, or at least the smaller spaces therein where dancing takes place, stands not as a sheltered community of joyous or harmonious innocence; it is, however, one of (fleeting) unity and even a little hope. In sum, the camp replicates the divided nation itself, with all its constituent elements, tragedies, and possibilities.

The compound is meticulously recreated onscreen for this role. As in the demilitarised zone between North and South after the war, barbed wire makes for a ubiquitous marker, separating the two groups of prisoners but allowing them to view clearly the other side as well as the surrounding countryside. The film opens with a black-and-white newsreel introduction to its unusual layout and circumstances: that thousands of the captured enemy combatants wished not to return to North Korea or even China. As insisted upon by the US-UN side, the principle of "voluntary repatriation" constituted a major sticking point in peace negotiations in Panmunjom, which had begun in the summer of 1951, and may have prolonged the war, resulting in hundreds of thousands more killed. This dispute, of course, was not so straightforward, as scholarship has shown,[64] but an undeniable reality was that many Korean soldiers, on both sides, had been captured into combat, conscripted to fight for a country for which they held no allegiance or identification. As such, the design of the Geoje Island POW camp in "Swing Kids" serves as a microcosm of the war, as all the originally "communist" prisoners were separated into one of the two parts, with even a corridor, in mimicking the DMZ, between the two sections through which new prisoners were paraded while entering (Image 3).[65] And likewise, standing watch on the panopticon as formidable sentry and intervening adjudicator is the US army, the ultimate lord over the prisoners. This spatialisation of the film's only setting (aside from

Image 3 New prisoners entering the Geoje Island POW camp in the Korean War, in "Swing Kids"

a few short scenes in the neighbouring area) is filled out by the interiors, including scrap-metal buildings in which a few prisoners on the "pro-communist" side could infiltrate the "anti-communist" areas that included the American soldiers.

This sets the stage, then, for the introduction and interaction of the five main characters, the dancers eventually brought together into a performance team: a young man originally from northern Korea, Ro Gi-su, played convincingly by the K-pop star Do Kyung-su; a portly Chinese prisoner looking for stardom; a falsely imprisoned South Korean man looking for his wife; an enterprising and talented young Korean woman living in the local area who functions as an interpreter; and a black American serviceman, "Jackson", assigned the challenging but edifying task of preparing the other four for a big performance ordered by the camp commander. Each of the five has arrived onto this odd mix through hardship and trauma, the common bond driving their individual interests and yearnings. Other characters include a malevolent young American soldier who is suppressing something; the sometimes malevolent and always stereotypically thick-headed, pompous American camp commander; his smiling personal assistant played dumb by a North Korean spy; Gi-su's camp friend who, like the lead character himself, starts to question his received understanding of what's going on; an old friend of Gi-su's who is maimed into a frightening, screaming mouthpiece of the communist regime; and another latter entrant into the camp, a famously heroic North

Korean soldier and Gi-su's brother, Ro Gi-jin—a giant, infantile brute brutalised, scarred, and exploited by war, the exemplary unthinking killing machine expected from Northern soldiers.

Notwithstanding this impressive range of North Korean characters, the film highlights equally the American presence in the camp and, by extension, in the war and on the peninsula. Each of the three American characters—the commander, the hostile young soldier, and Jackson, all played by competent actors—embody the contradictory meaning attached to the US as a whole, not just to its army or its geopolitical role in Korea. In both reality and ideal, America stands as an ambiguous ally as well as antagonist, a source of tempting riches and dreams as well as of dread and danger. As in "Operation Chromite" but for the opposing message, the US displaces, or is conflated with, the war itself as the purveyor of fate. And the POW camp, like the rampaging wild boar in "Welcome to Dongmakgol", is the fearsome expression of war, this time in the hands of American authority. But unlike the boar, American imperialism as presented in "Swing Kids" is so pervasive and comprehensive that it cannot be contained. This includes American culture but also American material comforts and capitalism, signalled by the appearances of US goods stored in the supply room that Gi-su encounters early in the story. There is even a Warholian shot of countless Campbell's Soup cans stacked on a shelf, along with glimpses of plentiful sundry snacks like chocolate and cookies, which to Americans are disposable items but to wide-eyed Koreans are compelling lures for America at large.

Unmistakably, however, the predominant signification for America in "Swing Kids" is freedom, or at least aspirations thereof, and tap dancing represents the uninhibited freedom of movement and spirit, a means of escape—from ideology, family, poverty, national identity, bigotry, even imprisonment. The sheltered community, then, is not the camp but rather the five-member dance team. Jackson is himself confined by American racism in the camp at all turns, which makes him most fitting in training the motley group of pitiable performers that coalesce in front of him. Jackson also has to entice Gi-su to overcome his ingrained hostility to the others (and vice-versa) while nurturing Gi-su's growing fondness for American dance. For this, not just dancing but, more tangibly, shoes become the pervasive symbol, appearing in countless close-up shots, whether worn or not, on feet that are dancing or not, alive or not. As in "Taegukgi", shoes signal freedom but also a controllable destiny, a means of exercising individual agency and hence a marker of social identity as well as escape. As the

Image 4 Fantasy sequence of a dance-off between American soldiers and members of the POW camp's dance troupe in "Swing Kids"

young woman character tells Jackson at one point, her dancing boots are "magic shoes": "When I wear them, war, food, miserable things, they all just disappear". Other items do something similar—sticks and canes originally used as weapons being turned into performance accessories (more examples of lemons made into lemonade). A dance gesture like this, as "Swing Kids" shows repeatedly, can overcome barriers to communication and understanding by serving as a universal medium, a language all its own, in order to pursue happiness, establish connections, and mediate conflict. The most fantastic moment in this regard is the outbreak of a dance-off between the prisoner team and belligerent American soldiers in a scene straight out of *Westside Story* (Image 4).

Such suspensions of reality, however, seem all too brief, as ephemeral as the biting and amusing banter. Soon enough, the mood turns dark, along with the implications, as the visual cues pile up. And here, as frequent in appearance as shoes and just as wide-ranging in meaning is the spotlight, created by reflections, lamps, and sunlight through windows, as well as by stage lights. The spotlight refers to the highlighting of performance as well as the gaze of prison surveillance, but also the attendant hopes of fame and glory, even material comfort, that exert such a powerful pull but can be a ruinous temptation. For Gi-su and the other dancers, the spotlight, the stage, and the show that they are rehearsing also illuminate the tantalising path towards freedom, however momentarily, promised by (and in) America. And here, the blazing contrast comes as fire, the raging

source of communist power depicted as hateful, menacing, and demanding of absolute submission. The orange-red glow of fire envelopes interior shots of the "communist" camp and fuels an uprising in the story, and hence alludes to something even more destructive than the enticements of American bourgeois life that drive the story towards the end. Navigating between these two sources of light—the communist inferno and the capitalist spotlight, both leading to destruction—is a dangerous exercise, but ultimately the larger, fatal constraints of the POW camp itself hold the most force.

Impossible Endings

The Geoje Island POW camp is the backdrop in another notable film, "The Last Witness" (*Heuksuseon*, "Black narcissus [flower]"; Bae Chang-ho, 2001), which in turn showcases the many dramatisations, especially in literary fiction (like the novel on which this film is based), of the penetrating, painful, and tangled reach of the Korean War in South Korea's subsequent history. These novels, short stories, and films often feature extended flashbacks to reinforce this connection between the war, which never formally ended even after the Armistice of July 1953, and the myriad unresolvable matters that lingered or even emerged anew, down to the level of family and personal connections. These troubles accentuate the impossibility of achieving a lasting closure to the Korean War, whether in the 1950s or thereafter. Hence, it is not surprising that such cinematic treatments tend to be set in the latter part of the war, during the so-called "stalemate" of protracted truce negotiations and a non-moving battle front that nevertheless generated a lot of death.

Another film showcasing the physical geography of the Korean War, "The Front Line" (*Gojijeon* ["Battle for the high ground"]; Jang Hun, 2011), is illustrative in this regard: Like the middle of the peninsula itself over the final two and a half years of the confrontation—during which formal peace talks dragged on fruitlessly—one strategic hill stands for both the nation torn asunder and the horrifically pointless struggle over bits of territory that resulted only in abundant killing. The recurring shifts in possession of this ground actually lead to the contriving of a makeshift gift box through which the opposing soldiers establish a means of exchanging material goods and letters, thereby reconstructing their common national identity and humanity. The military demands from higher up in the command structures of both sides, however, insist on maintaining the

slaughter, which the film shows in relentless fashion, indeed to an extent rivalling the intensity of battle scenes in "Taegukgi". Also like that earlier film, one of the most extraordinary visuals in the "The Front Line" is a human wave of rushing Chinese soldiers, who this time suddenly and frighteningly appear in the night through flashes of lightning. (The strategic high ground in the film probably alludes to Baekma Hill near Cheorwon in South Korea, where a public memorial stands today for the legions killed on all sides, including thousands of Chinese soldiers.) The ghostly presence of hidden Chinese combatants, with their horns blazing, also reinforces the thematic centrality of sound in this film. As in "A Melody to Remember", the singing of songs drawn from a common culture and language depicts the capacity of music to cut through the shattering cacophony of war. The latter part of the story in "The Front Line" is set in the war's final days, and then the final hours, before the implementation of the Armistice on July 27, 1953. This is the day when, including *after* joyous news of the end arrived that morning, some of the fiercest fighting and killing occur in a last-ditch effort to claim as much territory as possible before the formal cease-fire at 10 pm that evening. The destructive waste of this pointless battle to the last death renders it a fitting emblem of the Korean War, with its utter futility in making a difference from what had been the case before the war began: a nation split at the 38th parallel, but now with heaps more bitterness and hatred on top of mounds of countless fallen bodies. The "high ground" takes on another, more horrendous meaning altogether in this regard.

The unshakable presence of death makes for classic horror, and not surprisingly—as if the battlefield carnage was not grisly enough—the Korean War has attracted treatment as the backdrop for a horror flick: "The Piper" (*Sonnim* ["The Guest"]; Kim Gwang-tae, 2015), which flips on its head the premise of "Welcome to Dongmakgol". In "The Piper", the isolated village in the midst of the war is not a paradise but rather the grim opposite: a community racked by deadly sins that stand for the many smaller-scale slaughters and recriminations unleashed by the civil war. Not quite zombies but the spirits of those unjustly killed hover over the village, which looks stable and fruitful when a limping recorder player and his consumption-stricken young son stumble in as the film opens. The only trouble that this village, controlled by an authoritative village headman, seems to experience is the occasional outbreak of a rat infestation. This mimics the durably appealing (and appalling) medieval German story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin,[66] but the rats here allude not to the plague or

to kidnapped children but rather vengeful spirits as well as perhaps enemy hordes in war. In following the customary plot, when the rats reappear, the "guest" of the film's Korean title—presumably in reference to the wandering piper—seems magically able to use his wits and sounds to herd the rats into a cave, where they are sealed away. This takes place far too early in the film, however, to serve as anything more than a setup for the explosively clamorous resurrection of ugly prejudices from under the creepy veneer of village harmony, arousing echoes of terrible crimes committed earlier in the war on fellow villagers targeted as social outcasts. When folk religion is mixed into this witches' brew, the resulting firestorm from the spiralling accusations and reprisals engulfs everyone, including the musician and his son. As a parable of the Korean War's frightening terrors and long-lingering spells, "The Piper" does the trick in a creatively gripping way.

As for "The Last Witness", which was the name of the original novel, the "black narcissus" of the film's Korean title refers to a communist spy element associated with an uprising in the Geoje POW camp by North Korean prisoners, as in "Swing Kids". And although no Americans appear in the scenes of the camp, "The Last Witness", too, features lots of spotlights, especially those from watch towers, given the decidedly *noir* heaviness of the movie's contrast lighting. Most of the storyline is actually set a half-century later, in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century South Korea, when ageing survivors of the POW camp are thrust back into the painful circumstances of their wartime survival by fresh crimes. The trigger is an elderly wealthy man found murdered in Seoul, and the young detective assigned to investigate the matter encounters a web of relationships and tragedies tracing back to the POW camp on Geoje Island during the war, the setting for the middle third of the film. Then and there, two local communists leading a violent escape from the POW camp face a brutal anti-communist constabulary officer who also happens to have been their childhood buddy, an allusion to the localised origins of much of the war's viciousness. The two other primary characters are a wealthy young woman from the area, Ji-hye, a communist mole disguised as a Catholic nun attending to the prisoners; and her family servant, Seok, who has held a fiercely protective, partially romantic bond with her since their childhood.

This relationship, the centrepiece of the film, actually transcends normal social connections and reaches a cosmic level of connotation during the war, as well as for another 50 years thereafter. For both Seok and Ji-hye, separately, have spent that intervening half-century imprisoned in

one form or another, unable to escape the events surrounding the prison camp that had determined their respective destinies. The film actually begins with a scene of Seok finally being released from his five decades of incarceration, thus also gaining his freedom, possibly, to exact revenge on those who had wronged him. These were the three buddies who had diverged in choosing sides when the war came, but whose actions reflected the larger political forces savagely at work, as enacted in the POW camp and its surroundings. The results of their conniving, in the 1950s, had tragically separated Seok from Ji-hye. The pair's desperate attempts to remain together ultimately gave way to their sacrifices to save each other, as Ji-hye suggests in a voice-over from her diary entry: "Fate falls especially hard on those who resist it". Their relationship had overcome the fateful barriers of hereditary social status—and Ji-hye always refers to Seok with the Korean term, *oppa*, for a sister's older brother—in constructing something akin to a sibling relationship. But as we know, the determinative force of the civil war was based on the destruction of fraternal bonds, including those of the three childhood buddies who had turned on each other. That two of them had survived and even thrived in the postwar era by obscuring their past misdeeds, while their victims, Seok and Ji-hye, had to disappear from society, highlights the enduring injustices of the Korean War's outcomes as well as, ultimately, the durability of the pair's connected destiny.

If, through its absence of Americans, "The Last Witness" directs the spotlight to the crimes committed by Koreans upon each other, another film set in the ending period of the Korean War, the pioneering "Spring in My Hometown" (*Areumdaun sijeol*, "A Beautiful time"; Lee Kwang-mo, 1998), points an intensely still lens on the US as the main culprit. Indeed "Spring in My Hometown", released in 1998, could be said to herald the brazen about-face in South Korean cinema, gestured at earlier by "The Taebaek Mountains" in 1994, towards a bluntly critical reconsideration of the American role in the Korean War as well as in national division, as shown also in later works such as "Welcome to Dongmakgol", "A Little Pond", and even "The Front Line".[67] Set in the conflict's closing months and its early aftermath in a village close to an American military base, "Spring in My Hometown" does not depict any combat. It instead focuses on the community's internal fissures based on the attachment to the US army, as well as to the ferociously anti-communist South Korean society that seems to be fully coming into its unforgiving self. Within this

framework is a collection of local children caught in the retributions and exploitations from the war that would mark South Korea thereafter.

The two lead characters, adolescent boys who are best friends—once again a fraternal connection—come from families on opposite sides of this duality in relation to the American military. The father of the wealthier boy, Seong-min, engages in illicit activity for the sake of American soldiers, which constitutes the basis for his family's privileges, while the father of Seong-min's poorer friend, Chang-hui, has been arrested, tortured, and ostracised as a communist, sealing the poor socio-economic standing of Chang-hui's family. The events leading to tragedy for Chang-hui are literally sparked by his discovery of his desperate mother's incorporation into this loathsome order, which encapsulates the moral divide in the narrative between the innocence of Korean children and the severely tainted lives of adults bound to the US-led anti-communist system. The yearning for a legitimate, autonomous Korean destiny is visualised throughout the film by distance shots of Koreans walking down a winding dirt path, and at times we see a roaring, dust-kicking American jeep forcing children off the road, including when they are undertaking a ritual for their lost friend. To further reiterate this point, Seong-min's older sister, after having established an amorous relationship with an unseen "Lieutenant Smith" at the base, becomes impregnated, then abandoned by Smith. The family's father himself eventually gets discarded as well, with a scarlet mark of shame no less, by the Americans, who now consider his activities unacceptable. As metaphors for South Korea's standing as a client and offshoot of American imperialism, these relationships' implications for modern history become self-evident.

As opposed to "Swing Kids", the portrayal of such shameful victimisation at the hands of Americans, including by the theme (or insinuation) of sexual exploitation, is not balanced by an equally stark depiction of communist brutalities. But also unlike the former film, "Spring in My Hometown" offers a path of national redemption beyond the fantastic or even the reliable appeal to familial bonds across the divided ethnos.[68] As in "A Melody to Remember" or "Welcome to Dongmakgol", only the realm of children, in standing for the nation in its salvageable form, can contain the legitimate basis of renewal from the ashes of civil war. This vision probably includes eventual reunification with the North, but it starts with a forthright revisiting of the historical origins of national division from the Korean War period. No subsequent film, not even "Welcome to

Dongmakgol" or "A Little Pond", goes as far as "Spring in My Hometown" (1998) in explicitly fingering the US as the prime antagonist of the nation. But a reconsideration of the war's larger meaning is pursued even by a film like "Operation Chromite", which otherwise seems to double down on traditional perspectives. Most other Korean War films, however, intervene in the ongoing process of national reflection not by offering black-and-white portrayals of the moral stakes or by revealing clear heroes and villains, but rather by pointing to Korea's civil war itself, and war in general, as the fatalistic historical force to overcome.

Chapter Seven. Struggle for Self-Determination: Development, Dictatorship, and Democratisation in South Korea, 1960s–1980s

Playbill

"The President's Barber" (*Hyoja-dong ibalsa* ["The Barber of Hyoja district"]); Im Chan-sang, 2004
"Harmonium in My Memory" (*Nae maeum ui punggeum*, ["Harmonium in my heart"]); Yi Yeong-jae, 1999
"Once in a Summer" (*Geu hae yeoreum* ["Summer that year"]); Jo Geun-sik, 2006
"A Single Spark" (*Areumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il* ["The Beautiful youth Jeon Tae-il"]); Bak Gwang-su, 1995
"The Drug King" (*Mayag-wang*); U Min-ho, 2018
"Memories of Murder" (*Sarin ui chu-eok*, "Remembrances of murder"); Bong Jun-ho, 2003
"Nameless Gangster" (*Beomjoewa ui jeonjaeng* ["War against crime"]); Yun Jong-bin, 2012
"Gangnam Blues" (*Gangnam 1970*); Yu Ha, 2014
"Silmido"; Gang U-seok, 2003

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
East Asian Popular Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_8

"The President's Last Bang" (*Geu ttae geu saramdeul* ["Those people at that time"]); Im Sang-su, 2005
"The Man Standing Next" (*Namsan ui bujangdeul* ["Directors of Namsan Headquarters"]); U Min-ho, 2020
"The Attorney" (*Byeonhoin*); Yang U-seok, 2013
"A Petal" (*Kkonnip*); Jang Seon-u, 1996
"May 18" (*Hwaryeohan hyuga* ["Fascinating vacations"]); Jang Seon-u, 2007
"A Taxi Driver" (*Taeksi unjeonsa*); Jang Hun, 2017
"Ordinary Person" (*Botong saram*); Kim Bong-han, 2017
"1987: When the Day Comes" (*1987: geu nari omyeon*); Jang Junhwan, 2017

Twelve-year-old Nagan, the paralysed son of the title character in "The President's Barber", lies asleep while being diagnosed by a traditional healer, who tells the father, "Your son is endowed with a strange fate and name, which should have meant a life without suffering, but he has taken on the karma of a serpent across the river that became a dragon". A cryptic message to the viewer as well as to the amusingly simple-minded barber, it furthers this remarkable film's workings as a parable of the 1960s and 1970s, the years of rule under President Park Chung Hee: the serpent that crossed the river to become a dragon. For Nagan, whose name means "joyous peace", had been born in April 1960 amid the student demonstrations that overthrew the reigning dictator, a democratic breakthrough that was cut short within a year by General Park Chung Hee's military coup of May 1961. This put Park in power until his shocking assassination in October 1979, the aftermath of which prompts the resolution to "The President's Barber" and caps its depiction throughout of the Park regime's comprehensive hold on the country: a stifling of the South Korean people's yearning for the freedom of self-determination and historical agency, as well as joyous peace.

Nagan's distressing development into a young man thus parallels the nearly two-decade lifespan of the Park period, when South Korea underwent rapid economic growth out of poverty but failed to advance out of authoritarianism. Park's military rule of the 1960s developed into his

"Yusin" constitutional dictatorship of the 1970s, followed by another military strongman's rule in the 1980s. In these latter two decades, politics and its personality cults reached chilling levels of harshness, with expressions of opposition punished by terrible means. Resistance nevertheless persisted and finally achieved the breakthrough to electoral democracy and political liberalisation in 1987, thanks to massive public demonstrations. The cost was high, though, beginning with the violent suppression of student protests in the fall of 1979 that led to Park's assassination in October that year, and reaching the peak of damage the following spring: The 1980 Gwangju Uprising, a not atypical student-led disturbance, turned into a shocking bloodbath when the army, under the direction of a new military junta, turned its guns and sticks on the citizenry of this southwestern city and region. Since then, this event has stood as a historical watershed that continues to guide South Korea's ongoing reckoning with its painful past. In the more immediate term, the Gwangju Uprising of 1980 set the stage and tone for the intense buildup of mass defiance until it burst forth irrepressibly in 1987, the opening year of permanent democratisation.

As with a celebrated cinematic dramatisation of that year's events, titled simply "1987" (see below), an unmistakably dominant motif in the films set in the roughly quarter-century period (1961–1987) of anti-communist, militarist authoritarianism is the centrality of the youth—children and young adults—as representations of the struggle for self-determination. Conversely, films that depict the brutality, indeed criminality, of the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s feature more the older generations as executors of the system, such as the confused government torturer in "The President's Barber", who gives Nagan a mild electrical shock that ends up paralysing the boy. Even when the main character, such as Nagan's father the barber, is not a young person, the stakes and burdens of national history are often shown to fall squarely on those of the youth. They stand as the agents, symbols, vehicles, or objects of the quest for individual freedom, authentic carriers of the nation's history and of its prospects for redirecting its fate. Due to several factors, particularly the age of most of the directors—members of the so-called x86 generation, born in the 1960s, who came of age and to the streets in the intense political struggle of the 1980s—such films have generally reflected the progressive historical understanding that prevailed at the turn of the twenty-first century. This view prioritises the resistance to dictatorship over the escape from poverty

in South Korea's meta-narrative of history. And here, as with Nagan, the youth drive the hopes of freedom from fate, with the long arc of the country's maturation signifying the pursuit of a more proper destiny.

The 1960s and 1970s: Youth Tragically Interrupted

There seems to have been a chronological symmetry to the dictatorship period's place in Korea's modern experience as a whole. Like the preceding 35-year period of Japanese rule, from 1910 to 1945, and the (as of now) succeeding 35 years of existence as a liberal democracy, the authoritarian era also endured for about 3.5 decades following the Korean War of 1950–1953. If, as in "The President's Barber", we can imagine the formative period of South Korea's history as arising only after the Korean War, then the 1960s would represent the country's adolescence, when the younger generations would mould, and be moulded into, the shape of the country's early form. That entity would then have come of age starting in the 1970s by developing a self-awareness and sense of the historical stakes, particularly under the military dictatorship. Meanwhile, in the realms of popular culture and economic development, equally dramatic transformations also took place, especially from the vantage point of young people: a sense of potential self-fulfilment and self-determination at odds with the politics and social conventions that seemed to reinforce authority, hierarchy, and exploitation. This combination produced turbulence around the world, as shown in youth activism in response to global cultural developments, and in the deepening of the Cold War as manifested in the Vietnam War. The films examined in this section incorporate all of these elements in their portrayals of South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s.

