Tradition and/of Bastards in the Korean Wave

Sheng-mei Ma

Abstract

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, the Korean Wave can be defined as Asia's wave of nostalgia for an essentialized tradition. Not only does the Korean Wave reiterate notions of older traditions, but it also constructs a new one in terms of "bastardy." Tellingly, many Korean television dramas revolve around protagonists of lowly origin caught in the hierarchy of premodern Korea. In the case of recent art-house and certain popular films, we are witnessing a transgressiveness that swings to both ends of the pendulum, from tradition to bastardy. Tradition lives in the fear of the symbolic "bastards" who might usurp power, such as through the contamination of the bloodline through incest. Yet, as a result of foreign invasions and suffering, the hermit Kingdom resembles a circle that tries to keep itself intact, impervious to outside forces. Translated into the Korean Wave's domestic television drama, this drive inward turns into the tease of forbidden love, usually between lovers who mistake each other for half-sibling, such as in Winter Sonata. Not until the "bastard" art house film Old Boy does the traditional tease of incest dare to manifest itself "nakedly." Indeed, even that which causes pain in the Korean consciousness is not instinctively demonized as the Other. Rather, it is internalized, opposite in valence to the Western tendency of outward projection. This duality of tradition and/of "bastardy" in the Korean Wave attracts Asian audiences all around the globe, which find themselves ambivalently wedged between a "lost" tradition and a modernity of the Other.

Keywords: Korean wave, *Seopyeonje*, *Old Boy*, Korean film, Korean television drama, tradition, bastards (bastardy)

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Introduction

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, the Korean Wave (*hallyu* (kr.); *hanliu* (ch.)) can be defined as Asia's wave of nostalgia for an essentialized tradition, as Asia plunges headlong into the ocean of modernity, also know as Westernization. Global technology allows a modernizing Asia to view its neighbor South Korea's period and contemporary films and television serials, which formulaically feature romance amidst the conservative social milieu of a Confucian, patriarchal legacy. Far more than a mere escapist fantasy, the Korean Wave's melodramatic, repetitious plot captures the quotidian life and longings of its viewers. What William Rothman sees as a fundamentally Western medium of film is made to carry the Asian "core."[1] Let me hasten to add that it is difficult to generalize about the Korean Wave, which spans art-house films and the equivalent of TV soap operas, contemporary and period pieces, romance and action, comedy and tragedy, sci-fi and classical genres. But in period television serials in particular, each audience discovers a fossilized Asian-ness, a preserve, an enclave of tradition. While this trait is shared by Korean films, in the case of recent art-house and some popular films, we are witnessing a transgressiveness that swings to the other end of the pendulum, from tradition to bastardy, creating the dichotomy found in the Korean Wave. As soaps reprise love stories by means of conventional filmic technique and stylized performances which draw from a repertoire of facial and body expressions to indicate joy, shock, annoyance, and so forth, art-house films indulge in the fringes of sensibility, among which are incest (*Old Boy*, 2003) and violent entanglements (*The Scarlet Letter*, 2004), along with betrayal, murder, and lesbianism), and forbidden romances (*Everyone Has Secrets*, 2004). With such a wide palette to choose from to project our fear

1. Rothman writes in his exegesis of *The Goddess* (1934): "In China, film itself was nontraditional; it entered on the wave of Western influence…. In China, as in Japan and India, film represents a radical discontinuity in traditional culture" (Rothman 1993, 60).

and, paradoxically, desire for a death by drowning in Western modernity, Asians, myself included as a diasporic Asian or a(n) (un)naturalized American, drift with the Korean Wave back to an imaginary homeland, the "unmoved mover" of the Korean peninsula.

