

Special Feature

A Historical Imagination of  
a Neo-liberal Society:  
Considerations on the Korean  
Historical Drama *Chuno*

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## The TV Drama *Chuno* and Its Popularity

*Chuno* is a Korean television historical costume drama which was produced and broadcast by the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) in 2010. This drama, which was aired on KBS2 channel every Wednesday and Thursday night, was a very successful one. Starting its broadcasting January 6, *Chuno* enjoyed average viewer ratings of over 30% until it ended with its twenty-fourth episode on March 15.<sup>1</sup> *Chuno* won many prizes throughout the year of 2010 including the Korean Broadcasting Grand Prize and the KBS Acting Grand Prize,<sup>2</sup> and a large number of cafes and blogs related to *Chuno* have sprung up on internet.

Just before *Chuno*, the director Gwak Jung-hwan had directed another historical drama *Hansung Byeolgok – Jeong* which was also aired on KBS2 channel in July 2007. Through that drama, director Gwak gained fame for his distinctive directing style and garnered almost absolute support from his devoted fans.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Chun Sung-il, the writer of *Chuno*, said, “There is a saying that what is important about historical drama is not ‘what period you write about’ but ‘what period you write in.’ In the old days and today, those hopes of people from low strata are small and useless, but those very hopes get together to make

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1. *Chuno*'s audience rating started from slightly over 20%, but it very soon went up higher than 30% and maintained 30-35% throughout. It is reported based on the survey of TNmS that the rating displayed 35.9% nationwide and 36.3% in Seoul March 25 when the final episode of *Chuno* was aired. On the viewer ratings for 24 episodes of *Chuno*, see Wikipedia in Korean (<http://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/%EC%B6%94%EB%85%B8>) which also shows the survey results of AGB Nielsen Media Research along with those of TNmS. There is a little difference between these two results.
2. In celebration of *Chuno*'s winning the Korean Broadcasting Grand Prize, KBS aired its highlight version September 3 and 4 which was composed of two 80-minute-long episodes. (Each episode of *Chuno* in the regular version ran 70 minutes.)
3. Broadcasting of *HansungByeolgok – Jeong* as a miniseries was short. It was aired Monday and Tuesday every week only for one month, from July 9 till July 31. After the drama ended, KBS was obliged to make its director's cut version DVD for the enthusiastic requests of the devoted fans of the drama. Though this DVD box set was a limited version and supplied on a preorder basis, KBS originally had no plan to make it. By contrast, *Chuno*'s DVD box set was promptly released soon after its broadcasting ended.

a history. I just wanted to make sure of it.”<sup>4</sup> So, it might be natural to say natural in one respect that *Chuno* was distinguished from other TV historical dramas preceding it from the start.

The title ‘*chuno* (推奴),’ which is synonymous with ‘*chusoe* (推刷),’ means ‘tracking down the fleeing slaves,’ ‘chasing after the fugitive slaves,’ or ‘charging and collecting money from slaves who live at their own homes outside their masters’ houses.’ This is the reason why the official English title of the drama *Chuno* is *The Slave Hunters*. Thus the drama *Chuno*, set during the late Joseon dynasty after the Manchu War of 1636-1637 (‘Byungja Horan,’ the second invasion by China of newly rising Ch’ing dynasty), brought *chunokun* (slave hunters) and *nobi* (奴婢, slaves) into the foreground, which is not usual among Korean TV historical dramas. Especially, *chuno*, i.e. slave hunting, and *chunokun*, i.e. slave hunter, were new subject matters for Korean historical dramas on TV and in film alike, which therefore played a crucial role in arousing curiosity and catching the attention of audience.

So many characters appear in *Chuno*, but the drama mainly follows the story of Lee Dae-gil, Song Tae-ha, and Kim Hye-won. Lee Dae-gil (portrayed by Jang Hyuk) is a *chunokun* who was born a *yangban* (nobility in Joseon) but fell to the level of a slave hunter after his half-brother and house slave Keun-nom (literally means Big One) ruined his family and fortune. His forbidden love with the house slave Un-nyeon and the punishment she received resulting from that love caused her brother Keum-nom to kill Dae-gil’s father and burn his house. After that, Dae-gil became a slave hunter and wanders all over the country in search of that brother and sister, driven by the burning desire for vengeance and his unforgettable love for Un-nyeon.

Song Tae-ha (portrayed by Oh Ji-ho) is a slave on the run who had been a military general and a devoted retainer and good friend of Crown Prince Sohyeon. He lost his wife and son at the hands of Ch’ing soldiers during the war, and as a political scapegoat after the suspicious death of the Crown Prince, he was forced to become a slave and serve a government official. He escapes and runs south to rescue the late Crown Prince’s little son Seok-kyeon who lives in exile on Jeju island, on the way gathering his old colleagues who had followed the reform-minded political vision of the late Crown Prince Sohyeon.

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4. See *Chuno*’s official homepage. <http://www.kbs.co.kr/drama/chuno/about/staff/index.html>.

Kim Hye-won (portrayed by Lee Da-hae) is Un-nyeon. She is now able to hide her status as a former slave because her half-brother Kim Seong-hwan (Keun-nom) has become wealthy after running away from Dae-gil's house. But she escaped from her arranged marriage and happens to be rescued from trouble by Song Tae-ha while she is on the run. They begin to develop a romantic relationship while traveling together and eventually get married. However, she is destined to reencounter Dae-gil, who has chased Tae-ha for money promised by Prime Minister Lee Kyeong-sik (portrayed by Kim Eung-su), who had made General Song Tae-ha into a slave.

Besides these three main characters, there are lots of other characters in *Chuno* who can never be ignored. Hwang Chul-woong (portrayed by Lee Jong-hyeok), who was Song Tae-ha's old friend and rival, now fiercely chases Tae-ha to kill him in order to further his own career. He betrayed Tae-ha, who had once saved his life during the war, and got married to Prime Minister Lee Kyeong-sik's only daughter, who is physically disabled. Chul-woong becomes a killing machine during the chase. Eop-bok (portrayed by Gong Hyung-jin) is an arrested fugitive slave who was formerly a hunter. Joining a secret society, he points a gun at the notorious yangbans, dreaming of slave liberation. Choi-janggung (literally General Choi) and Wang-son (literally Big Hand) are on Dae-gil's team as slave hunters (portrayed by Han Jeong-su and Kim Ji-seok respectively). And Seol-hwa (portrayed by Kim Ha-eun) is a lower class girl from a *sadangpae* (street entertainer group). She joins Dae-gil's team by chance and then accompanies the team with her weeping heart focused on Dae-gil, who can never forget Un-nyeon.

In *Chuno* we can see a good many other fascinating character like Chun Ji Ho (portrayed by Seong Dong-il), who is another skilled *chunokun* and rival of Dae-gil. So many characters form very complicated relationships among themselves in the drama. This spider-web-like network of relationships among characters is sometimes very crucial in understanding the deployment of *Chuno*'s story line. *Chuno*'s producers themselves provided a map of relationships among the characters on *Chuno*'s official website.<sup>5</sup> But *Chuno*'s fans themselves made and posted their own relationship maps on the internet, which also allows us to get a sense of *Chuno*'s high popularity with its audience.