We can begin with a film that is relatively tranquil in its setting and storyline, "Harmonium in My Memory" (*Nae maeum ui punggeum*, ["Harmonium in my heart"]; Yi Yeong-jae, 1999), based on a novelistic memoir. Set in the South Korean countryside in 1962, the first full year of the Park-led military *junta's* rule following its coup in 1961, the remoteness of the backdrop allows for a focus on simple coming-of-age love stories that have a somewhat indirect connection to developments elsewhere in the country. The main characters are a 17-year-old girl in the village, Hong-yeon, and a 21-year-old student teacher from Seoul, Suha, who has arrived to start his career at the local primary school, which the girl still attends despite her advanced age. She quickly develops a crush on the young man, but he himself undergoes a maturation while falling for a

fellow teacher, Eun-hui, who is four years his senior. These three main characters offer a limited but subtle range of representations of the younger generations in South Korea at the time, transposed to a rural, "backward" setting that enhances the contrast between the past and present and hints at the stirrings of modernising changes affecting the country at large.

The political circumstances in Seoul and the cities of the time do make a presence, such as through the slogan of "Reconstruction" (*Jaegeon*) pushed by the junta that came to power in 1961, but these connections are not prominent. Rather, the sense of the times comes more from the authoritarian approach to things at the school, echoing the recent military takeover in the capital, and from the countering, softer impulses of the three main characters, especially Eun-hui. Her efforts to instil feelings of discovery, exploration, and joy among the students in their education invite collegial reproaches from older teachers who emphasise hierarchy and discipline. In the material realm as well, the transformations are shown as subtle and incremental but still significant in totality, with the remote countryside serving as a receptacle for modern ideas and items. And here, too, the school, as represented by the ubiquitous musical instrument in classrooms of that era, the harmonium, facilitates the harmonisation of modernity and tradition, growth and stability, young and old. The teachers thus act as transmitters of the new and future South Korea, bringing to the schoolchildren and the villagers modern medicine, vaccination, hygiene, and the technologies and tastes of the latest in popular culture, as well as of course schooling itself.

All of these components, including the cultural influence of American popular music, appear in more pronounced form in a film set at the end of the 1960s, "Once in a Summer" (*Geu hae yeoreum*, ["Summer that year"]; Jo Keun-sik, 2006). Although relatively under-viewed despite its star power, this masterfully crafted tear-jerker depicts the loss and sacrifice stemming directly from the painful trials of South Korea's developmentalist past. But unlike "Harmonium in My Memory", this film does not shy away from politics, even with the story anchored in melodrama and taking place substantially in a rural setting. And although limited in scope—as the title suggests, the main narrative comes from one year, 1969—"Once in a Summer" exudes an epic feel through its expansive treatment of that summer's historical significance: the mass protests against Park Chung Hee's attempt to revise the constitution in order to run for a third consecutive presidential term[69]; the swelling urban youth culture, and its contrast to the underdeveloped rural areas; the ferocious power of anti-communist

ideology, wielded by the state and dispersed throughout society, that informs both urban and rural lives; the domination, entitlement, and abusive hold of big business; and the inescapable American impact, as wielded through popular culture and technological prowess. In a scene of villagers gathering around the communal television set to watch the moon landing, one of them asks, "Is the moon now American land?"

The film begins in contemporary times (mid-2000s) with a frail version of the lead character, Seog-yeong, an ailing college professor in his early 60s, as he is visited by a former student working for a television programme that finds long-lost friends and lovers. Her request to the professor to name such a person in his past—as well as her awkward singing—unleashes a flood of memories. The ensuing flashback sequence to 1969 then shows university student Seog-yeong with little interest in a campus rally against Park, and it turns out he generally lacks interest in politics, youth culture, his future, or much of anything else, and for this he is shown being needled by friends and harangued by his father, a wealthy businessman. To escape all of this Seog-yeong joins a student "farm outing" (*nonghwal*) to a remote village to help the locals with their work and spread the accoutrements of modern life. There he falls in love with a village girl, Jeong-in, who has an uneasy, distinctive standing in her community. She is one of the few literate adults, for one, and therefore staffs the local library, but more importantly, in a setting in which one's identity remains firmly tied to one's family, she has none.

Jeong-in was orphaned when her parents, both leftist guerrillas or activists, were either killed or ended up in the North following the Korean War, but who in any case bestowed upon their left-behind daughter an ostracised status. Before that, however, her father had established the library with all good intent, so it appears somehow that Jeong-in is bound to that small building in more ways than one. She is also shown forced to join anti-communist military drills while brandishing a wooden toy rifle, a ludicrous image signalling her fragile existence as an internal alien. She thus embodies the precarious condition of thousands if not millions who were associated with the enemy ideology in the anti-communist frenzy of post-liberation South Korea, a human object of intense surveillance, re-education, manipulation, and exploitation. In a pivotal scene of a gathering for a movie projected outdoors one evening, she must confirm to the illiterate village elder that his son, who had been working at an electrical plant far away, had in fact died after an accident, the notice of which Jeong-in had kept hidden in order to protect the older man. Upon

realising what had happened, he strikes her and explodes with invective that dredges up her background. This tense confrontation is interrupted by a fire engulfing the library, a result of Jeong-in's having left a candle burning by a window. In one evening, then, the grounds that anchored her already precarious existence in the village are completely upended, just as her affection for Seog-yeong has also become undeniable. The Korean romanticisation of the enduring, fateful impact of one's "first love", an exhaustive trope in melodramas, is given here a richly historical significance by the plentiful links to the times in both the setting and the narrative. This moment in the film also comes at the midway point, signalling the turn in Jeong-in's life for good, as well as the impossibility of return—to her life in the village and to her existence as someone bound by her past.

The first step in that journey of Jeong-in's new life comes when she agrees to follow Seog-yeong to Seoul. Seog-yeong, stricken by love and a hero's complex, is determined to rescue her, despite warnings from his student group leader that her background and their enormous class difference would make his plans untenable. This concern comes true almost immediately, as the couple gets ensnared in a roundup of student protestors in Seoul. In their separate and harsh interrogations, Jeong-in's parental stigma is introduced, but Seog-yeong's own family ties are offered as a chance to evade further incarceration if he formally denies having associated with her, or even knowing her. In an excruciating scene in front of a disheartened but resigned Jeong-in, he makes this choice. His subsequent redemption, by begging his powerful father—tellingly, at a construction site of his father's company—to intervene in gaining her release, ultimately does not result in his desired outcome, for she slips away from him and disappears into the mass of developing South Korea.

Pondering what motivated Jeong-in's decision, beyond any sense of betrayal, raises the larger question of why these lovers could not have stayed together in the South Korea of the time. Seog-yeong had offered her an exit from the enclosed environment of her village, but the smashing of his dreams of their life together brings home the reality that Jeong-in is now bound to an equally confining set of circumstances. For her to achieve true agency over her life, then, she had to make another escape. In turn, the broader historical judgement on the Park era comes to the forefront: What were the underlying basis and purpose of the stark differences in social or class identity in the intensively anti-communist, regimented mobilisation of the Park years? "Once in a Summer" suggests that one's family background and association with the militarist, developmentalist

state, the roots of which dated back to the Korean War and colonial eras, together determined an individual's prospects for freedom and agency. The overlapping life trajectories of Jeong-in and Seog-yeong, alas, were but a brief crossing before they again split along very different tracks. The train likewise figures prominently in the film, mostly as a conduit for transmitting people and ideas from the urban to the rural. There is also a scene, after the couple's decision to leave the village together, in which the couple is shown walking insecurely along railroad tracks leading up to Seoul, a sure reminder of the train's customary signification of fate. And fittingly, they go their separate ways at Seoul Station. Their contrasting outcomes after arriving in the capital likewise invite consideration of their differing class backgrounds, with Jeong-in's very plebeian standing in unavoidable conflict with that of the decidedly privileged Seog-yeong.

Class-based exploitation of the youth becomes an unequivocal theme in a film that bridges the 1960s and 1970s through the life of Jeon Tae-il, a young labour activist who died of self-immolation in 1970, at the age of 22. This manner of death, strikingly recreated in the film, is reflected in its English title, "A Single Spark" (Bak Gwang-su, 1995), but more revealing is the original Korean title, "The Beautiful Youth Jeon Tae-il" (*Areumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il*), which accentuates the scope of loss from a life so tragically shortened. Here, the determinant structures are sweatshop capitalism and authoritarianism, which both produced and relied upon the labour exploitation and government corruption that drove Jeon to the breaking point. This connection is enhanced by a second, parallel story—shown in colour as opposed to the depiction of Jeon's young adult life in black and white—set a few years later, in the mid-1970s, of a young couple: one a "factory girl" harassed by the police for trying to organise her fellow workers; and the other a dissident intellectual, on the run from the police state of the 1970s' *Yusin* dictatorship, who is researching the life of Jeon for a biography. He also provides the voiceover narration, in which he guides the viewer through his discovery of the connections between his circumstances and those of Jeon. The elaboration, indeed the agonising theorisation, of this relationship in the subsequent 1980s would draw many university students and intellectuals to the factory floor to awaken their proletarian senses as well as to provide the labourers guidance and solidarity. In "A Single Spark", which was perhaps the earliest theatrical feature in the labour film genre to appear after democratisation and viscerally recreated the harrowing experiences of resistance in the Park years, this inter-class alliance understandably features parallel lives and fates.

Unlike "Once in a Summer", however, the gap between the two tracks is small and maintained in the same direction. Furthermore, their crossing takes place posthumously, through a process of learning and awakening that reflected the growing impact of Jeon's death on the subsequent labour and democratisation movements.

The political overtones are not as explicit in "The President's Barber" (*Hyojadong ibalsa* ["The Barber of Hyoja district"]; Im Chan-sang, 2004), but they are just as striking. As with "Once in a Summer", the focus is on the violent structures and vulgar cultures of the anti-communist authoritarian system. The life of the title character, whose geographical proximity to the president's mansion leads to his role as the president's barber, takes an absurd, then appalling turn as he finds himself an unwitting eyewitness to major historical moments. (Indeed "Barber" is the closest replica in South Korean cinema of "Forrest Gump".) His experience, over two decades, thus stands as a sharply calibrated lens into life under Park Chung Hee's rule. The story actually begins in 1960, the year before the coup through which Park took power, with a dramatically comical recreation of the April 19 student revolution that overthrew President Syngman Rhee. This date also marks the birth of the barber's son, Nagan, the narrator of the film's voiceover. Over the course of his upbringing, Nagan ("joyous peace") grows symbolically as the stifled yearning for democracy and hence the allegorical counterpart to Park, references to whom include "Yongan"—"royal countenance", literally "the dragon's face"—which the barber is sternly warned not to nick when he shaves the president. The more frequent epithet for Park is "Gakha" ("his eminence"), which Park's chief bodyguard equates with the similar-sounding "gukka" ("country" or "state"), a refrain that he forces the barber to recite while doing military-style push-ups as punishment for the helpless man's ignorance.

In such a crude way breezy violence infuses the exercise of authority visited upon the barber. In a disturbingly amusing parallel, the characters of the president's chief bodyguard and the KCIA chief, both of whom are using the barber as a pawn in their machinations against each other, take turns in different scenes kicking the barber in the shin in a fit of rage—a behaviour shown also in the films, discussed below, on the 1979 assassination of Park. Currying favour with the president is the reason these underlings do this, but they are also generally given free rein to abuse their power, for ultimately it comes from the dictator, who himself tries to keep his hands clean, distanced from the unpleasant, petty details of the enforcement of his reign. The barber, having garnered the president's confidence

through his regular visits to the Blue House, eventually comes face to face with the horrors of such proximity, when Nagan, thanks unwittingly to his fearful father, absurdly becomes ensnared in a scheme to nab political opponents as communist spies. What follows is an extraordinarily unsettling scene, barely mitigated by its comical undertone: The boy Nagan undergoes mild torture through electric shock, although he remains happily unaware of what is happening to him, just as the casual torturer himself is unable to act upon his doubts about what he is doing. However distressed he gets, however, the barber is too intimidated to tell the president that Nagan has been abducted by the state security apparatus. Nagan is eventually released, but the ordeal has paralysed him.

An ensuing, poignant montage follows the desperate barber, with his crippled son on his back, as he walks on dilapidated bridges and past stacks of unused construction lumber, decaying emblems of South Korea's developmentalist construct. He must travel far away from the geographies of power to find a medicine man in the wintry mountains of Gangwon province, who gives him an encrypted diagnosis of his son's malady—which is also the barber's own—as well as the prescriptive resolution, which can come only with the passing of the "dragon" itself. After the president has died, and after the barber finally demurs, in his own amusing way, an offer to service the next dictator, Chun Doo-hwan (though not so named, his bald head is enough to give him away), the now 20-year-old Nagan regains his mobility.

As we know, Park's passing did not mean the end of military dictatorship. South Korean society's paralysis thus came less from the outward form of authoritarianism as much as from the inward debilitation that sapped young people like Nagan of their joy, dignity, and curiosity—that robbed them of their youth. This is illustrated by the barber's young brother-in-law and Nagan's uncle, who is shown as an energetic, happy young man passionate about American popular culture and eager to go on his Vietnam War adventure, the closest he would get to the US. After he returns from his stint in the war, however, he has completely changed: broken, reticent, and sobered by his treatment at the hands of American soldiers. His outcome is thus an accompaniment to what would befall Nagan himself, thanks to his father's inextricable side job as the president's barber. The feeble and clueless barber, thrust into privilege, even power, by the incidental location of his barber shop, had been easily taken in and corrupted by this order and thus represented the older generations' responsibility for failing to protect the children and youth. Still, however

much the director, Im Chan-sang, sought to demonstrate the banality of coercion and violence under Park's rule, showing a boy undergoing torture seems to have crossed a line into the blatant embrace of shock value. As Lim noted, however, while conceding the lack of any evidence of this having actually occurred, every young adult who really was tortured by the state was, in the end, someone's child.[70] Indeed, in the film's semiotics, Nagan, in embodying the country's fledgling democratic spirit, was everyone's child.

Criminality and Karmic Violence in the 1970s and 1980s

Films set in the 1970s and 1980s have tended to shift the generational focus to those in positions of fateful power in order to associate the government and the times with criminality. The idea is that, as an unelected and increasingly brutal autocracy veering towards fascist rule in the 1970s and 1980s, the South Korean military dictatorships blurred if not decimated the line between legality and illegality. Understandably, the favoured theme in such dramatisations has been the underworld, the realm of organised crime that, in the rapidly industrialising and globalising South Korea of the era, operated as a fixture in the social landscape as much as the heavy-handed regime itself. The logical unfolding of this relationship resulted in Park's being killed in 1979 by his own henchman, the stunning event that two major films have made their narrative focus. These works in turn drew upon a popular upswell in gangster films starting in the 1990s, corresponding to the start of *hallyu* cinema, when it seemed several major hits every year came in this genre. Tellingly, the blockbuster that epitomised the trend, "Friends" (2001), was a historical film set in 1970s' and 1980s' Busan, which became a clichéd backdrop for several of these treatments. As the excessive violence probably de-sensitised the moviegoing public and invited ever more in-your-face showings of brutality, films featuring the underworld remained popular, and likewise some of the more stimulating releases have featured a historical setting.

For the 1970s, known for the *Yusin* constitutional dictatorship that began formally in late 1972 but characterised the entire decade, the films have naturally taken a dark, unsettling tone. Many of President Park's signature *Yusin* programmes actually began at the start of the 1970s or earlier, including the export-led industrialisation drive through state

oversight, intensified anti-communism, the manipulation of elections, the prosecution of dissent, and mass mobilisation campaigns like the New Village Movement. Some of these features are interwoven into a visceral accounting of the 1970s' tandem of autocracy and criminality by "The Drug King" (*Mayag-wang*; U Min-ho, 2018). Starring Song Kang-ho in the title role, the film is about a brazen methamphetamine manufacturer and trafficker in Busan, Yi Dusam, who styles himself a businessman contributing to the national developmentalist drive to export manufactured goods. Starting with his entrance as a runner in the thriving trade in knockoff goods with nearby Japan, Yi revives his life after a close call and bout in prison by hitting upon the explosively lucrative potential of *ppong*, the slang for "hiropong" (philopon), until he eventually becomes undone by his creation, both the chemical and the organisational. The government's official crackdown on this and other organised crime activity actually fuels the thorough participation of venal officials in making such activities rewarding, if not thriving. The state's monopoly on legitimate violence is thus expressed as an effort to exercise a monopoly on criminality, with the KCIA, the foremost secret police agency, managing the chain of bribery and selective suppression. This ever-growing kleptocracy eventually buckles under its own weight, a lesson embodied in the singular semi-clean character in the film, a prosecutor sent down to Busan from the outside, named Kim, who becomes Yi Dusam's foil and the audience's proxy for historical perspective and judgement. Kim is shown on multiple occasions walking through and observing sweatshops staffed by overworked female labourers, and in one of his interrogations he asks Dusam to fathom the astronomical difference between his illicit profits and these workers' pittance in wages.

The condemnation is directed at not only the drug king, but the *Yusin* system as a whole, if not the de facto king himself, Park Chung Hee, whose portrait appears prominently in government offices and whom Dusam cites as his role model (they both came from Manchuria, Dusam notes). Indeed real-life events, including the manipulation of elections and even the dissident Kim Dae-Jung's kidnapping, are woven into the story. Yi Dusam launders his activities and riches by latching onto public campaigns and causes, from the New Village Movement to public anti-communist leagues, and even by heading local civic groups devoted to music and the arts. He believes that, endowed with the same entrepreneurial and patriotic spirit, he is doing the president's bidding at the local level. The difference in legality is but a formality, as both Yi's and Park's

empires depend on corruption and violence, so Yi might as well put up a legitimate front. "Let's match the wave of the times", he exhorts to his partners, which might even constitute historical payback by weakening the Japanese people through addiction: "Isn't selling meth in Japan patriotic?" Like the Walter White character in the American television series *Breaking Bad*, Yi Dusam also has to take charge of making the stuff himself, and for this he recruits a master narcotics concocter, whom he refers to as "Professor Baek" and someone akin to "grandfather Dangun", the mythical progenitor of the Korean people. The comical conflations extend to Dusam's sense of his invincibility and indispensability, both hallmarks also of strongmen like Park Chung Hee, especially as their prolonged time in power turns such belief into a self-legitimation creed. They come to feel external to the workings of fate itself, that they can bend the larger structures of destiny to their own will, a delusion that usually leads to their downfall. With Park, that came in the fall of 1979, in a process that began with student demonstrations in Busan and ended with his assassination on October 26. Yi Dusam's own *untergang* in "The Drug King" naturally overlaps with these real events, as his enemies start to close in on him during the student protests. Amid his increasingly drug-addled downward spiral, Dusam makes his way to Seoul for Park's funeral and wonders how those idiots whom Dusam had paid off handsomely could have actually killed Park. His paranoia of grandeur reaches a peak here: "I've devoted my life to helping our country's modernisation", he claims in channelling Park, and this is what I get?

For the ensuing decade, such a relationship between criminality, violence, and dictatorship is both reinforced and complicated by the remarkable "Memories of Murder" (*Sarin ui chu-eok* ["Remembrances of murder"]; Bong Jun-ho, 2003), about the efforts by local police detectives to catch a serial killer in the mid-1980s. Even before the stunning revelation of the actual killer in 2020 brought renewed attention to the film, "Memories of Murder" had become a box office hit and drawn considerable praise in cinephile circles as director Bong Jun-ho's early masterpiece, with particular emphasis on the film's projection of mood and narrative through visual cues.[71] The story is based on unsolved murders from 1986 and 1987 (and beyond) in the southwestern corner of the capital region, about an hour from Seoul. This distance is far enough to give the setting the remote feel of a gritty, run-down town with its insular particularities, while still highlighting the national culture of everyday violence as the medium for exercising authority, especially that of the police.

A local police detective, Bak Duman, who brags of his talents in discernment but does not hesitate to get physical, and his unruly partner, Jo Yong-gu, are joined by a detective from Seoul, named Seo, who arrives to help solve the case. Seo, much more studious and controlled, usually seems to be looking for something different from what his partners seek, and he quickly sees through the local policemen's coercive methods of extracting "memories of murder" to confirm their easy suspicions—until he, too, desperately joins the prevailing institutional culture.

The depicted violence of the police, however non-lethal and hackneyed, far surpasses that of anyone except the serial killer himself, which is one of many signs that the habits of casual brutality have long become normalised in this setting, even as they face increasingly stiff pushback from civil society. Such routines are personified in the ever-explosive detective Jo, who routinely kicks people—actually a fallback behaviour for all the detectives—but eventually gets his comeuppance in his favoured right leg. True to the humorously disconcerting tone of the film, the local police flail in both their actions and logic in the quest to find the killer. As for detective Bak, aside from his breezy roughness, he appears well-intentioned and even sympathetic, but he is also laughably wrongheaded. At one point he consults a local shaman and at another point he checks out fellow bathers at a public spa because he is convinced that the killer, who has left no hair at the crime scenes, must be shaving himself in the nether regions. This scene also points to the steadiest visual motif in the film, the gaze—that of the police and especially of detective Bak, who often stares into the camera while eyeing a suspect or simply the audience, as if he is looking at the still-at-large killer himself. To the end Bak maintains his faith in the compelling authority of his gaze, not only for helping him solve problems but to weaken a suspect into giving himself away. Such self-legitimation, characteristic of the autocratic surveillance state, ultimately fashions reality out of tunnel vision, representations of which make many appearances in the film.

In addition to constant reminders of the police and the police state, such as loudspeaker pronouncements of civil defence drills, the uncomfortable tension of the mid-1980s, marked by government oppression but also increasing societal resistance, comes from the makeup and manner of the local citizenry. The final suspect is, significantly, a quiet young man of nondescript nature (aside from his soft features) who, under interrogation, stands defiant, apparently out of his awareness of the absurdity of the exercise but also out of indignation. He retorts that people in town have

caught on to the beating of suspects into confessions, and he is determined not to allow this to happen to him. In this way he adds to the rising suspicion about the investigation, from university students physically fighting back against the policemen to the insistent questioning from an investigative journalist. In a scene with the detectives and their chief at the police station, under the portrait of dictator Chun Doo-hwan, a final young person, the singular female police official, Gui-ok, offers the men a critical clue in the investigation. But her idea is gigglingly dismissed by Bak, and although dressed professionally in uniform, she is expected to fetch coffee for everyone. A bumbling masculinity, as a stand-in for the hoary dictatorship, is surely on trial here, but its impact extends beyond the nature of the governing regime to the real consequences of failing to solve these heinous crimes. That in the film all the victims of the serial killer are young females—although the actual victims, more numerous than in the film, ranged widely in age[72]—highlights the broader victimisation of the people by the system at large.

The overlap between criminality and governance shines through in other films set in the 1970s and 1980s as well. For the latter decade, and in a similar vein to "The Drug King" examined above, is "Nameless Gangster" (*Beomjoewa ui jeonjaeng* ["War against crime"]; Yun Jong-bin, 2012), a work whose Korean title is the name of a publicly declared "war on [organised] crime" by President Roe Tae-woo. In this story, the main criminal begins as a dirty customs agent in Busan, who gets into the Japan meth trade by working with one of the major gangs. But unlike in "The Drug King", he mostly escapes legal punishment, primarily through his own shamelessness, a metaphor perhaps for the survivability of the army general, Roh, who became elected as democratic South Korea's first president in the late 1980s. For films set in the 1970s, in the depths of Park Chung Hee's grip on power, notable offerings include "Gangnam Blues" (*Gangnam 1970*; Yu Ha, 2014). Here, the rapid development of paddy lands south of the Han River into the wealthiest real estate in the country provides the setting for two friends who rise up through the underworld in conjunction with the corrupt political networks scaffolding the *Yusin* decade.