A methodological pitfall immediately manifests itself when Asia appears to be treated as a patient lying on a couch, confiding its collective dream of the Korean Wave to a would-be psychoanalyst of Asian extraction in a "white" lab coat. This approach from mass-consumed texts to culture is nothing new, of course. Peter Brooks champions the study of what he calls *The Melodramatic Imagination* by concentrating on French melodrama of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In melodrama, Brooks locates the "moral occult," which is "not a metaphysical system; it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth. It bears comparison to the unconscious mind, for it is a sphere of being where our most basic desires and interdictions lie" (Brooks 1976, 5). Eric Bentley is quoted by Brooks as labeling melodrama "'the Naturalism of the dream life' and notes its affinities with infantile narcissism" (Brooks 1976, 35). Unlike Brooks and Bentley's disinterested position vis-à-vis a subject over one hundred years ago, let me minimize the distance between my subject and myself: this is not so much psychoanalysis of the Korean or Asian modernities as self-analysis. "Tradition and/of Bastards" is a paradigm that speaks to me as much as it does to Asian fans. Although an outsider to the Korean language, I find in the Korean Wave an uncanny familiarity through the Chinese-inflected Korean tradition, from the grand ideology of Confucian patriarchy to minor, decorative calligraphy. Of course, Asian faces and bodies are the basis of fan identification. The shock of recognition overwhelms me at one point when I realize that on the upper left arms of Jang Dong-gun, the male lead in *Tae Guk Gi* (2004), of Seong Hyeon-a, the actress in *Watching It Again and Again* and *The Scarlet Letter*, and quite a few others are the round scars of either the smallpox or BCG (Bacille Calmette-Guerin or tuberculosis) vaccination. My scars mark the medical practice of the 1960s in Taiwan, an inscription on the body rarely found amongst Americans of my generation, at which

time such diseases seem to have been eradicated in the United States. As there is generally not much nudity in bedroom scenes, I have no way of telling whether these Korean stars' left hip joint and thigh bear two nickel-sized scars as well, left by similar vaccinations. For a diasporic audience to see "celebrities" exhibiting one's own physical "defects" is a pleasant mini-epiphany.

Physical kinship aside, the cultural trajectories of Asian modernities are amazingly similar. Modernization and Westernization have almost been synonymous in the lexicons of Japan and China since the Meiji Restoration in 1868-1912 and the Chinese May Fourth Movement of 1919. Westernization has also descended upon Korea in terms of the machinery of Japanese colonialism of 1910-1945. After a century or more of mimicking the West, the contemporary Korean Wave offers a ritual of play, i.e., outside of the Western sphere of influence in work, to transport Asian and Asian diasporic audiences back to an unsullied Asian essence. The Korean Wave offers an alternative to the domination of Hollywood and Western entertainment. For transnational migrants like myself, the Korean Wave drives a wedge into American assimilation and veers toward nostalgic Asian identity, even Pan-Asian solidarity. Accordingly, the Korean Wave leans toward traditional conservatism in social etiquette and gender relationships. Indeed, an insular, centripetal movement characterizes the Korean Wave. This nostalgia for the old ways comes dressed in new Western clothes: the sets, costumes, and cityscapes are marked by advanced capitalism; the music soundtrack is filled with the well-nigh ubiquitous Western piano and violin; and there are repeated allusions to, if not partially set in, the West; and stars' fetishized Western-looking physique—fair skin, long legs, and dyed hair.[2] The centripetal force homebound contains its centrifugal opposite Westbound.

A filmic schism lies between Korean tradition and Western modernization. Of course, Korea itself has split in two. The Korean Wave reaching the shores of China and elsewhere has in general veiled the

2. See Sheng-mei Ma (forthcoming).

partition of North and South Korea. Despite the fact that the aftermath of the Korean War is a recurring motif in literature, such as Yun Heung-gil's *The House of Twilight* (1989) and Hwang Sun-won's *The Book of Masks* (1989), and that the subgenre of political films, such as *Shiri* (1999), *Joint Security Area* (2000), *Double Agent* (2003), and *Tae Guk Gi*, are enormously successful in the domestic market, the Korean Wave abroad remains adamantly silent on the state of dividedness along the 38th Parallel. Euphemistically called the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), the 38th Parallel is one of the heaviest armed trouble spots around the world, with patrols, watchtowers, landmines, barbed wires, secret tunnels, and other unpublicized surveillance measures. Yet in the romances, the sociopolitical tension is brushed aside, implied, at most, in male characters' conscription as a rite of passage for manhood and, frequently, as a melodramatic twist to bring about tear-jerking scenes of parting. Compulsory military service serves, along with terminal illness and overseas travel, mostly to the United States and Europe, as favorite strategies to induce lovers' suffering and regret.