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5. See it at <http://www.kbs.co.kr/drama/chuno/cast/cast01/index.html>.

## Some Interesting Things about *Chuno*

We can discern several factors concerning why *Chuno* could gain such high popularity. First of all, it cannot help being pointed out that the producers of *Chuno* made very effective use of a sensationalist strategy. *Chuno* exploited sex appeal especially in the early episodes. Actress Lee Da-hae, who played the role of heroine, was at the heart of the controversy over sexually suggestive contents in *Chuno*. In episode 3, her bare chest and shoulders were exposed when she came near to being raped by two peddlers just before being rescued by Song Tae-ha. It was physical overexposure given that the drama was made for broadcasting on public TV networks. In episode 7 also, her naked chest and shoulder were exposed in the scene where injured Un-nyeon/Kim Hye-won got treatment. This time, Lee Da-hae's exposed body parts were blotted out by a camera blur (so-called 'mosaic'). But in episode 8 on the very next day, her chest and shoulder became naked once again while she was in a room changing clothes. This scene was shown without any camera blur. As a result, production crews of *Chuno* were blamed for consciously using sexual suggestiveness (or explicitness) as an instrument for commercial success because they used a camera blur when exposure of body parts seemed to be natural in the development of the drama (in the case of episode 7) whereas they used none when it may well be doubted if the exposure of nude body parts was necessary (in the case of episode 8).<sup>6</sup>

However, the drama *Chuno* not only exposed parts of the actress' body but even stripped actors' bodies literally naked. The upper bodies of Dae-gil and his two colleagues are almost naked throughout the drama. These half-nude, well-muscled bodies of three main *chunokun* characters are one of the features which make *Chuno* a very unique drama. But the most famous scene appears in the first episode. In this scene, Choi-jangggun is taking a bath and Wang-son is washing clothes, and both of them are almost naked. In comparison with Wang-son's body being seated, Choi-jangggun's standing body is shown in its entirety, strikingly all nude. Only the most private part of his body is narrowly hidden from the eyes of the camera/audience by the stuff piled up in the foreground of the scene. Such

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6. According to AGB's survey, viewer ratings of *Chuno*'s episode 7 happened to reach 34.0% nationwide and 36.1% in Seoul and neighboring areas. See Wikipedia in Korean: <http://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/%EC%B6%94%EB%85%B8>.

male nudes were clearly one of the reasons why the drama *Chuno* became the talk of the town as soon as it debuted on the TV screen.

In other words, it is clear that male bodies are visual objects in *Chuno*. Given that in traditional sexual geography in the field of vision men are usually positioned as viewing subjects whereas women, and especially their bodies, are situated as objects of the (usually male) gaze (Berger 1972:35-64), such a structure of looking in *Chuno* is remarkable. Particularly in modern consumer society, we can see that there are many different kinds of gazes, each with a different relationship to objectifying power, and that these gazes are not seen strictly along the lines of male and female. It is not rare that various media including advertising above all sell images of the man who is confident enough in his masculinity to be the object of a desiring gaze (Sturken and Cartwright 2001:87-91). In this respect, bare male bodies as spectacles in *Chuno* embody very well the transformed cultural environment and constellations of sexual politics in Korean consumer society which has grown since the mid-1980s and 1990s (Joo 2010). Moreover, it must be kept in mind that in the scene in question naked male bodies are straightforwardly set up as objects of the female gaze. The scene in the first episode is exactly such a situation: the hostess of the inn where Dae-gil's team stays is peeping at Choi-janggum taking a bath. So to speak, the male body is becoming a fetish as an object of the voyeuristic female gaze here, which is a reversal of traditional sexual order in the visual field or that of classical Hollywood movies (Mulvey 1989).

This, however, does not mean to say that *Chuno* is a feminist drama or a drama mainly appealing to female audience. It is obvious that *Chuno* is a male-dominated drama. Such a straightforwardly reversed constellation of looking as the one mentioned above is not so frequent in *Chuno*, and the story line is driven by male main characters. As an excellent action historical drama, the general mood of *Chuno* is undeniably masculine. However, it is not easy to say the masculinity prevalent in *Chuno* is that of macho, either. Well-muscled bodies of male main characters are certainly a trademark of the drama *Chuno*, but those well-chiseled bodies as spectacles and the same naked bodies as sexual objects rather can be said to embody 'consumable masculinity' than traditional authoritative and repressive masculinity. Considering its production context within Korean consumer society, this 'consumable masculinity' of *Chuno* may well be comparable to the masculinity of the 'new man' having emerged in the western consumer societies since the 1980s whose sexual meaning has less to do

with macho images of strength and virility than with fetished and narcissistic display, and whose bodies are the bodies to be looked at (Nixon 1997:293-96).

At this point, it is also worth pointing out that male characters in *Chuno* call their male elders 'Un-ni.' This is in itself no strange thing in that it is said 'Un-ni' was originally a title used to address the elder person of the same sex. But male characters using this title for addressing their male elders in *Chuno* might generate a sense of sexual ambiguity because the title 'Un-ni' means 'elder sister' and has been largely used only among women in modern Korean society. This may also be one of the reasons why the production crew emphasized with a subtitle that it is a title used for calling the elder person of the same sex when 'Un-ni' is used by Wang-son for the first time in the drama (in its first episode).

Lastly, some words related to those spectacular and stylish actions in *Chuno* which is also one of main reasons for the drama's such high popularity. There are several fight scenes of horizontal composition shown in a long or full shot and a relatively long take. These kinds of action sequences frequently appear in flash backs and describe General Song Tae-ha's fighting with a number of Ch'ing soldiers during the war of ten years ago. In these sequences, Song Tae-ha slashes down Ch'ing soldiers one by one with his big spear-shaped sword in alternating slow or fast motion, proceeding horizontally from the one end to the other end of the frame. In terms of form and style, these sequences are strongly reminiscent of the famous escape scene from *Old Boy*, the Cannes Film Festival's Grand Prix winning Korean movie, which was directed by Park Chan-wook and released in 2003. In that scene, Oh Dae-su (portrayed by Choi Min-sik), having just come out of the room in which he has been confined for fifteen years without knowing the reason, advances down the long and narrow corridor knocking down hoodlums one by one with a hammer in his hand. This fight scene is shown in a horizontally composed frame, in a full and long shot, with the camera shooting the corridor from a distance as if from the wall, in other words, from an impossible point of view. In this way, *Chuno* made intertextual connections with cultural products very familiar to the public, and it seems this kind of intertextual reference also made a contribution to the drama's winning high popularity from the audience.

