



Mun Ye-bong, a Partisan Maiden in a “Partisan State”

Yun-Jong LEE

Abstract

This paper studies how the image of Mun Ye-bong as a traditional docile Korean woman is taken advantage of by early North Korean propaganda films following her migration to North Korea in 1948. Focusing on A Partisan Maiden, aka A Partisan Woman (Ppalchisan cheonyeo, 1954), among her early North Korean pictures, this study examines how Mun’s image is appropriated in the propaganda films of both colonized Korea and North Korea immediately after decolonization in 1945. A Partisan Maiden is highly notable in Mun’s filmography, for the film features her not only as the main character, a departure from her regular and minor appearances as daughter, fiancée, wife, and mother of male heroes, but also as a communist guerilla fighter against US troops during the Korean War. The film’s warrior-protagonist role metamorphoses Mun from a “sweetheart of thirty millions” (samcheonman-ui yeonin), a colonial-period epithet of her, to a “people’s actress” (inmin baeu) in North Korea. However, I will argue that this metamorphosis is conflated with Mun’s image of the traditional Korean mother, who faces mythical, figurative death in the nation-birth.

Keywords: Mun Ye-bong, *A Partisan Maiden*, *A Partisan Woman*, North Korean cinema, propaganda film, people’s actress, partisan state, family state, nation-building, martyrdom

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Introduction

This paper delves into how Mun Ye-bong's (1917–1999) meek and docile image in colonized-era Korea was used by early North Korean propaganda films following Mun's migration to North Korea in 1948. In particular, it focuses on *A Partisan Maiden*, aka *A Partisan Woman* (*Ppalchisan cheonyeo*, 1954, dir. Yun Yong-gyu), among her early North Korean films, in which Mun plays a leading role, that of a communist guerilla fighting American troops during the Korean War. Mun had been a huge movie star in Japanese colonial period, such that she was deemed “sweetheart of thirty millions” (*samcheonman-ui yeonin*). After migrating to North Korea following liberation, Mun's sweetheart image was transformed into the figure of a “people's actress” (*inmin baeu*), an honorary title conferred by the North Korean government, inasmuch as her film career and image helped build a nation as well as a national film industry there. Notably, this transformation is tightly interlinked with the persistence of her image as a traditional Korean lady possessing modesty and the quality of endurance. This image was particularly well utilized in Japanese-Korean collaborative films of the colonial period and North Korean propaganda films. For this reason, I will pay special attention to how Mun's traditionally feminine image is appropriated in the propaganda films of both colonized Korea and North Korea immediately following decolonization.

A Partisan Maiden is highly notable in Mun Ye-bong's filmography. The film features Mun as a martyr heroine as well as a socialist activist determined to liberate North Korea from the persecution of *American imperialism* during the Korean War (1950–1953). Mun's starring role in *A Partisan Maiden* contrasts starkly with her minor appearances as a fiancée, wife, or mother of a male hero in such early North Korean films as *My Home Village* (*Nae gohyang*, 1949), *Blast Furnace* (*Yonggwangno*, 1950), *A Boy Partisan* (*Sonyeon ppalchisan*, 1951), and *A Newly-Wed* (*Sinhon bubu*, 1955). Even as the sweetheart of ten millions in the colonial era (1910–1945), Mun often took supporting roles as sweetheart, wife, or mother of leading man in such pro-Japan propaganda films as *Military Train* (*Gunyong yeolcha*, 1938), *Tuition* (*Sueomnyo*, 1940), *Volunteer* (*Jiwonbyeong*, 1941), and *Straits of*

Chosun (Joseon haehyeop, 1943).¹ After her performance as a female warrior in *A Partisan Maiden*, Mun continued to appear on the silver screen as mother, and later grandmother, in North Korean films.

While Mun had almost always played a rather passive and quiet woman in the films of both colonial Korea and decolonized North Korea, the role of a female guerilla fighter in *A Partisan Maiden* holds a unique and important place in her film career as well as in her star image. I would argue that Mun's performance contributed significantly to the nation-building project of early North Korea, for her rendition of martyrdom in *A Partisan Maiden* allegorizes a maiden-mother's death in her birthing of a nation. This allegory of a woman partisan's act of nation-building is even more pertinent, given that North Korea is often conceived of as a *partisan state* insofar as it is said that Kim Il-sung founded the nation while serving as a partisan fighter against the Japanese imperialists in Manchuria (Kwon and Chung 2012, 15). More notable is that both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il amply stressed on the role of cinema as a main propaganda instrument in socialist nation-building (Suk-Young Kim 2010). In this vein, I will examine in this paper how Mun's feminine image in *A Partisan Maiden* is naturally linked with that of a strong-willed guerilla fighter and how North Korean elites portrayed her in the image of mother of the nation.