Given the reticence on the divided state of being, the Korean Wave, nevertheless, let slip a near "repetition compulsion," wherein "tradition" is oftentimes perpetuated or even embodied by characters who can only be described as "illegitimate bastards." While bastards threaten the line of succession, the Korean Wave features their ultimate absorption into tradition. One possible interpretation is that by containing its own aberrations, a Hermit Kingdom's self-referential tradition is made to grow even more inclusive and potent. Aberrations challenge and strengthen rather than weaken tradition. Rarely iconoclastic and never anti-traditionalist, these bastards in television serials are driven by a modernist, nonconformist impulse of self-realization. Thus, they rise up from their lot in life and end up marrying into the tradition, literally, in the way that bastard characters are invariably legitimated by marriage and family acceptance of both the individual family as well as the collective family of the state. Another interpretation is that tradition appears to doubt its own legitimacy, requiring a steady stream of "rehabilitated" bastards to validate itself. The former

sees Korea as the tradition incorporating dissent; the latter sees Korea as, to borrow Zhouliu Wu's 1945 novel on the colonized Taiwan, *Orphan of Asia*, shoved aside by bigger kids in East Asia.

The polarity coexists in the Korean national character of *han* (written as *hen* for "hate" and "remorse" in Chinese). This is a concept of endless debate among scholars. JaHyun Kim Haboush finds in the Korean history "narratives of the *han* (sufferings, sorrows, pains) of the Korean people" (Haboush 2001, 190). In his otherwise insightful analysis of Im Kwon-Taek's *Seopyeonje* (1993), Julian Stringer assigns *han* to a footnote where he cites Isolde Standish citing M. Shapiro making fun of *han*: "the result of injustices perpetrated by, among others, parents, friends, siblings, a colonial ruler, an occupying army, past governments, the present government, and those who in crucial moments failed to display sincerity" (Stringer 2002, 180-181). What appears to an insider to be genuine racial pain is to other scholars a running joke. The joke, nevertheless, does bring up the significance of "sincerity" or *cheng* in the Korean culture. A long history of foreign colonization by China and Japan, compounded by internal strife and ongoing division, has steeped the Korean consciousness in suffering and misery. *Han* is the fatalistic resignation to pain ("remorse"), punctuated by the occasional outburst of rage and protest ("hate"). The Korean Wave thus swings between two contradictory emotions, individual adherence to and rebellion against tradition versus tradition's punishment and subconscious sanction of rebels. That the Korean Wave has swept across its neighbors suggests a *han*-ing of Asia. Granted that the urban, metropolitan consumers of Korean shows are perhaps too privileged to share Korean history, the melodramatic pull of native tradition and Western modernity strikes a chord among Asian fans with a keen sense of besiegement.

Not only does the Korean Wave reiterate tradition and bastardy, it, in effect, constructs a tradition of bastards. Both the television dramas of *The Tao of Business*[3] and *The Tao of Medicine* revolve around

3. Given that the bulk of these television serials are dubbed, I initially tried to romanize all titles and character names according to the Mandarin pronunciation. But for

protagonists of lowly origin caught in the hierarchy of premodern Korea. The female lead of *The Tao of Business* used to work in the ginseng fields and became the adopted heiress apparent to a business conglomerate; the male lead boasts of no *yangban* (aristocrat) ties other than his facility in Chinese, his business skills, and the possession of a sincere heart. The spin-off *The Tao of Medicine* even features an illegitimate son of a concubine. In both dramas, constant references to the protagonists' humble class background render them sympathetic to modern audience who value equality. The protagonist of *The Tao of Medicine* often identifies himself as *no* (奴 male slave), evoking the history of slavery in premodern Korea explicated in Kichung Kim's "Unheard Voices: The Life of the *Nobi* in O Hwi-mun's *Swaemirok*." Another long-running television drama, *Watching It Again and Again* plays on similar characterizations. The second children of both families in *Watching It Again and Again* are, shall we say, bastards. Gi-pung is a choreographer, almost a prodigal son in a paternal lineage of doctors of traditional herbal medicine, school principals, and prosecutors, all heirs to a tradition of law and order. Jeong Eun-ju is an "ugly duckling" raised by her paternal grandmother and returned to a family of strangers. While *Watching It Again and Again* builds its many climaxes around conflicts between tradition and bastards, its subtext underwrites a tradition of bastards. This duality of tradition and/of bastards in the Korean Wave attracts Asian audiences all around the globe, who find themselves ambivalently wedged between a "lost" tradition and a "white" modernity.

