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The Beautiful, the Lame, and the Weird: Three Types of Colonial Heroes in Contemporary Korean Films

Baek Moonim

Introduction

Films based on the colonial period in Korea have been produced in rapid-fire succession since the beginning of the twenty-first century. A long tradition of projecting masculinized national heroes in Korea cinema arguably ended with the final installment of *The General's Son* (*Janggun ui adeul*, dir. Im Kwon-taek) trilogy in the early 1990s, superseded by a series of genre films, culminating in the recent war epic *My Way* (*Mai wei*, dir. Gang Je-gyu 2011), that foreground colonial heroes that do not necessarily embody national characteristics. Two forces arising in the latter half of the 1990s have informed this production: the first originates in the push within the humanities to reconsider the colonial period from the perspective of cultural modernization, and the second comes from the tendency of narrating the nation¹ via the notion of 'Korean blockbusters.' The break from viewing the colonial period politically and economically through a nationalistic bifurcation between 'repression and resistance' to a move to re-illuminate it as a modernization process countervailing Western civilization and mass culture, stirred interest in the history of the culture, customs, and everyday life of the colonial period. Research into how mass culture (i.e., film, music, fashion, sports, and cartoons) changed everyday life and the very senses of the colonized masses has been prolific, as have been investigations into the various identities that cannot be reduced to national identity. This has inflected a tendency at the start of the twenty-first century in visual media such as TV and film to visualize the colonial period in lurid and often fantastic fashion as the origin of cultural modernism.²

1. A term observed from Homi K. Bhabha's "Narrating the Nation" (1990, 1-7). In that it emphasizes the importance of narration as an act of constituting a symbol related to the nation-state and the domain of significance, and that through this act the territory of the 'other' in the nation-state is emerged, and that it focuses on that property's revelation, I think this term is helpful in expressing the characteristic of Korean blockbusters.

2. As a discourse that has propelled such changes in the research trend within the humanities, "colonial modernity," which is indebted to the postcolonialism research of the '90s while attempting to transform the theoretical framework of old debates between internal development theory (*naejaejeok baljeollon*) and colonial modernization theory (*singminji geundaehwaron*), is given attention. Jo Hyeonggeun sees that research on the colonial period, which regarded the colony's structural limitations and those on the proliferation and establishment of modernity as impossible to coexist (as seen in the debates above), is now changing direction to seek the

Here, although the colonial period is still depicted as a painful time of imperial Japanese colonial rule and regulation, it is more strikingly marked as a spacio-temporal background in which urban life is visualized in an enchanting nostalgic atmosphere. Meanwhile, the Korean blockbuster, a term coined by film producers to point out the technological achievement of high budget films that aimed to localize the Hollywood blockbuster, applied its technical and aesthetic charms to the *topoi* of the divided nation, Korean War, nuclear development, and other grand narratives at the nation-state level, structuring the framework of genre films as background for male action. The most recent epic, *My Way*, filmed on a budget one-third to one-sixth that of Hollywood blockbusters, was touted as being on par with *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg 1998) in its representation of World War II.³ In

possibility of their coexistence with the induction of “colonial modernity” theory. For publications that have significantly influenced the change, Jo references the seminal English-language collection such as Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson eds., *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press [1999] 2001)—the sub-title of this volume’s Korean translation is “naejaejeok baljeonron gwa sikminji geundaehwaron eul neomeoseo” [overcoming internal development theory and colonial modernization theory]; as well as the Korean volumes, Kim Jin-song, *Seoul e ttanseuhol eul heohara* [Allow Dance Halls in Seoul] (Seoul: Hyeonsil Munhwa Yeongu 1999), and Kim Jin-kyun et al., *Geundae juhe wa singminji gyuyul gwollyeok* [Modern Subjectivity and Colonial Regulation Power] (Seoul: Munhwa Gwahaksa 2003). Each of these works create opportunities to critically re-examine the colonial period, from the levels of structure, subject, and experience, by analyzing the aspect established with a modern agent that internalizes the obedience of colonial subjects in everyday life caused by minute operations of colonial regulation authorities, the aspect of colonial modernism realizing various identities through cultural hegemony, and the dimension of accomplishing internal experience through colonized individuals’ trivial and fragmented everyday life (Jo 2009). Scholars who have analyzed films set during the colonial period also noticed that “colonial modernity was not only a hot intellectual item, but also a subject of broad public interest,” so that Korean film industry responded to this “popular demand for stories and historical accounts” (K. H. Kim 2011, 58-59). In addition, I believe that the rapid expansion of cultural studies in ‘90s Korea after the collapse of the East-European bloc and democratization provided another background. The cultural studies achieved in the West with the ‘68 Revolution were imported to Korea. During this process, the popular culture industry expanded and actively progressed in the underground, and the ‘cultural turn’ that these cultural studies arranged also had a large impact on twenty-first century mass culture dealing with the colonial period from the aspect of modernization.

3. Most domestic journal reviews, approving the production company CJ E&M’s promotion strategy, tried to instill pride by comparing the production value of this film to that of Hollywood war epics such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Thin Red Line* (dir. Terrence Mallick 1998), *Enemy at the Gates* (dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud 2001) and *Pearl Harbor* (dir. Michael Bay 2001). The major argument was that *My Way* is inferior to none of these films in

the film, the colonial period serves as an opportunity to furnish a geopolitical background in which a Korean male drafted by the Japanese army goes through the Sino-Soviet borders, Siberia, and Normandy, and, of course, provides the spectacle of war. Thus, films created in the twenty-first century that deal with the colonial period project that time-space as a vessel offering visual signs of early modern urban culture, and as a geopolitical background in which male heroes perform action in sports, western drama, adventure, spy, detective, and war genres.

I pay special attention here to the fact that in these films the framework of male action genre is used as a principle means to remember the colonial period and that, therein, male heroes different from those of the past are being produced. Ensuing from the dissolution of nationalistic, monologic narratives of 'repression and resistance,' colonial male heroes appear not as national heroes, but as beings with a different identity. Filmmaking of the new genre sets the colonial period not as national pre-text but as a space-time in which the pursuit of non-national aims (athletic achievement, treasure, money, or survival itself) serve as a means to imaginatively solve the problems of post-colonial Korea. Following Christine Gledhill's concept of genre as a useful framework to understand the life of films in the context of post grand theory film studies (Gledhill 2000, 221), I argue that the colonial male action genre utilizes familiar generic conventions not only as a tool to remember or understand history, but also as a cultural instrument with which to solve contemporary sociocultural problems.