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1. In the colonial Joseon, women mostly took minor roles in films inasmuch as an actress for either theater or cinema was not only an extremely new and unfamiliar profession to the audience in general but it also carried negative connotations. Since acting was deemed mainly men's job and actresses were equated with Korean courtesan, *gisaeng*, there were prejudices against actresses as immoral, promiscuous, and self-indulgent women. Under the circumstance, even huge colonial female film stars such as Mun Ye-bong and Kim Sin-jae played minor roles except for in such women-featured classical tales as *The Story of Chunhyang*, *Janghwa and Hongryeon*, and *The Story of Sim Cheong*, wherein either Mun or Kim appeared as a main protagonist (Park 2008, 191).

From the “Sweetheart of Ten Millions” to “People’s Actress”

The year 2019 is the twentieth anniversary of Mun Ye-bong’s death in North Korea. During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) Mun enjoyed superstardom in the Korean film industry centered on Gyeongseong (Seoul). After migrating to North Korea following Korea’s decolonization from Japan, Mun maintained a highly respected position as an artist with the title of “actress of distinguished service” (*gonghun baeu*) bestowed in 1953, and was further promoted “people’s actress” (*inmin baeu*) in the 1980s. Although ousted from the Pyongyang film scene in 1969, the victim of political purges, Mun was one of the few fortunate individuals to be rehabilitated, reentering the film industry about a decade later. Her promotion to people’s actress following her 1980 restoration was likely meant to allow Mun to spend her final years in peace and honor. Mun Ye-bong passed away on March 26, 1999.

Mun Ye-bong was born on January 3, 1917 in Hamgyeong-do province. Persuaded by her father, Mun Su-il, a fervent theater lover and actor himself, Mun Ye-bong began her acting career in her early teens as a stage actress. Almost as soon as she set her foot on stage her talent caught the attention of Na Un-gyu, a friend of her father who had become a preeminent name in Korean film with his 1926 nationalist film, *Arirang*. In 1932, Mun debuted as a screen actress in *A Ferry Boat That Has No Owner* (*Imja eomneun narutbae*, 1932, dir. Yi Gyu-hwan; hereafter *Ferry Boat*), in which she played the teenage daughter of an old-style ferry boatman played by Na. *Ferry Boat* made Mun a burgeoning film star “with her beauty and credulous facial expressions learned from her theater experience” (Han 2019, 27).

More screen roles followed in such films as *The Story of Chunhyang* (*Chunhyang jeon*, 1935, dir. Yi Myeong-u), *Spring Wind* (*Chungpung*, 1936, dir. Bak Gi-chae), and *Wanderer* (*Nageune*, 1937, dir. Yi Gyu-hwan). Her appearance in *Wanderer*, in particular, was so loved by her colonial Korean audience that it garnered her the epithet, “sweetheart of thirty millions” (*samcheonman-ui yeonin*). Of particular note about the two films *Ferry Boat* and *Wanderer*, is that both were directed by Yi Gyun-hwan, who was, along with Na Un-gyu, one of the most respected nationalist directors of the

colonial period. In this vein, Mun played women about to be raped by males symbolizing the menaces to Korean identity, such as a pro-Japanese Koreans or modernized men in Japanese style. Her crisis enrages her father in *Ferry Boat* and her husband in *Wanderer* so that these men finally stand up against Japanese colonialism as well as the modernized way of life that has interrupted traditional *Koreanness*. Along with Na's own *Arirang*, *Ferry Boat* was one of the films produced from Korean filmmakers' nationalist fervor against the Japanese colonization and it inspired many Korean cinemagoers to rise against that colonization (Lee 2007, 404).

In addition to her roles as victimized woman in Korean nationalist films of the colonial period, Mun was also respected by many people in her own right. During her stint as a stage actress Mun met a playwright, Im Seon-gyu, whom she soon married and had children with—in the face of her father's opposition—when still a teenager. Mun devotedly served her sick consumptive husband, who later recovered to gain fame with his play, *Betrayed by Love and Crying for Money* (*Sarang-e sokgo don-e ulgo*, 1936). As Mun continued to pursue her career and role as family-provider in lieu of her husband, she was praised as a good wife and decent actress by theater people, the press, and the theater-going public. Her decent-woman image was further consolidated by her role as Chunhyang, a Korean cultural icon of womanly fidelity to one's husband. The Chunhyang role ensconced her not only as a solid star in the Korean film industry, but also as a screen diva representing Korea with her on and off screen persona of "good wife and wise mother" (*yangcheo hyeonmon*) that had been promoted by the Japanese Empire since the Meiji Restoration. Her stardom was such that Korean films made between 1935 and 1945 have been categorized into those starring Mun and those not (Han 2019, 15).