These bastard characters' present lowly status does not bespeak a lowly origin, as all of them are inherently noble. A routine plot point in period dramas has the parents serving the Korean king in court. Framed by evildoers, the parents go into ignominious exile. The television serials then follow the children's slow and painful climb up the social ladder, back to the center of power occupied by the king. These bastards can be male or female, young or mature,

fear of linguistic and cultural mistranslations or errors. I have no choice but to follow the new Korean Romanization system, as recommended by the *Korea Journal*.

premodern or contemporary. They can be young like the school dropout in *The Eighteen Year Old Bride* (*Nangnang 18se*), who is married to the eldest grandson of a distinguished family. The only person who appreciates her talents is the traditional grandfather, almost "regal" in *hanbok* and his carriage, so sagacious that he foresees his own death. They can be mature women in *Cheers for Women* (*Nuren wansuei*) and *Match Made in Heaven (Tianpei liangyuan*), where female independence is celebrated in spite of age differences with younger men.

A good illustration of the contemporary and mature male bastard is Han Tae-jun in *Hotelier*, who rises from a bellhop to be manager in Korea's luxurious hotel, only to temporarily resign in disgrace over trumped-up charges of sexual assault, ending in self-exile in Las Vegas. Although loved by both female protagonists, his hotel colleague and the daughter of a rival business mogul, he basically serves as matchmaker on behalf of these two women with his competitors. He is rewarded with the loneliness of presiding over a grand hotel. One of the last scenes shows him, the hotel manager, picking litter off the staircase while his lover walks away with another man. The well-crafted serial, with an excellent script, fast-paced hotel sequence, and daring—by soaps' standards—dim lighting inside hotel rooms to suggest Han and other characters' melancholy, adamantly refuses to explore class inequity and the lifelong effect on the psyche. Plagued by inferiority, Han's suppression of love borders on self-abjection and masochism. His personality consists of "masculine" strength in running a business, overcoming episode after episode of obstacles and hostile takeover attempts, and of a "feminine" vulnerability. His profession is, after all, service-oriented rather than one of mercantile raiding. The serial demurs on exploration of Han's incongruous psyche because Han embodies *han*, the Korean sentiment of savoring one's misery and self-denial. In viewing the Korean Wave, the "pleasure principle" resembles an urge being assuaged, moving from a slightly off-balanced state of being, like sexual arousal, to consummation through some measure of vigorousness and pain. Pleasure and pain are as locked together as the *yin* and *yang* symbol on the Korean

national flag.[4]

Indeed, even that which causes pain in the Korean consciousness is not instinctively demonized as the Other. Rather, it is internalized, as opposed to the Western tendency of projecting outward. The television serial *All about Eve* (2000) is unusually heavy with the male character's obsession with Yeong-mi, a manipulative, snake-like Eve figure. This character's sacrifice in rescuing Yeong-mi from an oncoming truck results in Yeong-mi's sense of guilt and a suicide attempt by drowning. Yeong-mi survives the drowning and emerges an amnesiac, her evil self cleansed and baptized by water, restoring her to the pristine, unsullied state of a six-year-old. It is thus discovered that she was abandoned by her mother at six years of age and abused by her alcoholic father. (Both plot twists recycle the two favorite devices of life changes in the Korean Wave—the traffic accident and amnesia.) This enacts the Korean collective unconscious of a return to prelapsarian innocence. Although populated by its constellation of adult-age performers, the Korean Wave never fails to open with and/or flashback to characters' teenage years or even childhood set in rural, traditional Korea as a means of generating nostalgia for a lost Eden. This often entails performers in their twenties or even thirties playing high-school students engaged in puppy

4. In addition to the more presentable analogy of sexual arousal, one can liken symbiotic pleasure and pain to the mixed sensations of saunas, vigorous massages, and even athlete's foot. In the recent Chinese television serial *Shuanxian pao* (Twin Cannonball), a businessman muses about his athlete's foot. "It's been with me for over thirty years. It's unbearable," he continues while kneading his itching feet and issuing a long sigh, "but it sure feels good."

A more concrete example comes from the sole "comic" moment in Im Kwon-Taek's *Seopyeonje*. As the traveling *pansori* troupe is kicked out by the ointment peddler, they travel along a stone wall across a bleak landscape, having nowhere to go. The father begins singing "Arirang," the famous Korean folksong, and is joined by Song-hwa as they near the camera, finally joined by Dong-ha's drum. Thus, steps away from the camera, they perform a comic song and dance, complete with happy gestures, twirling around each other. Yet this comic moment and their fleeting joy are flanked by a humiliating scene when they are "fired" from the only job they can find and by an uncertain future.

love. Despite their youthful looks, this remains a tired and awkward formula.