## **Mobility, Modernity, Capitalism, and *Chuno***

However, there seems to be another, more fundamental reason why the drama

*Chuno* has had such a strong appeal for contemporary people when considered from a viewpoint of cultural sociology. It seems to me we can start from the dominant mood and style of *Chuno* as an action historical drama which shows a very speedy progression of its story line.

What is outstanding about the drama *Chuno* is speedy movement without pause, and intense and continuous physical mobility. These characteristics look even more outstanding when taking into consideration the fact that *Chuno* belongs to the genre of historical drama, which will be more discussed a little later. *Chuno* is full of spectacular sword play, martial arts, horse riding, acrobatic movement of human bodies, and, above all, running. Fugitive slaves are running away for their lives and freedom, and the slave hunters are running after them for money. Those who dream of a 'new world' are on the run, and those who want to keep their own interest and power send 'blade runners'<sup>7</sup> to kill them. So, the chased are running, and the chasers are also running. Therefore, the dominant mood of the drama *Chuno* can be epitomized by the word 'mobility' as the title itself clearly suggests.

But the mobility of *Chuno* is not confined to the physical dimension. *Chuno*'s characters are in the middle of rapid social mobility. Some of them have fallen from high and noble status due to love (Lee Dae-gil) or by political conspiracy (Song Tae-ha). Some of them are driven by their intense desire for upward mobility in status (Un-nyeon/Kim Hye-won) or career (Hwang Chul-woong). So, the dominant mood of the drama *Chuno* can be defined as 'mobility' in terms of its content and theme as well as its form and tempo, and this 'mobility' is in the social dimension as well as in the physical dimension.

Thus *Chuno* is dominated by the term 'mobility,' which is frequently singled out as a term characterizing one of the main aspects or the experience of modernity though the historical backdrop of the drama is pre-modern Jeoseon society. Perhaps one of the best works that has presented on-screen mobility and continuous movement as the logic and the experience of modernity is Dziga Vertov's film *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929). As a "city symphony" (Turvey 2011:135-62), *Man with the Movie Camera* is "a study of *the* – not *a* – city"

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7. Here, I refer to the legendary Hollywood SF film *Blade Runner* (directed by Ridley Scott, 1982). In this apocalyptic movie set in L.A. of the year 2019, the 'blade runner' carries out the duty of finding and terminating 'replicants' which can be defined as futuristic slaves or servants.



(Roberts 2000:92) in spite of its being based on the images of Soviet Russian cities. And, as well known, modernism was an urban phenomenon. The city and its modern life represented in Vertov's film can be summed up in a word, 'mobility,' which is in this case via "Vertov's dedication to machinism" (Turvey 2011:138). Not only are there the analogy between human being and machine and the analogy between city itself and machine, but also man – above all his eye – becomes one with the movie camera, and significantly enough, both are on a motor car. Thereby, as Vertov (1984:17) has said, the "man with the movie camera" as "kino-eye," as a mechanical eye, frees himself from human immobility and, being in constant motion, records movement, starting with movements and maneuvering in the chaos of movement.

And, this very mobility and movement underlie *modernité* as "the modes of experiencing that which is 'new' in 'modern' society" (Frisby 1985:1). The concept of modernity in this sense was first given its modern meaning by Charles Baudelaire's "phenomenology of modernity" (Frisby 1985:16). As well known, in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" written in 1859-60 and first published in 1863, Baudelaire presented the very famous definition of *modernité* (modernity).

Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable... As for this transitory, fleeting element whose metamorphoses are so frequent, you have no right to scorn it or to ignore it. (Calinescu 1987:48)

And he goes on, "As for this transitory, fleeting element whose metamorphoses are so frequent, you have no right to scorn it or to ignore it" (Calinescu 1987:48). Modernity in this sense is none other than "the new mode of the perception and experience of social and historical existence set in train by upheaval of capitalism" (Frisby 1985:4). Why? A succinct but the most eloquent explanation for this is presented in *The Communist Manifesto*. According to Marshall Berman (1988:87-129), this small pamphlet published in 1848 contains Marx's modernist 'melting vision.'

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of

production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Marx and Engels 2000: 248)

“All that is solid melts into air.” The ‘melting vision’ of Marx as a modernist which can be summed up in this one sentence is getting the ever increasing reality-relevance today, in this age of neo-liberal globalization. And *Chuno*, as a unique historical drama, hereby could be defined as a historical imagination of a neo-liberal society in the age of globalization if we pay full attention to the fact that it is characterized by mobility and movement defining some dominant aspects of capitalist modernity.

### ***Chuno* and Korean TV Historical Dramas**

That the drama *Chuno* is dominated by mobility becomes much more noteworthy when we place *Chuno* in its genre context. Traditionally, in Korean TV historical drama we could discern two typical sub-genres or branches: orthodox historical drama and court melodrama. So-called orthodox historical dramas are generally based on the ‘real’ and ‘official’ history, or regarded as so. Its subject matters tend to be the person(s) or event(s) of historic importance including the rise and fall of dynasties, war, political conspiracy and power games, and so on. Historical dramas of this branch are said to have appeal largely to a middle-aged male audience and tend to be epic dramas which are broadcast for a long time period. For example, *Tears of the Dragon* (KBS1), whose story is about the establishment of the Joseon dynasty in 1392 by Taejo Lee Seong-kye (portrayed by Kim Moo-saeng) and the strengthening of its foundation afterwards by Taejong Lee Bang-won, the third king (portrayed by Yu Dong-geun), was broadcast from November 1996 until May 1998 with a total of 159 (and one special) episodes. Another epic drama *Taejo Wang-geon* (KBS1), which is the story of the first founding emperor of Goryeo dynasty Wang-geon (877-943, portrayed by Choi Soo-jong) and recorded the third highest viewer rating

(37.3%) among historical dramas broadcast after the year of 2000,<sup>8</sup> was a 200-episode drama broadcast between April 2000 and February 2002.

On the other hand, what we can call court melodramas are the dramas which tell the story of love affairs taking place in the royal palace. These dramas focus on the conspiracy and war between or among court women over the king's love. Though these conspiracies and wars for the king's love between queen and concubine or among concubines are usually entwined with the power struggles between or among political parties, this kind of historical drama can be defined as none other than (home) melodramas just set in the royal palace of 'once upon a time.' Jang Hui-bin (literally meaning Consort Hui of the Jang Clan, 1659-1701), who was a concubine of Sukjong, the nineteenth king of the Joseon dynasty, and punished to death after having been elevated to his third queen, is one of the historic figures who have been made the main character of this kind of historical drama over and over again. SBS (Seoul Broadcasting System) broadcast the drama *Jang Hui-bin*, whose title role was played by actress Jung Sun-kyeong from February till September in 1995, while KBS2 also made and broadcast its own drama of the same title between November 2002 and October 2003. In KBS2's 100-episode drama, the title role Jang Hui-bin was played by actress Kim Hye-su.<sup>9</sup>

What I want to point out here is that the mood of Korean TV historical dramas has been static in contrast to that of *Chuno*. The tempo of their story progression tends to be rather slow regardless of belonging to the so-called orthodox historical drama or the court melodrama. In the context of neo-liberal globalization since the mid-1990s, by the way, there have emerged lots of TV historical dramas which are not easily classified into or defined by the two traditional branches of the existing Korean historical dramas and their traits. These dramas represent some new trends in Korean TV historical dramas of the 2000s.