Considering the nationalist film *Wanderer* found major box-office success in and outside of Korea—to include even Japan and Manchuria—it is ironic that Mun was subsequently invited to star in Japan-Korea co-produced propaganda films, such as *Military Train* (*Gunyong yeolcha*, 1938, dir. Seo Gwang-je), *Tuition* (*Sueomnyo*, 1940, dir. Choe In-gyu), *Volunteer* (*Jiwonbyeong*, 1941, dir. An Seok-ju), and *Straits of Chosun* (*Joseon haehyeop*, 1943, dir. Bak Gi-chae). These Japanese collaborative films were produced

to mobilize colonized Koreans into the war Japan had been waging against China since 1937, and which later expanded into one against the United States and its allies from 1941. In the abovementioned propaganda films, Mun often plays a “Korean woman in traditional Korean dress (*joseonot*) in a primitive rural home who is waiting for her brother, lover, or husband leaving for the city or war” (Chung and Kim 2016, 312). For this reason, Mun was even called in the 1940s a “lady of the rear guard” (*chonghu buin*), which diversified her regular image as a wise mother and good wife that was established in the 1930s to that of a melodramatic, suffering wife left alone on the home-front (Lee 2007, 402–412). One exception is Mun’s performance in *Sweet Dream* (*Mimong*, 1936, dir. Yang Ju-nam), wherein she plays an unusually adulterous wife and mother who is extremely faithful to her sexual desires. Yet, even the female protagonist in *Sweet Dream*, wearing *joseonot* and her hair in a bun, returns to a traditional, modest Korean woman’s role as mother by killing herself in a tremendous pang of conscience toward her little daughter hospitalized from a car accident she had caused. In this sense, Mun’s stardom as *sweetheart of thirty millions* is constituted upon her image of a modest Korean woman (daughter, sister, sweetheart, and wife), who is left alone suffering and enduring a hard life in a pre-modern, primitive, rural hometown by preserving the essence of Koreanness.

After Korea’s decolonization from Japan in 1945, Mun moved to North Korea with her husband and children to the warm welcome of Kim Il-sung, who was already fully aware of the cinema’s strong potential propaganda. As part of Kim’s communist propaganda film projects, Mun participated in the production of the very first North Korean feature film, *My Home Village*, aka *My Hometown* (*Nae gohyang*, 1949, dir. Gang Hong-sik), playing Ok-dan, a rural woman and girlfriend of a Korean partisan. Produced during the Soviet occupation of North Korea, *My Home Village* was strongly influenced by Soviet cinema highlighting class struggle, so the film incites the underprivileged to fight for liberation from both the propertied class and Japanese imperialism. Yet, the film largely focuses on how Kim Il-sung helped liberate Korea from Japan by appropriating substantially Korean-style melodramatic narrative, so “[its] propaganda core ... is a [Korean] populist-

nationalist" one in its "emotional evocation of the Korean landscape, village life, and the pure, uncorrupted spirit of the peasants, especially women" (Armstrong 2002, 16).

In fact, the role of Ok-dan is not very different from Mun's roles in colonial-period films, insofar as she is a traditional, docile Korean woman who endures all the colonial injustices and oppressions in a rural village as she awaits her boyfriend who has left to fight the Japanese colonizers as a partisan soldier.² Her roles in other North Korean films are just variations of the long-suffering women characters played earlier: the mother of a boy partisan fighter against the Japanese army in *A Boy Partisan* (*Sonyeon ppalchisan*, 1951, dir. Yun Yong-gyu), wife of a factory worker in *Blast Furnace* (*Yonggwangno*, 1951, dir. Min Jeong-sik), a guerilla fighter herself in *A Partisan Maiden* (*Ppalchisan cheonyeo*, 1954, dir. Yun Yong-gyu), and a middle-aged woman who teaches a newlywed girl how to be a good socialist wife in *A Honeymoon Couple* (*Sinhon bubu*, 1955, dir. Yun Yong-gyu) (Jeon 2018). Although the roles she played in the abovementioned early North Korean films garnered Mun the title of "actress of distinguished service" (*gonghun baeu*) from Kim Il-sung in 1953, she continued to play mothers in the post-Korean War reformation films, such as *A View of Mt. Baekdu* (*Baekdusan-i boinda*, 1956), *Let's not Forget Paju* (*Itji malja Paju-reul*, 1957), *How Shall I Live if You Leave?* (*Eotteoge tteoreojeo sal su isseurya*, 1957), *Maiden of Mt. Geumgang* (*Geumgangsang cheonyeo*, 1959), *Song of Dangyeol* (*Dangyeol-ui norae*, 1959), *A Student Weather Station* (*Kkomagi sangdae*, 1963), *Red Flower* (*Bulgeun kkot*, 1963), *Regained Name* (*Dasi chajeun ireum*, 1963), *The Invasion of the General Sherman* (*Chimnyakseon samanho*, 1964), and *On a Road to Progress*, parts 1 and 2 (*Seongjang-ui gil-eseo*, 1965–1966) (Han 2019, 95, 100).

Yet, victimized by the political purge influenced by China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) of the removal of feudal remnants of Japanese colonialism,

2. Travis Workman has also written on *My Home Village*, though he misunderstands Ok-dan's character as the sister of the hero when he says that "the male protagonist, Gwan-pil, has no love interest" (Workman 2015, 90–91). But Ok-dan is Gwan-pil's love interest in the film, who enduringly waits for her fiancé by taking care of both his and her own mother in the rural village.