The hit movie that helped inaugurate the *hallyu* films' portrayal of the 1970s and 1980s as a period rife with criminality through state power was *Silmido* (Gang Useok, 2003). The title refers to a small island in Incheon Harbor, where hardened criminals were secretly trained for a mission to kill the North Korean leader. In immediately highlighting the parallels

between legality and criminality, the film begins with shots of North Korean commandos attempting a raid on the Blue House to kill Park Chung Hee in early 1968—the supposed trigger for the South's retaliatory action to eliminate Kim Il Sung—interspersed with scenes of gangsters going about their violence and then being nabbed and sentenced to death. They are instead secretly put through a gruelling training regimen for their mission to Pyongyang, but in the process they develop a renewed sense of community in their island camp, even as their previous identities in the mainland are disappeared. The entire plan is suddenly cancelled in 1971 for political reasons, but the 30-odd trainees remain destined to become cannon fodder, as the camp commander is now ordered to wipe out all traces of the assassination project lest it become known to the public. Such vulnerability at the whimsical hands of a state veering towards legalised dictatorship would be a chilling portent of the Yusin system's inauguration very shortly afterwards, in 1972.

Needless to say, the unequal, unjust, and corrupt delineation of power under Yusin relied on the larger structures of state-guided industrialisation, anti-communism, dictatorship, and militarisation that had reflected, since the 1960s, the ruling priorities and approaches of the man who, interestingly, has remained unnamed in the movies. This refusal to utter the name of Park Chung Hee appears to have become a trope in historical films, including two works that recreate his assassination, "The President's Last Bang" (*Geu ttae geu saramdeul* ["Those people at that time"]; Im Sang-soo, 2005) and the more recent "The Man Standing Next" (*Namsan ui bujangdeul* ["Directors of Namsan Headquarters"]; U Min-ho, 2020). In neither film does Park's name get mentioned, at least not fully, and like in "The President's Barber", even the participants in the spiteful rivalry that prompted the killing, Kim Jae-gyu and Cha Ji-cheol, are given different names.[73] As for Park, in "The President's Last Bang" he is referred to only by the informal KCIA code name of "Harabeoji" (grandfather) or simply "Gakha" (his eminence). This ploy of using a false name for the ruler at once comments on the lingering impact of military authoritarianism as well as on the ongoing contentiousness surrounding that period and its dominant political figure. The film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim suggests that this denial of real names is part of the filmmakers' larger rejection of verisimilitude in their respective re-tellings of history.[74] The filmmakers might have also wished to avoid the headaches of litigation. "The President's Last Bang" acknowledges as much in its blank opening

shot, which was supposed to have shown real documentary footage but deleted it in accordance with a judge's ruling following a lawsuit by Park's son. Instead, the text on screen simply says, in a playfully Orwellian manner that portends what's to come, that the "persons and events appearing in the film do not correspond to reality", while the next frame's wording says exactly the opposite, at least in English (in Korean there is a reminder that the originally planned film footage was removed due to a court order).

Such confusion at the start acts as a prelude to a film that, like some other Korean historical films such as "YMCA Baseball Team" (Chap. 5), is a comedic, indeed absurdist, take on a deadly serious topic. "The President's Last Bang" is titled in Korean, "Those People at That Time", a variation on the title of a hit song ("Geu ttae geu saram": "That Person, then") at the time, the singer of which was present, as shown in the films, at the dinner gathering where Park was killed. Using a reference to this song as the film's title also captures the enveloping mood towards the end of 1979 while drawing attention to the people—or rather, the kinds of people—who surrounded the reclusive president increasingly beset by a siege mentality. Set in a 24-hour period between October 26 and 27, "The President's Last Bang" can be considered in fact a character study not of Park but rather of Kim Jae-gyu, head of the KCIA and hence the chief enforcer of Yusin repression. The irony of such a man killing Park is of course extraordinary and hence teeming with potentiality when attempting to dramatically contextualise the event. Here the viewer gets a glimpse of the regime's brutalities through the activities of Kim's (fictional) assistant. He commandeers young women for Park, checks on the KCIA torture chambers, and like other KCIA operatives is shown liberally spouting vulgarities in a preening display of his summary power, and all this in the few hours before that fateful dinner gathering of October 26. In that short span Park is shown increasingly wanting to distance himself from the KCIA chief, who for his part is enraged at the grip on Park held by his widely despised chief bodyguard, Cha Ji-cheol, portrayed as a boorish buffoon who struts around the Blue House in his underwear. Kim, worried about how his failing health could erode Park's confidence in him, has been pondering for a while whether, to get rid of Cha, he should kill Park too (or vice-versa). This would also address the ongoing unrest in the southeast of the country led by student demonstrations—something that Park sees as little more than a nuisance, insulated as he is in Cha's cocoon. Such a mishmash of realisations, rationalisations, and connections mirrors

the confusing disjunct between the Yusin mechanisms of oppression, shown in the film as actually falling far short of a disciplined or well-ordered apparatus, and the unsettling volatility outside Park's inner circle.

Fittingly, Kim's shooting of Cha and Park at the dinner that evening is depicted as a farce, featuring jamming guns, flying digits, shorting circuits, screaming yet nurturing young women, and a grovelling former general taking refuge under the dining table. But as chaos ensues with the outbreak of violence, Park himself is shown calmly bewildered by what's going on. Earlier in the dinner, rather than a commanding presence Park had appeared indeed as a meek, needy "grandfather" wondering how to clamp down on ungrateful students and opposition politicians. And earlier in the day, the movie had further cut him down: Like his lieutenants, he displays a fondness for speaking Japanese, listening to Japanese songs, and uttering Japanese aphorisms, and perhaps most damningly, personally engaging in the petty corruption that lubricated the elaborate network of transactions that constituted the regime. But true to form, he remains unfazed as Kim delivers the *coup de grace* while cursing Park in Japanese. And in highlighting the explosive potentiality of this act, a visual commentary appears in the form of a blood-splattered folding screen that looks uncannily like a plum flower painting by the revolutionary nineteenth-century artist Jo Hui-ryong (Image 1).

Astoundingly, this elaborate assassination scene marks just the halfway point of the film; the rest of the story, in dampening any revolutionary

Image 1 KCIA chief Kim in front of a blood-splattered folding screen after assassinating President Park Chung Hee, in "The President's Last Bang"

potential assigned to his actions, follows Kim as he tries to assemble a convincing account of what happened within a ruling apparatus that quickly falls apart. Not only Park but the entire security state thus is exposed as a paper tiger, or at least as a beast unable to function without its brain (or heart). Lines of authority suddenly appear unclear and unreliable, as everyone discovers that the leader's cold, naked body on the coroner's table, which is beckoning some solution, instead produces a cacophony of meek reasoning and impulses. This impression is reinforced by the film's doubling down on the fascist sheen of the regime's outer form. The clean columns of both interior and exterior backdrops, including a Nuremberg rally scene straight out of a *Star Wars* film, add to the gleam of grand monuments and marble prominently visible since the start of the film. The incongruence between this persistence of the regime's imposing externalities and its internal collapse seems to comment on the overlaid structures of life under Park. They quickly crumble upon his death, mangling collateral fates but also the common perceptions of the link between actions and consequences, so authoritative had been the dependence on one person built over nearly 20 years. The dramatisation of Park's assassination is thus less concerned with commenting on the man himself as much as on the enveloping mentalities and practised behaviours of those around him. Hence, like in "The President's Barber", the karmic judgement visited upon individuals for having colluded or simply touched by the system, willingly or not, is a microcosm of the damning judgement on the collectivity as a whole.

In "The Man Standing Next" (2020) as well, heavenly vengeance strikes Park first, the victim of the very instruments of violent surveillance and secrecy that he created and depended upon, but the character studies apply more to those surrounding him, starting well before the killing. Here, the motivations of assassin Kim Jae-gyu, KCIA director, undergo further elaboration: The president's bodyguard and subject of Kim's growing rage, Cha (surnamed Gwak in the film), has now been authorised to eliminate Kim by Park himself. The president blames Kim for allowing a previous KCIA director to pilfer state (read: Park's) funds, reveal secrets openly in front of the US Congress (the so-called Koreagate scandal),[75] and publish a damning memoir in Japan. For his part, Kim now considers Park, as a besieged emperor beholden to nefarious sycophants, as having betrayed the 1961 "revolution"—the May 16 coup—that Park had led but that so many other military men, like Kim, had supported. (As he shoots Park dead, Kim issues an execution decree to that effect.) Kim's

appropriation of lethal historical judgement thus appears driven less by idealism, despite his possibly noble intent and careful planning, as by personal vendettas and paranoia, the same traits exhibited by President Park. This is perhaps why, as the story moves on, the growing presence of the next military dictator, Chun Doo-hwan, becomes creepily conspicuous. Like the 1961 "revolution" itself, in the end the assassination takes shape as something more akin to a palace coup, with the promises of change that would release South Koreans from dictatorship severely attenuated by age-old principles and approaches, despite (or because of) two decades of historical development.

The Fight for Self-Determination in the 1980s

In hindsight, then, as well as for constructing historical meta-narratives, the liberation from autocracy would have to be shown as something taken, not given. The fateful forces that had gripped South Korea from the start, and especially since 1961, would not relinquish their hold on their own, even if they turned their guns on each other; the oppressed people would have to fight for their freedom, against what had long seemed like the fixed order of things built over decades, centuries, or millennia of cultural and political practice. While the cinematic portrayal of the democracy movement generally acknowledges the deep historical roots of the spirit of resistance, as shown above, the focus lies on the decade of the 1980s, in a process that began with the tragedy of Gwangju. The Gwangju Uprising of 1980 has received plentiful filmic attention, as to be expected, with its waves of historical impact reaching far beyond the 1980s. For the immediate term, however, this event sparked and inspired that decade's ostensibly unstoppable buildup towards the massive demonstrations of 1987 that forced the democratic transition. Throughout, the story of determined and heroic resistance accentuates the people's sacrifice, but it also firmly implants agency in their hands for a grander struggle.

The crucial start of that decade of democratisation, the 1980s, provides the setting even for a film that, aside from a brief mention, skips over Gwangju: "The Attorney" (*Byeonhoin*; Yang U-seok, 2013), which became a record-setting box office hit. A commemoration of former president Roh Moo Hyun's deeds as a civil rights attorney in Busan in the early 1980s, when he helped defend a group of students falsely charged with communist subversion, "The Attorney" relies on flashbacks internal to the storyline but that do not connect to the present day. The reflection of the

past in the present (and vice-versa) is instead left implicit, although the film seems to have joined a wave of popular dramatisations in response to the conservative political turn of the late 2000s following Roh's term in office (and his shocking suicide of 2009). This shift also accompanied the continuing "Park Chung Hee syndrome's" nostalgia for the former dictator and the political re-emergence of his daughter Park Geun-hye in the early twenty-first century. Without explicit reference to Park or his successor Chun, the Roh character in "The Attorney" is clearly profiled as a counterpart to the strongmen. Indeed the story arc of Roh's transformation from a parvenu real estate lawyer to a self-sacrificing civil rights attorney signals the consensus meta-narrative of South Korean history, now widely agreed upon, that democratisation flowed from, or at least accompanied, the economic developments. The point of disagreement remains over the timing of that breakthrough moment—whether it indeed had to wait until the 1980s or even as late as 1987—and who the protagonists were or should be considered to have been: Park and the military and business elites, or the victims and resistors, especially the workers and students. "The Attorney", while addressing the existence of these contending perspectives even from the time of the late 1970s and early 1980s, clearly falls into the latter camp.

In fact the difference between the two rulers, whether Park or Chun, was irrelevant, the film seems to argue. More important was the stout structure of the developmental anti-communist military autocracy that bred oppression, corruption, and, most of all, the open violation of the written law itself. As partly a classic courtroom drama, the story depends on the heroic lawyer using both the letter and spirit of the law against a governing order that flaunts its capacity to disregard official norms. Here the state's justification for such craven illegality, even more than the sustenance of the military dictatorship or of autocracy in general, is national division, more specifically the cause of anti-communism, which is portrayed as the ultimate legitimation for the behaviour of the governing and legal orders. The prosecutors, judges, military officers, police officials, and secret police officials are all in on the act, using the cause of nabbing "commies" (*ppalgaengi*) to validate whatever they do in flouting codified legalities. Included in this group are the economic elite, the corporate heads and entrepreneurs who, as long as they did not oppose the anti-communist developmental state, were given material rewards that would presumably filter down to the common people. For the lead character—interestingly, also not named for the actual historical figure—this bargain

is rejected when he is forced to choose between continuing his comfortable existence as a real estate lawyer who rode the system or dedicating himself to upending it by defending a young person whom he had earlier berated. Up until this awakening, the protagonist had repeatedly dismissed student resistance activities while determining that, now with his achievement of professional success, he could serve his country by racing as a yachtsman in the Olympics.

The prodding towards enlightenment comes from several supporting characters: a journalist buddy from his high school days who is struggling against corrupt editors at his newspaper; the young heir to a big construction company who wants fervently to help democratise his country, just not yet because it's not quite the right time; a mentoring civil rights lawyer who tells the puzzled attorney that the two men fundamentally see the world differently; and most of all, an elderly single woman who runs a pork stew restaurant (a Busan specialty) that the attorney had frequented since his days as a desperately poor student. When her son disappears in a roundup of members of a reading club charged with circulating communist material,[76] her agonisingly personalised pleas to the attorney bring home the systemic dimension of the problem. He immediately changes course, which requires that he re-engage in his studies and decline the construction tycoon's lucrative offer to hire him. The main character's turn thus should stand for the country's readiness to transition to freedom, but this familiar story of an epiphany that triggers self-sacrifice probably would have been more compelling had the attorney come to his senses before, not after, he had achieved material comfort. Although the attorney-hero is shown rejecting the young tycoon's analysis of the times by insisting that the timing is always right for democracy and justice, his own transition only after he gains wealth weakens his own argument, and presumably that of the film as well.

Notwithstanding this particular glitch, the film thus counters the widely held view even now that rationalises the timing of democratisation—its achievement in the 1980s, if not specifically in 1987—as something that could only follow an extended period of intensive industrialisation under uncompromising anti-communism. In other words, the people were not ready for democracy under most if not all of Park Chung Hee's rule; it took the extra bit of brutality—and economic development—of the 1980s under the rule of Chun Doo-hwan, the man whom just about everyone in the South Korean political spectrum now vilifies, for things to reach this critical breaking point. However strained for political purposes this

narrative seems, it is understandable that Chun, who finally died in 2021, would provide this historical marker for the 1980s' decade in everyone's eyes. For 1980 was the year of General Chun's consolidation of personal power, including his formal inauguration as an unelected president and, more importantly, of the Gwangju Uprising that began on May 18.

Among the numerous cinematic recreations of Gwangju are two from director Jang Seon-u. The first is the wrenching "A Petal" (*Kkonnip*, 1996), based on an extended short story by novelist Choe Yun, an unremittingly bleak portrayal of Gwangju's devastating impact on a severely traumatised girl survivor. Afterwards, as she wanders around in a daze and is further victimised at every turn, especially through sexual assault, she becomes an embodiment of the massacre's wide-ranging societal complicity, as well as its severely heavy burden on the forging of national memory and identity.[77] The second film from Jang is "May 18" (*Hwaryeohan hyuga* ["Fascinating vacations"], 2007), which like "Taegukgi" (Chap. 6) is a straightforward dramatisation of a major historical tragedy through a particular family—and even featuring, like in Korean War films, the trope of separated brothers. The older brother and his love interest allude to real historical figures from the event whose bond became immortalised in a famous song, which is played over the ending credits and still operates as a rallying cry in some political circles.[78] This reflects the continuing hold of Gwangju in the popular memory of that year and of its impact on the grand struggle for democracy. The striking contrast between the beautifully bucolic scenes of regular people and places, on the one hand, and the menacing military bearing down on the city presents visually the film's insistent, though not very sophisticated, depictions of the moral stakes. Its adherence to stark realism also continued the approach of the first such explicit depiction of Gwangju, "Hour Glass" (*Morae sigye*), a television miniseries from 1995 that appears to have set the groundwork for the wave of epic cinematic portrayals of modern Korean history that appeared thereafter.

Gwangju films reached a new level altogether with another star vehicle for Song Kang-Ho. After having played "The President's Barber" and then "The Attorney", but before he starred as "The Drug King", he returned to the role of a charmingly fallible everyman of the film's title, "A Taxi Driver" (*Taeksi unjeonsa*; Jang Hun, 2017), who in the spring of 1980 transports a German journalist looking to cover a civil uprising that had just begun in Gwangju. Based on the account by the real reporter, Jürgen Hinzpeter, the lead character himself, named "Kim Man-seop"

(also "Kim Sabok") in the story, was never identified until after the film's release. But the taxi driver's greater importance is as a representation for the people as a whole, or at least of the middle and older generations. The contrasting youth appear in the characters of a university student in Gwangju and of the taxi driver's own little daughter, forced to grow up early because of her mother's death and her financially strapped father's many challenges as a single parent living in Seoul. Into this scenario comes the chance to make a major fare by driving the reporter Hinzpeter down to Gwangju, an opportunity that the shamelessly resourceful Kim Manseop seizes. In their joint journey south they serve as stand-ins for the perspectives of two populations whose awareness, eventually, of what was really happening would be crucial for turning Gwangju into a historical watershed. Hinzpeter was one of several crucial foreign correspondents in Gwangju during the uprising, which took place from May 18 to 27, when government troops sealed the city and blockaded press coverage, and his smuggled film footage and photos later provided critical evidence for rallying the democratisation movement. The taxi driver, on the other hand, in reflecting South Korea's populace as a whole, likewise was transformed upon his discovery of what took place, a process in which his taxi served literally as a vehicle for truth, engagement, and awakening.

Indeed, the taxi is central to the film's plentiful visual symbolism, including as the carrier not only of people and their fates but also of mirrors, which provide a (reflecting) window for witnessing, revealing, enlightening, and chronicling. The mirror draws the viewer to the cab driver as he is viewing things, such as goings on behind him and of course his passengers, including the reporter. The latter is shown in the mirror at times operating his film camera (with its own mirrors), which in turn provides perspective and, more importantly, documentary evidence. The mirrors also signal reflection in thought, and here the damage to a side mirror of Kim's cab early in the story offers a portent of upcoming disruptions to his life. He also hangs a small family picture frame on his rearview mirror to remind him of the confluence of his present life centred on his daughter and his past life centred on his deceased wife. In grim contrast is a chase scene later, as taxi drivers spot in their mirrors menacing military vehicles, emblems of the repressive present that draws from the past. In all these ways the mirror is strongly associated with the passage of time—the karmic connections between actions and extended outcomes, which, given the setting of the Gwangju Uprising, are also endowed with an unmistakably historic weight. The journalists who appear in the story, including

Hinzpeter, express repeatedly this core justification for their activities in the face of danger, and they are joined in this ethos by the students and citizens, and eventually the taxi driver himself. In challenging a deadly regime that stifles the transmission of truth, they persist for the sake of a collective goal that will reward their sacrifices. In this way, looking into a mirror is above all a metaphor for reflecting on the connections between the past, present, and future within a setting of extraordinary historical significance.

Cinematically, Gwangju's epochal import is conveyed also through colour schemes that mark the event's major sequences. As in "May 18", the main character's little green cab is blended into a lush spring background of verdant mountains and fields as it approaches the stricken city early in the film. The pastoral surroundings thus offer a stark contrast to the ensuing scenes within Gwangju, already reeling from the paratroopers' atrocities on the third day of the uprising. Most of the narrative takes place within this moment, on May 20 and 21, when the confrontation between soldiers and citizens reached a peak, culminating in the direct mass shooting of demonstrators in the main thoroughfare that killed dozens if not hundreds. The scenes of Kim Man-seop and Jürgen Hinzpeter's witnessing (and participating in) this seminal moment are dominated by clouds of teargas enveloping the carnage (Image 2), producing a grey fog of war

Image 2 German journalist Jürgen Hinzpeter and Korean cab driver Kim Man-seop surrounded by tear gas in "A Taxi Driver"

Image 3 Hinzpeter and Kim approaching the scene of a burning television station, from "A Taxi Driver"

that contrasts sharply with the earlier green as well as with the other dominant colour within the city, the angry nighttime red of fires and danger. The fires erupt from the citizens' attack on a local television station that continued to spew government distortions (Image 3), and the glowing red bathes the threatening hunt by secret policemen for the visitors from beyond Gwangju, and especially of their precious cargo, the reporter's video footage.

Like Hinzpeter's film canister, Kim's taxi is a critical transmitter of the evidence that would help enlarge and extend the historical impact of Gwangju's struggle, a process that relied on the resolute mobility of the two main characters as couriers between Gwangju and the outside world. Here taxis, and taxi driving as a profession, act as the primary symbol of the film. As a vehicle on the roads, the Seoul taxi of the main character is the carrier of fate, albeit not quite on the semiotic level of trains on tracks. It connects Kim Man-seop the cab driver with Hinzpeter the journalist and transports them to an end that would significantly alter many lives. More generally, taxis, including those that the two men encounter in Gwangju, take on this unknowingly determinant role of taking people from one place to another, which sometimes redirects the destiny of the taxi drivers as well. When told that local cabbies have been prosecuted by the army for driving citizens to protest sites, Kim retorts that it's not as if taxi drivers can know whom they will pick up as passengers. The professional integrity of taxi driving, finer details of which are a point of

contention between Kim and the locals, thus references their common service of facilitating arrivals at proper destinations. In the film's historical framing, taxis and cab driving also stand for the integration of Gwangju and the rest of the country, indeed the world, in the struggle against South Korea's military dictatorship and its barbarous actions. The taxis thus represent and enable the drive for democracy, as it were, a venture that demands cooperation. Once in Gwangju, Kim's Seoul taxi keeps breaking down, at one point requiring a tow from the local drivers. They also give him Gwangju licence plates to help him and the reporter exit the city, a narrow escape that demands a final expression of professional and moral solidarity from the local cabbies.[79]

The other major symbol for agency through mobility is shoes, which like trains take on a consistent signification in the spectrum between fate and freedom in South Korean historical films. In "A Taxi Driver", footwear is introduced early on as an emblem of the growth of both Kim's daughter and his financial struggles. At a crucial juncture towards the end of the film, when Kim decides to postpone his return to Seoul and reunion with his daughter, he does so right after picking out a new pair of slippers for her (Image 4). As with Jae-sik, the Gwangju university student, she represents the country's promise, for whom shoes can provide protection and expedite the movement towards a democratic future. The fate of

Image 4 Kim Man-seop in front of a shoe shop in "A Taxi Driver"

Jae-sik himself is shown firmly attached to his sneakers, something that Kim comes to recognise as well. A shot of sloughed shoes strewn on the streets following a chaotic crackdown on protestors shows the outcome when citizens, especially young people, are stripped of their means of mobility, and hence also of their agency and freedom.

This symbolic significance of shoes features prominently also in "Ordinary Person" (*Botong saram*; Kim Bong-han, 2017), one of two major theatrical releases of 2017 commemorating the 30th anniversary of the 1987 democratisation. Unlike the other film, "1987: When the Day Comes" (below), "Ordinary Person", though equally accomplished and compelling, did not enjoy much box office success. One reason perhaps is because, although the film is set in the early months of 1987 that helped fuel the explosion of mass unrest in the spring, its scope is limited and its characters are fictional, albeit highly representative and realistic. More to the point, like many other films discussed in this chapter, "Ordinary Person" highlights the blurring of the boundary between legality and illegality, as the plot revolves around the fabrication of crimes by the criminal state through its constitutive organs, especially the police. The two main characters are both part of the state enforcement apparatus: a struggling local detective in Seoul, Gang Seong-jin, who casually exercises his summary powers of petty abuse over apprehended pro-democracy demonstrators; and a stony KCIA operative, Choe Gyu-dong, who lures Seong-jin, through money, favours, and intimidation, into investigating a concocted serial killer case. Institutionalised gas-lighting through the abuse of informational power is thus a major theme in the film's portrayal of this government under military dictatorship. But so is the potential of using information, through the institutions of the press and universities, as a critical tool of resistance. Such potency is represented by the cop's closest friend, Chu Jae-jin, an investigative newspaper reporter who headlines the sprinkling throughout the film of quotidian acts of budding public defiance. Jae-jin tells his anxious buddy that he just wants to lead the life of an "ordinary person" in a "sensible" society, in which one is free from being hounded by corruption at every turn. When Seong-jin must make a life-altering choice upon being confronted by Jae-jin's determination to expose the state's criminal fabrication, the fates of people close to him fall into his stained hands.