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8. This is based on the report of the *Hankookilbo* (June 20, 2011). According to this report, the viewer rating for *Daejanggeum* (MBC) with 41.6% is on top, and *Chuno* with 31.7% takes sixth place. (<http://news.hankooki.com/lpage/culture/201106/h2011062022005886330.htm>.)

9. MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation) recently made and broadcast a historical drama *Dong-yi* from March till October in 2010. This 60-episode fusion drama with a similar mood to *Daejanggeum* (2003-2004) or *Yi-san* (2007-2008), MBC's other historical dramas, focused on the life of Choi Suk-bin (literally Consort Suk of the Choi Clan, 1670-1718) who became a concubine of King Sukjong and mother of Yeongjo, the twenty-first king of the Joseon dynasty, despite her being lowborn. But in this drama too, her rival Jang Hui-bin (portrayed by Lee So-yeon) is one of the main characters in the drama though not the title role.

One of new trends easily discerned is the attempt at insisting or even proving that we Koreans have already had several experiences of so-called globalization in our history. Some historical dramas thereby have tried to summon the global or globalized-looking heroes or heroines from Korean history in search of globalization experiences in the historic past of the Korean peninsula.<sup>10</sup> For example, KBS2 broadcast *Hae-sin* (*Jang Bogo, the God of the Sea*) between November 2004 and May 2005. This 51-episode epic drama was the story of Jang Bo-go (portrayed by Choi Soo-jong), who constructed a grand oceanic empire of international trade with Cheonghaejin, an island located at the south-westernmost tip of the Korean peninsula (Wan-do, today), as his foothold and reigned over broad areas of northeast Asia militarily and economically during the late period of Unified Silla about 1,200 years ago. The tendency of Korean TV historical dramas to describe ancient historic figures as globalized heroes/heroines or at least the persons who already had global experiences has continued until now in dramas like *Dae Jo-Yeong* (KBS1 2006-2007), *Taewangsasingi* (*The Legend*, MBC 2007), *Cheonchu-Taehu* (*Empress Cheonchu* or *The Iron Empress*, KBS2 2009), etc. In the course, some dramas veered closer to the genre of fantasy rather than historical drama. The costumes of the characters and the ancient setting in the dramas looked more and more cosmopolitan and the criterion of historical truthfulness increasingly became a secondary one.

Another trend found in the dramas is the continuously self-developing – in fact, career developing – characters, be they hero or heroine. They overcome the misfortunes and hardships repeatedly coming to them by self-development rather than other kinds of measures like revenge, so to speak. *Daejanggeum*, a smash hit drama of MBC set in the middle of Joseon dynasty which also greatly expanded the realm of Han-ryu, or Hallyu, i.e. Korean Wave, beyond Japan to China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, is representative of this trend. MBC broadcast *Daejanggeum* (*Jewel in the Palace*), from September 2003 until late March 2004 with total of 54 (and two special) episodes. The heroine Seo Jang-geum (*Daejanggeum* literally means the Great Jang-geum), portrayed by actress and model Lee Young-ae,

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10. This could be seen as the attempts at constructing the historical fantasies meeting the demands of the time for active and independent response to the grand transformation on a global scale. At the same time, such attempts also hardly avoided the temptation or danger to be nationalistic or even chauvinistic sometimes particularly in the social context that advancing abroad was being emphasized through the media by the state and the capitals.

becomes kitchen maid at the royal palace overcoming a lot of hardships from when she entered the palace as young child. But many other ordeals were still waiting for her including being exiled to Jeju Island and the death of Han Sang-gung (portrayed by Yang Mi-kyeong), her mentor and old friend of Jang-geum's late mother. But Jang-geum is not broken down. She learns medicine this time, and not only reenters the palace at last but also even becomes a sixth rank official and personal doctor of King Joongjong, the first woman to hold such a high position in Joseon. In this respect, Jang-geum is representative of the continuously self-developing – career developing – heroes/heroines in TV historical dramas of the 2000s. And, this kind of hero/heroine seems to correspond exactly to the self-improving subject, self-empowering subject as the new subject required by transformed Korean capitalism during the last 20 years, which used to be defined as the new economy, a knowledge-based economy, and so on (Seo 2009).

Let me take a short look at just two more successful historical dramas of the 2000s. *Immortal Admiral Yi Sun-sin*, which was aired on KBS1 from September 2004 till August 2005, describes in its 104 episodes the life of Admiral Yi Sun-sin (portrayed by Kim Myung-min), who is one of the historic figures Korean people respect the most. Yi Sun-sin was the Joseon admiral who made the greatest contribution to national defense during the seven-year Imjin War begun by Japan's invasion upon Joseon in 1592. Whereas the latter half of the drama focuses on the naval battles and Yi Sun-sin's self-sacrifice and great military feats as a prominent admiral with extraordinary resourcefulness, the first half of the drama shows the process of Yi Sun-sin's growth achieved by getting over so many ordeals and frustrations in his career and private life. Thus, while the second half of this epic drama embodies the self-prepared and self-sacrificing leader on TV screen, the first half presents the self-developing, self-improving subject. Of course, it might go without saying that both of them are inseparable from each other.

Another drama which is necessary to talk about is *Queen Seondeok*, a 62-episode drama aired on MBC from May till December in 2009. This is also a mega-hit of MBC. *Queen Seondeok* won an average viewer rating of 35.4%, which means it is ranked at fourth among the most popular TV historical dramas broadcast in the 2000s.<sup>11</sup> The charismatic acting of actress Ko Hyun-jung, who

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11. Refer to the report of the *Hankookilbo* (June 20, 2011) like the preceding. See <http://news.hankooki.com/lpage/culture/201106/h2011062022005886330.htm>.

played the role of Misil and the fascinating persona of the mysterious character Misil herself were main reasons for the high popularity of the drama. But the subject matter of this drama is still the chronicle of Queen Seondeok (?-647), the first queen not only of Silla but also the first queen in the entire history of Korea. It is said that the base for the unification of the three kingdoms, i.e., Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla, was established during her sixteen-year reign (632-647). However, the drama *Queen Seondeok* was a so-called fusion historical drama, namely a fantasy which has little interest in truthful representation of historic reality. The drama (re) created rather than described the life of Deokman/Queen Seondeok (portrayed by Lee Yo-won) regardless of historical facts and evidence. In this drama, Deokman is abandoned as a baby due to a prophecy but returns fifteen years later from the desert in Central Asia, somewhere on the Silk Road significantly enough, where she has grown up. She joins forces with Princess Cheonmyeong (portrayed by Park Ye-jin), her twin sister, and Kim Yu-sin (portrayed by Uhm Tae-woong), a leader of Hwarang, to oppose Misil, a royal concubine who wants to be the first female ruler of Silla. Cheonmyeong is assassinated just after Deokman is finally identified as the lost princess and her twin sister, and Deokman decides to become queen herself. Thus in the drama, Deokman/Queen Seondeok is a self-improving heroine (her status as a member of the royal family and her right to the throne are not guaranteed as natural-born) and a globalized heroine (young Deokman grows up somewhere on the Silk Road, thus in an environment in which she naturally encounters a variety of ethnicities and cultures), neither of which has anything to do with any historical record.