Mun was sent to work on collective farms from 1969 (Han 2019, 105–106). However, Mun was fortunate among film stars in that after about a decade of such banishment she was politically rehabilitated and re-ensconced in the North Korean film industry. Notably, her comeback film following her purge was *The Story of Chunhyang* (*Chunhyang-jeon*, 1980, dir. Yun Young-gyu; hereafter *Chunhyang*) in the role of the mother of its male protagonist, Yi Mong-ryong. The aforementioned film's namesake, *Chunghyang*, which had made Mun a star in the colonial period with her in its title role, now reinstated her in the role of the mother, which indeed encapsulates Mun's transformation from *sweetheart* to *mother*. The reinstatement was even extended to Kim Jong-il's entitlement of Mun as a "people's actress" (*inmin baeu*). In 1982, Kim Jong-il further awarded Mun a national medal of the first grade to celebrate his father Kim Il-sung's seventieth birthday (Y. Jeon 1999, 154). After continuing to play roles of mother and grandmother in North Korean films from the 1980s, Mun passed away in 1999 as the *people's actress*, leaving behind four children and six grandchildren (Han 2019, 128).

Mun Ye-bong, Feminine Socialist Warrior in *A Partisan Maiden*

As mentioned earlier, Mun Ye-bong's image in North Korean films was rarely dissimilar from that in colonial-period Korean films. It is as if Mun's image as a suffering, decent woman in both Korean nationalist films and colonial Japan-Korea co-produced propaganda films was naturally succeeded by the image of the good communist woman she played in North Korean propaganda films. Unlike her supporting roles in other North Korean films, Mun takes the leading role in *A Partisan Maiden*, playing a literal female warrior during the Korean War battling American soldiers with inner strength and iron will. However, the eponymous leading character in *A Partisan Maiden* neither instructs nor directly guides other male guerilla fighters, but silently sacrifices herself in the end. This section focuses on how this slight variation of Mun's cinematic image in *A Partisan Maiden* fits the aim of Kim Il-sung-styled North Korean propaganda films that manipulated national gender perceptions allowing Mun to contribute to

building a new socialist nation and its cinema by playing the role of national mother.

Before moving into a detailed analysis of the film, I would like to open this section by mentioning two noteworthy aspects of *A Partisan Maiden* in North Korean film history as well as in Mun Ye-bong's filmography. On the one hand, the film is a watershed in Mun's career in that it marks the complete end of her *sweetheart* phase; after this film her roles in North Korean cinema are firmly solidified as that of mother and grandmother. Thanks to her East Asian stardom in the colonial period, Mun could play a premarital girl in her early twenties in *A Partisan Maiden*, although in real life she was in her mid-thirties and married with children. Yet, the title role in the film is not only Mun's final starring stint but also her last sweetheart character, performed on the threshold of her transformation into the symbolic mother of a new socialist nation, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), upon which I will elaborate in the following section. In this sense, Mun's character in *A Partisan Maiden* symbolizes a *national mother*, namely a virgin partisan fighter who supports Kim Il-sung, the father of the DPRK.

On the other hand, *A Partisan Maiden* fully utilizes Mun's image as an ideal, premodern, and traditional Korean woman to create a nationalist-socialist propaganda film. In other words, the film propagandizes how North Korean women should dedicate themselves to fight against the capitalist empire—the United States—and build a new socialist nation by acting just like the leading character in the film and sacrificing themselves for the nation and its patriarchal leader, Kim Il-sung. Mun's on and off screen image as good wife/sweetheart and wise mother is retained in *A Partisan Maiden* to the extent that the image that made her a film diva both in colonial Korean nationalist films and Japanese propaganda films promoting the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere is unequivocally appropriated in North Korean propaganda films.

A Partisan Maiden portrays a group of North Korean partisan fighters' attacks on American troops occupying Haeju in Hwanghae-do province during the Korean War. Under instructions of Kim Il-sung to cinematize Korean War heroes, production on *A Partisan Maiden* began from 1952 in

the midst of that war (Han 2019, 89). Kim Seung-gu wrote the screenplay for and Yun Yong-gyu was chosen to direct the film, which was based on the real-life story of the female partisan Jo Ok-hui.³ *A Partisan Maiden* was only completed in 1954 after taking many twists and turns in the course of the war. Modeled after Jo, the film's titular character, Yeong-suk, is an active socialist warrior, who not only wears a Mao-styled military uniform (*inminbok*) but with her hair medium-length and wavy rather than in a bun, as seen in the picture below, but she also physically fights American soldiers with rifles and grenades. In playing Yeong-suk, Mun departs from her regular roles in colonial and early North Korean films, which are, as mentioned earlier, mostly those of meek, docile, patient, and even passive women in *joseonot*, with hair in the traditional bun, awaiting father, brother, sweetheart, or husband in pristine rural Korean landscapes.



Figure 1. Mun Ye-bong as Yeong-suk in *A Partisan Maiden* (*Ppalchisan cheonyeo*, 1954)

3. Jo Ok-hui was also the subject of Bak Pal-yang's epic poem "A Song of Hwanghae" (*Hwanghae-ui norae*) published in 1958.