Still, just as everything seems to be falling apart, "Everything will be fine" emerges as the operative slogan in the latter part of the film—to

show that the struggle against the corruption of dictatorship must be viewed in the bigger picture and over the longer term. In the immediate setting of early 1987, however, the structures and habitual practices of abusive authoritarianism bear down on the protagonist's closest surroundings and relationships. In "Ordinary Person", this starts with an ordinary dog, unleashed and straying around the police station grounds but serving symbolically as a source of hope and reflection. Seong-jin's growing affection for this creature and his sudden, angry discovery of its precarious existence help drive his risky awakening. Indeed Koreans' customary scorn for dogs—deeply ensconced in their everyday speech in which the word "dog" (*gae*) is attached to countless things as a vulgarity—and their contemptuous expectations of a dog's absolute, abject servitude are integrated, in highly suggestive fashion, into the dialogue throughout. As for Seong-jin's family, the long ordeal of living under military rule, as in "The President's Barber", is signalled by the disabling of his boy's legs, indicating the people's paralysis and common experiences under a system predicated on bullying. That Seong-jin has not been able to get his son's condition medically treated reflects his poverty and hence vulnerability to the exploitative workings of power. A final representative of the voiceless, sacrificing masses is Seong-jin's wife, who is mute but demonstrates through her facial expressions and hands the core humanity from which can spring hope. But this awareness comes late, and in the first half of the film Seong-jin's relationship to his wife replicates more that of the regime to the people. Eventually his downfall within the system is finalised through his enactment, in desperation, of precisely what he had previously forced his own captives to do: put his thumb print, smeared in blood-red ink, on a fabricated confession sheet on his way from torture to jail. But all around him, everyone else seems to be finding their legs and voices, rising up in the spring of 1987 determined to join the growing chorus on the streets.

Featuring an almost identically rousing ending sequence of such protests and released in theatres just a few crucial months later, "1987: When the Day Comes" (*1987: geu nari omyeon*; Jang Jun-hwan, 2017) presents a riveting and frenetic account of actual events from the first half of 1987. This intense six-month span began with the death under torture of one protesting university student and ended with the death of another such young person, who was struck by a teargas canister. These tragedies bookended the buildup of popular anger, culminating in swelling street rallies around the country in June, that forced the regime's declaration of an

immediate transition to electoral democracy, which finally and formally brought to an end over a quarter-century of military rule. Like "Taegukgi" (the Korean War) and "May 18" (Gwangju Uprising), in one sense "1987" is a rather straightforward chronicling of an epochal event. The film also feels like a breathless action film, a string of dozens of one-minute scenes that introduce and follow many of the major real figures in both the regime and the resistance, as well as of fictional characters such as a love interest of the second killed student. At the cost of contextualisation and character development, the cumulative effect of these quick cuts is an intervention in historical memory: The democratisation of 1987 came from countless individual encounters, moral choices, and sacrifices by Koreans seeking to shatter the imposing structures of tyranny. Excluded from the film's characters, however, are the most well-known and influential political figures, such as the two main opposition politicians (who later became presidents) and the dictator himself, Chun Doo-hwan. Chun's ubiquitous presence nevertheless is felt through his looming portrait in government offices, as well as through a key directive from him near the film's end. His absence as a character also reinforces the film's narrative focus on that one (half-) year, despite the storyline's dramatisation of the provocative remembrance of Gwangju, the event that had solidified Chun's stranglehold on power at the start of the decade. Beyond that moment in 1980, however, a sense of the deeper historical backdrop that made 1987 possible is mostly missing, which is understandable but still regrettable.

In addition to the heavy sacrifices made by the students and young people in general, and despite the portrayal of contributions from a dizzying array of characters both large and small, the film, including through its symbolism, seems to attribute the most decisive impact to certain institutions: the police on one side, and organised religion and especially the press on the other. Newspapers and print media in general are featured as indispensable instruments for those in the resistance, whether prison guards, students, or intellectuals. As in "A Taxi Driver" and "Ordinary Person", reporters and the journalistic profession as a whole (or at least certain newspapers in Seoul) come across as fearlessly curious seekers of revelation and truth despite the formidable repression that they suffered. Indeed the film is presented somewhat like a documentary, with ringing typewriter-font subtitles identifying new characters and settings. Likewise, the centrality of religious figures, from Buddhists and Protestants to especially the Catholic clergy, accounts faithfully for their actual contributions, a history that extended much further back than the 1980s but proved

Image 5 Bak Cheowon, head of the Anti-Communist Investigation Agency, looking at fleeing dissident Kim Jeong-nam hanging over a stained-glass church window, in "1987: When the Day Comes"

especially critical in the spring of 1987. This was when a priest openly announced details of the government's cover-up of that student's torture death from January. In another scene, the anti-communist police violently barge into a church in the hunt for an opposition figure on the run, whose dangling from the roof while being chased is visible through a stained-glass image of Jesus on the cross (Image 5). Here the morality play is somewhat heavy-handed, but the highlighting of institutional religion's role makes sense.

On the other end is the impression of an internally divided security apparatus as having been decisive. Such a depiction can rankle historical sensibilities, but in the film's subtext it is meant to show the true character of the absolutist dictatorship, with the whims of the strongman quickly shifting the fates of all of his underlings fighting amongst themselves to do his bidding. This phenomenon is personified in the main character—if there is any single figure to fill that bill—Bak Cheowon, the head of the Anti-Communist Investigation Agency, which functioned as a secret police organisation. Originally from the Pyongyang area, his story was typical of refugees from the Korean War period who had experienced the terrible recriminations under communist control in the north and came south to

Image 6 Bak Cheowon's image superimposed over the portrait of dictator Chun Doo-hwan in "1987: When the Day Comes"

constitute the bedrock of anti-communism in South Korean politics and culture. Early in the film, his lingering northwestern accent is ridiculed by the unruly prosecutor who refuses to cave to the regime's many forces pressuring him while he investigates what happened to the tortured student. At the end of the film, Bak's undoing comes at the hands of a rival police agency, which functions as one tool of the dictator's that swats down another. Bak's fervent anti-communism and what he believed was his unimpeachable loyalty to the regime come crashing down as all for naught by this apparent betrayal, a realisation visualised by the superimposition of the glare from Chun's portrait onto the fallen Bak (Image 6). Such refracted impressions of those in service to the regime are a recurring motif.

Reflecting back on the history of South Korea's developmentalist anti-communist dictatorships, the balance between the officially republican government and its unofficial autocratic reality shifted with the times. But the common strain was not military rule as much as a regression to traditional means of autocratic domination through the criminality of the state itself, regardless of who established the system or who was in charge. The films set in the quarter-century era of military dictatorship have largely

established strong historical connections to the deep collective past while implying its lingering, fated presence in contemporary times. Reckoning with this dark past and its shadowy remnants constitutes a core component of this project, and the historical films have contributed to the process by commonly imagining South Korean history as grounded in generational conflict and disjuncture. This explains the thematic primacy of the travails of the youth, including their struggles for the self-determination of democracy against an entrenched, powerfully set world of sullied adults. The three-plus decades of post-democratic South Korea have served as a temporal mirror in this regard, reflecting but also spotlighting the country's historical outcomes and constant need for revisiting its dark past. Such exercises would continue for historical films set in the most recent, post-democratisation period as well.

Chapter Eight. The Cyclical Buildup of Historical Burdens: Reckonings in the Post-democratisation Era, 1980s–2010s

Playbill

"Peppermint Candy" (*Bakha satang*); Lee Chang-dong, 2000
"The Old Garden" (*Orae doen jeongwon*); Im Sang-su, 2007
"House of Hummingbird" (*Beolsae* ["Hummingbird"]); Kim Bora, 2018
"Traces of Love" (*Ga-eul-lo* ["To autumn"]); Kim Dae-seung, 2006
"Bungee Jumping on Their Own" (*Beonji jeompeu-reul hada* ["Bungee jumping"]); Kim Dae-seung, 2001
"My Sassy Girl" (*Yeopgi-jeogin geu nyeo* ["That bizarre girl"]); Gwak Jae-yong, 2001
"Ode to My Father" (*Kukje sijang* ["International market"]); Yun Je-gyun, 2014
"Samjin Company English Class" (*Samjin geurup yeongeo Toik-ban* ["Samjin Corp. TOEIC class"]); Yi Jong-pil, 2020
"Sunny"; Gang Hyeong-cheol, 2011
"Herstory"; Min Gyu-dong, 2018
"Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982" (*82-nyeon saeng Kim Ji-yeong*); Kim Do-yeong, 2019

K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
East Asian Popular Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4_9

The film "Peppermint Candy" begins and ends with basically the same scene: The main character, Yeong-ho, while lying on the banks of a particular stream, looks up at a passing train on a railroad bridge. In between these two moments, however, are 20 years of life that turned a naive, sensitive young man, who in the film's reverse narrative appears at the end, into someone quite different, indeed almost the polar opposite. In complementing the many allusions, such as in the paired scenes above, to the cosmology of cyclical return, the railroad tracks that connect the film's six chapters of Yeong-ho's adulthood point towards fatalistic destiny, with each chapter adding to the cumulative, indeed linear effect of his actions and environs. Instead of redirecting or reversing his self-destructive course, Yeong-ho seems unable, as if stuck on train tracks, to veer off the path set at a Gwangju rail depot in May 1980. Hence the simultaneous workings of both cyclical and linear time enable "Peppermint Candy" to capture masterfully the historical development of South Korea over the final two decades of the twentieth century, from the depths of military dictatorship to the anxious cusp of a new era.

Some experiences obviously have a greater impact than others, enough to place one's life, as if on a trailing caboose on a long train, on a route that cannot be foreseen, much less controlled. Alternatively, as in history, each major moment, while framing the possibilities and inclinations of subsequent experiences, makes room for choice and individual agency, however difficult it may be. For unlike Yeong-ho, South Korean society as a whole overcame the trauma of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, by using the tragedy to drive the democratic transition and further maturation. At the turn of the twenty-first century, when "Peppermint Candy" (2000) was released, this extended outcome was less clear, as the country was recovering from the shocks of the most severe economic crisis since the Korean War. Before and after that 1997–1998 emergency, South Koreans continued to build on the 1987 democratisation, maintaining the breakneck material development while also using the new spirit of openness to undertake comprehensive reforms affecting almost every social sector. Naturally the cinematic works set in the most recent era have dramatised the content and form of this prolonged but acute transition, and with the passage of time their historical perspectives crystallised into varying depictions of what it all meant. But these sweeping tales of the country's closest past decades all feature a firm connection between historical burdens and later outcomes. This common approach thereby projects the present back onto the nearest past and, more intensively, raises the converse question: How

does recent history continue to refine judgement on contemporary society?

What these films generally have not done as well is to consider more fully those who were left behind in the great transformation of democratisation: those on the margins such as labourers, immigrants, and especially women. In the 2010s, however, as more of the focus shifted to the female experience, and as more women directors, writers, producers, and other creators made feature films, the notions of historical progress, completion, or triumph came under further scrutiny if not direct challenge. The 1990s had witnessed the beginnings of major legal changes, which had trailed material, social, and cultural transformations to finally address the last major institutional holdover of Confucian tradition—the legal framework behind the comprehensive subordination of females in Korean society. A final legislative push came in the mid-2000s with the abolition of the household registration system that had been in place for a century, if not longer. The mixture of chronologies that characterised films set at the turn of the twenty-first century captured such a progression of separate social sectors along differing speeds and trajectories of historical change. In turn these works continued to complicate the process of historical reckoning, especially given the stubborn elements from the past that attenuated any sense of historical accomplishment or finality.

Between Cyclical and Progressive Recent History

The gap between the cyclical and linear notions of history often seems formidable, but they are in a sense equally necessary pillars of the bridge between fate and freedom, or structure and agency, upon which traverses historical experience. Korean films of the *hallyu* period could draw upon more than a millennium of cultural understanding, especially from Buddhist teachings, that moderated the sense of inexorable, cumulative progress in the modern era. This perhaps explains the wondrous variety of time narratives—time-shifting, flashbacks, parallel time frames, concurrent or conflicting chronologies—that sometimes appear even within the same film. Such a manner of mixing and merging different historical timetables seems more feasible when the chronological gap is not so great, and hence it sees heavy usage in films set in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when dealing with the past becomes a more immediate, indeed unavoidable concern.

This principle is illustrated well in a film that actually was released in the opening year of the new century. When "Peppermint Candy" (*Bakha satang*; Lee Chang-dong, 2000) hit the theatres, its backward narrative immediately drew attention, with individual chapters connected by film footage, run in reverse, of railroad tracks as seen from the end of a moving train. This signals the connections in the adult life stages of Kim Yeong-ho, the anti-hero protagonist, and reinforces the train as the film's overriding symbol. Powerfully, the originating point in Yeong-ho's two-decade degeneration is a train depot in Gwangju in May of 1980, when as a fresh recruit he is sent to the city as part of the military suppression of the civic uprising. In the backward narration of the movie, however, this episode comes at the end. The film begins with a very different Yeong-ho, around 40 years of age in 1999, who staggers into a reunion party, held at a riverbank under a railroad bridge, of his former factory work group from his pre-military youth. The revellers, however, discover that the shy and reserved Yeong-ho they once knew has been replaced by a nasty, confused, bitter, and ultimately suicidal middle-aged man. He soon meets his end by climbing onto the tracks and confronting, with open arms, an oncoming train while shouting, "I want to go back again!"

This is the train, we find, that had set his life on a course of increasing depravity, venality, violence, abusiveness, and all-around unpleasantness, ever since that moment in Gwangju two decades earlier. Each succeeding chapter in the film goes further back in time, demonstrating the accumulation of experiences that corrupted Yeong-ho's character: his suicidal and homicidal state after having lost everything to the 1997 financial crisis, as he reunites briefly with his long-lost first love, Sunim, who is now clinging to life in a hospital bed; which is preceded by Yeong-ho's life as an angry, philandering, and abusive petty businessman in 1994; preceded by his ugly activities as a dirty cop who readily tortures captured dissidents in the spring of 1987 while the mass democracy demonstrations are taking place; preceded by his initiation into the brutalising police force of the military dictatorship in 1984, when he also callously rejects Sunim; preceded by his experience in Gwangju in 1980, just as his wholesome affection for Sunim ("purity") was developing, as symbolised by his hoarding of peppermint candy pieces that she sent him as he was beginning his military service. This last (earliest) episode also shows his meeting Sunim for the first time at a picnic gathering of his work team along the same riverbank and railroad bridge of the film's opening. Together, then, these "time boxes" in reverse chronological order reveal with increasing insight how an

unadulterated young man was transformed, through the cumulative effect of his environment over two decades, into a monster.

As noted above, the train, or the railroad, constitutes the metaphorical centrepiece of this character's descent, as if the stops on its hellish trip corresponded to the film's chapters. A train, if only as a passing roar and lights, makes an appearance in each of the chapters, supplementing the brief interludes between episodes showing movement along railroad tracks. The train hence seems to signal inexorability—Yeong-ho's incapacity to dislodge, through derailment, his doomed course once the train has left the station, so to speak, from Gwangju. But Gwangju does not hold exclusive determinative power; each successive stage in Yeong-ho's life introduces historical forces from South Korea's development that layer more harm upon his original sin and hence lead to the next stage: military dictatorship, brutality and corruption, the culture of greed and expendability. Over these two decades, South Korea undergoes democratisation, of course, but this hardly registers in Yeong-ho's life, so bound is he to the violent structures and mentalities of military authoritarianism. Despite his fervent attempts to forget and overcome his past,[80] such remnants of the past are too strong—overwhelming, in fact, particularly since the ethos of developmentalist capitalism, now in the guise of neo-liberalism, continued even after political liberalisation. (The economic crisis of 1997–1998 that bankrupted so many South Koreans seems to have tipped Yeong-ho over the edge.) Indeed the train represents not only the unshakable grip of trauma but also the extraordinary industrialisation and material transformation, carefully realised in the backdrops of the separate episodes, that South Korea pushed through under a techno-nationalist military dictatorship, the remnants of which continue to hold sway.

What is perhaps most remarkable about "Peppermint Candy", however, are the concurrent workings also of cyclical temporality—and hence of the struggle in the nation's history between fate and freedom—that is just as compelling as the forward drive of Yeong-ho's life to its end. Although the railroad tracks suggest Yeong-ho's life proceeding on a separate, parallel trajectory as that of the country, often it is directly crossing with and affected by that larger path. The train, though crucial in suggesting destiny, also stands as one of many items that act as not just recurring motifs but as carriers of a cosmological recurrence of existence, which introduces karma into the equation. The causes of Yeong-ho's decay not only accumulate but constantly resurface (or never go away). Mirrors and the washroom, for example, reflect his life as a torturer. And as in "Once

in a Summer" (Chap. 7), the notion of the everlasting hold of one's "first love" takes various forms, despite Yeong-ho's decision early on to deny it, at least on the surface. His violent hands, which become stained by blood (literally and figuratively) and faeces (literally), function in a similar way following the moment he demonstrates his rejection of Sunim with his probing hands. And two final motifs also signal Yeong-ho's inability to elude his life cycles: a camera that Sunim had gifted him (he had told her he wanted to be a photographer) that he rejected, twice no less, the second time by destroying the film contained therein; and a gunshot wound to his leg from the Gwangju debacle, which acts up at inopportune moments. The reason why all this cannot be attributed simply to Gwangju is that Yeong-ho has a *deja vu* experience when he first meets Sunim, as he tells her that he recognises their surroundings of the riverbank and the railroad bridge for some reason. The cycle of existence is completed when he walks away from his friends' gathering to duplicate the movie's opening shot of his lying on the same riverbank and watching a train pass overhead on the same bridge. And as he stares upward, the young Yeong-ho is moved to tears, although it remains uncertain why: due to his recognition of a bad previous existence that would soon exercise retribution in his current life, or to the simple emotions or an unsullied, very sensitive young man? Whatever the case, given the integral integration of South Korea's historical circumstances into his life to come, the answer would have to apply to the nation as a whole.

What to make of this historical legacy, especially of the democratisation struggle, constitutes one of the central themes also of "The Old Garden" (*Orae doen jeongwon*; Im Sang-su, 2007), an adaptation of Hwang Seogyeong's famed novel of the same name. Just as Deok-su in "Ode to My Father" and the women in "Sunny" ponder the value of the sacrifices they have made (below), "The Old Garden" poses questions about the human toll of engaging in the anti-dictatorship resistance. But unlike "Ode to My Father", the main lead characters in "The Old Garden" find little comfort in the broader progress that resulted from their sacrifices, for their personal loss cannot be properly counterbalanced by national redemption; rather, as in "Once in a Summer" (Chap. 7), the separation from one's love interest is made permanent. There is little hint of celebration or glorification of the fight for democracy and its great breakthrough in 1987, which overthrew the military dictatorship of the 1980s that had perpetrated the Gwangju massacre. Instead "The Old Garden" questions the ultimate significance of sacrifice for the greater good when the costs of

that sacrifice extend beyond one's self. It is, in sum, a mournful allegory on the larger meaning and value of South Korea's democratisation and modernisation.

As with most of the other films in this chapter, "The Old Garden" depends considerably on time mixing, and the constant back-and-forth between different time settings, sometimes separated by nearly two decades, continues throughout the narrative (as in the novel). The movie begins with the male protagonist, Hyeon-u, who has spent nearly 17 years in jail for his role in the anti-dictatorship resistance of the 1980s, finally gaining release in the closing years of the 1990s. Having been completely stripped of any contact with friends or family, he is stunned to find that his mother has become wealthy through real estate speculation and that his siblings enjoy unimagined material comforts. He also learns that his beloved, Yun-hui, has died, and he becomes overwhelmed by grief after first not knowing how to respond to this news, so numb had he become to the world outside the penitentiary. This lack of awareness stands in sharp contrast to the time when, as a young man, he was perhaps too conscious of what was happening around him, and thus begin the flashbacks, starting with that familiar setting: Gwangju, May 1980.

As in "Peppermint Candy", the violence of the Gwangju Uprising is minimally shown; rather, the devastation comes through in a scene in which Hyeon-u visits, in the opening days of the uprising, a makeshift morgue in a Gwangju gymnasium filled with wailing, blood-stained plastic body bags, and crude coffins. He is suffused with rage and thirst for retribution, but as a wanted man he must flee, and a year later he finds sanctuary and love in a remote cottage that is home to Yun-hui, a schoolteacher and artist. But Yun-hui tells him resolutely that, while she is sympathetic to the cause, she is no activist. This ambivalence becomes important to the story in the film's second half, when the focal point shifts to Yun-hui as she acts as the voice of scepticism about "the movement" as well as a caretaker of younger activists in Hyeon-u's stead. Both roles heighten her position, ultimately, as a heroine but also as another victim—not only through her death from cancer, but also through her forced separation from Hyeon-u. For a relatively blissful few months, they had built a homestead in that mountainside cabin, tending to their vegetable patch while wondering how long they can remain isolated from the troubles of the world. Alas, Hyeon-u hears that most of his fellow resistors have been captured, and so, racked with guilt, he decides to return to Seoul, where he, too, will inevitably be nabbed. But this urge to sacrifice himself invites a rebuke

from Yun-hui, an independent, modern woman who prioritises individual needs and smaller-scale bonds. She thus wonders aloud in agony why Hyeon-u cannot, for once, do things for himself (and the couple) instead of mostly for others.

This line of questioning escalates to issues surrounding the value and cost of the democracy movement as a whole. In the present day of the film's story, as the twentieth century is nearing its close, Hyeon-u reconnects with his former fellow agitators, all having been freed but suffering in their respective ways—from bankruptcy, alcoholism, mental illness, and loved ones' early deaths. Such outcomes are shown even in the scenes from the mid-1980s, at the tense height of the organised, underground opposition after Hyeon-u's arrest in 1981, when Yun-hui becomes that senior advisor of sorts to a new generation of activists and workers. Clashes between their determined resistance and the casual savagery of the security forces are interspersed with comparably fierce debates within the movement. Their arguments about how to understand and proceed show the internal ideological fissures and demands, in the aftermath of Gwangju, that are portrayed as forming an oppressive structure on their own. Yun-hui eventually grapples with an offshoot of this struggle, trying to raise her daughter, the product of her brief time with Hyeon-u, while suffering from a serious illness. The girl grows up without a father and eventually without a mother, for Yun-hui, after repeated denials of visitation rights or even correspondence with Hyeon-u during his incarceration, passes away in the mid-1990s without ever seeing him again. She leaves for him a portrait she drew that places a young Hyeon-u, in his high school uniform, side by side with the older Yun-hui, with her head bald from cancer treatments. This temporal disjuncture reinforces the film's recurring overlap between the past and present, as do the frequent seamless flashbacks. Compressed time is demonstrated also by Hyeon-u's re-emergence into the world, like Rip Van Winkle, after 17 years in prison, as well as fantasy sequences involving his infant daughter, who as a glam teenager at the end of the film finally meets her father in the middle of bustling, gleaming Seoul. As much as the new society as a whole, she is the fruit of the "old garden" cultivated by the painful struggles of her parents' generation, which might have made the sacrifices, in the end, worthwhile. And like the boy Nagan in "The President's Barber" (Chap. 7), she might also represent the resilient spirit of democracy. But what remains elusive is a secure sense of propriety and historical justice, given what had driven her father to make his choice and her mother to suffer from that decision.