In spite of all these new trends, however, the general mood of Korean TV historical costume dramas has still been static even in the 2000s. This is the same even in the case that the drama contains large-scaled battle scenes for example. Such relatively dynamic scenes as battle scenes usually do not comprise a large part in the entire length of a drama, and most of the rest tends to be static and have a relatively slow tempo. It is needless to say the static mood of drama and the slow tempo of its progression are more dominant in the case of such dramas as *Daejanggeum* that do not have such violent scenes. Generally, mobility has not been a familiar value to historical dramas just the same as in traditional societies themselves.

We can say, therefore, the dominant mood of Korean TV historical dramas of the 2000s, too, is distant from that of mobility. At this point, I cannot but speak of *Joseon Yeolhyeongsa Damo* (literally 'Damo, Female Detective of Joseon'). This action historical drama which was broadcast on MBC from the end of July

until early September in 2003 was one of the first important fusion historical dramas on Korean TV. Set in the Joseon dynasty at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, *Damo*, a 14-episode drama, tells a tale of love, conspiracy, loyalty, and honor, revolving around the destinies of three main characters. Jang Chae-ok (portrayed by Ha Ji-won), the title role of the drama, is the undercover 'Damo' who learned sword fighting when she was a little girl and now works for the police bureau of Hansung, the capital city of Joseon. (So, the English title of the drama is *Damo, the Undercover Lady Detective*.) As such, she is one of the first 'action heroines' in the history of Korean TV historical drama. And, it is no exaggeration at all for publicity to say that "*Damo* sets a new standard with dazzling special effects, breathtaking cinematography, and mystical martial art scenes"<sup>12</sup> because the drama was so famous and won tremendous popularity for its spectacles, speedy progression and unique style.<sup>13</sup>

So, *Damo* is noteworthy enough in that it is a rare Korean historical drama which is speedy and very dynamic throughout. Nevertheless, it seems to be difficult to say *Damo* can be defined by mobility in its entirety. Even in *Damo*, mobility belongs not to the resident heroine or hero but to their nomad opponent. Commander Hwang Bo-yoon (portrayed by Lee Seo-jin), Chae-ok's immediate superior, the man of law, stays and waits. He remains at his place within a territory (of the state, of the law, of love). It is Jang Sung-baek (portrayed by Kim Min-joon), the leader of a rebel group, who can be characterized by mobility. He runs and moves ceaselessly. Or, he must do so. He crosses over and attempts to remove the borders of the territory (of the state, of the law, of love or family). And, Chae-ok is shaken. Strictly speaking, she is not resident nor nomad. She is simultaneously an in-between and a go-between.

In this respect, the mobile mood of *Chuno* is remarkable. It can be characterized by mobility in its entirety. All of its characters are basically nomads. Or, they are forced to be though they dream of settling down, of having a permanent residence. As mentioned earlier, the chased are running and the chasers are running. They must run. Un-nyeon crossed over the boundaries of status. Tae-ha was forced

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12. This sentence comes from a publicity phrase for the English version of *Damo* DVD Box set. <http://www.yaentertainment.com/catalog/damo.html>.

13. *Damo*'s popularity was so high that there even came a newly-coined word, the 'Damo Pye-in' (meaning the 'Damo ruined'), referring to those who can't do any other thing at all, so addicted are they to watching *Damo* over and over again.



to do so by the political move. Dae-gil was forced to cross over the boundaries by a forbidden love which itself was a transgression of the boundaries. Slave hunters run for the money, Dae-gil for the money and love, and Tae-ha for the dream. As we all know, money, love, and dreams know no boundary or limit. Chul-woong is sent to kill his former friend by the man in power, but he soon begins to run after him only by his own will. His desire, or rather, drive (in the Lacanian sense of that psychoanalytic term) does not know its limit, either. To say nothing of the fugitive slaves, even the resident slaves themselves are the unrooted as well. Though not slaves, the lower class people are never in a better situation than slaves in that their lives, too, are as unstable as slaves' in the face of the state and the upper class. It thus can be said that most of the people in *Chuno* including its main characters are the subjects thrown into the process of deterritorialization in the Deleuzean sense (Deleuze and Guattari 1984). And, needless to say, capital is the strongest force of deterritorialization in today's world.

### Slavery Society in *Chuno* and Neo-liberal Society

Paul Virilio argues that the modern state, its 'dromocracy'<sup>14</sup> has robbed dromomaniacs, i.e. the masses, of street rights and turned them into the proletariat soldiers by the weapon of speed, by the dictatorship of movement. According to Virilio (1986:30-1), this dromocratic revolution, begun with the events of 1789, provided the two dominating classes with their specific proletariat: "the 'nation on the march' of the mass army's military proletariat sent out on the highway territory" on the one hand, and "an industrial proletariat, a 'workers' army,' as it is called, that remains enclosed in the vast camp of the national territory" on the other. And thereby "the new commercial bourgeoisie tends to enrich itself by amassing the *productive movements (actions)* of the industrial proletariat..., while the military class amasses the *destructive act* of the mobile masses, and the *production of destruction* is accomplished by the proletariat's power of assault." In his view, this dromocratic revolution was a process in which mobility was turned from a freedom or right into an obligation.

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14. 'Dromocracy' means 'rule by speed(ing)' or 'rule by running at full speed.'



The events of 1789 claimed to be a revolt against *subjection*, that is, against the *constraint to immobility* symbolized by the ancient feudal serfdom... – a revolt against arbitrary confinement and the obligation to reside in one place. But no one yet suspected that the ‘conquest of the freedom to come and go’ so dear to Montaigne could, by a sleight of hand, become an *obligation to mobility*. The ‘mass uprising’ of 1793 was the institution of the first *dictatorship of movement*, subtly replacing the *freedom of movement* of the early days of the revolution. (Virilio 1986:29-30)

It is none other than the modern state and capital that have deprived the mass of the freedom of and the right to mobility and made it an obligation. Mobility as the logic and the basic experience of capitalist modernity which is summed up in one sentence, “all that is solid melts into air” is nothing but this mobility as an obligation. In the age of neo-liberal globalization, deterritorialization by capital in particular is enforcing upon us this obligation to mobility physically and socially in every sphere and at every level of our everyday life. Consequently, today, under the dromocracy of capital, even the industrial proletariat cannot remain in the camp of the national territory. The industrial proletariat also has to run into death like the military proletariat and cannot keep their stability any longer.