I read the formation of these new colonial heroes as a response to two key contemporary conditions—de-ideologization and survivalism—that arose and were fortified since the late 1990s when a post-authoritarian social regime was intertwined with rapprochement on the Korean Peninsula and when the humiliating memory of colonialization was rehearsed with the unexpected shock of the IMF crisis. Democratization since the late 1980s went along with the overall de-ideologization: first, it became clear that the ideological

technological achievement against its cost (Jeon 2012). Even the director Gang himself compares this film to *Saving Private Ryan* when asked about the visual description of battle of Normandy that is the critical scene in both films, and says that *My Way* depicts the battle (where two protagonists were in service at the moment) from the German point of view, while *Saving Private Ryan* from the Allied Forces (see Jeong 2011).

shield of the Cold War that the authoritarian regimes foregrounded to legitimate their control and to repress their political competitors was no longer viable; and second, virtually none of the counter ideologies including resistant nationalism were able to wield influence over people in the face of the communist East-European bloc's deconstruction and diffusion into late capitalist society. In other words, the democratization process since the late 1980s in Korea was also a shift toward de-ideologization without imagination of competing alternative systems, leaving only a vague strife for achievement of status as a fully developed, westernized society (symbolized in the attainment of OECD membership in 1996)—that is, before the disaster of the IMF crisis.

Among the then-influential ideologies, including countervailing anti-communist and resistant nationalism as well as leftist ideology, not one survived this period of de-ideologization. But if we follow Althusser's definition of ideology, which puts it as a representation of "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1971, 162), and reveals that everybody is always within ideology, we can assert that Koreans in the post-authoritarian period were newly ideologized or, to use Althusser's appropriation of the Lacanian term, "interpellated" as subjects of late capitalism reducing all the older ideologies to outdated, stiff antiquity. Not only was the anti-communism that the authoritarian regime had long espoused transformed into a relic—in the cinema it was first articulated in the cordial representations of North Koreans in *Joint Security Area* (*Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok jeiseuei*, dir. Park Chan-wook 2000)—but also the resistant nationalism and leftist ideology that had theretofore prioritized collectivity lost their force, giving way to an ideology of survivalism, a new ethos that derided allegiance to the cause of collective good in favor of a survivalist self-interest.

The IMF crisis, I argue, radically strengthened this survivalism and, at the same time, triggered a reflexive fixation of subjectivity in recessive national identity or, alternatively, a retrospect to seek forgotten values throughout the modernization process itself. While survivalism served to legitimate the unscrupulous gratification of selfish desire, a burgeoning *ressentiment* took over voice of Koreans who were frustrated by the fact that their great launch into developed country status was obstructed and that their lives would regress (again) to a neo-colonized state. Meanwhile, a powerful introspection

also emerged, grounded in critical reflection on Korea's unconditional pursuit of modernization-capitalization to the sacrifice of responsibility toward the others, which the sociologist Kim Hongjung described as "authenticity" (H. Kim 2009, 19-50). The films I analyze here articulate these complex and often contradictory sentiments. They variously foreground the *ressentiment* against frustrated national achievement, stage nostalgia for the older values that faded under the inhospitable environment of late capitalist society, and cynically furnish a self-portrait of the animalistic survivor. As such, the colonial period that provides the spacio-temporal background for these films is at the same time the reminder of the trauma of colonialization precipitated by the IMF crisis and the clue to solving contemporary sociocultural problems.⁴

My focus is on the specific characteristics of colonized male heroes, which I group into three types: the victim hero in a buddy-double relationship with an imperial Japanese partner (*2009 Lost Memories* [*2009 Loseuteu memorijeu*], dir. Lee Si-myung 2002; *My Way*), the caricatured independence activist in the colonial capital Gyeongseong performing anti-Japanese terrorist action (*Radio Days* [*Radio deijeu*], dir. Ha Gi-ho 2008; *Once Upon A Time in Korea* [*Wonseu eopon eo taim*], dir. Jung Yong-gi 2008), and the generic superhero in works that mix the grammar of sports, Western, adventure, spy, and caper movie genres along with comedy (*The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* [*Joemun nom, nappeun nom, isanghan nom*], dir. Kim Ji-un 2008; *Dajjimawa Lee* [*Dajjimawa Ri*], dir. Ryu Seung-wan 2008; *Once Upon A Time in Korea*).⁵

4. In analyzing the remasculinization in Korean films of the last two decades of the twentieth century, Kyung Hyun Kim focuses on a new male subjectivity that emerged in the period of post-trauma (a trauma of, in this case, the Korean War and Gwangju massacre) while processing "the name of the father in a cycle of desecration, disavowal, and re-inscription" (K. H. Kim 2004, 17). However, Kim's analysis stops before the transformation of male subjectivity under the IMF crisis, which is one of the main factors for my argument. While Kim's study is concerned with the remasculinization process mainly in the New Korean Cinema after the death of the father, symbolized by the death of president Park Chung Hee, I more focus on the rupture between the ideologized (whether it is by anti-communist, resistant nationalist, or by leftist) male subjectivity in films since liberation and de-ideologized male subjectivity in postdemocratization and, specifically, post-IMF crisis films set in the colonial period. The importance of having experienced the IMF crisis is, in my argument, that it critically reminded Koreans of the colonialization trauma which, at the same time, made them identify the delusion of blind capitalistic pursuits that had captured most Koreans.