The most recent hit featuring such bastard characters is *A Jewel in the Palace*, where an orphan girl experiences the loss of parents, who fell from grace due to a Machiavellian struggle inside the royal court. Dae Janggeum fulfills viewers' dreams in her ascent to be in charge of the royal kitchen and, eventually, the king's health. Through hard work and sincerity, she perfects the traditional skills of cuisine and herbal medicine. The king loves Dae Janggeum so much that he does not force her into concubinage, having been aware all along of her ongoing platonic love for his general Min Jeong-ho. Dae Janggeum is a part of the royal court, yet she remains apart from it, uncorrupted. The traditional, Confucian value of *cheng* (sincerity, honesty, truthfulness) is repeatedly valorized in business (*The Tao of Business*), in medicine (*The Tao of Medicine*), in cuisine and medicine (*A Jewel in the Palace*), and other fields the Korean Wave chooses to put on the air. The invariably long and arduous apprenticeship in each of these serials teaches not so much professional skills in cooking as the value of "sincerity." Anachronistic indeed in a fast-paced, late capitalist Asia where television viewers are embroiled daily in business transactions and office politics, the Korean Wave provides an after-work sanctuary where the fans live out their nostalgia for lost virtues by means of, ironically, the commercial products of television serials and films. Desire for a sincere heart and pure love is commodified, advertised, packaged, distributed, and consumed. Such desire unfolds according to, at times, an idiotic script, particularly multiple characters' refrain in *A Jewel in the Palace of* "Is that so?" or "That is impossible, absolutely impossible." These phrases echo throughout the serial, serving no purpose other than slowing down and prolonging tension and suspense.

What I dismiss as idiotic may be the key to the serial's Asian success. Tania Modleski's pioneering work *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) sheds light on this alleged generic weakness of melodrama by drawing from Women's Studies. Marcia Kinder is quoted as stating that "the 'open-ended, slow paced, multi-climaxed' structure of soap

operas is 'in tune with patterns of female sexuality.'" Going beyond sexuality, Modleski borrows from Nancy Chodorow in linking women's work at home to the melodramatic style: "The work of maintenance and reproduction is characterized by its repetitive and routine continuity, and does not involve a specific sequence or progression" (98). Melodrama is the mainstay of the Korean Wave, television serials and films alike. Im Kwon-Taek's 1993 groundbreaking film *Seopyeonje* enjoyed tremendous domestic success and inherited the filmic tradition of celebrating Korean national culture via folk performances, as Frances Gateward traces it in "Youth in Crisis" (Gateward 2003, 116). As such, it falls within melodrama, the art-house label overseas notwithstanding. Moreover, an auteur such as Im Kwon-Taek appears to reprise, like soaps, the Korean folk art, *pansori*, and in particular the legend of Chunhyang, in *Seopyeonje* and in *Chunhyang* (2000). This legendary female sacrifice is, after all, the subject of the 1955 film by Yi Gyu-hwan, *Chunhyanjeon* (The Story of Chunhyang) (Gateward 2003, 116). Through the singing of *pansori*, Im conducts an unending performance of Chunhyang for nearly a decade, consistent with television serials' aversion to finales and with Roland Barthes's argument of "discourse's instinct for preservation."[5]

The Korean national character of *han* dominates *Seopyeonje* as well as *pansori* that the traveling troupe in the film performs. The impulsive, alcoholic Yu-bong teaches Song-hwa and Dong-ho, both adopted, that grief is essential to the mastery of *pansori*. A comparatively raw form of art, with singing often at the top of the lungs, accompanied by a drummer who echoes in yells and grunts, *pansori* comes, as it were, straight from the heart and the folk, an undisguised expression of emotions, its feel of spontaneity accomplished through arduous training in rote memory, delivery, and music of the

5. Invariably, long-running Korean TV serials make a mess in concluding themselves, such as *Watching It Again and Again*, so much so that serials seem averse to closures. On the other hand, one finds it hard to resist the temptation to rush to the last disk to find out what happen. Yet one still dreads the emptiness that sets in once the last disk is done, as if life's soothing repetition has ceased.

oral tradition. Struggling against the onslaught of Western modernity, *pansori* is reduced to peddling ointment, the Korean version of "snake oil," on the street, and eventually drowned out, literally, by a Western band composed of a trumpet, horn, and accordion. Tradition and art are bumped out by modernization and commercialization. The adoptive son and apprentice drummer Dong-ho rebels against the abusive Yu-bong and the moribund tradition he represents and runs away. In their impoverished state, Yu-bong secretly blinds Song-hwa with the herbal medicine *buja* (附子) in order to bring on *han* and the perfection of *pansori*. *Buja* from ancient Korea is both the poison of sightlessness and the panacea to effect true vision. Dong-ho, now married and a collector of medicinal herbs for a Seoul pharmacy, searches for his adoptive family in his Western-style windbreaker. The modernized, metropolitan Korea has nostalgically returned to that of the traditional and rural.