So, it is never surprising that the slaves in *Chuno* strongly remind us of the vast and ever-increasing population of non-regular workers in neo-liberal Korean capitalism. In the full-fledged restructuring since the financial crisis of 1997, Korean people have undergone massive lay-offs they had never experienced before, and the constant existence of an unemployed population on a large scale has become a natural environment. And, enhanced flexibility in employment has brought the emergence of massive non-regular workers. They comprise more than 30% of paid workers according to the government while it is also insisted they have comprised more than 50% of the economically active population since 2001. Their wages are less than that of regular workers by 45%. Therefore, non-regular workers’ suffering is not simply composed of their economic troubles like low wages. Above all, they are deprived of human dignity today just as the slaves were several hundred years ago.

Another figure who is strongly suggested by the slaves in *Chuno* is today’s debtor. The over-issue of credit cards which was actually connived by the government with the aim of boosting the economy after the crisis of 1997 has led to the rapidly increasing number of credit delinquents. And traditional difficulty for the powerless commoners in borrowing money from banks has cornered

them into getting private loans at deadly high interest, a situation which though not new, has gotten severely worse since the economic crisis. These two types of debtors both suffer from high interest rates, either of private loans or credit cards. So many debtors are not even given the opportunity of recovery due to their bad credit. Borrowers of private loans are far more close to the status of slave. They frequently suffer from direct physical violence or its threat by predatory loan sharks. Sometimes it has been reported that some young female debtors have been forced into slave labor, even prostitution.

Now it becomes more evident why the drama *Chuno* could have such a strong appeal for the Korean audience of the 2000s. Viewers could see in the drama the same situation that they live in, a world highly similar to their own. In other words, Korean viewers of the 2000s could find a strong analogy between the slavery society of the Joseon dynasty described in *Chuno* and their own neo-liberal society of the Republic of Korea. The producers of *Chuno* themselves invite viewers to take notice of such an analogy. On the official homepage of *Chuno*, they say as follows concerning the reason why the drama ‘suddenly’ covers the topic of fugitive slaves.

Only a few hundred years ago, there were people trafficked for monetary gain. They were humans but not treated humanely. They could be bought, sold, abandoned and offered as a gift. Not very much different from any physical commodity, *their numbers surged in the early Joseon era to comprise up to 47% of the entire population on the Korean Peninsula and 53% of the population of the capital of Hanyang in 1609, just after the Imjin War with Japan. The number of slaves was more than the number of yangban (upperclass people) and laymen combined. Most of the people on the streets and in the markets were slaves.*

Can you imagine a world where half of the people on the streets were treated as less than human? They had no hopes or dreams in life. They do not even dream of having dreams. It was the social norm taken for granted by all. It was a world where *the worth of the lives of half the population was determined by a few won.* Their desire to live like a human could only come true by running away. (Italics are mine.)<sup>15</sup>

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15. All the statements of the production team or crew member quoted here can be found at *Chuno*'s official home page. As for the purpose of the plan, see <http://www.kbs.co.kr/drama/chuno/about/plan/index.html>. The statements can be found in the English version as well. Search at [http://english.kbs.co.kr/TVRadio/Programs/prog\\_tv](http://english.kbs.co.kr/TVRadio/Programs/prog_tv).

They point to the fact that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the setting of the drama, about half of the population of Joseon consisted of slaves. We have only to think about here the number of non-regular workers and their proportion to the entire working people in the currently becoming 20:80 society of Korea. It might also be worth keeping in mind that, as mentioned here, slaves were treated as a commodity. It is the very existential condition for most people in capitalism that they themselves are commodities of the labor force.

And, *Chuno's* production team members, especially the director and writer, seem to be highly self-conscious about what they are doing. They say, "Fiction based on contemporary times reminds us of what we are forgetting, while fiction based on a different time period brings our focus to the present time." Then, what does *Chuno*, as fiction based upon a different time, want us to focus on and do concerning the present time?

Social disparities were at the climax in the period *Chuno* is set in.....The drama is built around the tale of slaves in this historical era. *After hundreds of years, if modern viewers find even a glimpse of their own faces in the drama characters, that is probably because we continue living like slaves in Korea.* The value of lives continues to be assessed in monetary terms. Existing social contradictions may not compare to the slave days, but it's likely true that *it is difficult to avoid living like a slave without having to fight with all our might in the modern world.* (Italics are mine.)

This is a big part of the reason "why [they] are *chasing after fugitive slaves* in Korea in 2010."

## ***Chuno's* Political Imagination**

Interestingly, there is a scene where it looks like *Chuno* is making some (critical) comments on the current situation of North Korea. It is the first opening scene of the entire drama in which Dae-gil's team arrests Eop-bok and other several fugitive slaves who were trying to cross the Amnok River (the Yalu River) to run away into Ch'ing of China. It is somewhat natural Eop-bok and accompanying fugitive slaves are associated with contemporary North Korean defectors in that the Amnok River which forms the border between China and North Korea is the typical route into China for those who escape from North Korea. Furthermore,

the broker (portrayed by Yoon Gi-won) who exacts unreasonable amounts of money from Eop-bok and the slaves for the passage and is soon revealed by Daegil as a fugitive slave himself also reminds us of the contemporary brokers who, though in many cases from North Korea themselves, exploit North Korean defectors by making bad use of the latter's troubled situations.

As a matter of fact, it is no surprise for *Chuno* to present us such an association if we keep in mind Virilio's argument that the Marxist State first appeared as a 'dictatorship of motor functions,' a totalitarianism very carefully programming and exploiting every form of mass movement. According to him, history shows the rise of methods of military proletarianization in the State, and the gulag was in reality only an outburst of the movement of military proletarianization. The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was only the 'dictatorship of movement, of the act' (Virilio 1986:31-2). It might be added that such military proletarianization and the dictatorship of movement have been far more strengthened in a grotesque form under the rule of the anachronistic feudal-socialist state in North Korea.

But if we can speak of *Chuno's* political imagination, it is more directed towards South Korea just as its historical imagination establishes a strong analogy between the slavery society of Joseon dynasty and the neo-liberal capitalist society of Korea in the 2000s. Just preceding the opening scene mentioned above, an introductory sequence informs the viewers of the drama's periodical setting and its political and social situation with the aid of narration and subtitles. And then, the drama *Chuno* begins its story clearly and specifically stating its periodical setting in chronological terms through the subtitle: the year of 1648, the 26<sup>th</sup> year of the rule of King Injo.