5. The only film that deals with the colonial period with a female protagonist is *Blue Swallow*

YMCA Baseball Team (*YMCA yagudan*, dir. Kim Hyeon-seok 2002), the first film of the twenty-first century to deal with the colonial period, introduces the above three archetypes of male heroes that were represented from that point forward. The narrative structure of formation, frustration (through division and external pressure), comeback, and success of Korea's first baseball team, the Hwangseong YMCA, takes up the generic conventions of the sports film; the main character, who is a cleanup hitter, overcomes environmental limitations and dramatically hits a home run to come from behind and win. Here, the classical scholar Lee Hochang is a superhero that references existing genres: as the cleanup hitter he is the hero of the sports film as well as a traditional narrative hero in that he appears at the climax as an undercover emissary (*amhaeng eosa*).⁶ Also, the pitcher and independence activist Oh Daehyeon is depicted as a character in a buddy-double relationship with the Japanese military police officer Nomura. Having become a colonized independence activist and a military officer for the empire, respectively, these military school alumni play out a Korea-Japan

(*Cheongyeon*, dir. Yun Jong-chan 2005), about Korea's first female private pilot, Bak Gyeong-won. This film, along with *Modern Boy* (*Modeon boi*, dir. Jeong Ji-u 2008) with a *femme fatale* independence activist as a lover of the modern boy, created a tragic female protagonist figure. These female protagonists, in order to concentrate on the tasks of flight and independence movement, have masculinized characters giving up heterosexual romance. These two films, despite their high production value, failed to become box office hits, and *Blue Swallow* especially became an unfortunate work as a controversy arose around the "pro-Japanese" past of Bak Gyeong-won, who compromised with the Japanese authority for inter-continental flights. (On the relationship between nationalism and feminism in the production of this film, see Gwon [2008]). I think that gender politics is a very sensitive issue not only in these films but other twenty-first century films about the colonial period, in embodying the colonized subjects of the colonial period; fully investigating this will have to be put off for future research.

6. The childhood dream of this man which was never realized due to the abolishment of the state examination (*gwageo*) was to be an undercover emissary (*amhaeng eosa*). The dream imaginatively comes true when the rusticated character dramatically appears at the stadium on a government-owned horse (using the *mapae* license he was given) in order to participate in the baseball game after two outs of the second half of the ninth inning. Another interesting point related to this reference is, when chaos takes place as the Japanese military police get entangled with spectators while trying to arrest the Korean players who won the game. The little horseman holds Lee Hochang's *mapae* license up high and shouts, "I can't stand this anymore. Here comes *amhaeng eosa*!" Because the actor who plays the little horseman is Jo Seung-u, who starred as Lee Mongryong in Im Kwon-taek's *Chunhyang* in 2000, this scene uses the traditional narrative of *Chunhyangjeon* (*A Story of Chunhyang*) and at the same time can be understood as seeming to wish for, or need, a 'real' *amhaeng eosa*'s appearance (and not Lee Hochang) as a savior of colonized Korea.

baseball game in which they exhibit sportsmanship as equal partners, which imperialism did not ostensibly allow. Here, Oh Daehyeon, burning with nationalism, claims that he would not only assassinate the five traitors (*Eulsa ojeok*) but also the fifty-five hundred (if any) traitors; he concludes, however, a Korean victory over the Japanese in the game would impart imaginative power to the colonized. In visualizing the Eulsa Treaty (1905) era as the moment of the advent of Western sports, and further by projecting its three protagonists (the imaginary undercover emissary/sluggish, the independence activist, and the Korean-Japanese partners) as being bound by sportsmanship, *YMCA* shows the three types of colonized male heroes that were created when twenty-first century Korean film began to deal with the colonial period within the framework of de-ideologization and survivalism.

These heroes are different from the remasculinized, “authentic” colonized male heroes depicted in Korean cinema after liberation, examples of which include the independence fighters in ‘liberation films’ (*gwangbok yeonghwa*), the anti-Japanese fighters of the 1960s and 1970s Manchurian action films,⁷ or, more recently, the gangster Kim Du-han in the influential 1990s series *The General’s Son*, who fought for superiority over the Japanese *yakuzas* in the back alleys of the colonial capital Gyeongseong. Further, they are qualitatively distinct from the post-1980 Gwangju intellectual-activists that populated Korean New Wave films. The mature intellectual protagonists of the Korean New Wave, who attained critical historical perspective through the intense fight against military dictatorship and against the father’s generation, and who dreamt about solidarity with the people, disappeared in the post-democratic and consumer capitalist period of the ’90s, leaving behind as final relics films like *The Uprising* (*Yi Jaesu ui nan*, dir. Park Gwang-su 1998)

7. On the biography of martyrs who considered the March 1st movement as the launch pad for independence movements in *gwangbok yeonghwa* produced shortly after liberation, refer to Lee Sunjin (2005). On the cultural films that reconstitute the colonial memories centered on the independence movement career of Syngman Rhee after the Korean War, refer to Lee (2010). On the topic of Manchuria being depicted as a space for anti-Japanese nationalism in Manchurian action films of the ’60s and ’70s, refer to Han (2009). Meanwhile, there is a sole exceptional film among Manchurian action films, *Break up the Chain* (*Soesaseul eul kkeuneora*, dir. Lee Man-hui 1971), which describes male protagonists who decide to remain as outlaws to avoid shifting their identities into national heroes. Kim Soyoung and Park Yuhui read this as a progressive resistance to the Park Chung Hee regime’s nationalist project. See Kim Soyoung (2009) and Park (2008).

and *Lies* (*Geojinmal*, dir. Jang Seon-u 1999). The abrupt disaster of the IMF crisis prepared the ground for Korean blockbusters to take over the invocation of nationalist sentiment, producing infantilized boys (regressed to a state of yearning for father-West), and survival-machines, while positioning the classical national heroes and adult intellectuals as anachronic but nostalgic traces. I will explore the formation and implications of these de-ideologized characteristics of contemporary Korean films dealing with colonial period through an investigation of three types: the pretty boy male heroes targeting political or cultural circulation in Asian theaters, the earnest resister caricatured as outdated and ideologized, and the hero, projected as superheroes drawn from the grammar of genre, to assuage guilty consciences. I cast these types the *beautiful*, the *lane*, and the *weird*, respectively.