In reflecting the view of many, if not most, South Koreans regarding their recent past, "The Old Garden" stays somewhat ambivalent regarding this matter, even while lamenting the excessiveness and unevenness of the sacrifices demanded from those at the forefront of the struggle. At minimum this story further complicates the glorified standing of democratisation and the prioritisation of idealistic over material advancement. But it also adds further glory to the generation of mostly young people who fought, and paid a heavy price, for the country's welfare—arguably, as much as the Korean War generation had done in its struggle against communism and poverty. In this film, however, even after the 1987 political liberalisation, Hyeon-u spends another decade in jail, as if, like Yeong-ho in "Peppermint Candy", he is chained to the formative period of his youth, regardless of the formal transformations in the structures of authority. Without necessarily trapping these characters in the grip of history, such portrayals reflect the ongoing difficulties of arriving at a comfortable understanding of the democratic transition's significance.

At other times such uncertainty is expressed as scepticism over the breakneck developmentalist ethos, which produced economic growth but also established precarious constructs, even in the literal sense, that would torment the country long after political liberalisation. The mid-1990s witnessed a succession of collapses that issued a jarring reminder about the temporal disconnect between different sectors of development, showing the edifice that was South Korea crumbling like a house of cards. "House of Hummingbird" (*Beolsae* ["Hummingbird"]; Kim Bora, 2018), a taciturn portrait of a teenaged girl, Eun-hui, living through these times while undergoing a process of self-discovery, places the protagonist in southeastern Seoul—the region called "Gangnam"—as two shockingly unforgettable pieces of news locate her story in history: that of the mid-1994 death of Kim Il Sung, the North Korean dictator, and of the collapse of a section of the Seongsu Bridge over the Han River in Seoul shortly thereafter. The latter moment, in particular, functions also as a symbol of the absence of a clear path forward for the adolescent protagonist, who suffers familial, school, and cultural pressures as she seeks a more definitive role in all three realms. The analogy to the country's own rush towards development is visualised in an eerie scene of her and her two siblings looking from the riverbank at the dilapidated bridge, which had killed over 30. Whether for the individual or the country, the search for a reassuring pathway forward gets clouded by the lingering debris.

Such a theme is explored also in "Traces of Love" (*Ga-eul-lo* ["To autumn"]; Kim Dae-seung, 2006), a melodrama of separation and reckoning following the sudden collapse in 1995 of the Sampung Department Store in southern Seoul, which took over 500 lives. What gets destroyed along with the building is unavoidably historical: a sense of clarity and reassurance about the country's recent past as well as the present. The political undercurrents were also unmistakable, for in the aftermath of this event, investigations revealed collusion between corrupt government inspectors and regulators with the department store's owner, a would-be tycoon who cut corners on the building's construction. In the film, the couple shattered by the disaster consists of a budding young prosecutor, named Hyeon-u, struggling against a venal legal culture, and his fiancée, a television documentary producer named "Minju", perhaps meaning "democracy". Minju, having been in the department store when it caved in, finally succumbs to her injuries under the rubble while comforting a young cafe employee, Sejin. The story mostly follows Hyeon-u and Sejin on replicating journeys of mourning and self-discovery, interspersed with many flashback scenes of their respective interactions with Minju, who serves as the spiritual conduit between the two survivors.

Instead of becoming preoccupied with indignation and despair, which are self-apparent in any case, the film rather quietly grounds the survivors' grief in the ancient spiritual solace of regeneration and renewal, with tacit optimism for a path out of trauma. Although absent a Buddhist element in the storyline aside from brief visits by the main characters to a mountain temple, "Traces of Love", like "The Old Garden", is nevertheless suffused with inferences of reincarnation and its implications for the cycles of history. This is shown in the constant shifting between—to the point of blending—past and present, and in the lavish scenery of changing seasons that reflect and direct wanderings of consolation. As the film's Korean title suggests, autumn, more so than spring, signals rebirth, recovery, and rediscovery out of trauma, a lesson that extends to the nationwide grief and scepticism that understandably prevailed in South Korea following this shocking tragedy in 1995. The presentation of the characters' travels across the country's beautiful landscape, which alone is enough to make a viewing of the film rewarding, seals the overlap between the personal and the societal.

Such a historically informed deployment of reincarnation as a plot device appeared also in two very different but equally compelling films that appeared in 2001—the first a hit comedy that introduced two future

movie stars, and the second a less-viewed but even more remarkable story about the recurring presence of the past. This latter work, "Bungee Jumping on Their Own" (*Beonji jeompeu-reul hada* ["Bungee jumping"]; Kim Dae-seung, 2001), was the debut effort by the same director, later, of "Blood Rain" (Chap. 4) and, indeed, of "Traces of Love". Like the latter film, "Bungee Jumping" is a melodrama that integrates reincarnation into thinking about the way the circle of history expresses itself through characters and social concerns. (In more ways than one, the act of bungee jumping alludes to the cyclical nature of being.) Through extended flashbacks, the plot links two time frames—the present moment of 2001 and 17 years earlier in the mid-1980s—but rather than democratisation, the pressing social issue is homosexuality. And through the transposition of one's existential essence, the film deftly applies a distinctly Korean-Buddhistic approach to illuminating this contemporary matter of growing attention (and contention). Standby motifs of trains, personal tokens (a lighter), gestures (raising a pinky finger), and "first love" ideals highlight the human connections bound by destiny and reframe the notion of a "soul mate" by asking, "When you love somebody, do you really love some body, or some soul?"

Though not as explicitly, a similar question is asked by the often uproarious comedy "My Sassy Girl" (*Yeopgi-jeogin geu nyeo* ["That bizarre girl"]; Gwak Jae-yong, 2001), the historical allusions in which appear limited to short fantasy scenes of a generic or fictional past, as well as of an imaginary future. Indeed, on the surface the sassy girl, played with irresistible panache by a young Jeon Ji-hyeon (Gianna Jun), is an in-your-face prophet who not only smashes the established gender hierarchy, but exuberantly, and menacingly, flips it. The countering character comes in the form of an emasculated young man who wears pink clothing and high heels, gets taken down by female cops, and must continually be rescued by the girl, who even goes back in time to impose her personal gender order. As a fantasy or romantic comedy, "My Sassy Girl" is actually not so successful, but these hints at genre seem just a ploy, for the real purpose is to throw a major wrench into popular expectations of love and fate. In nodding to the melodramatic convention of fated coupling, the film actually accentuates its disdain for any patriarchal constraints on female freedom. Love comes only through the exercise of agency, and in pounding home this point, "My Sassy Girl" forecasts, with a heavy but hilarious hand, later films (next section below) that impart feminist messaging to the recent past by mixing historical time frames.

This overlap, but portrayed on a much more epic scale, also characterises the second most popular historical film in South Korean box office history, "Ode to My Father" (*Kukje sijang* ["International market"]; Yun Je-gyun, 2014), the setting of which extends from 1950 to the present of the mid-2010s. While not as innovative as other works in its juxtaposition of differing chronologies, "timing" is central to the storyline. Most of the film is filled with extended flashback episodes interspersed with shorter interludes of the present day, which establishes the connection between the past and the present in a semi-cyclical, semi-linear dynamic. More importantly, however, unlike the films examined above, "Ode" demurs from the politics of this experience. Instead, the film conceives historical development as measured mostly by economic growth, along with South Korea's integration into the global order, which together also comment on the meaning of national division. The Korean title, *Gukje sijang* ("International Market"), references the famed bazaar in Busan formed by Korean War refugees, which in turn calls attention to the crucial role of ties to the larger world in the country's material advancement.

The film's opening sequence, set in contemporary times, establishes this outlook with panoramic views of the harbour area of Busan, filled with images of sleek tall buildings, construction cranes, and half-finished giant bridges reinforcing the inexorable progress of development. An elderly couple taking in the view bears the worn features of having traversed this arduous path of modernisation. But while the woman has found peace in her old age, her husband Yun Deok-su, the film's protagonist, stubbornly clings to his small shop in the International Market and nastily chases away would-be buyers who want to upgrade it like the surrounding stores. We eventually discover that Deok-su is still waiting, somehow, for his father, whom he last saw over 60 years earlier and whose lingering spiritual presence represents Confucian familial responsibility and personal sacrifice—which explains the film's English title of "Ode to My Father"—as well as the interconnectivity between the past and present.[81]

The viewer is then transported back to the first of several main chapters in Deok-su's life: his family's harrowing escape through the Heungnam Evacuation of December 1950, just ahead of advancing Chinese soldiers in the Korean War. This is when ten-year-old Deok-su, in the hysteria of the mass scramble to board an American warship, loses his younger sister Maksun, who had been clinging to his back while he chaotically boarded the rescue ship. His father, who must now stay behind to look for her, instructs Deok-su to find the store run by an aunt in Busan, where they

will all reunite after the father finds Maksun. We next see Deok-su's mother and her three remaining children eking out a living in the International Market area of Busan, as American GIs dangle chocolate to kids on the street and entrepreneurial Koreans attached to the American military pass by, including a young-ish man named Chung Ju Yung (Jeong Ju-yeong), the founder of Hyundai. Chung is clearly more the face of South Korean historical development in the film than political figures like President Syngman Rhee, whose temporary capital during the Korean War was located a stone's throw away from the International Market, or President Park Chung Hee, the main force behind the state-directed, export-oriented industrialisation that elevated the standing of companies like Hyundai onto a permanent pedestal. Rhee's only appearance in the movie is as a radio voice, and Park's not even that. Instead, the cameos come from economic or cultural figures attached to the outside world, like Chung, Andre Kim the fashion designer, or the pop singer Nam Jin, whom Deok-su encounters in Vietnam as a fellow soldier. Deok-su, as did Chung Ju Yung, Park Chung Hee, and countless young men of the time, treats the Vietnam War as a financial opportunity, a trough replenished by the Cold War. As with its effect on South Korea's industrialisation, the Vietnam War also represents the next step in Deok-su's development. This episode's closing scene of desperate Vietnamese villagers being whisked away in a South Korean gunboat, with Deok-su jumping into the water to save a little girl who had been separated from her older brother, is a replay of the earlier American rescue of northern Koreans from Heungnam, when Deok-su carried a little girl, his sister, on his back while climbing onto a ship.[82] At long last, in the final flashback chapter of his life, when he participates in an early 1980s televised reunion of separated family members from the Korean War, he finds his long-lost sister Maksun, who has grown up in California.

The jolting loss of his sister amid the desperate scramble to board American ships in the Korean War, her subsequent upbringing in the US while separated from her birth family as well as from her native country—as an adult she is shown having married a Caucasian and barely able to speak Korean—and even the siblings' ultimate reunion, are open to subtle, conflicting readings of the film's messaging. But unmistakably, "Ode to My Father" views South Korea's external connections, especially with the US, as the incubator of modern South Korean history, which is defined primarily as material progress. All the episodes reiterate this idea, including the one set in the 1960s in which Deok-su, in a bid to finance his

younger brother's university education, enlists as a coal miner sent to West Germany, for this is where Deok-su—again, as a stand-in for the country as a whole—meets his future wife, one of the many South Korean nurses exported to West Germany at the time. That he also impregnates her there carries further significance, marking the outside as the reproductive generator of South Korea's internal development. The story arc of his maturation, after all, began with the Korean War, when US-led UN forces established the basis of the country's subsequent growth and identity. Indeed the American commander's decision to jettison his military equipment in order to make room for the terrified Korean refugees shows the film's overall favourable impression of the US, albeit not without some ambivalence: Was Maksun really rescued, or snatched? Regardless, every major episode in Deok-su's life has an indelible foreign connection that shapes his fundamental being: the Heungnam Evacuation via American warships, his coming of age in the International Market area, his transformational experience as a miner in West Germany, his adventures in the Vietnam War, and finally his tearful reconnection with his long-lost baby sister calling from Los Angeles.

Whether so intended by the director, however, this internalisation of the outside world gives the impression of remaining oblivious to the more troublesome realities within the country, particularly the struggle against oppression. Hints of these conditions, however, appear here and there, in the harsh treatment meted out by power holders like street bullies or local businessmen, for example. Less vaguely perhaps, two satirical scenes show people reflexively jumping to attention whenever the South Korean national anthem is invoked over public loudspeakers, an inescapable component of life in the dictatorship era. In the latter such scene, Deok-su's wife Yeong-ja, while forced to follow along, grits her teeth at this trite exercise of authoritarian regimentation, and not only because it interrupts—metaphorically as well—her efforts to convince her husband not to go to Vietnam. Deok-su thinks he must go to earn money for his sister's dowry and to save their family store (so that his father can find them), but also because he must do his patriotic duty as deemed by the country's political leadership, which nevertheless warrants barely a mention in the film. "Ode to My Father" thus represents well the staunchly anti-communist, pro-American view of most of the oldest generation of South Koreans, who still consider the United States the country's indisputable saviour from the Korean War—the signal moment, to them, of their lives

and of South Korean history. (Such basic divides in historical memory continue to reflect and even determine the politics of South Korea today.)

This scene from the early 1970s between Deok-su and Yeong-ja is crucial also because it reinforces the movie's balancing of fate and freedom, though slightly more towards the latter, as represented by modernisation in the material realm and broader opening to the outside world. As for fate, the unavoidable but inscrutable cycle of existence and whims of destiny, usually expressed as bad luck, come across in Deok-su's helpless retort to his wife, one uttered often by Koreans in moments of helpless despair or confoundment: "This is my fate [*nae palja da*]!" Although a humorously observed motif in the film is Deok-su's bad "timing", shown in his inability to keep his eyes open for pictures, Deok-su's life does indeed suffer from untimely interventions from the heavens, it seems. These moments redirect his dreams and plans into a recurring pattern of difficult sacrifice for his family, starting with that fateful moment as a boy when his father anointed him the household's caretaker, just before bidding goodbye. This life responsibility and identity seem to be represented by the hold on Deok-su's life by his father's spirit, which in turn is symbolised, among other things, by butterflies. But the interweaving of this cosmically personal phenomenon with the realm of national history appears most visibly in the Vietnam episode, which replays the Korean War rescue, as described above. In its relationship to (South) Vietnam, then, South Korea takes the former US position in relation to South Korea. The cyclical paying forward of American grace through the Vietnam War, however, also requires a stage-oriented historical accounting of Deok-su's and South Korea's growth.

Here, though, in echoing Yun-hui's admonition in "The Old Garden" (above), Yeong-ja's point in her argument with her husband is instructive: "Do something for yourself for once instead of only for others. It's *your* life. Why are you missing from it?" Deok-su must exercise full agency in his life, she says, by finally letting go of his past in order to pursue his personal growth and goals. To be sure, the recurring force of fated interventions, or the stickiness of that past—especially Confucian familial duty—is deemed worth observing, but it must eventually give way or at least join the greater dynamic led by linear progress. Narratively, this reminder of the cumulative outcomes of "development" comes through the constant flash-forwarding back to the future of the present day, when Deok-su and Yeong-ja are doting grandparents living in relative comfort while their

adult children go on holiday to Thailand. Both realities constitute a reflection and product of their collective history, however glaring is the absence of the country's troublesome politics.

Struggles to Achieve Female Freedom

The backlash to "Ode to My Father" pointed to the harmful negligence from such a traditionalist view of South Korea's past: a glaring disregard for the painful moments, institutions, and behaviours from the dictatorship era, especially for those who were victimised, struggled, and continued to be suppressed and left behind, even as development and democratisation were achieved.[83] The film's ode to hoary Confucian patrilineal ideals of masculinist responsibility also seemed alarmingly unawares, if not antediluvian. In contrast, other films suggested that the political breakthrough of 1987 could serve as a pointed target of scepticism. The incongruity between the liberalisation promised and indeed partly accomplished, on the one hand, and the continuing repression experienced by subaltern Koreans, such as labourers and the rising numbers of immigrants, seemed to demand greater attention. And based on feature films set in the eras leading to and following the 1987 democratisation, no group is portrayed as having suffered from this disjuncture more than females, and no stubborn mechanism for the confining power of inherited fate was as debilitating as the patriarchy.

The 1990s, after all, represented historically the turbulent birth period of South Korea's new democracy, when norms and expectations that were long sought and are now mostly settled formed through sometimes severe trials, especially the great economic crisis of 1997–1998. Before that jarring event, however, the middle of the 1990s represented the period of "globalisation" (segye-hwa). This was the reformist slogan espoused by the presidency of Kim Young Sam, a former dissident who literally held hands with many traditionalist political elements in order to win election in 1992 as the second president after democratisation. The motto and its workings in the corporate culture and economy, still dominated by the *chaebol* family-run conglomerate companies like Hyundai and Samsung, provide the backdrop for a delightfully witty comedy about women clerical workers, "Samjin Company English Class" (*Samjin Geurup yeongeo Toikban* ["Samjin Corporation TOEIC English class"][84]; Yi Jong-pil, 2020). Given the title, the real company alluded to is hardly veiled; but equally suggestive, in stark contrast to "Ode to My Father", is the harmful impact

of globalisation, as represented by the heavy demands for learning English and its damaging gendered consequences in corporate culture. In these terms, the ill treatment of female white-collar labour in the film demonstrates how mid-1990s South Korea, despite the outward sheen of democracy and material advancement, was in important ways still a backwater.

The notion of backwater also takes on literal significance in the story as the flowing, polluted channel for the industrial exploitation of the environment and rural areas, as represented by a village where a Samjin Corporation electronics factory operates. Otherwise, the story is set in Seoul, with the cinematography recreating the nostalgic feel of a time when the city was a colourful, bustling arena of both plenitude and stress. Reminders in everyday technologies from that heady time abound, especially communications devices that signal a rapidly transitional moment when coin-operated pay phones, beeping pagers, and early wireless handsets somehow all worked together. Also unmistakable as time markers are fax machines—along with the practice of faxing—and bulky computers, representing the company's products and indispensable instruments in its open-area work spaces. Cultural references to the mid-1990s are most notable for alluding to American influence and its threats of domination, as exercised by the English language but also McDonald's, Bill Gates, corporate raiding, and the Hollywood movie character "Rambo". The latter two (three?) items stand for the aggressive, indeed hyper-masculinist pressures from abroad that bear down on this Korean corporate setting, the victims of which take on a decidedly feminine character. But it is also these women who lead the resistance.

"Rambo" is actually a real character and a main symbol. It is a goldfish, and its name is devised on the fly as the syllabic reverse of the name of its gentle human caretaker, "Boram". She is, together with Ja-yeong and Yuna, one of the three protagonists, all female clerical workers whose indispensability to the office stands in reverse proportion to their status and privileges. They band together to reveal a cover-up of leaking carcinogens from that electronics factory and of a looming international takeover led by a suave Korean-American man lining up as the new head and face of the company. But the three women bump against the corporate walls put up against their kind, who are confined and objectified much like a poor animal in a fish bowl. Biological destiny is undoubtedly highlighted here. Early in the film, when Ja-yeong first sees the goldfish in an office that she's helping to clear out, she asks her male co-worker about it (Image 1), to which the guy says the creature will have to be flushed down the

Image 1 Ja-yeong wondering about a company boss's pet, from "Samjin Company English Class"

Image 2 Boram and her supervisor with the goldfish named "Rambo", from "Samjin Company English Class"

toilet; and if it doesn't survive, well that's its fate. Sure enough, towards the end of the film, three goldfish appear together in a bigger tank, looking a little like the secretarial uniforms of the lead trio, to drive home the point that the fish represent the women, and vice-versa. Their efforts to save Rambo, an amusing subplot, hence works as a microcosm of the main plot to save the company and village through the empowerment of the women. Here, the fish bowl can stand for Samjin Corporation, the abusive culture of such companies, late capitalism, or South Korea as a whole, so oppressively wide-ranging are the structural forces (Image 2).

There is thus a strong class dimension to this tale of girl power, although pointedly the lesson is specifically about 1990s South Korea, as well as much later—to a lesser degree—given the news of the scandalous persistence of rude mistreatment ("gapjil") still endemic to the country's corporate environment. In the film, some of the nastiest verbal barrages come actually from a female manager, who is one of few members of her gender at that rank. But she has a university degree, unlike the three heroines, all graduates of trade schools who must tolerate their subordination while striving to improve their English enough to gain promotion. But English is hard, and given its functioning as a tool for power in the corporate setting as well as in larger society, the obstacles are formidable. So observes Yuna, the most worldly studious and large-thinking of the trio, who recognises the structural problem and yearns for a revolutionary flight from their plight in the company and the country. The dream of greener pastures is tempered considerably, however, by the environmental destruction of the countryside and the dangers of a US-dominated world.

Not all American characters are like that, though, and this is one of the many qualities of the film that are so irresistibly crafty. For English language ability, even at a rudimentary level, also becomes a tool for discovery, agency, and subversion. And in this regard, along with the solidarity from other female clerical workers and even some formerly clueless male bosses recruited to the cause, most of all it is actually numbers, more than words, that hold the answer. The numerology of the film is definitely centred on 3: the three main characters who appear together in countlessly interesting formations; the three in the name of the company ("Samjin" could mean "Three Advances" and/or "Three Truths"); and the three unsavoury Americans, one of whom is supposedly an MIT-level genius. But numbers also stand for fundamental principles and objective truths unsullied by human abuse. The numbers speak for themselves when yielding chemical test results or when conjured by Boram, a math savant whose quick calculations help drive the women's sleuthing of the mystery. In this quest Boram, who works in accounting and personalises her numerical affections, expresses disgust at being ordered to manipulate the figures. But the women find ways to turn this exercise of fraud into an instrument of empowerment. Thus their facility with numbers—precise amounts of ingredients in their bosses' coffees, the logic of fax numbers, counts of company shareholders—showcases the possibilities for females to turn the tables during this historical period shortly following, while further realising, democratisation. Whether this potential progress eventually came to

fruition is left unanswered by a somewhat ambivalent and shaky ending, which nevertheless does not diminish the film's overall effect.

More secure in its portrayal of historical outcomes is the hit movie "Sunny" (Gang Hyeong-cheol, 2011), a comedy-drama set in two time frames, the present day of 2010, and a quarter-century earlier, the mid-1980s, when seven high school girls in Seoul formed a clique called "Sunny". Their lives as teenagers are portrayed as vulgar and violent, which characterised their behaviour and manner of speech—though mostly in either a humorous or innocuous way—in coping with the vulgarity and violence of the time. Politics intrudes in the form of riot police battling pro-democracy demonstrators in the streets and secret policemen looking for the main character's older brother, a young labour activist fighting the dictatorship. That he eventually becomes a turncoat under pressure from the regime and, later in life, turns into a labour exploiter reflects well the unsettling impact of that period. As for the "Sunny" members, in their middle ages a quarter-century later, they have kept their penchant for pugnacity and swearing but have scattered into different outcomes in terms of livelihoods, families, and health. They all suffer, however, from the lingering patriarchy, except for one member, Chun-hwa, who has managed to attain complete freedom and self-made wealth, but alas it is her terminal illness that prompts a reunion after all this time.

The main character, Nami, takes the lead in 2010 to find the others after discovering Chun-hwa's condition in the hospital, a symbolically significant setting where much of the story in the present day takes place. Chun-hwa, as the leader of the "Sunny" comrades in high school, had warmly welcomed Nami, a new student from the boondocks of Jeolla province trying to overcome her provincial accent and hostility from another clique member, Suji. Suji, who is as beautiful as she is reserved, finally accepts Nami despite her personal antipathy to people from Jeolla province due to her stepmother's origins there. This process of acceptance, as articulated by Nami herself, would support the regional reconciliation necessary for democratisation. Indeed all the action-packed fighting of rival girl gangs with each other and with the riot police, which is staged with limited damage as an indicator of good and evil group identities, seems designed to highlight the struggles of overcoming or accounting for the past, especially the persistence of gendered burdens. In support of this sentiment, the persistent time-switching between the two settings culminates in a pairing towards the film's end. In one scene, Nami the high schooler speaks through a videotaped recording to Nami the mother,

herself, of a troubled teenaged girl; and in another, the older Nami comforts her adolescent version on a street bench following a moment of heartbreak. This latter moment, a fantasy sequence, comes after Nami acknowledges that, for all her domesticated comforts in middle age, she still needs to follow in the footsteps of her ill friend Chun-hwa and become the protagonist (*juin-gong*) in her life instead of always playing the supporting role, whether as a wife, mother, or simply a woman.