Their "reunion" unfolds as the climactic *pansori* piece of "Simcheong," which narrates a daughter sacrificing herself to restore her father's eyesight, a parallel to Song-hwa's own suffering. The adoptive siblings sing to mourn not only their dead father but the national allegory of the fatherland, as Fredric Jameson conceives it.[6] Halfway through their farewell duet, their song and drum are gradually muted in favor of the non-diegetic theme music, consisting mostly of Western musical instruments.[7] Julian Stringer in "*Seopyeonje* and the Inner Domain of National Culture" explores how Im suggests *imyeon* (inner meaning) transcends the human body by means of non-diegetic music originating from outside the film. But Im also reinscribes a common Asian view in that true emotions graduate from words to silence and the ineffable is best veiled. At the juncture of the diminishing of Song-hwa's *pansori* and the rise of Western theme music, she actually lifts her eyes for the first time since she

6. See Jameson (1986).

7. Julian Stringer identifies the mood music of this scene as "traditional[ly] Korean with "flute and synthesizer." Perhaps the tune sounds traditional to Stringer, but a synthesizer is not.

enters the room, looking at Dong-ho opposite to herself, as if she could see. It is not a blank stare of the blind, as in the latter half of the film, but she sees with her heart. More specifically, their eyes appear to meet at the moment when Song-hwa cries out in her song "Abeoji" (father). They reunite through the sorrow over the *abeoji* in the Simchong song. The two adoptive siblings rechannel their love, which borders on pseudo-incest, to memorialize their father. Ironically, Western theme music replaces the *pansori* and Western filmmaking technique chronicles a vanishing Korean folk art, all in the name of valorizing tradition. Stringer dwells extensively on the artifice of the *pansori* episodes. For instance, the songs are said to mix three different female voices, but it is not readily apparent whether the three voices are featured at different times or are mixed throughout the film. Furthermore, the joyous "Jindo Arirang," as loud and clear from afar as near the camera, is a studio recording. Stringer concludes, "at the very moment it reveals its 'inner meaning,' *pansori* is manipulated through ideologies of editing and sound mixing" (Stringer 2002, 177).

The shop owner who overhears their nightlong concert describes their singing in erotic terms: "The words were caressing each other." And they only stop in pre-dawn hours, covered with sweat, breathless, spent, as though from a bout of long-deferred, self-abandoned lovemaking. While "elevating" their transgressive amour to traditional filial piety, Im adds an ambivalent incestuous "aside" from the shop owner. Consistently, the filmmaker balances the adoptive family between tradition and taboo. When Yu-bong blinds Song-hwa to help her gain insight into *pansori*, the old calligrapher friend wonders if it is because he wishes to keep her with him. A tyrannical father is implied to have crippled the child not for her sake, but for his. Insofar as the adoptive apprentices are concerned, the calligrapher may well have been their father since he asks Yu-bong again and again to give the children to him. A candidate as adoptive father, the calligrapher's words counter Yu-bong's justification. The concluding scene underscores the ambiguous relationship between tradition and bastardy. A blind Song-hwa is led via a rope by a young girl, who has

not appeared until the last scene, walking across a field in the wintry snow in slow-motion. This is a reprise of earlier scenes where Yu-bong leads Song-hwa. One is free to read this as a Korean compulsion to intensify *han*—the hopelessness of a blind woman in *hanbok* and her possibly illegitimate daughter, going nowhere. Of course, the continuity of *pansori* is implied by the presence of the young girl. But it is not unreasonable to speculate, as Chungmoo Choi does, that the girl is sired by none other than Yu-bong, adding yet another pseudo-incestuous scenario.[8]