The Beautiful: Asian Brothers

My Way is in many ways an interesting case, disclosing the phenomenon that occurs when a Korean blockbuster aspires to become an Asian blockbuster, as well as the emotional limits of Korean audiences in their engagement with the colonial period. It is important to note first that the director of this film is Gang Je-gyu, who pioneered the appropriation of the Hollywood blockbuster production and genre systems and applied it to bifurcated home country vs. enemy country national narratives. He invented the Korean blockbuster in 1999 with *Shiri* (*Swiri*),⁸ which dealt with North/South Korea issues,

8. Although the first Korean blockbuster is known to be *The Soul Guardians* (*Toemarak*, dir. Park Gwang-chun 1998), *Shiri* established the archetype of Korean blockbusters that adopted an organized marketing strategy and wide release formation. As Chris Berry argues in comparing the localization of the blockbuster in China and Korea, “Chinese responses are colored more by refusal of Hollywood blockbuster, and Korean ones by an effort to produce local versions,” as first exemplified by *Shiri* that bested *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron 1997) in the domestic market, leading to a resurgence of the local industry (Berry 2003, 220-24). There have been various studies on the connotation and denotation of Korean blockbusters, most notably: *Hangukhyeong beulokbeoseuteo: Ateullantiseu hogeun Amerika* [Korean Blockbuster: Atlantis or America] (S. Kim 2001) first explores the (im)possibility of Korean blockbusters in epistemic, institutional transformation of non-Western cinema; *Beulokbeoseuteo ui hwansang, Hanguk yeonghwa ui nareusisijeum* [The Fantasy of Blockbusters, the Narcissism of Korean Cinema] (G. Kim 2002) examines the nationalist characteristics of Korean blockbusters; and *The South*

and reached a sort of zenith with *Taegukgi* (*Taegeukgi hwinalimyeo* 2004), which covers the Korean War. His comeback film, *My Way*, through which he attracted much attention after a seven-year gap, addresses the conflict between Koreans and Japanese in the World War II through the grammar of war films. Its production scale was the largest in Korean film history. Further, Gang gestured aggressively at the Asian market by featuring the representative stars of Korea, Japan, and China (Jang Dong-geon, Odagiri Jo, and Fan Bingbing, respectively) and expanded the war theater to include the Nomonhan Incident, the Soviet-German War, and the Battle of Normandy.

One critic astutely observed that Gang Je-gyu “seems to be declaring an end to the Korean blockbuster, which he made possible, and striving for an Asian blockbuster with *My Way*” (An 2012). But interestingly, the very Japanese and Chinese markets to which the film was partly aimed acted to inflect the content of the film, arousing repulsion among Korean audiences. For instance, the Chinese actress Fan Bingbing’s appearance in the film was blatantly token; more crucially, the film’s core projection of an imperial Japanese youth and a colonial Korean youth as equal victims of the war produced a ‘pro-Japanese’ controversy, which continues to be one of the most sensitive issues in Korea. These controversies beg reflection for the way they highlight the possibilities and limitations of the nature of an Asian blockbuster, particularly one in which the colonial period is the setting, which by definition aims at box office success in the Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian markets.

I believe that *My Way* is a logical conclusion of a disposition inherent in Korean blockbusters. In the Korean blockbuster, the natural *enemies* to the nation-state seemed to be North Korea and Japan,⁹ arising from the longstanding anti-communist and anti-Japanese basis. However, whether it is a spy or war movie, the North Korean and Japanese males figured as

Korean Film Renaissance (Choi 2010) provides English readers with the introduction of the idea of Korean blockbusters in light of Steve Neale’s criteria of “specialness” and “spectacle” while seeking a proper set of measures in order to situate and evaluate Korean blockbusters.

9. As China has recently been growing power in East Asia, both the Ming and Qing dynasties, which in the past attempted to make Korea its subject country, are becoming more visible in Korean cinema. The most recent example is *War of the Arrows* (*Choejong byeonggi hwal*, dir. Kim Han-min 2011), which is set in the seventeenth century Manchu War.

opponents are not simply enemy or evil characters, but are rather depicted as *buddy-doubles* of the South Korean male protagonist. This cannot be simply explained by the grammar of genre films, in which, classically, the two main characters in male action films are mirror images of each other. Rather, the North Korean and Japanese males who appear as enemies share a fundamental trauma with the South Korean males; this trauma is an historically produced triangle wherein the West is tabled as a third influence that has begotten the trauma. This third influence has not been explicitly depicted in Korean blockbuster films, with a few critical exceptions such as the Western powers' ban of securing a nuclear-powered submarine in Korea in *Phantom: The Submarine* (Yuryeong dir. Min Byeong-cheon 1999) and the technological gaze of the Western satellite camera in *Soldiers of Heaven* (Cheongun, dir. Min Jun-gi 2005), both of which function as the absent cause that regulates or motivates the activities of non-Western agents and further, the narrative itself. This mechanism of the West in the sub- or unconscious level of Korean blockbusters is, I argue, related to the IMF crisis, through which *ressentiment* toward the West as agent of a blockade on the road to the 'future once believed to be possible' recalled the humiliating trauma of colonial experience. In this light, North Korea is enlisted cinematically as a partner who could have, through reunification, formed a superpower with South Korea, and Japan is depicted as a partner suffering from the trauma of jettisoning from the West. Therefore, even though North Korea and Japan had appeared as enemies, their defeats in the films are not the occasion for pleasure. As *Phantom: The Submarine* and *2009 Lost Memories* plainly show, although the enemy Japan is removed or ousted by the South Korean protagonists, the scenes that deal with this are variegated with guilt and pain, rather than triumph. Japan, just like South Korea, has a colonialist unconsciousness that desires *power* symbolized by nuclear weapons and the northern territory, and when the Western power thwarts that desire, the colonial trauma is rehearsed.¹⁰ Therefore, Japan is not a victimizer but a victim like Korea, and what prevents both nations from escaping trauma

10. On the perspective that regards scenes attacking Japan colored with guilt as a form of self-punishment, in other words the violation of Korean mass culture's taboo against Koreans attacking another country, see Kim (2002). For commentaries on the problem of the West acting as an absent cause to Korea-Japan binary, see Baek (2006).

is the absent cause of the West that would not allow power; hence, the common sentiment in these films is a thwarted colonialist unconsciousness: the *ressentiment* of brothers-Asia, who have been banned from advancement to superpower status by the father-West. This is done, ironically, by use of the blockbuster technology cover, which shows the power of father-West.