It is just a little more than ten years after the Ch'ing dynasty China's invasion of Joseon (1636-1637). At this war called 'Byungja Horan (丙子胡亂)' in Korea, Joseon was defeated, and King Injo himself knelt down and bowed his head touching the ground ('kowtow') nine times in total to Huang Taiji, the first emperor of the Ch'ing dynasty, at the platform set up in Samjeondo. With such a ceremony of surrender, Joseon submitted to Ch'ing. Joseon agreed to pay tribute to Ch'ing and serve in the war against Ming. Injo yielded up three pro-war officers to Ch'ing. He was also forced to send his own first and second sons and the sons or brothers of ministers to Ch'ing as hostages.

If it's not wrong to regard the drama *Chuno* as a historical imagination of the neo-liberal Korean society, it might be not wrong, either, to associate this

defeat of Joseon at the war in 1637 with Korea's financial crisis in 1997, the crisis of 360 years later. To many Koreans, their government's unconditional acceptance of IMF's demand for restructuring as the terms of monetary aid was seen as unconditional surrender to IMF and transnational financial capitals based on Wall Street. Actually, many Korean people called such a situation the 'Second Gukchi,' i.e. the 'second national humiliation,' which was derived from 'Gyeongsul Gukchi (庚戌國恥),' i.e. the 'humiliation of the nation in 1910,' indicating the signing and public proclamation of the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty officially starting the period of Japanese colonial rule in the Korean peninsula. And King Injo's 'kowtow (叩頭)' as the ceremony of surrender to Ch'ing at the end of January 1637 was also called the 'humiliation at Samjeondo.' In this respect too, the drama *Chuno* set in Joseon of eleven years after the war with and the surrender to Ch'ing can be regarded as a historical imagination, a historical fantasy of Korean capitalist society under the full-scale domination of neo-liberalism since the financial crisis and the less-than-two-year IMF management system.

In the center of *Chuno's* political imagination, there is Crown Prince Sohyeon (昭顯世子, 1612-1645). The introductory narration and subtitle start from the death of Crown Prince Sohyeon, and thereby so manifestly notify that his death is the very political background of the drama *Chuno*. Crown Prince Sohyeon volunteered to go to Ch'ing as hostage after King Injo, his father, surrendered to Huang Taiji. The narration and subtitle state that the Crown Prince died only two months after having returned from his being held as hostage for eight years in Ch'ing, and his death which was suspected a murder by poisoning caused a big political maelstrom and created a lot of victims including his wife and sons. *Chuno's* periodical setting is in 1648, three years after the unexpected sudden death of Crown Prince Sohyeon.

The master of Song Tae-ha and his colleagues in the drama, Crown Prince Sohyeon has the image of frustrated reformer. Being held captive in Shenyang, the capital of the Ch'ing dynasty, and accompanying the Ch'ing troops advancing to Beijing, the capital of the falling Ming dynasty, the Crown Prince understood very well the power of Ch'ing and the rapidly changing international situation. He also had an open mind to Catholicism and western science and culture through his friendship with Jesuit missionary Adam Shall, a friendship which formed during his stay in Beijing. February 1645, the Crown Prince returned to Joseon with lots of western books and items in his hands and the ideal to make Joseon a new country in his heart, but now he was only a threat to the throne for

his father King Injo and to their interests for the existing power groups. Only two months after his return from eight years of hostage life, Crown Prince Sohyeon became sick abed, and only three days later he died. King Injo, his own father, was at the heart of all the suspicions about his death (Lee 2005:81-126).

If the interpretation of Crown Prince Sohyeon as a frustrated reformer prince whose dream of reforming the country was broken down even before beginning to blossom is right, his “dream and frustration were indeed dream and frustration of Joseon” (Lee 2005:126). And they were dream and frustration of Song Tae-ha and his colleagues as well. Political drama in *Chuno* begins from the death of Crown Prince Sohyeon, the failure and frustration of his dream. Given that *Chuno* was made and broadcast at the start of 2010, isn't there a possibility of interpreting the setting of *Chuno* as having an association with the death of ex-President Rho Moo-hyun in the middle of the previous year? The death of Crown Prince Sohyeon is the originating source of the political drama in *Chuno*. Doesn't it invoke the shocking May 2009 suicide of ex-President Rho, who had been shown to be a reform-oriented leader?

Such an interpretation is not impossible if we take into consideration that director Gwak Jung-hwan, as already mentioned, had made *HansungByeolgok – Jeong* before he worked for *Chuno*, and *HansungByeolgok – Jeong* was a drama about Jeongjo, the renowned reformer king of the Joseon dynasty. This eight-episode drama is set in the year of 1800, the twenty-fifth and last year of Jeongjo's reign on the throne, when he died of his long-battled chronic disease at the age of 49. His death also has been suspected a murder by poison though no evidence has been found (Lee 2005:247-89). *HansungByeolgok – Jeong* depicts the dreams, frustrations and love of three young people who want to construct a new world without discrimination based on the natural-born status. Their story is entwined with the conspiracy to kill Jeongjo, which gives this drama its English title, *Conspiracy in the Court*. In the drama, King Jeongjo, who is indicated by the letter 'Jeong (正)' in the title and portrayed by Ahn Nae-sang, is struggling to construct new Joseon and at the same time struggling against the oppositional forces wanting to protect the identity of Joseon. He is ceaselessly agonizing. “My belief is mocked by reality, and my dream let those regrettable sacrifices increase... Am I indeed right not to give up?...”<sup>16</sup>

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16. See the official homepage of *HansungByeolgok – Jeong* at <http://www.kbs.co.kr/drama/>

*HansungByeolgok – Jeong* is on the side of the theory that King Jeongjo was murdered, and his dream of and attempt at reforming Joseon is ultimately frustrated in the drama. The similar dream of three young people also ends with their deaths. Thus, *HansungByeolgok – Jeong*, which was broadcast in summer of 2007, told a story about the attempt at reform and its frustration in the last year of the presidency of Rho Moo-hyun, who did try a variety of reforms and experienced many such frustrations and failure, and at the same time embodied the most anti-authoritative presidential image as the youngest president in the history of Korea. Did this drama sense a series of reforms being spoiled and have a premonition of their failures in the near future? Interestingly enough in this respect, there were three TV dramas directly dealing with King Jeongjo in a single year, the year of 2007: *Yi San*, *The Assassination Mystery of Jeongjo – The 8 Days*, and *HansungByeolgok – Jeong*.<sup>17</sup> King Jeongjo is a historic figure representative of reform and its frustration in Korea, which is the reason why he has enjoyed such high popularity among the public as well as cultural producers in any field. Therefore, his popularity itself shows how ardent Korean people's dreams for reform are and how deep their frustrations at the aborted reforms are.

In this context, from a kind of auteuristic viewpoint, director Gwak Jung-hwan's *Chuno* and *HansungByeolgok – Jeong* can be said to be dramas about political reform and its frustration in the age of neo-liberal globalization. And, Crown Prince Sohyeon and King Jeongjo are the figures embodying this very point in each drama.