That the "nuclear" *pansori* family headed by Yu-bong is constructed rather than biologically-related only increases the challenge to the taboo of incest. Even the "extended" *pansori* family from which Yu-bong acquires his skills has become an outcast in relation to the mainstream modernizing Korea. While an apprentice, Yu-bong is himself banished by his master because the master's mistress seduced Yu-bong. Yu-bong has to learn Chunhyang's climactic prison song from his old classmate, who has degenerated into a drug addict. A circle of orphans and dubious kindred, the *pansori* families symbolize Korea's self-image torn between obsession with tradition and a gnawing doubt of illegitimacy. What is countenanced as tradition often turns out to be problematic in Im's films. During a teahouse performance, the "aristocrat" guest harasses Song-hwa, coercing her to serve him drinks and to drink herself to prove her "respect for elders." Traditional respect is abused by a "bastard" who scoffs at Yu-bong, a "peasant." The guest evokes class and social hierarchy from the Korean tradition to oppress the marginalized tradition of *pansori*. By the same token, Governor Byeon, with the weight of patriarchal and imperial authority, pressures Chunhyang to serve him as a concubine. Yet Chunhyang symbolizes the true tradition of commitment to her husband, despite torture and impending execution by the "bastard" governor.

8. Chungmoi Choi advances this claim of rape in "Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea" and in "The Politics of Gender, Aestheticism, and Cultural Nationalism in *Sopyonje* and *The Genealogy*."

Tradition lives in fear of bastards who might usurp power, such as through the contamination of the bloodline through incest. Elizabeth Barnes defines incest as "the impulse . . . for stasis, a refusal to circulate one's body, one's blood, even one's attention outside the sphere of one's own family" (*Incest and the Literary Imagination* 4). Drawing from Freud's founding myth outlined in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Barnes contends that after killing the patriarchal father, the sons gain power and access to women (italics in original, 6). In their remorse, the sons "entered into a fraternal contract that establishes 'laws,'" which include "renounce[ing] their women—the mother and sisters of the horde" (6). But incest persists despite such interdiction, usually associated with "a vice of the poor" and "the prerogative of the rich" (4) in the West. While incest in the form of the Freudian Oedipus complex is far too transgressive for the melodramatic Korean Wave, the family structure and kinship remain so basic to the social fabric that a woman calls her male lover *oppa* (elder brother). A common practice in many Asian cultures, for instance, the Cantonese "Gaw" (elder brother) and "Moi" (younger sister) between lovers, the address of "elder brother" for lover surely does not mean a proclivity for incest. Yet as a result of foreign invasions and suffering, the Hermit Kingdom resembles a circle that tries to stay intact, within itself, impervious to outside forces. Translated into the Korean Wave's domestic television drama, this drive inward turns into the tease of forbidden love, usually between lovers who mistake each other for half-sibling, such as *Winter Sonata*. Not until the "bastard" art-house film *Old Boy* does the traditional tease of incest dare to manifest itself "nakedly."

The intense lovemaking scene halfway through the film turns out to be between father and daughter, unbeknownst to the pair, nor to the audience. The searing pain that prompts the young woman Mido's scream upon penetration gains new meaning after this revelation. Ecstasy derives from sin. The film opens with the protagonist Oh Dae-su being locked up for fifteen years for an offense never made clear to him, hence intimating the Original Sin. In a Kafkaesque and schizophrenic state, Dae-su shifts between extremes of dog-like

servility and rage. As he breaks his cell and begins his revenge, viewers are taken through a grotesque gallery of violence and pain, in the manner not so much of a mystery's suspense than of horror in the theater of cruelty. The mastermind of Dae-su's imprisonment and incest is himself a perpetrator of incest with his sister in high school. The siblings had sinned out of irrepressible love and carnal desire, chanced upon and witnessed by Dae-su, who in turn spread the rumor, causing the sister to commit suicide. The bereaved brother has choreographed Dae-su's unwitting incest with his daughter by means of manipulation of his and her mind through hypnosis, drugs, and other devices favored by Korean melodrama. For instance, *Winter Sonata* uses these very devices to move along its twenty episodes, which toy with the pseudo-incestuous relationships of two generations. What better way to prevent devoted lovers from uniting than this abomination? In the vein of the primordial Oedipus and Electra complexes, the filmmaker Park Chan-wook gives us flashes, indecent exposure perhaps, of the Hermit Kingdom's fixation on tradition and/of bastards as well as its longing for a regressive, womb-like wholesomeness. In the final bloodbath, Dae-su cuts off his tongue in exchange for Mido's innocence of her sin. They apparently continue to live in damnation, with the father-husband enduring in self-inflicted silence the everlasting curse that is akin to Cain's.