My Way merely takes this Korean blockbuster framework to the extreme. However, this time it was expanded in the form of an Asian blockbuster with the Asian market in mind from its conception. A critical symptom of this reproduction and expansion is the film's war theater. While the film aims to capture 'World War II through the eyes of an Asian,' the film's battlefield is not Southeast Asia during the Pacific War, but rather the Sino-Soviet border area Nomonhan and the Siberian concentration camp, Soviet areas where the Soviet-German battles took place, and Normandy. After the Nomonhan Battle, known as Japan's most humiliating defeat, the most typical imperial soldier Tatsuo becomes a POW and is positioned squarely as victim, while the victimizer is not Chinese or Southeast Asian, but *whites* from the Soviet Union. The long sequence at the Siberian concentration camp projects the image of a Holocaust experienced by Asians. The journey of Tatsuo and Junsik, who were driven by the Soviets as human shields to fight the Germans, and then had to fight the Allied Forces as German soldiers, are starkly visualized as Asian soldiers tossed about amidst battles between white men. In other words, World War II, not the Greater East Asian War or the Pacific War, is signified as a Western or white war; moreover, Tatsuo and Junsik here are strongly tied not as the colonizer and colonized, but by the common point of being racially *Asian*. Therefore, their bodies are interchangeable: the scene that most effectively illustrates this point is when Junsik at Normandy pulls off his military serial number chain and hands it over to Tatsuo advising "if you are caught by the Allied Forces, don't let them know you are Japanese; say that you are Korean," before his death.

Many Korean viewers have pointed out that *My Way*'s Japanese-Korean victim-soldier brotherhood recycles the South-North split brotherhood of Gang's previous work *Taegukgi*, but that the most recent iteration ultimately fails. However, Gang's de-ideological infantilization with either the brother or Japanese colonizer is not fundamentally different in both films. Just as the device in *Taegukgi* that made Jintae unconditionally protect his younger brother Jinseok was the blood relationship of family, the pure and peaceful

childhood state which could have been preserved if not for the war, what made Junsik cherish Tatsuo so much in *My Way* was once again the childhood state in which they could “enjoy running together” as rivals in a marathon. Similarly, just as ideological formations such as communism or liberalism are not at all important to Jintae (which is why he turned into a North Korean soldier without hesitation when he thought the South Korean soldiers killed Jinseok), to Junsik historical circumstances such as imperialism or the pain of the colonized were not at all important. The scene in which beautiful youths peacefully run together, shown in both films, is made ‘something good’ by dint of the fact that it had been damaged by the absolute evil of war, be it the Korean War or World War II. Furthermore, it is made into ‘something beautiful’ by the casting of Korea and Japan’s hottest actors. Perhaps Gang Je-gyu sees this infantilized regression as reconciliation between the North and South, and empire and colony, as a key strategy in conquering the Asian market. However, this is a schizophrenic situation where the exterior of the action blockbuster exposes starkly the desire for father-Westernization, wherein the infantilized boys who did not grow up to be adult men are beautifully displayed. This is far from creating a new colonial subjectivity that is not reduced to being a national hero, but rather a regression from the figure of the mature intellectual striving for historical responsibility to the figure of the quasi-innocent immature boy concealing the repressed colonialist desire brought on by the IMF crisis.

The Lane: The Stiffened Terrorist

Whereas the first type of hero is depicted via a tragic sentiment based on victimhood, the second and third types of heroes are comic characters. It is important to note here that comedy featured prominently not only in colonial historical films, but also in a great variety of genre films throughout the 1990s. This interruption of humor partly arose from the period’s post-democratization, demilitarization, post-authoritarianism, and de-ideologization thrusts, along with the end of the Cold War. This is most evident in films that include North Koreans and gangsters who embody Cold War and militarized culture. For instance, *Joint Security Area*, a monumental film that was the first to depict North Korea from a post-Cold

War perspective, is drawn with a comedic undertone, inducing empathy for the friendship between South and North Korean soldiers standing on guard at the DMZ. This was followed by a slew of light-hearted relationships in the early 2000s: a North Korean agent working secretly in the South (*The Spy*, *Lee Cheol-jin* [*Gancheop Li Cheoljin*], dir. Jang Jin 1999), North Korean soldiers shipwrecked on the Southern shores by accident (*Lost in the South Mission: Going Home* [*Donghaemul gwa Baekdusan i*], dir. An Jin-u 2003), a North Korean college girl fallen in love with a South Korean college boy (*Love of South and North* [*Namnam bungnyeo*], dir. Jeong Cho-sin 2003). In these films, North Korea is described no longer as an object of fear, but an object of domestication.¹¹ On the other hand, the series of gangster comedies that emerged with the success of *No. 3* (*Neombeo sseuri*, dir. Song Neung-han 1997) enjoyed sustained popularity for their caricatures of authoritarian, militarized macho gangsters and bullies who advocate “when drums beat, laws are silent.”¹² One of the key features in the disappearance of North Korea or gangsters as objects of fear is the visualization of aggressive military or ideological power as relics, that is, as existences behind the times. A North Korean military drill moving to South Korean pop music, gangsters who wish to become competitive CEOs, or global gangsters armed not with sashimi knives but English language proficiency and internet education, and others are, as Henry Bergson argues, reproduced in a comic code triggered by the stiff beings who could not adapt to the codes of the times.¹³

The independence activists portrayed comically in films that dealt with the colonial period after the 2000s are also beings that failed to adapt to

11. Here, domestication means that North Korea is no longer regarded as a threatening antagonist but rather a being that strives for identical values as the South Koreans, such as animalistic desires (hunger), materialistic ambition (indulgence in the commercial products and pop-cultural pleasure), and individualistic ambition (self-complacency and heterosexual love).

12. To directly translate this modern Korean proverb “*Beop eun meolgo jumeok eun gakkapda*,” it would be “While the law is distant, the fist is close,” which cynically describes a loophole in the law in protecting the weak.