Yet, the character of Yeong-suk is a predictable figure in North Korean propaganda cinema and literature, which largely depict, as Steven Chung points out, "the narrow period between the mid-to-late 1920s and the end of the war in 1953" (Chung 2014, 172). Unexceptionally set in this time-space, Yeong-suk is another ardent follower of Kim Il-sung, and is overly grateful for his distribution of a small plot of farmland to her family before the war. Active as a leader of the North Korean women's communist league in Haeju, and fiercely enraged by the loss of her mother in an American air raid during the early stages of the Korean War, Yeong-suk participates decisively in a partisan unit. The source of her resolution to be a woman partisan is "the unceasing injustice of the landlord, the foreigner, the other, and the importance of self-actualization (whether this is realized in an act of vengeance, the agitation of a group or mob, or in the shining example of a leader)" (Chung 2014, 173). In this vein, the film not only stresses how her mother and townspeople have been oppressed, persecuted, and even killed by the evil foreign force, but also pinpoints how Kim Il-sung awakened "Koreans who must thwart Americans without providing even a grain of rice or a drop of water so that the American bastards will be unable to remain on Korean territory" (Seung-gu Kim 1954, 20).

After bombing and severing a bridge that brings in military resources such as weapons and ammunitions to the American army, the partisan fighters in the film try their best to frustrate American attempts to repair the bridge. Concealed in the town, Yeong-suk secretly rescues her townspeople by killing individual American soldiers who at times bully Koreans at gunpoint, all while gathering intelligence on the enemy and spreading flyers propagandizing the imminent emancipation by Kim Il-sung. As the bridge is, despite their efforts, repaired, Yeong-suk with unfailing perseverance then helps her partisan boyfriend, Nam-yong, to bomb it again. This bombing makes the American soldiers that much more hell bent on hunting down the guerilla fighters that a few townspeople, who have been supporting Yeong-suk and her comrades, end up being detained. While extricating these detainees from the American military camp, Yeong-suk is shot and captured alone, and eventually dragged to her execution ground.

In *A Partisan Maiden*, Mun Ye-bong renders Yeong-suk as an adamant,

strong-willed heroine with a firm faith in communism as well as in the Kim Il-sung regime. Although the film does include scenes of Yeong-suk firing a gun and bombing, she is portrayed more as a sacred martyr than strong warrior, especially in comparison to the depictions of women fighters in the contemporaneous cinema of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Dai Jin Hua has asserted that the PRC films made between 1949 and 1976 served "the Communist Party's grand socialist project" that assigned women a role "not by being women, but by being warriors that [they] can enjoy an equal or undifferentiated, social status with men" (Dai 1995, 258). During this period, the asexual and genderless Chinese women are asked to erase their gendered distinction from men so that the dominance of male power was ironically reasserted and consolidated for the *New China* established on the destruction of the old order. Under the powerful patriarchal discourse of the Chinese Communist Party that became a "spiritual father," women in Chinese films are so de-gendered as *New Women* that they become "sexless members of a large collective group identity—women disguised as men, women who have to dissolve their female subjectivity and grow up in a large collectivity as 'women heroes'" (Dai 1995, 263).

Unlike these genderless women heroes in early PRC films, Mun Ye-bong's characters in DPRK films, including *A Partisan Maiden*, are excessively feminine in that they are quietly supportive of their husbands and sons who are mostly guerilla fighters or factory workers. Yeong-suk in *A Partisan Maiden*, the most active and warrior-like figure that Mun ever played in her colonial Korean and DPRK films, never lectures, commands, or yells at men, but is supportive of, even submissive to, male fighters, and rather remains in the background for them. In this sense, Yeong-suk is quite different from the Chinese female heroines of *The Song of Youth* (*Qingchu zhi ge*, 1959, dir. Cui Wei), *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*, 1960, dir. Xie Jin) and *Li Shuangshuang* (1962, dir. Lu Ren), who conspicuously speak and act before their male comrades so that their on-screen presence dominates the entire film. In so doing, the modern Chinese cinematic heroines in the early PRC shed their Confucian femininity of quiet obeisance to their patriarchal figures—father, husband, or son. Not to mention that they only wear Mao-suits, not only to enhance the efficiency of their labor-power on farm and

in factory, but also to prove they can contribute equal labor power toward constructing the socialist nation.

I have no intention of idealizing or fetishizing the defeminized heroines in PRC films between 1947 and 1976, but rather consent to Dai's problematization of them, for what the women warriors or laborers in them lack is not only femininity but also subjectivity; they have no choice but to be instrumentalized for socialist nation-building. Nevertheless, the women in the Chinese films appear to be given at least ostensible gender equality under the Mao's gender policy. In contrast to this ostensible gender equality, the DPRK policy on women seems incommensurate with the depiction of them in its motion pictures, a depiction that is actually incompatible with the socialist insistence on the equality between the bourgeois and proletariat, between men and women.