The struggle to account for, in order to overcome, a painfully gendered past also frames films that deal with the survivors of the "comfort women" system, not as a story set in the 1940s but rather as more recent endeavours to gain recognition for their suffering. Two such feature films, as with the two works that connected the wartime ordeals to latter-day outcomes (Chap. 5), were released very close in time. The second film will be analysed: "Herstory" (Min Gyu-dong, 2018).[85] As the title suggests, "Herstory" is meant to draw attention to the gendered dimension of both the societal disregard for the comfort women's experiences and of the difficult means by which accounts of their hardships gradually won recognition in the court of public opinion starting soon after democratisation. Here the court is also the government docket located in Shimonoseki, Japan, while the other main setting is Busan, with the film's characters shuttling between these two cities, including by ferry boat, during the 1990s in an effort to win Japanese government acknowledgement, compensation, and apology.

This long, enervating legal fight is led by the film's two leading characters, whose relationship is transformed fundamentally over the course of the film, including through a shifting of the dramatic focus from one to the other. In the beginning of the story, Bae Jeong-gil, an elderly woman in the early 1990s, appears as the long-time housekeeper for a wealthy middle-aged woman, Mun Jeong-suk, who owns a travel agency that is thriving—due partly, of all things, to "gisaeng" (courtesan) tours of men from Japan. Jeong-suk's ignorance of this seedy dimension to her business is shattered when, at a gathering of a women's business association that she helps lead, she is suddenly arrested for abetting prostitution. Such a personal connection to larger implications, including Jeong-suk's struggles—as with Nami in "Sunny"—in raising a teenaged daughter, is both joltingly symbolic and key to the film's gendered messaging. Jeong-suk also seems to be a single mother, and left unaccounted for is her fluency in Japanese, which presumably comes from her interactions with Japanese tourists.[86] Rather, what is deemed important in Jeong-suk's character

profile is her almost wilful ignorance—in mirroring that of society as a whole, including Korea's professional women—of the backstory of these struggling "grandmothers", including her housekeeper Jeong-gil, who quits suddenly. After walking through a poor neighbourhood in search of Jeong-gil, Jeong-suk finds her debilitated while dealing with a mentally ill adult son suffering from syphilis. He would later take on elevated significance in the storyline and serves throughout as a symbol of painful, uncomfortable historical remnants. For he appears to have inherited that condition, just as Jeong-gil was once a "comfort woman".

This revelation produces a major turnabout in Jeong-suk's outlook on things, and she decides to divert her attention from the travel agency to the cause of these grandmothers, initially to gain monetary relief for their difficult circumstances, but eventually for something even more difficult: official acknowledgement. The film follows the development of the plaintiffs' pursuit of compensation in a Japanese court, enabled throughout by Jeong-suk's resources—which eventually are depleted, forcing her into debt—and the assistance of civic groups as well as a Japanese legal team led by a Korean-Japanese attorney. The main group of four "grandmothers" includes her former housekeeper Jeong-gil, whose climactic testimony at the end of the film presents a stunning revelation. By then, the court case has taken six years and nearly two dozen trips between Busan and Shimonoseki, earning the nickname of Shimonoseki-Busan Court (*Gwanbu jaepan*) in reference to the ferry that plied this route. In their first trip on this boat, one of the elderly women gets sick because of the triggering of traumatic memories from half a century earlier, when she had taken the same trip under very different, indeed awful circumstances. The film actually spends a lot of time showing these women crammed into the confined spaces of moving vehicles, in likely allusion to the trains, trucks, and ships that during the war had carried them to horrific destinies. Now, however, they are shown freely chatting, reminiscing, and even singing Japanese soldiers' songs that suddenly materialise like a permanent wound. The power of traumatic history presents itself in full, but such disturbing moments also symbolise the continuing hold of this trauma's gendered dimension. Except for that attorney and Jeong-gil's son, all of the film's main characters are females, of many generations and vocations, who constantly battle the systematic structures of abuse and disregard that inhibit meaningful historical reckoning. And the outbursts of fierce opposition, often violently, to these grandmothers' legal pursuit are all carried out by

men, Korean and Japanese, consciously and not, whether in the courtroom, the streets, or even taxis.

Such a struggle to exercise female agency and escape the patriarchal cycles of recent history also lies at the heart of the most controversial of all these provocative films discussed here, "Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982" (*82-nyeon saeng Kim Ji-yeong*; Kim Do-yeong, 2019). When it resonated as a best-selling novel, the backlash was severe from particularly young men who insisted that it unjustly distorted the contemporary situation, and that it wilfully targeted Korean males. The film adaptation, though faithful to the novel in broader terms, presents a fuller historical dimensionality to the characters and societal context through the integration of many short flashback scenes. While set primarily in the late 2010s, the recalling of Ji-yeong's life is concentrated in three separate stages: as a young girl in the early 1990s, as a high school student later in the decade, and as a young woman in the 2000s attending university before working at a marketing agency for several years. After getting married, however, eventually she quits her job to raise her baby daughter, and these most recent transitions seem to have contributed to her current mental illness, which appears most conspicuously as a multiple personality disorder. But the pressures had welled from more structural and historical sources as well.

Unlike films such as "Samjin Company English Class" (above) and some female-centric works set in the colonial period (Chap. 5), the family lies at the centre of the story, and as a microcosm of society at large, it imparts the protagonist's most immediate difficulties but also a way forward through treatment. At an expansive framing, the film presents the story of Ji-yeong's place in a matrilineal succession of four generations, starting with her maternal grandmother. She thus bears the accumulated trauma of three generations and must prevent its transmission to a fourth, her baby daughter. But the cyclical component of fate also intervenes, in the form of basic Confucian mentalities of male domination that persist, however weakening. Thus it makes sense that in Ji-yeong's suddenly vocal manifestations of her illness, she channels the compassion and remorse of both her maternal grandmother and mother, like a shaman summoning the pain of reincarnated loved ones. These two figures also appear as key living characters, especially Ji-yeong's mother, who carries literal scars of her sacrifices and occasionally delivers bursts of pent-up anger. Other reminders from this feminine line include the two older women's poignant melancholy, which drives their protective affection for their daughters and granddaughters. But it is also female family members—notably, Ji-yeong's

mother-in-law and her aunts on her father's side—who demonstrate the deep rootedness of the problem by acting as legitimating transmitters of male supremacy. Indeed, in comparison the male family members elicit a more hopeful tone. Ji-yeong's well-meaning father, however traditional and occasionally offensive, has been moderated considerably by her mother, and her younger brother, Jiseok, has served as an accommodating receptacle of life lessons from his female elders, conditioned not to harm and always striving to improve. (This father-son gap in awareness is indexed by a gift pen and, remarkably, red bean doughnuts.) And Ji-yeong's husband Dae-hyeon, portrayed as nearly flawless in his sensitivity to the problem's causes and his compassionate support for finding a sincere remedy, seems to personify the promise of South Korean society as a whole to learn from its past.

The interaction and passage of the generations in Ji-yeong's family thus act as a measurement of the country's progress, and as a cauldron of conflicting ideas and chronologies from its history. In this regard, the most intriguing character is Ji-yeong's older sister Eun-yeong, who serves as the voice of frank clarity and, more pointedly, of opposition: unstinting resistance to the Confucian patriarchy, to be sure, but also to the lofty public standing of the 1987 democratisation. As an unmarried school teacher in her late 30s in the present day, she still acts as a somewhat domineering matriarch of sorts to her siblings, bestowing uncompromising wisdom and constant reminders of her refusal to bow. She playfully insists, in fact, that her younger brother Jiseok bow gratefully to her for having taught him proper manners and views. When he complains about having grown up under her thumb, she responds, "Hey, think of all the advantages you [guys] have received since nineteen eighty-something". She ostensibly is signalling her feigned disregard for the details of his birth, but she is likely also referring to the supposedly historical moment of 1987—probably Jiseok's birth year—when democratisation took place, but for the benefit of only half the population at most. As it turns out, Eun-yeong has long held such awareness and is old enough to remember (the ultimate disappointment of) that year. In one of the film's flashbacks, Eun-yeong as a young teenager shows her baby sister Ji-yeong where on a map of the world she wants to go. In echoing the sentiment of Yuna in "Samjin Company English Class", most of all Eun-yeong just wants to escape her native country; in fact she wishes to travel to the Scandinavian lands, not

just because of their famous progressiveness but also "because that's where there are no Koreans". Ji-yeong's mother, for her part, has been more amenable to received social norms, but she too carries a fiercely righteous determination and therefore historical resonance: Although studious and smart, in her youth of the 1960s and 70s she had to go work in one of the many factories huddled in downtown Seoul's Cheonggyecheon Stream area in order to support her two older brothers' schooling. She thus had to forego her own dreams of becoming a teacher, an achievement that had to await her daughter Eun-yeong. "That's the kind of thing women did in those times", the mother tells her puzzled little girl Ji-yeong. She had thus joined the legions of underpaid female labourers who underpinned South Korea's supposedly miraculous industrialisation, plaudits for which took on a blindly masculinist ring.

The coexistence of varying chronologies in this history hence reflects the conflicting trajectories of gendered progress in South Korea, the most conspicuous indicators of which understandably appear in the material realm of economic and technological advancement. The stages of Ji-yeong's upbringing in the 1990s and 2000s are reflected in the changing mobile phone, which usually serves as a transmitter of good news and familial connection (both good and bad), but also as a medium of protection, including by documenting her illness. The dramatic transformation of the everyday mobile phone seems to contrast with the plodding emancipation of Korean females, with the persistence of longstanding ways attenuating, interrupting, or preventing progress. This dynamic also appears in the layout of a typical Korean apartment. In Ji-yeong's present-day abode, the kitchen occupies the most confining space, thereby evoking the "inner quarters" (*anppang*) of traditional houses, while the veranda, facing the outside, lies on the opposite end. The balcony is also where Ji-yeong receives the most direct sunlight, which makes a frequent appearance in the film, conferring warmth, enlightenment, and hopes for a new day and better future. Ji-yeong's journey—perhaps reflecting that of her country, given the frequency of flashbacks in the film—entails crossing or bridging that part of her apartment dedicated to gendered domesticity, which can enclose and trap much like a bird cage or a fish bowl, to the other side, where the walls and windows give way to open air. Or perhaps the solution lies somewhere in the middle. The closing scene shows Ji-yeong, having found her agency and purpose, seated at her kitchen

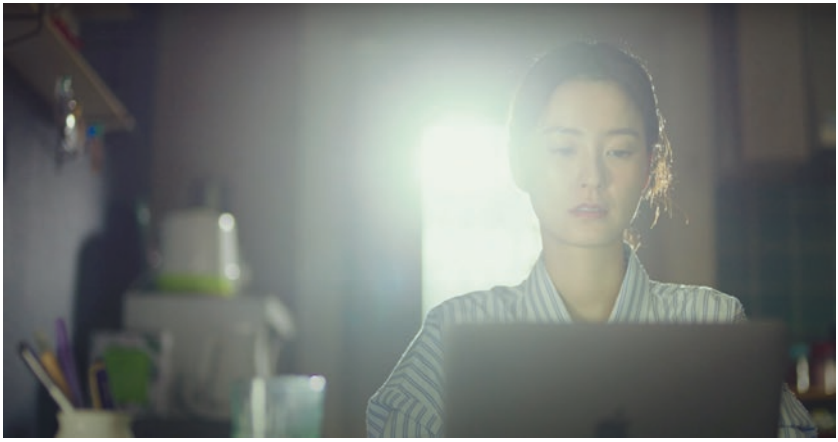

Image 3 The title character of "Kim Ji-yeong, Born 1982" writing her autobiography at the close of the film

table, but with sunbeams streaming through as she starts to compose her autobiography (Image 3).

Among South Korean subaltern groups at the turn of the 21st century, females were the ones marginalised throughout history while remaining central to the family system, the realm of existence perhaps most reflective and generative of core values and collective character. This was likely why, as in other societies, modern change may have proved hardest to achieve in gender relations, for this would involve the intimate realm of the family and all its anchoring ties to the rest of society. The films set in this period of South Korea's emergence as a new democracy thus prioritise the unfinished task of realising the promises of democratisation where—for at least half the population, but actually everyone—it counts the most. Whether for women or society at large, the recent past remains most receptive to a revisiting of this balance between cyclical recurrence and linear progress, a dynamic firmly dependent on both collective identity and readily perceived connections between past and present. Democratisation itself is taken as a positive step, of course, but also—as shown in "The Old Garden" as well as in the films centred on female characters from the 1990s to the 2010s—remains open to serious questioning amid reconsideration of what actually achieved freedom and what remained beholden to fate.

Appendix A. Actors in Multiple Films

Name (Alternative Rendering)	*Films (Book Chapter)*
An Seong-gi (Ahn Sung-ki)	Eternal Empire (3); Chihwason (5); Spring in My Hometown (6); The Taebaek Mountains (6); May 18 (7); Silmido (7)
Baek Yun-sik (Yoon-sik)	The Face Reader (1); Feng Shui (4); The President's Last Bang (7)
Bak Cheol-min (Park Chul-min)	Blood Rain (4); Operation Chromite (6); A Petal (7); A Single Spark (7); May 18 (7); Traces of Love (7)
Bak Gyeong-hye	1987 (7); The Drug King (7)
Bak Hae-il (Park Hae-il)	The King's Letters (1); The Fortress (2); War of the Arrows (2); Modern Boy (5); Memories of Murder (7)
Bak Hui-sun (Park Hee-soon)	The Fortress (2); Gabi (5); 1987 (7)
Bak Hye-su (Park Hye-soo)	Swing Kids (6); Samjin Company English Class (8)
Bak Seong-ung (Park Seung-woong)	The Fatal Encounter (3); Love, Lies (5)
Bak Won-sang (Park Won-sang)	Warriors of the Dawn (2); The Throne (3); May 18 (7)
Cha Seung-won	Blades of Blood (3); Blood Rain (4); Map Against the World (4)
Cha Tae-hyeon (Tae-hyun)	The Grand Heist (3); My Sassy Girl (8)

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K. M. Hwang, *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films*,
East Asian Popular Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4

(continued)

Name (Alternative Rendering)	*Films (Book Chapter)*
Cheon U-hui (Chun Woo-hee)	Love, Lies (5); The Piper (6); Sunny (8)
Choe Deong-mun (Choi Duk-moon)	The King's Letters (1); The Admiral (2); The Throne (3); Assassination (5); A Little Pond (6); Once in a Summer (7)
Choe Dong-jun	Blood Rain (4); The Taebaek Mountains (6)
Choe Gwi-hwa (Choi Guy-ha)	Malmoe (5); The Drug King (7); A Taxi Driver (7)
Choe Jong-won (Choi Jong-won)	Eternal Empire (3); Blood Rain (4); The Taebaek Mountains (6); Traces of Love (8)
Choe Min-sik (Choi Min-sik)	Forbidden Dream (1); The Admiral (2); The Tiger (5); Taegukgi (6); Nameless Gangster (7)
Eom Hyo-seop (Um Hyo-sup)	Private Eye (4); May 18 (7)
Eom Ji-seong	The Throne (3); Ode to My Father (8)
Eom Ji-won (Uhm Ji-won)	The Good, the Bad, and the Weird (5); Private Eye (5); Traces of Love (8)
Eom Tae-gu (Uhm Tae-goo)	The Age of Shadows (5); A Taxi Driver (7)
Gang Dong-won (Kang Dong-won)	Kundo (4); 1987 (7)
Go A-seong (Goh A-sung)	Radio Dayz (5); A Resistance (5); A Melody of Remember (5); Samjin Company English Class (8)
Go Chang-seok (Ko Chang-seok)	The Face Reader (1); The Grand Heist (3); The Front Line (6); 1987 (7); A Taxi Driver (7)
Go Seo-hui	Memories of Murder (7); Peppermint Candy (7)
Go Su (Soo)	The Fortress (3); The Front Line (6)
Gong Yu (Yoo)	The Age of Shadows (5); Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982 (8)
Gwak Do-won (Kwak Do-won)	The Attorney (7); The Man Standing Next (7); Nameless Gangster (7)
Gwon Tae-won	Blood Rain (4); Spring in My Hometown (6); The Taebaek Mountains (6); Taegukgi (6); May 18 (7); Nameless Gangster (7)
Gwon Yul (Kwon Yul)	The Admiral (2); Anarchist from the Colony (5)
Ha Jeong-u (Jung-woo)	Kundo (4); Assassination (5); The Handmaiden (5); 1987 (7); Nameless Gangster (7)
Han Hyo-ju (Hyo-joo)	Masquerade (3); Love, Lies (5)
Han Ji-min	The Fatal Encounter (3); The Age of Shadows (5); Blue Swallow (5)
Han Seok-gyu (Suk-kyu)	Forbidden Dream (1); The President's Last Bang (7)
Heo Jun-ho (Huh Joon-ho)	Forbidden Dream (1); A Petal (7); Silmido (7)
Heo Seong-tae (Sung-tae)	The Fortress (2); Feng Shui (3); Age of Shadows (5); Malmoe (5)

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Name (Alternative Rendering)	*Films (Book Chapter)*
Hwang Jeong-min (Jung-min)	Blades of Blood (3); Battleship Island (5); Private Eye (5); YMCA Baseball Team (5); Ode to My Father (8)
Im Si-wan	A Melody to Remember (6); The Attorney (7)
Jang Dong-geun (Dong-gun)	2009: Lost Memories (5); Taegukgi (6)
Jang Gwang	The Treacherous (1); Masquerade (2)
Jang Hyeok	The Swordsman (2); Ordinary Person (7)
Jang Yeong-nam (Young-nam)	Love, Lies (5); Ode to My Father (8)
Jeon Ho-jin (Chun Ho-jin)	The Treacherous (1); Blood Rain (4)
Jeon Hye-jin	The Throne (3); A Little Pond (6); A Taxi Driver (7)
Jeon Ji-hyeon (Gianna Jun)	Assassination (5); My Sassy Girl (8)
Jeon Mi-seon	The King's Letters (1); Memories of Murder (7); Bungee Jumping of Their Own (8)
Jeong Gyu-su	Blood Rain (4); The President's Barber (7)
Jeong In-gi (In-ki)	Spirits' Homecoming (5); The Front Line (6); House of Hummingbird (8)
Jeong Jae-jin	Welcome to Dongmakgol (6); The President's Barber (7)
Jeong Jae-yeong (Jung Jae-young)	The Fatal Encounter (3); Welcome to Dongmakgol (6); Silmido (7)
Jeong Jin-yeong (Jung Jin-young)	The King and the Clown (1); The Book of Fish (4); Heung-boo (4); Gangnam Blues (7); A Taxi Driver (7); Ode to My Father (8)
Jeong Jun-ho (Jung Joon-ho)	Operation Chromite (5); The Last Witness (6)
Jeong Man-sik	The Swordsman (2); Kundo (4); The Tiger (5); Ordinary Person (7)
Jeong Seog-yong (Suk-yong)	The King and the Clown (1); The Throne (3); Once in a Summer (7); Sunny (8)
Jeong Won-jung	The Attorney (7); Sunny (8)
Ji Seong (Sung)	Blood Rain (4); Feng Shui (4)
Jo Hyeon-cheol (Hyun-chul)	Malmoe (5); Samjin Group English Class (8)
Jo Jae-hyeon (Cho Jae-hyun)	Eternal Empire (3); The Fatal Encounter (3)
Jo Jeong-seok (Jung-suk)	The Face Reader (1); The Fatal Encounter (3); The Drug King (7)
Jo Jin-ung (Cho Jin-woong)	The Admiral (2); Kundo (4); Assassination (5); The Handmaiden (5); The Front Line (6); Nameless Gangster (7)
Jo Seung-u (Cho Slung-woo)	Feng Shui (4); Assassination (5)
Jo U-jin (Woo Jin)	The Fortress (2); War of the Arrows (2); The Book of Fish (4); 1987 (7); The Drug King (7)
Ju Jin-mo [b. 1958]	Kundo (4); The President's Barber (7)

(*continued*)

(continued)

Name (Alternative Rendering)	*Films (Book Chapter)*
Kim Dae-myeong	Fatal Encounter (3); The Drug King (7)
Kim Eung-su (Eung-soo)	Gabi (5); The President's Last Bang (7)
Kim Hae-suk (Hae-sook)	The Throne (3); Kundo (4); Assassination (5); The Handmaiden (5); Herstory (8)
Kim Hong-pa	Forbidden Dream (1); Assassination (5); Malmoe (5); The Tiger (5); The Drug King (7); The Man Standing Next (7); Nameless Gangster (7)
Kim Hye-su (Hae-soo)	The Face Reader (1); Eternal Empire (4); Modern Boy (5); YMCA Baseball Team (5)
Kim In-gwon	Masquerade (2); Map Against the World (3)
Kim In-u (In Woo)	Anarchist from the Colony (5); Battleship Island (5); Herstory (8)
Kim Jong-su	The Drug King (7); Nameless Gangster (7); Samjin Company English Class (8)
Kim Ju-hyeok (Joo-hyuk)	Heungboo (4); Blue Swallow (5); YMCA Baseball Team (5)
Kim Jun-han	The King's Letters (1); Anarchist from the Colony (5); The Drug King (7); Herstory (8)
Kim Mu-yeol	War of the Arrows (2); Warriors of the Dawn (2)
Kim Myeong-gon (Myung-gon)	The Admiral (2); Masquerade (2); Warriors of the Dawn (2); Eternal Empire (3); My Heart (5); The Taebaek Mountains (6)
Kim Roe-ha (Roi-ha)	Radio Dayz (5); A Little Pond (6); Memories of Murder (7)
Kim Sae-byeok (Sae-byuk)	A Resistance (5); House of Hummingbird (8)
Kim Sang-gyeong (Sang-kyung)	May 18 (7); Memories of Murder (7)
Kim Sang-ho	The Tiger (5); Ordinary Person (7); The President's Last Bang (7); The Old Garden (8)
Kim Seon-yeong (Sun-young)	Malmoe (5); Herstory (8)
Kim So-jin	The Drug King (7); The Man Standing Next (7)
Kim Tae-hun	The Admiral (2); Song of a Flower (4); Malmoe (5)
Kim Tae-ri	The Handmaiden (5); 1987 (7)
Kim Tae-u (Tae-Woo)	The Face Reader (1); Forbidden Dream (1)
Kim Ui-seong (Eui-sung)	The Face Reader (1); The Book of Fish (4); Assassination (5)
Kim Yeo-jin	Chihwaseon (4); Peppermint Candy (7)
Kim Yeong-ae (Young-ae)	Operation Chromite (6); The Attorney (7)
Kim Yun-seok	The Fortress (2); 1987 (7)
Ma Dong-seok (Don Lee)	Kundo (4); The Good, The Bad, and The Weird (5); Nameless Gangster (7)
Min Hyo-rin	The Grand Heist (3); Sunny (8)
Min Jin-ung (Jin-woong)	Anarchist from the Colony (5); Malmoe (5)

(*continued*)

(continued)