13. To Bergson, laughter is clearly a social gesture. Livelihood and society continuously pay attention in order for one to find one’s bearings, and ask that one is flexible enough in body and mind to become used to the circumstances. Because the inelasticity of carelessness, spasticity, and antisociality causes laughter, those who laugh recognize the anxiety caused by the inelasticity and strive for “improvement” that would self-restrain such deeds (Bergson 2009, 15-16).

the period, with the same ideological, authoritarian, militarized earnestness as the North Koreans and gangsters. The independence activist group Taegeukdan in *Radio Days* run a cafe and save up funds for organizing an operation to interfere with the empire's communication system. However, comedy ensues from the group's method: seizing mail coming into Korea to pick out and burn official Japanese mail, they must take care that no Korean would experience disruptions in their mail service and so must themselves deliver the mail sent among Koreans. Similarly self-defeating and ineffective methods are used by the Bulsapa, a group of petty gangsters depicted in *No. 3*, who are armed with an anachronically unconditional and unyielding spirit. On the other hand, the two men in *Once Upon A Time in Korea* who are "the only independence activists in Gyeongseong" and who from time to time attempt to blow up the governor's train and assassinate key figures under the commands (*jiryeong*) of the provisional government, create trouble-filled slapstick with their unconditional loyalty, the recklessness of their plans, and the inadequacy of their actions. They not only fail to assassinate a key figure from the colonial government but are also praised against their will and even receive a medal from the colonial government for defending the Japanese national flag. (Ironically, this medal saves an activist's life when a Japanese commissioner's bullet hits it while it happens to be in his upper pocket.) To them, the independence movement is 3D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) labor, a system in which people must obey the given command regardless of how reckless it is; it is an anachronistic heavy labor that "the youth of these days don't do," as they themselves complain. Ultimately these independence activists' revolution (*hyeongmyeong*) succeeds (the password, "fireworks," which demands multiple simultaneous independence movements in various parts of Korea and Manchuria, lights up the night sky in the form of firecrackers [*Radio Days*], and the assassination of the commissioner of police affairs that is tackled unconditionally turns out to be a success anyways [*Once Upon A Time in Korea*]), but they are neither celebrated activists nor the main characters of the film.

But what is important is that they are not the objects of satire or ridicule. Their retrograde earnestness does arouse laughter, but the selfless purity of their intentions elicits a laughter that plays on and provides a relief for a sense of indebtedness towards the righteous sacrifice of independence fighters. That is, although these characters are funny precisely because they are bungling

and inferior, they also occasion laughter in the very anachronicity of their moral superiority and authenticity, which serve as vehicles for the sublimation of those guilty consciences ingenuously caught up in the changing times.¹⁴ This was also the case of North Korea and gangsters, who possessed an ethical legitimacy that hit on the guilty conscience of South Koreans tainted by capitalistic society. (For example, in *The Spy, Lee Cheol-jin*, the spy Lee comes to South Korea in order to steal super pig genes for North Korean inhabitants struggling from food shortage, and feels intense incompatibility when confronted by the posh culture of Teheran Street.¹⁵) Those activists, gangsters, soldiers and spies also stood as paragons of the value of fidelity (*uiri*), now virtually lost in the neoliberalist free-for-all system. (Although gangsters form an anachronistic hierarchical group with the motto of *du-sa-bu ilche* 頭師父一體,¹⁶ they risk their lives to protect each other while forming mutual safety nets.¹⁷) I think that there is a nostalgia that intrudes here for remains of an ideology in the de-ideologization period, that is considered legitimate, and that responds to the nostalgic character of those films that deal with the initial stages of cultural modernization.¹⁸ The comic impression of these independence activists are overlapped with that of the North Koreans and gangsters depicted comically in the films of the twenty-first century, and

14. According to Bergson again, we laugh not simply from viewing others' flaws or trifling faults, but also their virtues. For example, a stiff and obstinate virtue may be made comical, not because it is immoral but because it is unsociable (trapped in oneself) (Bergson 2009, 86-87).

15. Teheran Street (Teheran-ro) is a street in the Gangnam district of Seoul, where various financial centers and luxurious commercial establishments, including Hyundai department store, are located.

16. It means the boss, the teacher, and the father are equal, which parodies a Confucian proverb: *gun-sa-bu ilche* 君師父一體 (the king, the teacher, and the father are equal).

17. Of course conservative aspects do exist in the *uiri* in gangster films. Lee Seong-uk emphasizes the sense of crisis stemming from the feeling that Korea's public system cannot protect the individual created an environment of mythicizing private relationships (of blood, region, or school), and argues that *uiri* in gangster films is in a way a protective device that represents private relationships. He sees that this *uiri*, on the one hand, could be understood as human relationships that break away from all social practicalities or by the world of untainted authenticity, and on the other hand, could be problematic in that it is often violent toward the outside world that breaks away from this relationship (Lee 2004).

18. *Radio Days* especially shows the early modern era's naïve and yet innocent collective sentiment, that is early fascination by the mass media. On the utopian function of using mass media to compensate for the feelings of loss and depression in films on the colonial period, see Bae (2009, 27-41).

the '70-'80s democratization activists' image that shortly appeared as main characters in Korean films are also cast as remnants.

The Weird: Generic Super Hero

Lee Hochang, who turned from a classical scholar into a sports hero in *YMCA Baseball Team*, is succeeded by superheroes of genre films such as Yun Taegu of the Western film *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird*, Dajjimawa Lee of the spy film *Dajjimawa Lee*, and O Bonggu of the caper movie *Once Upon A Time in Korea*. These films, apart from the commonality of borrowing from a genre in which male protagonists perform action, also share the motif of 'lost treasures' as motive for that action. These include a treasure map, which is the last hope for Japan's war chest (*The Good, the Bad, and the Weird*), a gilt bronze statue of the Buddha in which the list of independence activists is hidden (*Dajjimawa Lee*), and the diamond on the Seokguram Buddha's forehead that symbolizes "the light of the East" that protects the motherland from Japanese raiders (*Once Upon A Time in Korea*). These treasures become the targets for which the Japanese, pro-Japanese, Manchurian bandits, independence activists, swindlers, thieves, and all other characters vie with each other in a large radius of action. These elements of genre films and mass culture that are freely dissembled, quoted, joined, and imitated, on the one hand, usefully function to reproduce the colonial period as a fantasy time space for the superheroes' wide-ranging action; on the other hand, they make the colonized setting a place for sports or games, a situation that one can overcome by their own individual abilities.