The dire cinematic contrast between the DPRK and the PRC in terms of the expression of gender is likely a result of Kim Il-sung's personal conviction that women should be feminine. A female partisan warrior like Yeong-suk in *A Partisan Woman* is created to promote the strong image of women liberated from domestic work in a newly established socialist nation, the DPRK, that seemingly ensures gender equality. Made in the midst of the Korean War, *A Partisan Woman* propagandizes the mobilization of women as laborers and soldiers by extolling socialist revolutionary women in military uniform as ideal heroines aside from the actual emancipation and enhancement of women's rights in the DPRK. However, this utilization of women in North Korean propaganda is contradictory, inasmuch as Kim Il-sung expresses "his essentialist view on women" by saying that "women should not solely focus on their liberation, rights, and equality and forget about the traditional feminine beauty and virtue that typically defined the Korean women ... women should be feminine after all" (Suk-Young Kim 2010, 258–259). Accordingly, a female partisan like Yeong-suk accomplishes her womanly duties in stepping back from the conspicuous act of representing her partisan unit. Instead, she tries to merit her male colleagues, especially by encouraging her boyfriend, Nam-yong, to (re)bomb and destroy the bridge.

The disparity in the representations of women warriors in the PRC

and DPRK cinema in the 1950s and 1960s is also explained by the early influence of the Soviet Union over North Korea up until Kim Il-sung seized absolute power in 1960. Just before and after the Korean War, the Soviet influence on the DPRK was so immense, as Kim Jae-yong points out, that under the intensifying Cold War between the US and USSR, North Korea initially adopted the Soviet Union's proletarian patriotism and internationalism, to include anti-Americanism, by which capitalist culture was deemed absolutely decadent, degenerated, and imperialistic (J. Kim 1994, 110). Therefore, the PRC-styled gender revolution had less impact in North Korean society in the 1950s and 1960s such that depictions of women in the DPRK remained more traditional and Confucian, emphasizing their feminine roles as wives and mothers more than as social actors. Just like the female characters Mun played in such colonial-period nationalist films as *Ferry Boat* and *Wanderer*, Yeong-suk in *A Partisan Maiden* and the mothers Mun played in DPRK films resonate with the male "postcolonial desire to restore the national essence by reinforcing ideals of untainted femininity" (Suk-Young Kim 2010, 259).

In this vein, *A Partisan Maiden* stresses Yeong-suk's mental strength and firm conviction rather than a powerful, warrior-like physique, by highlighting her martyrdom, wherein she remains, upon captured, uncompromised by American efforts to have her disclose the whereabouts of her co-fighters. Yeong-suk even endures the moment when one of her comrades, who has been masquerading as a pro-American spy, sacrifices himself to rescue her. As a result of her persistent refusal to divulge information, Yeong-suk faces execution by firing squad in a field at daybreak. This execution scene, wherein a few American men gun down a Korean woman, carries the strong potential to provoke its North Korean audience, especially its male spectators, to fury and rage over the American occupation of Haeju. This anger operates under exactly the same mechanisms as in anti-Japanese colonial Korean nationalist films, such as *Ferry Boat* and *Wanderer*. Mun's martyrdom in the film is thus used as a visual and narrative measure crucial for active male engagement with and support of the Kim Il-sung regime in its nation-building in the face of American occupation.

Death of a Partisan Maiden and Birth of a National Mother

Now, the roles that the partisan unit and female partisan fighter play in *A Partisan Maiden*, as well as in North Korean society more broadly, deserve our attention. In this section, I explore how the partisan acts are deeply interconnected with the nation-building project of the DPRK, so the nation could be constructed as a *partisan state*. To do so, this section particularly focuses on the death scene of Yeong-suk in *A Partisan Maiden*, for it symbolizes the anticipation of a new nation as well as a rebirth of Yeong-suk as the maiden-mother of that nation. In this death and rebirth of a partisan maiden, Mun Ye-bong’s image as a guerilla fighter in the film is conflated with her traditional Korean femininity in other films made before and after Korea’s decolonization. Yet, this conflation is crucial in as much as Mun’s traditional feminine image is easily idealized as the symbol of a national mother of the DPRK in the film as well as in North Korean society. The conflation is also paradoxically noteworthy in that Mun’s image as an ideal maiden-mother is again conflated with a true national mother, Kim Jong-suk, Kim Il-sung’s second wife and Kim Jong-il’s birth mother.

As Suk-Young Kim points out, “[t]he nationalistic tendency and ethnocentric impulse of North Korean film and performance became a highly effective means of delineating the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ comrades and enemies, and it functioned as a managing principle of the North Korean society” (Suk-Young Kim 2010, 25). This distinction between friends and enemies is, as Carl Schmitt has pinpointed, what essentially constitutes the partisan fighters. Along with this distinction, Schmitt conceptualizes the four traits of a partisan: the “irregular struggle” in contrast to the regular army; their “intensive political engagement”; their “heightened guerillaism”; and lastly “tellurian” attachment (Schmitt 2004, 9–14). Based on these traits of a partisan as a political group and its distinction between self and the other, North Korea is often characterized as a *partisan state* that adheres to the abovementioned four partisan rules. Following Wada Haruki, a Japanese historian of North Korea, Heonik Kwon and Byung-ho Chung illustrates how the DPRK is a *partisan state* in that an armed resistance group led by Kim Il-sung based mainly in Japanese-

occupied Manchuria was amply supported by the Korean immigrant community there and later gained considerable power in the early phase of North Korean state-building with strong support from the Soviet Union. Not to mention that the Kim-led partisan group from the Manchurian era succeeded in seizing power in North Korea after the Korean War such that Kim and his partisan faction became “an unchallenged, singular political force in North Korea [by the end of the 1960s], and it remains so to this day” (Kwon and Chung 2012, 16).