Name (Alternative Rendering)	*Films (Book Chapter)*
Mun Chae-won (Moon Chae-won)	War of the Arrows (2); Feng Shui (4)
Mun Seong-geun (Sung-gun)	A Little Pond (6); 1987 (7); A Petal (7); A Single Spark (7)
Mun So-ri (Moon So-ri)	The Handmaiden (5); The President's Barber (7); Peppermint Candy (8)
O Dal-su (Oh Dal-soo)	Assassination (5); The Good, the Bad, and the Weird (5); Private Eye (5); 1987 (7); The Attorney (7); Once in a Summer (7); The President's Barber (7); Ode to My Father (8)
O Jeong-se (Oh Jung-se)	Radio Dayz (5); Swing Kids (6)
Ra Mi-ran	The Tiger (5); Ordinary Person (7); Ode to My Father (8)
Ryu Deok-hwan	Private Eye (5); Welcome to Dongmakgol (6)
Ryu Seung-nyong (Seung-ryong)	The Admiral (2); Blades of Blood (2); Masquerade (2); War of the Arrows (2); The Book of Fish (4); The Sound of a Flower (4); The Front Line (5); The Piper (6)
Ryu Seung-su	The Good, the Bad, the Weird (5); The Front Line (6); The President's Barber (7)
Seol Gyeong-gu (Sol Kyung-gu)	The Book of Fish (4); 1987 (7); A Petal (7); Peppermint Candy (7); Silmido (7)
Seong Yu-bin (Sung Yoo-bin)	The Fatal Encounter (3); The Tiger (5)
Shin Gu (Goo)	Forbidden Dream (1); 2009: Lost Memories (5); Modern Boy (5); YMCA Baseball Team (5)
Shin Ha-gyun	The Front Line (6); Welcome to Dongmakgol (6)
Sim Eun-gyeong (Shim Eun-kyung)	Masquerade (2); Sunny (8)
So Ji-seop (Ji-sub)	The Throne (3); Battleship Island (5)
Son Byeong-ho	The Good, the Bad, the Weird (5); 1987 (7); May 18 (7); The President's Barber (7)
Song Gang-ho	The Face Reader (1); The King's Letters (1); The Throne (3); The Age of Shadows (5); The Good, the Bad, and the Weird (5); YMCA Baseball Team (5); The Attorney (7); The Drug King (7); Memories of Murder (7); The President's Barber (7); A Taxi Driver (7)
Song Jae-ho	Private Eye (5); May 18 (7); Memories of Murder (7); The President's Last Bang (7)
Song Ok-suk (Oak-sook)	Spring in My Hometown (6); Harmonium in My Memory (7); My Sassy Girl (8)
Song Yeong-chang	Kundo (4); The Good, the Bad, the Weird (5); Malmoe (5); The Attorney (7); The Drug King (7)

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Name (Alternative Rendering)	*Films (Book Chapter)*
Toru Nakamura	2009: Lost Memories (5); Blue Swallow (5)
U Hyeon (Woo Hyun)	The King and the Clown (1); Malmoe (5); 1987 (7)
Ye Su-jeong (Soo-jung)	Malmoe (5); Herstory (8); Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982 (8)
Yi Byeong-heon (Lee Byung-hun)	The Fortress (2); Masquerade (2); The Age of Shadows (5); The Good, the Bad, and the Weird (5); Harmonium in My Memory (7); The Man Standing Next (7); Once in a Summer (7); Bungee Jumping of Their Own (8)
Yi Da-wit (Lee David)	The Fortress (2); War of the Arrows (2); The Front Line (6); Swing Kids (6); Taegukgi (6)
Yi Dae-yeon	The Throne (3); YMCA Baseball Team (5); A Little Pond (6); Harmonium in My Memory (7); Peppermint Candy (7)
Yi Eun-ju (Lee Eun-ju)	Taegukgi (6); Bungee Jumping of Their Own (8)
Yi Gyeong-yeong (Lee Kyoung-young)	War of the Arrows (2); Kundo (4); Assassination (5); Battleship Island (5)
Yi Hui-jun (Lee Hee-jun)	A Melody to Remember (6); 1987 (7); The Drug King (7); The Man Standing Next (7)
Yi Jae-eung	Memories of Murder (7); The President's Barber (7)
Yi Je-hun (Je-hoon)	Anarchist from the Colony (5); The Front Line (6)
Yi Jeong-hyeon (Lee Jung-hyun)	The Admiral (2); Battleship Island (5); A Petal (7)
Yi Jeong-jae (Lee Jung-jae)	The Face Reader (1); Warriors of the Dawn (2); Assassination (5); The Last Witness (6); Operation Chromite (6)
Yi Jeong-eun (Lee Jung-eun)	The Book of Fish (4); A Taxi Driver (7)
Yi Jun-gi (Lee Joon-gi)	The King and the Clown (1); May 18 (7)
Yi Mi-yeon (Lee Mi-yeon)	The Last Witness (6); Harmonium in My Memory (7)
Yi Seom (Esom)	Warriors of the Dawn (3); Samjin Company English Class (8)
Yi Seong-min (Lee Sung-min)	Kundo (4); The Piper (6); The Attorney (7); The Drug King (7); The Man Standing Next (7)
Yi Seong-uk (Lee Sung-wook)	Malmoe (5); Samjin Group English Class (8)
Yi Yu-yeong (Lee You Young)	The Treacherous (1); Herstory (8)
Yu Eun-mi (Yoo Eun-mi)	The Fatal Encounter (3); Malmoe (5); A Taxi Driver (7)
Yu Hae-jin (Yoo Hae-jin)	The King and the Clown (1); Blood Rain (4); Malmoe (5); 1987 (7); Once in a Summer (7); A Taxi Driver (7)
Yu Ho-jeong (Yoo Ho-jeong)	Chihwason (4); Sunny (8)

(*continued*)

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Name (Alternative Rendering)	*Films (Book Chapter)*
Yu Jae-myeong (Jae-myung)	The Tiger (5); The Drug King (7); Nameless Gangster (7)
Yu Seung-mok	1987 (7); Memories of Murder (7)
Yun Hui-cheol	My Heart (5); The President's Barber (7)
Yun Je-mun (Yoon Je-moon)	Forbidden Dream (1); The Good, the Bad, the Weird (5); Private Eye (5); The Drug King (7)
Yun Ju-sang	The King and the Clown (1); The Taebaek Mountains (6); The President's Barber (7)
Yun Yeo-jeong (Yoon Yuh-jung)	The Old Garden (7); The President's Last Bang (7)

Appendix B. Box Office Ranks

Covered Films in the All-Time South Korean Box Office Records (As of the end of 2022. Rank includes Hollywood and other foreign films.) *www.kobis.or.kr/kobis/business/stat/boxs/findFormerBoxOfficeList.do*

Rank	*English Title*	*Attendance*	*Release Date*	*Chapter*
1	The Admiral	17,615,844	2014-07-30	2
4	Ode to My Father	14,264,059	2014-12-17	8
13	Assassination	12,706,855	2015-07-22	5
14	Masquerade	12,324,062	2012-09-13	2
16	A Taxi Driver	12,189,698	2017-08-02	7
18	The Attorney	11,375,223	2013-12-18	7
22	The King and the Clown	10,514,177	2005-12-29	1
31	The Face Reader	9,135,806	2013-09-11	1
47	Age of Shadows	7,500,457	2016-09-07	5
48	War of the Arrows	7,470,633	2011-08-10	2
51	Sunny	7,363,139	2011-05-04	8
54	1987: When the Day Comes	7,232,452	2017-12-27	7
60	Operation Chromite	7,051,237	2016-07-27	6
66	May 18	6,855,433	2007-07-25	7
67	The Good, the Bad, and the Weird	6,686,075	2008-07-17	5
69	Battleship Island	6,592,151	2017-07-26	5

(*continued*)

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Covered Films in the All-Time South Korean Box Office Records (As of the end of 2022. Rank includes Hollywood and other foreign films.) *www.kobis.or.kr/kobis/business/stat/boxs/findFormerBoxOfficeList.do*

Rank	*English Title*	*Attendance*	*Release Date*	*Chapter*
71	Welcome to Dongmakgol	6,436,900	2005-08-04	6
73	The Throne	6,247,745	2015-09-16	3

Appendix C. Critical and Popular Scores

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Film Rankings (As of October 2022)

Official English Title	*Release Year*	*Author's Score (5)*	*Daum Movies Netizens (10)*	*Naver Movies critics (10)*	*Naver Netizens (10)*	*Rotten Tomatoes (100)*	*Rotten Tomatoes Audience (100)*	*Admissions (koreanfilm.or.kr)*	*Chapter*
Handmaiden, The	2016	**5**	6.8	7.68	7.16	96	91	4,289,008	5
Throne, The	2015	**5**	7.9	7.54	8.29		77	6,247,638	3
Attorney, The	2013	4.75	9.3	7.43	9	77	87	11,375,223	7
Blood Rain	2005	4.75	7.8		7.98		55	1,926,681	4
Memories of Murder	2003	4.75	9.4		9.41	95	93	5,255,376	7
Taxi Driver, A	2017	4.75	9.1	6.09	9.03	96	91	12,189,702	7
Assassination	2015	4.5	8.5	6.57	8.98	83	84	12,706,796	5
King and the Clown, The	2005	4.5	9.2	6.67	9.04		88	10,514,177	1
Ode to My Father	2014	4.5	7.1	5.81	9.02	71	85	14,264,282	8
Peppermint Candy	2000	4.5	9.1	**9**	9	86	82	850,000	8
President's Barber, The	2004	4.5	8.1		7.49		71	748,380	7
Swing Kids	2018	4.5	8.5	6.38	8.41	63	**97**	1,474,056	6
Welcome to Dongmakgol	2005	4.5	9.1	8	8.89	88	92	6,436,900	6
Face Reader, The	2013	4.25	8	6.53	8.02		74	9,135,806	1
Modern Boy	2008	4.25	6.7	5.57	6.87			762,360	5
My Heart	2000	4.25	9.1		**9.53**				5
Once in a Summer	2006	4.25	9.1		8.93			290,538	7
President's Last Bang, The	2005	4.25	8.2		7.44	82	72	890,602	7
Samjin Company English Class	2020	4.25	8.3	7	8.25			1,572,071	8

War of the Arrows	2011	4.25	8.1	6.8	7.86	**100**	78	7,470,367	2
YMCA Baseball Team	2002	4.25	6.8		7.19		40		5
The Admiral--Roaring Currents	2014	4	7.8	6.29	8.44	86	79	**17,615,844**	2
Blue Swallow	2005	4	7.3	6.33	7.59			496,061	5
Bungee Jumping on Their Own	2001	4	9		8.98				8
Fortress, The	2017	4	7.4	7.5	8.11			3,849,129	2
Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982	2019	4	6.7	6.79	6.67			3,679,162	8
Kundo: Age of the Rampant	2014	4	7.2	7.11	6.94	82	68	4,775,924	4
Masquerade	2012	4	8.6	7.27	9.25	**100**	89	12,323,750	2
Spring in My Hometown	1998	4	8.6		7.72				7
Sunny	2011	4	9	6.71	9.12		77	7,362,608	8
Traces of Love	2006	4	8.1	5.67	7.2		62	601,710	8
1987: When the Day Comes	2017	3.75	9.5	8.08		82	94	7,232,452	7
Book of Fish, The	2021	3.75	9	7	9.36			342,648	4
Drug King, The	2018	3.75	5.5	5.14	6.34	83	64	1,864,076	7
Fatal Encounter, The	2014	3.75	7.3	5.64	7.1	60	78	3,849,700	3
Harmonium in My Memory	1999	3.75	8.8		8.99		65		7
House of Hummingbird	2018	3.75	8.3	8.38	8.74	98	74	148,001	8
Jiseul	2013	3.75	9.1	8.86	6.28		64	145,448	6
Last Witness, The	2001	3.75	6.6		5.98				6

(*continued*)

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Film Rankings (As of October 2022)

Official English Title	*Release Year*	*Author's Score (5)*	*Daum Movies Netizens (10)*	*Naver Movies critics (10)*	*Naver Netizens (10)*	*Rotten Tomatoes (100)*	*Rotten Tomatoes Audience (100)*	*Admissions (koreanfilm.or.kr)*	*Chapter*
Man Standing Next, The	2020	3.75	8.4	6.9	7.47	84		4,750,345	7
My Sassy Girl	2001	3.75	8.6		9.3		93		8
Old Garden, The	2007	3.75	8.4	7.4	7.34		65	285,433	7
Private Eye	2009	3.75	7.3	5.72	7.36		63	1,892,398	5
Radio Dayz	2008	3.75	6.5		5.9			210,525	5
Single Spark, A	1995	3.75	8.8		8.89				7
Anarchist from the Colony	2017	3.5	8	6.7	8.12		86	2,359,800	5
Chihwaseon	2002	3.5	8.3		8.7	83	77		4
Fengshui	2018	3.5	6.7	5.8	7.07			2,087,584	4
Forbidden Dream	2019	3.5	8.3	6.7	8.81			2,000,648	1
Gabi	2012	3.5	7.7	5.13	6.85			270,602	5
Herstory	2018	3.5	9	6.67	9.29			337,485	8
Little Pond, A	2008	3.5	8.6	7.56	6.59			46,428	6
Love, Lies	2016	3.5	6.7	5.62	8.1		43	485,695	5
May 18	2007	3.5	8.7	6.25	7.54		65	6,855,283	7
Melody to Remember, A	2016	3.5	8.3	5.66	8.52		67	1,069,864	6
Ordinary Person	2017	3.5	8.1	5.86	7.97			383,336	7
Piper, The	2015	3.5	6.5	6.66	6.48		68	828,025	6
Spirits' Homecoming	2016	3.5	**9.7**	5	7.72		38	3,587,252	5
Taebaek Mountains, The	1994	3.5	7.8		7.76				6

Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War	2004	3.5	9.1		9.22	80	93	11,746,135	6
Eternal Empire	1994	3.25	7.3		7.38				3
Front Line, The	2011	3.25	8.5	7.34	8.69			2,945,137	6
Heung-boo—the Revolutionist	2017	3.25	5.5	4.57	4.45			416,303	4
Malmoe: The Secret Mission	2019	3.25	9.1	5.86	9.14			2,866,597	5
Map Against the World	2016	3.25	7.2	5.78	7.17			974,262	4
Nameless Gangster	2012	3.25	8.3	7.5	8.66	**100**	75	4,720,116	7
Resistance: The Story of Yu Gwan-sun	2019	3.25	9	6.2	8.66			1,157,954	5
Silmido	2003	3.25	8		8.38		84	11,081,000	7
Tiger, The	2015	3.25	7.8	7.08	8.03	**100**	75	1,762,742	5
Warriors of the Dawn	2017	3.25	7.9	6.5	7.29		86	837,500	2
Battleship Island	2017	3	6.7	6.17	5.3	67	80	6,592,151	5
Blades of Blood	2010	3	6.6	6.83	5.47		34	1,383,647	2
Good, the Bad, and the Weird, The	2008	3	7.9	7	7.74	80	83	6,685,883	5
Grand Heist, The	2012	3	7.2	5.75	7.59		54	4,909,864	3
King's Letters, The	2019	3	4.6	6.45	3.36			958,775	1
Petal, A	1996	3	8.5		7.55				7
Sound of a Flower	2015	3	5.8	5.44	5.6			317,505	5
Swordsman, The	2020	3	7.8	4.5	7.91			190,237	2
Age of Shadows, The	2016	2.75	7.7	7.5	8.45	**100**	83	7,500,457	5
Gangnam Blues	2014	2.75	7.2	5.84	7.16	60	53	2,192,276	7
Operation Chromite	2016	2.75	5.6	3.41	8.04	40	52	7,051,237	6
2009 Lost Memories	2002	2.5	7		8.04	33	56		5
Treacherous, The	2015	2	6.6	4.97	6.9		60	1,110,274	1

Notes

1. Interestingly, the most accomplished films in which Buddhism does take centre stage, as it were, in a historical manner might have been made before the *hallyu* period starting in the mid-to-late 1990s. For an analysis of such works, see David E. James, "Im Kwon-Taek: Korean National Cinema and Buddhism", *Film Quarterly* 54.3 (Spring 2001): 14–31.
2. For a thorough study of the political, economic, and cultural context of South Korean cinema's emergence out of the dictatorship era and into the heights of sophistication and popularity, see Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves* (Columbia University Press, 2010).
3. The first, "Silmido" (analysed in Chap. 8), was released in 2003, followed by "Taegukgi" (Chap. 6) in 2004, and "Welcome to Dongmakgol" (Chap. 6) in 2005 and "The King and the Clown" (Chap. 1) in 2006. Three of these four movies ("Welcome to Dongmakgol" excepted) broke attendance records.
4. See Appendix B.
5. Director Yi Jun-ik, maker of one of the earliest super-blockbuster historical films, "The King and the Clown" (Chap. 1) of 2006, which garnered over 10 million in attendance, expressed in an interview at the time that South Korean cinema was in the midst of a major transi-

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4

tion towards the dominance of historical films, especially those that reflected the prioritisation of common people's experiences in the nation's past. Kim Ga-hui, "Interview: Director Yi Jun-ik of the 10-million-viewers breakthrough hit 'The King and the Clown'" [Inteobyu: il cheonman sinhwa "Wang ui namja" Yi Jun-ik gamdok], *Hangyoreh sinmun* 2006.2.10. https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/movie/101258.html

6. Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema—Identity, Culture, Politics* (Manchester University Press, 2000), chapter 3.
7. Much of this overarching character of pre-*hallyu* films—again, though not specifically of historical films—came from the purposeful pursuit of the National Cinema Movement of the 1980s, which the authors see as having played a central role in advancing the movies and cinema culture. See Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo, and Han Ju Kwak, *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination* (Praeger, 2003), Introduction and Chap. 3. For a countering argument, given the limitations imposed by the political circumstances during much of the post-liberation era, see Steven Chung, *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 14.
8. For an early study of how the basis of the *minjung* orientation in film and culture from the 1980s helped lay the basis for significant developments in South Korean cinema's quality and treatments, see Isolde Standish, "Korean Cinema and the New Realism", in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 1994), chapter 5.
9. Writing at the very end of the 1990s, Hyangjin Lee observed this promising phenomenon taking shape with the early works of many directors who would later become well established, some of whom had already applied their idiosyncratic, critical sensibilities to historical settings. See Lee, op. cit., pp. 61–62.
10. Probably foremost among the English-language online review sites dedicated to Korean films is koreanfilm.org, featuring insightful, thorough, and stimulating essays by skilled reviewers such as Darcy Paquet and Kyu-Hyun Kim. The review aggregator RottenTomatoes.com also includes many Korean films.
11. More details of the historical backgrounds of the events and characters can be found in web sites such as HanCinema.net or in the Wikipedia entry for each film, or the directory—a kind of encyclopae-

dia—operated by the Korean Film Council: http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/eng/main/main.jsp. A few publications have compiled these insights into book-length form as well, among which a recommended work in Korean is Yi Yeong-chun & Yi Seung-yeop, *Yeonghwa-sok yeoksa gipeun iyagi—Hanguksa pyeon* (Deep stories behind the history in films—Korean history volume). As suggested by its title, the book focuses on the historical contexts, with references to textual sources, much more than on analysis of the films, which is minimal. For something similar in English, see Mi Park, *Korean Historical Dramas: Heroes and Villains in Korean History*.

12. Perhaps the most prominent academic advocate of incorporating film into historical investigation has been Robert A. Rosenstone, who in the 1990s proclaimed, finally, historical films' recognition, however reluctantly, by the profession at large. But Rosenstone did not stop there and has argued for film and film analysis as integral to pursuing historical understanding: "Far more radical in its implications is the investigation of how a visual medium, subject to the conventions of drama and fiction, might be used as a serious vehicle for thinking about our relationship to the past". Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, p. 3. See also Rosenstone, *History on Film, Film on History* (2006), which lays out his case for the correspondences between film and text as illuminating elements for constructions of the past. For a recent manifestation of the widespread acceptance of historical film analysis in the historical profession, see the works of Marnie Hughes-Warrington, including *The History on Film Reader*, a collection of essays from various scholars published as part of the "Routledge Readers in History" series.
13. Other examples abound from later in this volume: Two similar depictions of 1930s Seoul under colonial rule appeared in 2008 (Chap. 5); two films (Chap. 5) about the horrific "comfort women" experiences and their contemporary incarnations appeared in 2016; two films set in 1987 (Chap. 7) marking the 30th anniversary of democratisation were released in 2017; and a pair of releases from 2018 (Chap. 8) both tackled the 1990s history of the comfort women survivors' struggles for historical reckoning.
14. King Sejo (r. 1455–1468) occupies a somewhat ambivalent place in historical standing, for his record as a strong and fruitful monarch has not completely compensated for the bloody means by which he took the throne.

15. During its theatrical release, "The King and the Clown" blew away all box office records to become the first Korean film to draw over 10 million in audience. The film still remained in the Top 10 in Korean box office history as of the end of 2021. See Appendix B.
16. For more on the sexual dimensions of both the film and its reception in South Korea, see Jiyoung Shin, "Male Homosexuality in 'The King and the Clown': Hybrid Construction and Contested Meanings", *The Journal of Korean Studies* 14.1 (spring 2013): 89–114. Although Shin's study does not mention this particular criticism, she notes that director Yi Jun-ik appears to have forwarded such a pathological element in Yeonsan's sexuality (pp. 101–2).
17. Interestingly, the English rendering, in the film's subtitles, for these maidens' formal identities ("unpyeong") is "comforters".
18. The timing of the film's release, in a grim way, might also have contributed to its box office success, coming the summer after the tragic April 16, 2014 sinking of the Sewol ferry that took over 300 lives. See Ha Seung-woo, "The Return of Yi Sun-shin: Mediating the Present and the Past", *Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies* 1 (2014): 235–39.
19. For an English translation of this book, see Yu Sŏng-nyong, *The Book of Corrections: Reflections on the National Crisis During the Japanese Invasion of Korea, 1592–1598.* Choi Byonghyon, trs. (Institute of East Asian Studies, UC Berkeley, 2002).
20. For these and other helpful insights and discussions through a historically-informed review, see Kim Kyu Hyun, "A Whirlpool of History: Roaring Currents between a Determined War Film and a Deifying Biopic", *International Journal of Korean History* 19.2 (Aug. 2014): 271–80. Interestingly, although the Japanese commanders were played by well-established Korean film actors, a Japanese actor, Ōtani Ryōhei, played the much smaller role of a Japanese-turned-Korean spy, "Junsa".
21. The role is played by the famously versatile actor Ryu Seung-nyong, who coincidentally also played the Manchu commander in "War of the Arrows" and the Japanese "pirate" commander in "The Admiral".
22. Having been somewhat accidentally put in a position to ascend the throne, in 1608, upon the death of his father (King Seonjo), Gwanghae—a child of Seonjo's concubine—remained vulnerable in his position, which probably explains why potential claimants to the throne among his half-siblings, as well as his step-mother, were exiled or killed during his reign.

23. For a similar reading that connects the body-double plot device in "Masquerade" to notions of political legitimacy, see Louisa Jo Mitchell, *Disrupting Heritage Cinema: The Historical Films of South Korea* (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2018), pp. 151–52.
24. See JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Great East Asian War and the Birth of the Korean Nation* (Columbia University Press, 2016).
25. For an informative English-language study of Yeongjo and his reign, see Jahyun Kim Haboush, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea* (Columbia University Press, 2001).
26. A major rebellion arose in 1728, less than five years into Yeongjo's reign, fuelled by such charges against the new monarch. A film also has dramatised this uprising: "The Age of Blood" (*Yeongmo: Ballan ui sidae*; Kim Hong-seong, 2017). For a monographic study on this event, see Andrew Jackson, *The 1728 Musin Rebellion: Politics and Plotting in Eighteenth-Century Korea* (University of Hawaii Press, 2018).
27. See the List of Actors in Appendix A.
28. For a thorough discussion of the issues and consideration of the historical evidence, see Christopher Lovins, *King Chŏngjo, an Enlightened Despot in Early Modern Korea* (State University of New York Press, 2019), pp. 22–24.
29. See Martina Deuchler, "'Heaven Does Not Discriminate': A Study of Secondary Sons in Chosŏn Korea". *Journal of Korean Studies* 6 (1988–89): 121–63; and Kyung Moon Hwang, *Beyond Birth*, chapter 6.
30. Not long after "Eternal Empire", Yi published a three-part hagiographical novel, *In'gan ui gil* ("Path of humanity"), of Park Chung Hee's life. As Park's daughter, the president Park Geun-hye, was being impeached in 2016 and 2017 for corruption, Yi (Ryu Cheol-jin), a long-time professor at Ewha Woman's University who had taken advisory roles in Park's government, was investigated, tried, and convicted of engaging in academic fraud on behalf of the daughter of the Park scandal's main culprit, Choe Sun-sil. Yi served only a year in prison but could not rehabilitate his professorial career.
31. The four officials were Yi Deung-mu, Yu Deuk-gong, Seo Isu, and Bak Jega. Bak would go down in history as one of the great thinkers and writers of the era and a core member of the reformist Northern Learning movement.