However, the enjoyment of the colonial period as sports or games is also interposed by the conditions of the twenty-first century in which the people's perception of life and death are changed. As Kim Hongjung points out, the sentiment that dominated the early '90s (which he calls "the ethos of authenticity"), in other words, "the painful and pitiful emotions of fatal indebtedness for the deaths of people sacrificed in the struggle with social irrationality, and the shame and sorrow" (H. Kim 2009, 17) of knowing that we (who are not dead) endured the '80s 'safely,' went through rapid changes with the IMF crisis.

This ethos of authenticity in Korean society was formed in the pro-democracy movement in the '80s and composed the core of the so-called 386 generation's generation consciousness. It was magnified and intensified as a value in the fields of literature and culture in the '90s, and drastically declined as a dominant social value when Korean society entered into total restructuring after the 1997 IMF crisis. Since the financial crisis, Korean society lost the foundation on which a model of authenticity could realistically prosper. This is because, in the society that has turned into a nature-like jungle of winner takes all, limitless competition, and survival of the fittest, the most desperate interest integrates to 'life itself,' or the problem of 'survival,' rather than 'authentic life.' The survivor no longer is ashamed of his own survival. Rather, it is shown off as an achievement that should be imitated, praised, and respected. A social fantasy around a new heroic figure, who celebrates success, wealth, health, and honor, is being developed, and in this process Korean society has entered a so-called 'post-authenticity regime.' The new attitude of life that comes in place of the collapsed authenticity is a neoliberalist 'snobbism' and 'animality' that, without remorse but with instrumental reflexivity as its resource, strives for success and wealth, and focuses on financial technique, real-estate speculation, and self-improvement while sanctifying 'getting rich.' (H. Kim 2009, 19-20)

I think in a twenty-first century Korean society in which the economic, social, biological survivor is the hero, laughter has taken on new codings. Kim points out that the subject of authenticity in the past was similar to tragic heroes and therefore had no *humor*, and this is because the tragic heroes were too sincere in overcoming their fate and completing it through a tragic death, as if they do not have a body that drinks and eats; these beings were subjects of an authenticity that was responsible for the community's fate, who owned only the noble spirit, ethical ideals, and iron will, and were ignorant or nonchalant of the body as a mass of desire or the body's spontaneity (H. Kim 2009, 41). On the other hand, the protagonists in the above films are not tragic heroes: first, they easily and amusingly defeat the antagonist and rival with immortal bodies and superpowers, and also acquire the 'lost treasures'; and second, as portraits of Koreans with neoliberalist snobbish and animalistic natures (exemplified by a gross body with tears and

runny noses in *Dajjimawa Lee*,¹⁹ a narcissistic dandy with eloquence and wealth that lures women in *Once Upon A Time in Corea*, or a petty thief with animalistic instincts for stealing and retaining other people's property in *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird*), arouse sympathetic laughter. Hence, one of the codes that laughter has in the twenty-first century Korean social culture is the reassurance of those who have been freed from the ethos of authenticity recognizing each other's snobbism and animality. However, as seen in the third section above, laughter is still ambivalent in post-authenticity society. Aside from mocking the subjects of authenticity as inferior beings who are inflexibly lagging behind, there coexists a laughter based on the nostalgia of the superior value that remains in them. Likewise, even in the films depicting superheroes, the portraits of neoliberalism bring forth sympathetic and reassuring laughter with their snobbish, animalistic character, but when an extreme form of snobbish and animalistic character is expressed in gross and weird forms, it can bring forth anxious self-deprecation.

I think that the superhero who shows this ambivalence most clearly is the weird in *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird*—Yun Taegu. Although *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* features three main characters, Pak Dowon, the bounty hunter (the good), Pak Chang-i, the bandit hitman (the bad), and Yun Taegu, Yun is clearly the film's superhero; after all, he leads all of the film's narration as he first gets in his hands the 'treasure map' that all the characters are chasing after, does not get it taken away until the end, and is the only one who triggers laughter. Nevertheless, his virtues lie not in physical strength or even a resourceful mind, but unusual path-taking that surpasses conventional frameworks and enigmatic survival skills. This is what makes the film *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* interesting as well as what places the character of Yun as the weird in the Korean films of the twenty-first century. As early as the establishing scenes in which Pak Dowon and Pak Chang-i approach the imperial train in order to claim the treasure map, the map falls quite

19. A typical scene is one in which Dajjimawa Lee embraces his injured comrade and wails, his tears and runny nose flow excessively into his comrade's nose and mouth, eventually causing him to suffocate to death. This scene in which the comrade is 'murdered' not by the enemy but by a comrade nevertheless causes laughter, because as Bergson claims (2009, 89) the viewers' attention is not concentrated on the act itself (Dajjimawa Lee lamenting) but on the gestures (running of tears and nose).

randomly into the hands of the petty thief Yun, who knows nothing about its value or meaning. The imperial train with Pak Dowon and Pak Chang-i onboard inexorably follows the tracks, but Yun, with map in hand, jumps off the train and runs diagonally toward the pathless desert, and away from the tracks. This imperial train scene, where the film's first action spectacle is revealed, concludes by clearly visualizing the direction of the treasure map and Yun through the movement of the weird, who moves away from the binarity of the good and the bad.

We might see this complex and absurd image as one created by overlapping visions: that of the countless survivors who left colonial Korea (the 'past') and turned to Manchuria (a 'new start') and therefore survived by fair means or foul;²⁰ and that of the post-authentic snob and animal. Yun, unlike Pak Dowon and Pak Chang-i in their stereotypical clothing styles (Western and punk respectively), is an ordinary looking person who wears tattered, mended, stateless clothes, with an appearance of an average male and not a pretty boy like the good or the bad; he does not have a clear goal in mind like the good and the bad who got on the imperial train to move along the fixed tracks, but noisily and waylessly bounces around to survive somehow. This might be the essence of the laughter provided by this colonial superhero's noisy farce in Manchuria, free from any nationalistic undertones. It is laughter toward the mysterious and the weird that provides relief with its spontaneity rather than stiffness from the sincerity toward the goals, and at the same time provides a self-deprecation with the survival instincts of the snob and the animals, which are no longer human.