Over the years, my daughter, in her early teens now, has been somewhat of a reluctant follower of Korean television serials. Forced to convert from Disney animations to dubbed Korean drama in order to improve her listening comprehension of Mandarin, she, I know, prefers the fun and effortless Disney cartoons. Together, we have lost track of how many Korean family dramas we have watched, but a firm conviction has grown out of all these shows, which I used to impart to her as advice for life: "Never marry a Korean man!," to which she always shouts back: "I'm NOT going to marry." Korean actors routinely effect changes in actresses' directions on the road and in life by dragging them away from cocktail parties, train stations and airports, even weddings, through traffic and rain, amidst family members and strangers. (Kwon Sang-woo is an expert on this manly

show of force in *Stairway to Heaven*, which aired on Korean television in 2003-2004.) This reminds me of the cartoon staple of Neanderthals dragging away women by their long hair. That such physical violence ends happily in Korean dramas reaffirms Modleski's observation that "the transformation of brutal . . . men into tender lovers, the insistent denial of the reality of male hostility towards women, point to ideological conflicts so profound that readers must constantly return to the same text (to texts which are virtually the same) in order to be reconvinced" (Modleski 1982, 111).

If this is a stereotype of Korean masculinity, then at least one Korean American female agrees with me. In *Becoming Asian-American* (2002), Nazli Kiria quotes Michelle, a young Korean American, who vents a similar sentiment: "I always swore I would never marry an immigrant [from Korea]. . . . They're on top of the world, and women are second class to them" (91). Conservative, even reactionary gender relationships evidently do not diminish the power of the Korean Wave in Asia; indeed, it reassures female viewers of a benevolent patriarchal modernity. By contrast, the Korean Wave subsides in the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean before reaching North America for various reasons, a distaste for expressions of gender inequality, I suspect, among them. As a practical matter, technology that makes possible the rapid distribution of Korean dramas in Asia makes it nearly impossible to disseminate in North America. Of the two Korean films from my personal collection that I put on reserve for my upper-division honors seminar on "Asian Diaspora Culture" in Fall 2005, one fails to play on the Sony DVD player at the university library's reserve room due to having the wrong "region code," and the other has an entire segment that is unreadable. I purchased these Korean films either in China or in New York's Chinatown and had no problem playing them on my home Apex DVD player. The relatively inexpensive VCDs, coupled with the lax copyright laws in Asia, allow the Korean Wave to saturate one market, but these VCDs are worthless in another market. "East is East, and West is West," chants Kipling, "and never the twain shall meet." Even as a comprador from the East tries to reach out by including the "rage" spreading across

the Asia and Asian Diaspora under the subject of "Asian Diaspora Culture," the West may remain blithely indifferent. I was informed of the unreadable disks by one student the night prior to class discussion at the end of the semester, while the films had been on reserve throughout the semester. In Asia and Asian diasporic communities across North America, viewers, on their own initiative, seek out these films and television serials for entertainment. In American mainstream culture, students dread, understandably perhaps, the drudgery of sitting through alien films with unpronounceable names and confusing plots, until the very last minute. One person's play is indeed another's work. On horseback, Fielding and Aziz in the conclusion to E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) attempt to hold onto each other, but "the horses," "the earth," and "the sky" do not wish them to meet. West and East "swerve[d] apart" on the Indian Continent. In introducing the Korean Wave to American university communities, the sea joins the chorus of disapproval, keeping Asian technology and American "riders" on opposite shores of the Pacific—for the time being.

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GLOSSARY

A Jewel in the Palace	대장금	*Shiri*	쉬리
All about Eve	이브의 모든 것	*Stairway to Heaven*	천국의 계단
Cheers for Women	여자만세	*Tae Guk Gi*	태극기
cheong (Ch.)	誠	*The Eighteen Year Old Bride*	낭랑18세
Double Agent	이중간첩		
Everyone Has Secrets	누구에게나 비밀은 있다	*The Scarlet Letter*	주홍글씨
		The Tao of Business	상도
Hotelier	호텔리어	*The Tao of Medicine*	허준
Joint Security Area	공동경비구역	*Tianpei liangyuan* (Ch.)	천생연분
Match Made in Heaven	천생연분	*Watching It Again and Again*	보고 또 보고
Nuren wansuei (Ch.)	여자만세		
Old Boy	올드보이	*Winter Sonata*	겨울연가
Seopyeonje	서편제		

(Ch.: Chinese)