Book Review

Korea Journal, vol. 62, no. 2 (summer 2022): 270–276.
doi: 10.25024/kj.2022.62.2.270

Cold War Cosmopolitanism: *Period Style in 1950s Korean Cinema*

By Christina Klein. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020. 320 pages. ISBN: 9780520296503.

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Before a reader jumps into the contents of this absorbing book-length study, his or her eyes are likely to be riveted to its cover illustration, a beautifully crisp black-and-white still cut of the actress Yun In-ja from a South Korean anti-communist espionage thriller *The Hand of Destiny* (*Unmyeong-ui son*, 1954). With an enigmatic yet intense facial expression coupled with a feline poise that simultaneously exudes the élan of a cosmopolitan cultural sophisticate and projects the allure of a classic film-noir *femme fatale*, Yun is pictured leaning on a bulky but slick-looking American automobile, impeccably attired and holding a designer handbag in her hands. This arresting image goes a long way toward preparing the reader for the intriguing, highly informative, and occasionally startling contents of the book, a richly textured exploration of the nexus points through which the burgeoning commercial cinema of the immediate postwar Korea (roughly from 1948 to 1961) intersected with the vastly complex and far-reaching networks of Cold War cultural production, consumption, and exchange, initiated by the United States in the prime of its hegemonic power.

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Currently director of American Studies at Boston College, Klein has previously authored *Cold War Orientalism* (University of California Press, 2003), in my view one of the very best books written on the US Cold War cultural policies and their enormous global impact, primarily concerned with the American construction of "free Asia" as a socio-political imaginary through active promotion and development of popular culture industries. She does not stint on the archival and print sources conventionally mined by diplomatic and political historians, but at the same time treats seriously what she calls the "middlebrow imagination" of Americans and Asians. She refuses to reduce these popular culture products, including popular Broadway and Hollywood musicals such as *South Pacific* and *The King and I*, to empty vessels for transporting and transmitting American Cold War ideologies. She instead discusses the patterns and modalities of consumption as well as the interpretation and appropriation of these products by a variety of historical agents, greatly adding to our understanding of the myriad ways in which the US government sought to win "hearts and minds" of the Asian population of the alleged "free world," and presenting new ways to appreciate these often exceedingly popular works of entertainment constructing the imaginary of "Asia" for the American—and in fact, global—consumers, sometimes dismissed or undervalued as insufficiently "artistic" or nakedly propagandistic.

Expanding her disciplinary reach but narrowing her scope, Klein in the present study tackles popular culture of the 1950s South Korea, concentrating on a series of popular (at least domestically) but not necessarily critically lauded Korean feature films directed by Han Hyung-mo, including *The Hand of Destiny* (1954), *Madame Freedom* (*Jayu buin*, 1956), *Hyperbola of Youth* (*Cheongchun ssangokseon*, 1956), *The Pure Love* (*Sunaebo*, 1957), *A Female Boss* (*Yeosajang*, 1959) and *My Sister is a Hussy* (*Eoni-neun malgwallyangi*, 1961). By doing so, she casts a new light on these films as representative examples of a postwar "period style," imbued with a historically specific attitude toward modernity, aligned to Cold War cosmopolitanism emanating from the US, and disseminated through the US military bases and other institutions. She suggests that this specific form of

opulent, openly consumerist, socially liberal and anti-traditionalist sensibility and orientation was a uniquely 1950s product, eventually superseded in the 1960s by the austere, patriarchal-nationalist developmentalism of the Park Chung-hee regime, yet making critical contributions to the rise of the globally successful New Korean Cinema of the 21st century.

Klein starts her book by closely examining the cultural institutions developed, staffed, and financed by Washington's Cold Warriors determined to propagate the superiority of the American liberal democratic system among the Asian population. First and foremost among these institutions was the Asia Foundation, which started out as the Committee for Free Asia in 1951. Its lasting influence on the cultures of post-Pacific War non-communist Asian nations—Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, and of course South Korea—cannot be underestimated. Klein is at her cultural historian's best when she explores the closely intertwined nature of these Cold War ideological institutions and South Korean culture industries, especially the film industry. She presents a wealth of historical details as well as eloquent and sometimes provocative arguments regarding the infiltration of US popular culture into South Korean society via such diverse routes as the Post Exchange (Px) system, networks of black markets, often only nominally censured by the American military, and the Armed Forces Korea Network (AFKN), and through the hands of such culture producers as the fashion designer Nora Noh, writer Kim Mal-bong, and filmmaker Han Hyung-mo.