32. This brief passage in the dynastic annals is presented as an opening inter-title in the film.
33. As Queen Dowager, Jeongsun, who married King Yeongjo as his second wife when she was 13 and he was in his 60s, would wield tremendous power during Jeongjo's reign and even more so following his death in 1800. In contemporary popular culture, she frequently stands for the abusive power of royal family members in the absence of strong monarchs in the nineteenth century. See Chap. 4.
34. In his analysis of the work, Christopher Lovins argues that such attention to lower-status characters, like Gapsu, is among the features that endow "The Fatal Encounter" with value as a true "historical film" beyond nationalist mythologising or modernist ideological advocacy. Lovins, "Royal Rage: *The Fatal Encounter* (Yŏngnin) as a Historical Film", *Acta Koreana* 20.2 (Dec. 2017): 449–69.
35. This is suggested by Kim So-yeong, "Why did his body have to be [seen] torn apart?" [Geu ui mom-eun wae jjitkyeoya haneun-ga?] *Cine 21* (2005-05-25). http://m.cine21.com/news/view/?mag_id=30806
36. For an analysis of the film as a reflection of the awareness of collective guilt during the first decade of the twenty-first century, see Hwang Yun Mi, "Allegory of the Purge Campaign: Memory and Trauma in South Korean Historical Drama", *Munhak gwa yeongsang* 16.1 (2015.3): 51–71. Although "purge" is probably not the correct rendering for the "[gwageosa] cheongsan" slogan of the public campaigns for historical truth-telling and reconciliation—it was arguably the opposing sentiment of "settlement" or "acknowledgement" of history, instead of a "purge"—the portrayal of collective guilt in the film does indeed spotlight the comprehensive dysfunctionality of Joseon society at the time, the early nineteenth century.
37. See Homer Hulbert, "The Ajun", *The Korea Review* (Feb. and June 1904): 63–70, 249–55; and Hwang, *Beyond Birth*, chapter 4.
38. An interesting twist comes from the fact that the main antagonist is played by the same actor, Baek Yun-sik, who in the "Face Reader" took the role of a top official protecting a besieged monarch.
39. Hong Gil-dong is the name often used in South Korea as an example in filling out forms. For a recent English-language rendering of the famous story, see *The Story of Hong Gildong*, Minsoo Kang, trs.
40. For a stimulating and thorough study of pre-*hallyu* films—those released from the 1950s to 1990s—that were set in the colonial

period, see Jinsoo An, *Parameters of Disavowal: Colonial Representation in South Korean Cinema*.

41. See Jeeyoung Shin, "Screening Colonial Modernity: Cinematic Re-Imaginations of Colonial Korea in the 2000s", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 36.8 (2019): 690–720. Regarding films from the 2000s set in the colonial period, Shin finds that they display a "clear rejection of the Manichean narrative of colonial exploitation and unmitigated national suffering" and thereby "broke away from the essentialist nationalism". Shin, p. 695.
42. The originating novel, by Kim Tak-hwan, is titled "Russian Coffee" (*Noseo-a gabi*).
43. The famous incident of secret royal emissaries sent to The Hague in 1907 is integrated into the story two years after the actual event, for example, and the Korean monarch's automobile appears to be a vintage 1930s model.
44. For a close analysis of "Blue Swallow", including a brief explanation of the controversy surrounding the film that likely led to its box office failure, see Jeeyoung Shin, "Screening Colonial Modernity", p. 704. Extraordinarily, the actors for both main characters separately met tragically early deaths later.
45. Bak is the author of "A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist", a short story, and "Three Generations", a novel, both of which have been published in English translation. Coincidentally, he was also the maternal grandfather of film director Bong Jun-ho, creator of, among other well-known films, "Parasite", which won the 2020 Academy Award for Best Picture and Best Director, and "Memories of Murder" (2003), analysed in Chap. 7.
46. Incidentally, the narrative perspective of the film's originating novel is the male lead character.
47. For more discussion on the relationship between the "hypervisibility" of modern girls and "new women" in colonial Seoul and their acts of "masquerading", see Jina E. Kim, *Urban Modernities in Colonial Korea and Taiwan* (Brill, 2019), chapter 4.
48. For a helpful analysis comparing the original novel with the film, see Chi-Yun Shin, "In Another Time and Place: *The Handmaiden* as an Adaptation", *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 11.1 (2019): 1–13.

49. Whether so intended or not, Kozuki calls to mind a prominent figure from the early twentieth century named Go Yeong-hui, originally from a famed interpreters' lineage, who used his Japanese language skills to become a high government official and a pro-Japanese turncoat. Go, not unlike Kozuki in "The Handmaiden", was awarded a nobility title and lavish sums upon Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910. In an interview for *Cine 21*, director Park Chan-wok emphasises—although the interviewer asked him very little about history—that the specific historical setting was indeed important to the story and the film as a whole, and as an example Park notes that Kozuki used his interpreting skills to engage in illicit activity and thereby gained enough favours from the Japanese to grow very rich. "Spoilers-revealing interview with Park Chan-wook", *Cine 21* (2016.06.06). For more on the real historical figure Go Yeong-hui and his family background of interpreters, see Kyung Moon Hwang, *Beyond Birth—Social Status in the Emergence of Modern Korea*, pp. 141–47. Go was also the uncle of renowned artist Go Hui-dong, who studied in Japan and is considered the first Korean master of western-style oil paintings.
50. An argues that this shift in thematic focus also reflected the South Korean government's 1965 normalisation treaty with Japan at a time when the government shaped cinematic directions, and the Cold War continued to direct the moral framing of official post-colonial South Korean identity. See An, *Parameters of Disavowal*, chapter 3.
51. These are the bombing of Japanese military officials in Shanghai by Yun Bong-gil, and the bombing attempt of the Japanese monarch in Tokyo by Yi Bong-chang. Before their deeds, these two Koreans took anticipatory commemorative photos, with descriptive placards around their necks and their weapons, a scene re-created by the fictional characters in "Assassination".
52. Hee-seung Lee, "Remembering to Reset: Representations of the Colonial Era in Recent Korean Films", in Rumi Sakamoto and Stephen Epstein (eds.), *Popular Culture and the Transformation of Japan–Korea Relations* (Routledge, 2020), p. 75.
53. Indeed two separate works have appeared about student soldiers in the same obscure corner of the war: "71: Into the Fire" (*Pohwa sokeuro*, 2010), and "The Battle of Jangsari" (*Jangsari: Itheojin yeongungdeul*, 2019).

54. Hyangjin Lee, "The 'Division Blockbuster' in South Korea: The Evolution of Cinematic Representations of War and Division", in Michael Berry and Chiho Sawada (eds.), *Divided Lenses: Screen Memories of War in East Asia* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), chapter 3; and We-jung Yi, "The Pleasure of Mourning: Korean War Blockbusters in Post–Cold War South Korea, 1998–2008", *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 58.1 (Fall 2018): 118–140. For We-jung Yi, three such Korean War blockbusters from the turn of the century constitute a subset of the hybrid "Korean-style blockbusters" grounded in the depiction of national history. Yi argues that these Korean War films, which curiously include the non-historical "JSA", all reflect the post-Cold War attempt at national reconciliation and hence expressed, at least from the South's perspective, a way to hold in abeyance the unease over national division as an unresolved and unmastered, indeed unmasterable matter. Thus these films, she writes, "screen—in a double sense—Korea's traumatic past".
55. Youngmin Choe, *Tourist Distractions: Traveling and Feeling in Transnational Hallyu Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 145–46. Choe observes that the Korean War, including through films, still serves in South Korea as the primary event for generating "postmemory", or "the memory of something that was never personally experienced, but via national or cultural tradition has come to feel vital or lived by the following generations".
56. See Susie Jie Young Kim, "Korea beyond and within the Armistice: Division and the Multiplicities of Time in Postwar Literature and Cinema", *Journal of Korean Studies* 18.2 (Fall 2013): 287–313, pp. 306–8. Kim asserts that "Taegukgi" "serves to confirm the present rather than uncover something new about the past" (p. 308), in effect reinforcing a kind of goal-oriented triumphalism regarding South Korea's post-Korean War historical standing via-a-vis the North. Perhaps not coincidentally, "Taegukgi" became the most popular film in South Korean box office history in the opening weeks of its theatrical run in early 2004.
57. For a discussion of examples of this perspective in pre-*hallyu* film and literature, see Theodore Hughes, "Planet Hallyuwood: Imaging the Korean War", *Acta Koreana* 14.1 (June 2011): 197–212.
58. Im Kwon-taek, Q&A at a screening of "Taebaek Mountains", San Francisco, USA, 1998.

59. See Su-kyoung Hwang, *Korea's Grievous War* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), chapter 1.
60. For a discussion of the religious overtones of the South Korean anti-communist ideology used to justify the fire bombings, see Su-kyoung Hwang, *Korea's Grievous War*, pp. 147–49.
61. See William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton University Press, 2002), Ch. 4; and Michael Pembroke, *Korea: Where the American Century Began* (Hardie Grant Books, 2018), Ch. 6.
62. See Daniel Martin, "South Korean Cinema's Postwar Pain: Gender and National Division in Korean War Films from the 1950s to the 2000s", *The Journal of Korean Studies* 19.1 (spring 2014): 93–114, pp. 104–5. Martin finds that the film's "anti-American message" is one of a "blisteringly angry critique of US military policy".
63. One example is Holt International Children's Services, which began in the mid-1950s with the Holts' adoption of several Korean War orphans. See Young Sun Park, *Rescue and Regulation: A History of Undesirable Children in Korea, 1884–1961* (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2018), chapter 5.
64. The most recent treatment comes from Monica Kim, who in *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War* (Princeton University Press, 2020) demonstrates how the US Army Psychological Strategy Board's rationales of "free choice", while conscious of the 1949 Geneva Convention principles (which had not been ratified by the US), aimed to achieve a "de-recognition" of the North Korean state and a public relations acceptance of the US involvement in Korea. Kim, *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War*, pp. 101–9.
65. This parallel was suggested also by Monica Kim in *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War*, p. 88: "Camp #1 was to be a reflection of the order of the nation-state system, where the norms of sovereignty would protect the POW individual". Kim noted earlier that the camp was actually built by the first prisoners themselves.
66. Raphael Kadushin, "The grim truth behind the Pied Piper" (BBC.com, September 4, 2020). https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200902-the-grim-truth-behind-the-pied-piper
67. As Andrew Jackson notes, the original script, from over a decade earlier, by director Yi Gwang-mo was even more explicit in assigning blame for the war to the US. Jackson argues that the heavy use of intertitles—mostly expressing Seongmin's recall but also indicating

particular wartime events over the course of the narrative—actually have the effect of "implicating" the (South Korean) viewer in the war's grim realities by more closely integrating the (fictional) personal realm with that of the war. See Jackson, "Intertitles, History and Memory in *Spring in My Hometown*", *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 9.2 (Aug. 2017): 107–23.

68. Hyangjin Lee spots an employment of "well-worn conventions of family melodrama" in the more recent films addressing national division. See Lee, "The 'Division Blockbuster' in South Korea", p. 71.
69. As a civilian candidate Park had won two consecutive presidential elections in 1963 and 1967, respectively—and over the same main opponent.
70. Director Im made these remarks in person following a screening of his film at Yale University in 2006, at which author was present.
71. For a recent analysis of the film along these and other lines, see Joseph Jeon, *Vicious Circuits: Korea's IMF Cinema and the End of the American Century* (Stanford University Press, 2019), chapter 1. Jeon argues that "Memories of Murder", with its story set in the mid-1980s but with a crucial 2003 denouement scene 15 years later, both elides the transformative period of transition immediately following democratisation and thoroughly accounts for it, especially the major shifts in both politics and the economy.
72. For more on these crimes and the capturing of the killer, see Danny Kim and Patrick Brzeski, "Korean Serial Killer Who Inspired Bong Joon-ho's 'Memories of Murder' Identified After 30 Years", *The Hollywood Reporter* (Sept. 29, 2019). https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/memories-murder-serial-killer-identified-30-years-1241310/
73. Neither Kim nor Cha took their respective posts until the mid-1970s, during the Yusin period, but in "President's Barber", both characters who represent them appear already in the 1960s.
74. Kyung-hyun Kim suggests, rather, that in a "postmodern maneuver", the historical Park is "processed as a simulation or a hyperreality", in a demonstration of the films' "resistance against realism". Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era*, chapter 3, locations 1107, 1182 (Kindle).
75. For a newspaper report alluding to the connections between Koreagate and a later scandal involving the same person, see "Accusations Against Lobbyist Echo Charges in 70's Scandal", *New York Times*

(April 15, 2005): https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/15/politics/accusations-against-lobbyist-echo-charges-in-70s-scandal.html.

76. This was a real event, the so-called Burim Case of 1981. See "Better late than never for victims in the Burim Case", *Hankyoreh sinmun* (Feb. 14, 2014). https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/624192.html.
77. For an extensive analysis of multiple facets of the film, particularly its gendered dimensionality, see Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 119–27.
78. This song is "Im eul wihan haengjin-gok", the "March of the Beloved".
79. Jooyeon Rhee finds that this cooperative spirit between the Gwangju cabbies and Kim, the driver from Seoul, reinforces the shared values of "male bonding" that Rhee finds to be a common theme in the films of "5.18 cinema". Rhee, "Beyond Victims and Heroes: The 5.18 Cinema Across Gender Boundary", *Korean Studies* 43 (2019): 68–95, p. 82.
80. For more on the functioning of the train and other "mnemonic traces", see Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, "*Peppermint Candy*: The Will *Not* to Forget", in Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (eds.), *New Korean Cinema*, chapter 11, pp. 165–66.
81. In the documentary accompanying the DVD of the film, director Yun Je-gyun states that the driving force behind the story was Deok-su's efforts to keep his promises to his father: to wait for him and to take the paternal leadership role in the family in his stead. Documentary, 17:00 mark.
82. In the DVD documentary, director Yun Je-gyun stated that he very much regretted not having thanked his father before his passing in 2004. In this sense the film was a very personal work honouring the sacrifices of his father and his father's generation. "Yun Deok-su", the lead character, was the director's father's name. Documentary, 1:00, 4:50, 5:30, and 58:00.
83. See, for example, "'Ode to My Father' stirs nostalgia, controversy", *The Korea Herald* (2015.01.06): https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150106000904.
84. TOEIC stands for Test of English for International Communication and was commonly used in corporate settings for hiring and promotion.

85. The other film is “I Can Speak”. The two films set mostly in the colonial period were “Spirits’ Homecoming” and “Snowy Road”, with the former analysed in Chap. 5.
86. The historical figure on whom Jeong-suk is based, the educated activist Kim Mun-suk, was a generation older than the film character—the same generation as the comfort women survivors, in fact, which was likely why she could speak Japanese. After the trial, Kim established a museum and educational centre in Busan dedicated to the comfort women survivors, where she worked until passing away in 2021 at the age of 94.

Filmography

Official English Title	*Original Title in Korean*	*English Translation of Korean title*	*Director*	*Release Year*
1987: When the Day Comes	1987: geu nari omyeon	1987: When the day comes	Jang Jun-hwan	2017
2009: Lost Memories	2009 Lost Memories	2009 Lost Memories	Yi Si-myeong	2002
Admiral, The--Roaring Currents	Myeongnyang	Battle of Myeongnyang	Kim Han-min	2014
Age of Shadows, The	Miljeong	Moles	Kim Ji-un	2016
Anarchist from the Colony	Bak Yeol	Bak Yeol	Yi Jun-ik	2017
Assassination	Amsal	Assassination	Choe Dong-hun	2015
Attorney, The	Byeonhoin	Attorney	Yang U-seok	2013
Battleship Island	Gunhamdo	Hashima Island	Ryu Seung-wan	2017
Blades of Blood	Gureu-meul beoseonan dal cheoreum	Like the moon that sheds the clouds	Yi Jun-ik	2010
Blood Rain	Hyeol ui nu	Blood rain	Kim Dae-seung	2005

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27268-4

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Official English Title	*Original Title in Korean*	*English Translation of Korean title*	*Director*	*Release Year*
Blue Swallow	Cheongyeon	Blue Swallow	Yun Jong-chan	2005
Book of Fish, The	Jasan Eobo	Black Mountain's fish species	Yi Jun-ik	2021
Bungee Jumping on Their Own	Beonji jeompeu-reul hada	Bungee jumping	Kim Dae-seung	2001
Chihwaseon	Chwihwaseon	Drunken painting immortal	Im Kwon-taek	2002
Drug King, The	Mayag-wang	Drug king	U Min-ho	2018
Eternal Empire	Yeongwonhan jeguk	Eternal Empire	Bak Jong-won	1994
Face Reader, The	Gwansang	Face reading	Han Jae-rim	2013
Fatal Encounter, The	Yeongnin	Monarch's wrath	Yi Jae-gyu	2014
Feng Shui	Myeongdang	Fortuitous places	Bak Hui-gon	2018
Forbidden Dream	Cheonmun: haneul e munneunda	Studying the stars: questioning the heavens	Heo Jin-ho	2019
Fortress, The	Namhan sanseong	Namhan Mountain Fortress	Hwang Dong-gyu	2017
Front Line, The	Gojijeon	Battle for the high ground	Jang Hun	2011
Gabi	Gabi	Coffee	Jang Yun-hyeon	2012
Gangnam Blues	Gangnam 1970	Gangnam, 1970	Yu Ha	2014
Good, the Bad, and the Weird, The	Joheun nom, nappeun nom, isang-han nom	Good, the bad, and the weird	Kim Ji-un	2008
Grand Heist, The	Baram gwa hamkke sarajida	Gone with the wind	Kim Ju-ho	2012
Handmaiden, The	Agassi	The Countess	Park Chan-wook	2016
Harmonium in My Memory	Nae maeum ui punggeum	Harmonium in my heart	Yi Yeong-jae	1999
Herstory	Herstory	Herstory	Min Gyu-dong	2018
Heung-boo—the Revolutionist	Heungbu—Geullo saesang eul bakkun ja	Heungbu—the man who changed his world through writing	Jo Geun-hyeong	2017
House of Hummingbird	Beolsae	Hummingbird	Kim Bora	2018

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Official English Title	*Original Title in Korean*	*English Translation of Korean title*	*Director*	*Release Year*
Jiseul	Jiseul	Potatoes	O Myeol	2013
Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982	82-nyeon saeng Kim Ji-yeong	Kim Ji-Yeong, Born in 1982	Kim Do-yeong	2019
King and the Clown, The	Wang ui namja	The King's man	Yi Jun-ik	2005
King's Letters, The	Narat malssami	Our country's language	Jo Cheol-hyeon	2019
Kundo: Age of the Rampant	Gundo: Millan ui sidae	Gundo: Age of people's uprisings	Yun Jong-bin	2014
Last Witness, The	Heuksuseon	Black narcissus flower	Bae Chang-ho	2001
Little Pond, A	Jageun yeonmot	Little pond	Yi Sang-u	2008
Love, Lies	Hae-eohwa	Flowers that understand words	Bak Heung-sik	2016
Malmoe: The Secret Mission	Malmoi	Collecting words	Eom Yu-na	2019
Man Standing Next, The	Namsan ui bujangdeul	Directors of Namsan Headquarters	U Min-ho	2020
Map Against the World	Gosanja: Daedong yeoji-do	Kim Jeong-ho: Great Map of Korea	Gang U-seok	2016
Masquerade	Gwanghae: wangi doen namja	Gwanghae: the man who became king	Chu Chang-min	2012
May 18	Hwaryeohan hyuga	Fascinating vacations	Jang Seon-u	2007
Melody to Remember, A	Oppa saenggak	Thinking of (a sister's) older brother	Yi Han	2016
Memories of Murder	Sarin ui chu-eok	Remembrances of murder	Bong Joon-ho	2003
Modern Boy	Modeon boi	Modern Boy	Jeong Ji-u	2008
My Heart	Jeong	Affection	Bae Chang-ho	2000
My Sassy Girl	Yeopgi-jeogin geu nyeo	That bizarre girl	Gwak Jae-yong	2001
Nameless Gangster	Beomjoewa ui jeonjaeng	War against crime	Yun Jong-bin	2012
Ode to My Father	Kukje sijang	International market	Yun Je-gyun	2014
Old Garden, The	Orae doen jeongwon	Old garden	Im Sang-su	2007
Once in a Summer	Geu hae yeoreum	Summer that year	Jo Geun-sik	2006

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Official English Title	*Original Title in Korean*	*English Translation of Korean title*	*Director*	*Release Year*
Operation Chromite	Incheon sangnyuk jakjeon	Inchon Landing	Yi Jae-han	2016
Ordinary Person	Botong saram	Ordinary person	Kim Bong-han	2017
Peppermint Candy	Bakha satang	Peppermint candy	Lee Chang-dong	2000
Petal, A	Kkonnip	Petal	Jang Seon-u	1996
Piper, The	Sonnim	The Guest	Kim Gwang-tae	2015
President's Barber, The	Hyoja-dong ibalsa	Barber of Hyoja district	Im Chan-sang	2004
President's Last Bang, The	Geu ttae geu saramdeul	Those people at that time	Im Sang-su	2005
Private Eye	Geurimja sarin	Shadow murders	Bak Dae-min	2009
Radio Dayz	Radio Dayz	Radio Days	Ha Gi-ho	2008
Resistance, A: The Story of Yu Gwan-sun	Hanggeo: Yu Gwan-sun iyagi	Resistance: the story of Yu Gwan-sun	Jo Min-ho	2019
Samjin Company English Class	Samjin Geurup Yeongeo Toik-ban	Samjin Corporation TOEIC English class	Yi Jong-pil	2020
Silmido	Silmido	Silmido	Gang U-seok	2003
Single Spark, A	Areumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il	Beautiful youth Jeon Tae-il	Bak Gwang-su	1995
Sound of a Flower	Dori hwaga	Song of peach and plum flowers	Yi Jong-pil	2015
Spirits' Homecoming	Gwihyang	Homecoming	Jo Jeong-nae	2016
Spring in My Hometown	Areumdaun sijeol	A beautiful time	Yi Gwang-mo	1998
Sunny	Sunny	Sunny	Gang Hyeong-cheol	2011
Swing Kids	Seuwing kijeu	Swing kids	Gang Hyeong-cheol	2018
Swordsman, The	Geumgaek	Swordsman	Choe Jae-hun	2020
Taebaek Mountains, The	Taebaek sanmaek	Taebaek Mountains	Im Kwon-taek	1994

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Official English Title	*Original Title in Korean*	*English Translation of Korean title*	*Director*	*Release Year*
Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War	Taegeukgi hwinallimyeo	Raising the Korean flag	Gang Je-gyu	2004
Taxi Driver, A	Taeksi unjeonsa	Taxi driver	Jang Hun	2017
Throne, The	Sado	Thoughts of sadness	Yi Jun-ik	2015
Tiger, The	Daeho	Great tiger	Bak Hun-jeong	2015
Traces of Love	Ga-eul-lo	To autumn	Kim Dae-seung	2006
Treacherous, The	Gansin	Wicked officials	Min Gyu-dong	2015
War of the Arrows	Choejong byeonggi hwal	Archery, the ultimate weapon	Kim Han-min	2011
Warriors of the Dawn	Daerip-gun	Proxy soldiers	Jeong Yun-cheol	2017
Welcome to Dongmakgol	Welkeom tu dongmakgol	Welcome to Dongmakgol	Bak Gwang-hyeon	2005
YMCA Baseball Team	YMCA yagu-dan	YMCA Baseball team	Kim Hyeon-seok	2002

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Subject Index[1]

[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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