Kim Il-sung’s road to autocracy was taken with a ceaseless line-drawing between friend and enemy. Filmed in the middle of Kim’s power struggles with other North Korean communist factions that persisted until the 1960s, *A Partisan Maiden* concomitantly represents how the nation should be built under partisan rules, and how this partisan state should be led by a male leader, Kim Il-sung, and supported by Kim’s partisan subordinates, to include a few female fighters. As a partisan state, DPRK thus takes the form of a *family state* wherein “[t]he Confucian tradition of identifying the father with the nation itself was manifested in every aspect of social life” so that Kim is always postulated as sole father of the nation (Suk-Young Kim 2010, 134–135). The concepts of a partisan state and a family state are, in fact, constitutive of each other along with “the memory of colonial suffering and struggle [that North Korea] represents” (Kwon and Chung 2012, 25). In this paternalist, patriarchal nation of the suffering past, “the heroic sacrifice of soldiers and partisans fighting Japanese, Americans, and South Koreans” is an important source of material for cinema (Suk-Young Kim 2010, 17). It is widely known that both Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il have openly preferred cinema to other art forms as the most effective propaganda genre. Without dissimulating this prioritization of film from the initial stage of the development of the DPRK, the Kims wanted to educate the nation with proper propaganda films based on true stories. A real-life revolutionary martyr such as Jo Ok-hui, who died in the war against American imperialism, is a paragon figure and the most suitable to be cinematized. *A Partisan Maiden* was thus filmed in the middle of the Korean War when North Korea’s antagonism toward the United States had intensified to its utmost extent.

However, Yeong-suk in *A Partisan Maiden* is somewhat too larger-

than-life, for the sequence of her imprisonment and death at sunrise is unrealistically dramatic and cinematic. I would suggest that the character of Yeong-suk seems to synthesize the propaganda legend of Jo Ok-hui with Kim Jong-suk, the sanctified mother of the DPRK. Like Jo, Kim Jong-suk was herself a partisan fighter, donning a military uniform during the colonial era. Since her mysterious death in Pyongyang in 1949, Kim has often appeared in North Korean paintings and revolutionary operas as a woman who harmonizes "traditional femininity and military masculinity" (Suk-Young Kim 2010, 246). In other words, Kim is represented as a woman who never neglects her Confucian womanly duty of serving and supporting her partisan husband by sewing and cooking at night on the battlefield, but also fights against the foreign invader in the daytime. While the DPRK endlessly legitimizes its moral and political standing from a collective memory of colonialism and resistance against it, Kim Jong-suk has been revered as "the most virtuous partisan, the one who is closest and most loyal to the partisan leader, [Kim Il-sung], and being the mother of military-first politics" (Kwon and Chung 2012, 59).

Although Jo is undoubtedly a national heroine who tragically faced a premarital death in her early twenties, it is largely unknown what sort of characteristics she possessed in life. Of course, there is no way of confirming the accuracy and truthfulness of representations of Kim Jong-suk in North Korean paintings and revolutionary operas as well. However, the premature, mythic deaths of the two women provide ideal motifs for fictional reconstruction in propaganda films to galvanize the fury of North Koreans at the United States. Inspired by Jo's episode, *A Partisan Maiden* recounts Yeong-suk's loss of her mother from American air raids that motivates her to become a partisan fighter to exact vengeance against the enemy. As a rare female partisan fighter like Jo and Kim, Yeong-suk is frequently reminded of the logic of partisanship, namely the distinction between friends and enemies. Further, the film shows how Yeong-suk's "tellurian" partisan unit is faithful to Schmitt's formulation of partisans by presenting their irregular and guerilla attacks on the American troops. Driven by her own intensive political engagement, Yeong-suk continues her guerilla struggle until captured by the Americans and chooses execution over compromise.



Figure 2. Mun Ye-bong as Yeong-suk in the execution scene of *A Partisan Maiden* (1954)

Given that Kim Il-sung is equated with the sun in North Korean propaganda and state ideology, Yeong-suk's death in the field at sunrise can be read as her death being not only a seed for a new nation but also a heroic act sanctified by Kim Il-sung. Her death in the film is consecrated as much as the death of Kim Jong-suk, and the DPRK state's posthumous heroicization of Kim's synthetic qualities as lying between military masculinity and domestic femininity might apply equally to Yeong-suk. Gazing at the rising sun before the American gunpoints, Yeong-suk shouts smiling, "Hail to General Kim Il-sung!" Although Yeong-suk is shot to death by American soldiers, her sacrifice gives forth the dawn of a new day, to be accompanied by Kim Il-sung's liberation of Haeju from the American occupation in the following scene. In this vein, the execution scene symbolizes the union between birth and death, night and day, Yeong-suk and Kim Il-sung, a maiden and her hero, a sole partisan leader and the father of the DPRK. Accordingly, Yeong-suk is, in being killed by Americans, reborn as a national mother of the DPRK.