However, *Chuno* seems to go one step further. Song Tae-ha and his colleagues make a determined attempt to realize the frustrated dream of Crown Prince Sohyeon. But they are destined to fail – and cannot even have a proper opportunity to start. The fundamental reason suggested by *Chuno* seems to be that Song Tae-ha and his colleagues do not have as the basis for their project the life of the lowliest people. In short, all their frustrations and failure, on the

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[hansung/about/cast/cast04.html](http://hansung/about/cast/cast04.html).

17. *Yi San* was produced and broadcast by MBC from September 2007 until June 2008. This 77- (and three special) episode drama was a big hit with viewer ratings of over 30%, and Yi-san/Jeongjo was portrayed by Lee Seo-jin. *The Assassination Mystery of Jeongjo – The 8 Days* was broadcast on cable channel CGV from November till December in 2007. In this drama, which claimed to be a TV movie and produced by cable TV channel CGV, the part of Jeongjo was played by Kim Sang-joong.



fundamental level, are due to the limits of the reform from above. They are paternalistic at best, and cannot be said to have true sympathy with the pain and the dream of the lower people including the slaves because they never step out of the boundaries of their *yangban* class. As a result, Jo Sun-bi ('Classical Scholar Jo,' portrayed by Choi Deok-moon), who has always raised his voice as a leader full of elitism, betrays his colleagues. Even Song Tae-ha, though a respectable man of honor, cannot think of a world without the distinction of the nobles and their means, and experiences some difficulty in admitting the fact that his newly-married wife Hye-won was a slave after he gets to know the truth.

What the political imagination of *Chuno* truly wants to emphasize seems to be elsewhere. Whereas the attempt at top-down socio-political reform from above by some progressive party of the upper *yangban* class has its clear limits regarding the fundamental understanding and transformation of social contradictions, the dream of the lowliest *nobi* class to change the world has the potential to do so, or at least a seed for that in itself though yet small and weak. While the drama *Chuno* ends with Dae-gil's death for his never-to-be-forgotten love, the politics of *Chuno* finishes with Eop-bok's intrusion into the royal palace and his shooting Prime Minister Lee Kyeong-sik to death. It is important for Eop-bok's rifle not to stop at killing several individual yangbans but to aim at the royal palace, i.e. de facto the King himself, at the ending of the drama. In other words, only the attempts at social change by the lowliest themselves could get to the most fundamental base of the established order and the true origin of all its contradictions. Furthermore, Eop-bok's uprising gives birth to another new subject for social transformation. A *nobil*/slave that has always been timid and submissive throughout the drama clenches his fists firmly while watching Eop-bok being arrested and trodden down violently just after killing the minister. The politics of *Chuno* is the reason why the story of Eop-bok and the slaves around him continues from the beginning to the very end of the drama, parallel with the story of the main characters Dae-gil, Tae-ha, Un-nyeon, and Chul-woong. It is also the reason why Eop-bok's face is always included in *Chuno*'s posters along with other four characters' faces.

Therefore, *Chuno* takes a warmer look at the lower people. The everyday life of slaves is full of hardships and sorrow but supported by care and consolation from each other. Eop-bok and Cho-bok (played by Min Ji-ah), two friend-like lovers, form another jewel-like love line along with the triangular one among Dae-gil, Un-nyeon, and Tae-ha. The slaves' secret society for their liberation is also different from that of the *yangbans*, containing the potential to split along



the lines, full of tensions but more disciplined, and in the end, betrayed by one of its own main members. Though containing an impostor and sometimes being misled by an undercover agent (portrayed by Park Gi-woong) dispatched by the men in power, the slaves' society hardly betray nor desert their members even at the moment of desperate danger. Or, slaves do not know how to do so. There is also a semi-utopian community: the gang of bandits led by Jak-gui (portrayed by Ahn Gil-gang) and their big hide-out deep in Worak Mountain where Dae-gil sent a slave mother and daughter in the first episode and where most of the main characters find safety and support in the later part of the drama. That community of bandits is the same as the community of slaves in that bandits are usually a product of poverty and social contradictions (Hobsbawm 1971). Through such instances, the drama *Chuno*, as its writer said (quoted earlier in this article), desires to capture "the journey of how their unachievable, desperate hopes get crushed and frustrated, but at the same time how their stories accumulate to build history." This is also another big part of the reason why the production crew of *Chuno* was "chasing after fugitive slaves in Korea in 2010."

## Closing Considerations on *Chuno*

What the slaves desired to get through radical social transformation, if possible even to be dreamt of, were perhaps those modern values of freedom and equality above all. Thus, the political imagination of the drama *Chuno* as a historical imagination of neo-liberal Korean society of the 2000s is about the dream for reform and its frustration, and at the same time about the dream for democracy and its frustration as well. In short, *Chuno* can be defined as a drama about the dream for reform and democracy and its frustration in the age of neo-liberalism. So, *Chuno*'s historical imagination can be said to be closely related to the current situation of Korean society in which socio-political and economic inequalities have increased, and everybody has been driven into naked competition with one another, and it is more and more obvious that a crisis of democracy has come.

When the broadcasting of the drama *Chuno* was still going on, I found a parody video file of *Chuno* on the internet. More strictly, it was a 'trace' of the video because there remained only the image from one frame of it. That was all. The video file itself did not exist anymore. So, I could only see that one image: it was an image of the current President of the Republic of Korea pointing a rifle at

something out of the frame with his one eye put closely to the scope. The image with the letters of 2MB written within its frame was a parody of a scene in which Eop-bok points his rifle at something out of the frame over a house wall. What Eop-bok was taking aim at with his rifle would be relatively obvious: Dae-gil, a slave hunter who arrested Eop-bok himself, or a notorious guy of the *yangban* class. But in the case of the President, at what was he taking aim with his rifle? I sometimes have wondered about that.

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## Abstract

*Chuno* is a TV historical drama broadcast by KBS in 2010. The drama, set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, brings slaves and 'slave hunters' into foreground as its title means 'chasing after the fugitive slaves.' *Chuno* enjoyed high popularity to which several factors contributed including suggestive sexual exploitation, consumable masculinity, and spectacular and stylish action often with intertextual references. However, the most important thing is that the main mood of *Chuno* is characterized by mobility defining the logic and experiences of capitalist modernity, which allows us to regard the drama *Chuno* as a historical imagination of a neo-liberal society in the age of globalization. The fact that *Chuno* is dominated by mobility is more remarkable in its genre context in that the general mood of Korean TV historical dramas have been static despite several new trends in the 2000s. As a historical imagination of a neo-liberal society, *Chuno* establishes a strong analogy between slavery society of the late Joseon and neo-liberal society of South Korea with the slaves reminding us of non-regular workers and debtors. The political imagination of *Chuno* tells a story about the dream for reform and its frustration through the motif of Crown Prince Sohyeon, but its politics goes one step further to tell a story about the dream for democracy and its frustration in the age of neo-liberalism through the hopes and stories of the lowliest people.

**Keywords:** *Chuno*, historical drama, mobility, modernity, neo-liberalism