Indeed, Klein's meticulous research incontrovertibly shows that this process of infiltration of US Cold War cosmopolitanism into Korean culture had never been a one-sided affair. Those South Koreans hawking Tang powdered orange juice (Klein does not list it among the popular consumer items leaked through the Px system but the present reviewer distinctly remembers it as a childhood 'treat'), canned Spam, ground coffee, and Dole bananas on the black market, the musicians and composers embracing mambo and Afro-American jazz, and the filmmakers such as Han Hyung-mo who routinely borrowed state-of-the-art cinematic equipment from the US military and *poached* (to use Klein's own term) tropes, designs, fashions,

and visual idioms from contemporary Hollywood productions, were not merely mimicking American culture. They were creating hybridized forms of postwar Korean culture, unique in its heady, perplexing, and at times seemingly "nonsensical" blending of wildly disparate elements—culled from a multitude of sources, including the continuously influential features of the Japanese (colonial and neo-colonial) modern, the American global capitalist and consumerist culture and its attendant ideologies and discourses, and the (sometimes freshly invented) Korean traditions. Klein suggests an apt metonymy for such hybridized forms of postwar Korean culture: *budae jjigae*, literally "troop stew," a commoner's delicacy that grew out of a mixture of Korean foodstuffs (*kimchi*, red chili peppers, rice cake) and the ingredients originally pilfered from the Px and American military bases (Spam, sausages).

Klein, especially in the latter half of the book, namely chapters 5, 6 and 7, investigates with care and a fine eye for detail these richly hybrid material cultures of 1950s Korea, but she also presents impressively well-thought-out textual analyses of Han's films, consistently focusing on his stylistic orientations, aesthetic strategies, and configuration of audio-visual elements, rather than merely stopping at extracting and summarizing (ideological) messages supposedly conveyed through these films. She persuasively illustrates how the narratives of Han's opuses that seemingly restore and affirm the patriarchal-nationalist ideology are often at odds with the pleasurable spectacles of female characters asserting their agency and freedom, unreservedly indulging in Western/American-style consumer habits, fashions, and surroundings. *My Sister is a Hussy*, for instance, despite its conservative conclusion touting "domestication" of its judo-practicing, stalwart heroine Sun-ae by her husband, cannot quite "tame" the (audience-pleasing) spectacles of the young heroine's physical prowess and powerful personality displayed throughout the body of the film (pp. 180–187).

This strategy of "reading against the grain" employed by Klein, drawing upon Scott Bukatman's critical reading of 1930s Hollywood screwball comedies, among other studies, leads her to a *tour de force* analysis of *Madame Freedom* in chapter 4, taking up the iconography of "*aprés* girl," a

postwar reincarnation *qua* genetic variant of the colonial period New Woman or *Moga* (Modern Girl). This chapter certainly constitutes the most nuanced and contextually attentive analysis of *Madame Freedom* I have read in any language so far. Klein effectively criticizes the standard view that the film endorses reassertion of patriarchal control over *apré* girl figures such as its protagonist Madame Oh. She points out that "… the punishment of Mme Oh at the end of the film in some sense enabled the prior scenes of Mme Oh's transgressive behaviors, by giving the viewer a free pass of plausible deniability" (p. 100).

Some readers might take issue with Klein's unabashed stance that Cold War cosmopolitanism, dominating, propagandistic and manipulative as it might have been, was ultimately feminist for South Korean women (cf. Yi Tae-yeong and Helen Kim). They might ask, was not American society and culture in 1950s just as patriarchal and androcentric as its South Korean equivalent, only in different ways? In the author's defense, I would argue that she is well aware of this problem, as her assessment of the United States Information Agency's potentially conflicting cultural messages for Asian women—that American women are perfectly happy as mothers and homemakers yet they are commended for actively engaging in public and civic lives—indicates (pp. 32–38). Yet, in some passages she appears to rely on familiar tropes such as that of Confucian orthodoxy and the ubiquitous sentiment of *han* to emphasize the radical (feminist) break Cold War cosmopolitanism enabled for South Korean women: she writes at one point, "Cold War liberalism validated the idea of women as autonomous human beings with identities distinct from their familial roles—a concept that is foundational to feminism, and deeply problematic with orthodox Confucianism" (p. 40).