Produced after Kim Jong-suk's death and filmed in the middle of the Korean War, *A Partisan Maiden* presents the mother of a new nation, who willingly confronts her death for the sake of the birth of a new socialist nation. While Jo Ok-hui is a mere female guerilla fighter sacrificed in the Korean War, Yeong-suk is a maiden-mother who dies in the birth of the DPRK, which is sanctified, just like the death of Kim Jong-suk, by the rising sun, Kim Il-sung. I would construe this allegorical death of Yeong-suk as a partisan maiden as Jo Ok-hi's metamorphosis into a partisan wife and mother, Kim Jong-suk. This death scene is further extrapolated to the metamorphosis of Mun Ye-bong from "sweetheart" to "people's actress," a national artist.

Kim Jong-suk is the figure of "a political trope" that "enter[s] the public discourse of nation-building with the establishment of the new socialist state." (Suk-Young Kim 2010, 205) In *A Partisan Maiden*, Yeong-suk willingly takes the path of martyr-mother of DPRK, Kim Jong-suk as partisan fighter. In this sense, Mun Ye-bong, even before she began to regularly play mothers in films made after *A Partisan Maiden*, plays a "national mother" in the film, the premarital death and ensuing nation-birth of whose main character can even be analogized with Mother Mary who gave a birth to Jesus Christ as a virgin. While Mun, in her mid-thirties and married with children, took the lead role of *A Partisan Maiden*, playing a character ten years younger, Yeong-suk as played by Mun never seems unfit for the role of maiden-mother, probably due to Mun's consistent image as a decent woman, a wise mother and good wife.

Evolving from "sweetheart of thirty millions" of colonial-era Korea to the "people's actress" in North Korea, Mun led the compatible life of a decent and modest Korean woman on and off the silver screen. Through this compatibility, her image of a partisan-activist martyr in *A Partisan Maiden* is a bridging role between her *sweetheart* persona as daughter, sister, girlfriend, and wife in colonial Korean and early North Korean propaganda films, and her cinematic incarnation of the national mother giving birth to a nation in DPRK propaganda films. Mun Ye-bong was indeed a diva of Korean propaganda films throughout her entire life and who merited the role of national actress in North Korea.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined how the image of a colonial and postcolonial film diva, Mun Ye-bong, was mobilized to build a new socialist nation, the DPRK, through analysis of the North Korean film, *A Partisan Maiden* in the film career of Mun. Beloved as a “sweetheart of thirty millions” in colonial Korea and as a “people’s actress” in North Korea, Mun often projected her image as a suffering, sacrificed woman who in propaganda films silently provokes male figures, whether nationalist activists, imperialist collaborators, or socialist fighters, to becoming emotionally charged enough to fulfill their commitments to Korea, Japan, or North Korea. In early North Korean propaganda films, Mun portrays a feminine supporter of her male comrades and a patriarchal leader in building a new socialist nation. In this, her role in *A Partisan Maiden* is no exception, albeit the most active, independent character of her film career.

Although rendering a female guerilla fighter with inner strength and will in *A Partisan Maiden*, Mun is never depicted as a leader of the people, but rather a womanly supporter of her partisan boyfriend and male colleagues as well as of North Korea’s true partisan leader, Kim Il-sung. In this sense, Mun’s character in the film is not far from her regular roles in other films as a traditional, feminine, passive, and obedient woman, namely a sister, sweetheart, wife, or mother. Mun expresses satisfaction in her autobiography that her character in the first North Korean film, *My Home Village*, was a “life-changing role,” different from the “sad, miserable, heartbroken Korean women” she played earlier, and thanks the “beneficiary” Kim Il-sung regime that transformed her “destiny” (Mun 2013, 122). However, the role is not that different from those played by Mun in colonial-period films. As I have shown in the first section of this paper, it is just another female character who patiently awaits her fiancé who is going off to fight Japanese imperialists. And even with slight and ostensible variations made in the main character of *A Partisan Maiden*, who stops being one who waits and becomes one who acts, Mun’s screen image has not changed as much as she might depict, for this time she is a self-sacrificing maiden who is only mobilized to glorify and magnify the sole father of the DPRK.

It seems that Kim Il-sung wanted to appropriate Mun's screen image of a modest and decent Korean woman as the ideal feminine revolutionary model for the DPRK; one who silently sacrifices herself for her male partisan fighters to build a new socialist nation-state. As the very first "actress of distinguished service" in North Korea, Mun in *A Partisan Maiden*, after all, plays a maiden and martyr-mother who gives birth to a partisan nation-state through her self-sacrificing martyrdom in her partisan fight in the Korean War. Although Mun's cinematic image is confined to the restricted gender role of Confucian femininity that has been manipulated and propagandized by the North Korean state, her stardom and persona are not easily invented, emulated, or challenged. It is for this reason that Mun, the *goddess of propaganda films*, has been so studied in Korean film history and will continue to be the focus of scholarly examination. I hope this study helps further research on Mun Ye-bong and inspires fresh approaches to her image and persona.

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