Conclusion

The films examined here have in common a refusal to portray the colonial male as a national hero fighting for the great cause of the nation. Rather, he takes the thoroughly infantilized position, ignorant of national problems or historical consciousness, and is depicted as a victim bearing a *ressentiment*

20. Thus, Manchuria in this film is dedicated to invoking the various survival sagas of Korean immigrants that have come down for decades.

against the absent cause of the West in the great historical flow along with the Japanese buddy (the beautiful), caricatured as an anachronistic nationalist blindly following orders (the lame), or depicted as materialistic or animalistic character who is chasing after the 'treasure' as a generic superhero (the weird). This form, I argue, reflects the broad cultural and intellectual resistance to narrowly fixing colonial subjects to national identities and mirrors the wide-ranging popular unconsciousness that cannot effectively reconcile contemporary Korea with the experience of the colonial period.

Therefore, these three types are still incomplete heroes in a dormant state. They have an unconsented, contradicting characteristic that reflects the Korean audiences' sentiment on the ambivalent and ambiguous colonial as well as post-authenticity period in which pleasure and consciousness of debt coexist. This immature or latent feature might be the main cause for most of these films' failure in domestic market, but we should read this public disregard as a portent of groping for a new representation with which the spectators can identify. These heroes have importance as deduced in the process of continuously rewriting the past colonial period in various ways to find multiple forms of subjectivity and in the process of seeking a new subjectivity in the period of de-ideologization and survivalism. In a cinema that has just begun to represent the colonial period at where such boundaries as ethnicity, race, class and gender intersect, we need heroes and heroines of more diverse aspects, not a single national hero, in order to revision a more mature and responsible historical agent.

I want to end with a short speculation on this possibility that has intermittently but significantly appeared in Korean theaters, through a very reflexive description of the colonized as collaborators or even colonizers in the form of horror genre. As a few scholars have noted, *Epitaph* (*Gidam*, dir. Jeonga hyeongje 2007) exploits "the haunting truth of mass collaboration with the Japanese on the part of Koreans during the war" (K. H. Kim 2011, 60) by staging the schizophrenic identity of the colonized, while *The Red Shoes* (*Bunhongsin*, dir. Kim Yong-gyun 2005) describes the repetition and reproduction of the colonial(ist) desire for aggressive vitality in twenty-first century Korea by foregrounding the absorbing power of the fetishism. These films and others such as *R-Point* (*Al pointeu*, dir. Gong Su-chang 2004) or *Antarctic Journal* (*Namgeuk ilgi*, dir. Im Pil-seong 2005) explore the possibility of reflection on the identity of Koreans not as the colonized, but as the

collaborator or colonizer who has (un)consciously admired and yearned for a fatuous modernity. This male monstrosity that has rarely appeared in Korean cinema might be the negative reprint of both the innocent, infantilized boys and survival machine, but they could, along with the comic but sympathetic agent of the anachronistic activists who represent the popular consciousness of debt, contribute to rewriting and reconstructing the historical meaning of the colonial as well as colonialist past.

Films of the Twenty-first Century Set during the Colonial Period: A Chronological List

- 2002. *YMCA Baseball Team* (*YMCA yagudan*). Directed by Kim Hyeon-seok.
- 2002. *2009 Lost Memories* (*2009 Loseuteu memorijeu*). Directed by Lee Si-myung.
- 2005. *Blue Swallow* (*Cheongyeon*). Directed by Yun Jong-chan.
- 2007. *Epitaph* (*Gidam*). Directed by Jeonga hyeongje (Jeong Sik and Jeong Beom-sik).
- 2008. *Radio Days* (*Radio deijeu*). Directed by Ha Gi-ho.
- 2008. *Modern Boy* (*Modeon boi*). Directed by Jeong Ji-u.
- 2008. *Once Upon A Time in Korea* (*Wonseu eopon eo taim*). Directed by Jung Yong-gi.
- 2008. *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (*Joeun nom, nappeun nom, isanghan nom*). Directed by Kim Jee-woon.
- 2008. *Dajjimawa Lee* (*Dajjimawa Ri*). Directed by Ryoo Seung-wan.
- 2011. *My Way* (*Mai wei*). Directed by Gang Je-gyu.

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Baek Moonim (scheinbar@yonsei.ac.kr) is an Associate Professor at Yonsei University. She earned her Ph.D. in modern Korean literature and film from Yonsei University. Her research interests include cinematic discourse and critical theory. She is the author of *Jum aut: Hanguk yeonghwa ui jeongchihak* [Zoom-Out: Politics of Korean Cinema] (2001), *Chunhyang ui ttaldeul* [Crippled Daughters of Chunhyang] (2001), *Hyeongeon* [Figural Images] (2004), and *Wolha ui yeogokseong: Yeogwi ro ingneun Hanguk gongpo yeonghwasa* [Scream under the Moon: Korean Horror Film History through Female Ghosts] (2008).

Abstract

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, films based on the colonial period have consistently been produced due to two forces generated in the latter half of the '90s. One is the flow within the humanities to reconstitute the colonial period with a perspective of cultural modernization spreading out to mass culture, and the other comes from the tendency to creatively narrate the national trauma that was evoked by the IMF crisis in Hollywood-style big-budget action blockbuster films. This paper considers the male hero of a colonized Korea in three different ways: as the de-ideologized hero who shares victimhood with the male hero of the Japanese empire in a buddy-double relationship, as an independence activist caricatured anachronistically for rigidly adhering to ideology, and as a superhero who becomes the imaginative winner through the grammar of genre films. In post-authoritarian Korea, where de-ideologization and survivalism is prevalent while the incomplete task of decolonization is still at hand, these characters are meaningful as still-advancing figures in a state of potentiality, which reflect the public sentiment that recalls the colonial period with an ambivalence that includes both visual pleasure and historical indebtedness.

Keywords: Colonial period, male hero, laughter, authenticity, IMF crisis.