I do not mean to suggest that Klein is misconstruing Confucianism or traditional Korean culture. Virulently anti-feminist and arch-patriarchal discourse drawing upon Confucian and other traditions has been a constant presence in South Korean society throughout its postwar history. We need no other reminder of this than the absurd displays of the self-identified Confucian "elders" demonstrating in public, circa 2003, against the revision

of *hojuje* (the household head system), holding a placard that read, "The elimination of *hojuje* shall turn all Koreans into beasts!" My issue is that she is not doing full justice to the discursive regime set up by her as an antagonist to Cold War cosmopolitan feminism, i.e., patriarchal cultural nationalism that, according to her, received the full endorsement of the Park Chung-hee dictatorship and has since remained a pervasive influence on the South Korean culture in both right-authoritarian and left-progressive guises. I think Klein would agree with me that this patriarchal cultural nationalism is not a simple repackaging of "traditional" ideas and values, such as cherry-picked tenets of Confucian ideas and practices. It is a discourse as modern as cosmopolitan feminism, shaped through the Korean experiences of Japanese colonial modernity (as was the case with the discourse on New Women during the colonial period) as well as contested processes of nation-building in the context of the Cold War framework. I wish, therefore, that Klein would have elaborated even just a bit more on the former as a countervailing discourse against Cold War cosmopolitanism and clarify its genealogical descent into the anti-feminist features of contemporary Korean culture.

Likewise, I feel that Klein somewhat stacks her deck against the films of other notable classical-era Korean filmmakers, notably Kim Ki-young and Lee Man-hee. Her interpretation of Kim's *The Housemaid* (*Hanyeo*, 1961) as a dark thriller exploring the psychic cost—self-destructive madness—of Westernization is certainly provocative but curiously limiting. If any South Korean filmmaker deserves a "reading against the grain" that goes beyond an ideology-bound, schematic interpretation, it would have to be Kim Ki-young. As a contrast to Han Hyung-mo's optimistic and feminist *ouevre*, Kim's films come off as somewhat mismatched. A similar point might be made with Klein's take on Lee Man-hee's film noir *Black Hair* (*Geumeun mori*, 1964) which she presents as an example of female disempowerment, although to her credit she acknowledges that the film could be read as a critique of patriarchal ideology: just as Han's period style is far more than an epidermis for his film's ideological or moral contents, Lee's genre-steeped, morally complex style and orientation deserve the kind of nuanced reading

that Klein reserves for Han's cinematic output.

Ultimately, these are minor caveats in a book full of fascinating and illuminating insights concerning the cultural history of postwar South Korea as well as of astute and convincing interpretations of several notable cinematic texts. At one point, Klein presents a reading of a key sequence in *The Hand of Destiny*, wherein Margaret, the female protagonist and a North Korean agent, is presumably observing US troops maneuvering near Incheon port, from which the aforementioned still-cut of Yun In-ja adorning the book cover is excerpted. Klein notes that the scene, decoupled from the film's narrative and character arcs, can be read as a "condensed metaphor" of the postwar South Korean history of consumer culture:

> Margaret's steely expression as she leans against the car now reads less as a spy's penetrating gaze and more as a woman's frank acknowledgement of the foreign source of the ideas and objects that enable her to reimagine her way of being in the world. (p.173)

Perhaps not everyone will be persuaded that this scene can be read in this way, but there is hardly denying the boldness and sophistication of Klein's interpretation. I for one will not be able to watch *The Hand of Destiny* in the same way again after reading her book.

A truly border-crossing academic study of the first order, I highly recommend *Cold War Cosmopolitanism* to any reader interested in cultural history of 1950s South Korea, the actual modes of operation (as opposed to mere notations that they indeed existed) of the global networks promoting the American cultural hegemony in the postwar world, as well as hitherto (unfairly) underappreciated aspects of postwar Korean cinema.

Received: 2021.10.21. Revised: 2022.05.20. Accepted: 2022.05.20.