Toppling the Tiger, Devouring the Dragon: Alternative Readings of Korean History through the Muhyŏp Genre

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ABSTRACT

This article looks into the transportation of the Chinese epic wuxia武侠 martial arts genre to Korean cinema and asks how the genre changed when it became the muhyŏp武俠 of Korean cinema. In this paper, I intend to look behind the Korean version of the wuxia genre and tackle some of the questions it raises. How should we look at these movies with often intensely nationalist content, which at the same time have been shot in China using Chinese directors and technicians? How does the Chinese form of the genre, loaded with historical references and a sense of Chineseness, dictate its perception in South Korea? Interestingly, this Chinese genre has been used to deal with, of all things, issues hotly contested by South Korea and China, such as for instance the question of Koguryŏ and Parhae. The question is how to interpret this tension between format and content. Does the awareness of Chinese elements in a South Korean movie such as Shadowless Sword in any way undercut the nationalist message of its narrative? Are we being confronted with subversive readings of the history and actuality of the relationship between Korea and China? The present article seeks to analyze these tensions and look beyond the obvious historiographical message of the content of these movies.

Keywords: Korean cinema, historiography, contested history, wuxia, muhyŏp, Koguryŏ, Parhae

Introduction

The Chinese wuxia武侠 genre has a long history, predating cinema. Loosely translated as 'heroic swordplay' or 'martial arts chivalry', it refers to lavishly produced costume movies about martial artists set against the background of its own world (known in Chinese as jianghu江湖 or kangho在韓 in Korean, which translates as “rivers and lakes”). The characters that inhabit this world are expert swordsmen and martial artists and obey their world's laws of chivalry and righteousness, often at great personal expense. A defining characteristic of Chinese wuxia pictures since the 1960s is the use of supernatural martial techniques, such as flying or great leaps into the air. These effects, which the Chinese public has come to expect, set the genre apart from the American Western and the Japanese samurai movies, with which it nonetheless shares many characteristics, such as the creation of a world of its own, a clear though usually implicitly stated code of conduct and the extraordinary fighting skills of the protagonist and his (or her) most important adversaries. The wuxia is tied not only to Chinese cinema and its history, but it is itself also deeply implicated in Chinese cultural practices. It has shown itself to be an adaptive and resilient genre,
Given the intense Chineseness of the genre, the inclusion of elements of Chinese nationalism in its narratives, and indeed the nationalist expectations of Chinese audiences of wuxia, it is not a genre one would expect to thrive on foreign soil. Yet it was transplanted onto Korean soil two times. In contrast with Japan and China, Korea had no tradition of chivalrous literature which could be easily adapted into movies. Korean cinema has traditionally favoured melodrama, comedy and gangster films, and only intermittently produced action movies (which for that matter would be closer to the historical genre dealing with the colonial period, with the gangster genre or with both). But following the increased cooperation between Hong Kong and South Korean cinema in the 70s, the wuxia epic entered South Korea under its Sino-Korean pronunciation: muhyop 武俠. As Kim Soyoung notes, South Korean action movies mainly tended to be tied to locales of Korean colonial resistance (Manchuria, Shanghai), which did not constitute particularly fertile soil for the wuxia epic. More significantly, an important reason for the increasing cinematic cooperation between Hong Kong and South Korea (which consisted of co-productions, shared casts, on location shoots in South Korea et cetera), was the fact that only by engaging in international co-productions could South Korean production companies obtain more rights to import lucrative foreign movies. It could be argued, then, that the first transplantation of the wuxia to Korean soil was doomed to fail. The muhyop
movie did manage to become part of Korean cinema, but only in a completely different guise. In the Korean cinema the 70s and 80s muhyŏp was little more than an alternative name for the well-established gangster genre.\(^9\) Where in Hong Kong wuxia heroes levitated and held long, action-filled sword duels, in the South Korea of the 70s, they were running from the (colonial) law, and fighting with bare fists in the back alleys of Seoul, Shanghai and Harbin.\(^10\)

Transplanting the Wuxia Epic

The first transplant of the wuxia epic, then, failed to produce a Korean version in anything but name. Until the new millennium, the Korean cinematic tradition knew no swordplay movies comparable to the wuxia. Its strengths have traditionally been the melodrama, the comedy and the gangster genre. Historical movies have been made, and in abundance, but without the wuxia characteristics. Korea’s historical movies usually fell into the category of melodrama seohwagallingi. These so-called saguk or ‘historical dramas,’ which are still very popular and which are almost exclusively TV series, tended to focus on motivation rather than action and feature long shots of generals, bureaucrats and ministers meeting, planning and scheming. They were in every sense a far cry from the action-centered wuxia. Despite the enduring popularity of the historical dramas the attraction of the Chinese wuxia genre was strong enough to attempt a re-introduction into Korean cinema in the late 90s, when the Korean film industry was in the middle of its boom. This time, however, the wuxia was chosen on account of its profitability, undeniable after the world-conquering successes of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, and not as an incidental consequence of cinematic cooperation between Hong Kong and South Korea, which in actual fact aimed at an increase in foreign film import quota. As a result, the star studded Korean muhyŏp Bichunmoo 비천무 was released in 2000 and enjoyed huge viewing numbers and seemingly endless bouts of publicity. The second transplant of the wuxia to Korean soil has proved successful. The moribund genre of historical movies received a new impetus and since 2000 a number of commercially successful Korean wuxia movies have been made. It could perhaps be argued that without Bichunmoo, which was a critical failure but performed at the box office, muhyŏp such as Musa 무사 (2001), Saulabi: Time Travel To The Root Of Samurai 싸울아비 (2001), Romantic Assassins 낭만자객 (2003), Sword In The Moon 청풍명월 (2003), The Legend Of Evil Lake 천년호 (2003), The Duelist 형사 (2003) and The Divine Weapon 신기전 (2008) would not have found the financial means to have produce them. In this paper, I intend to look behind the Korean version of the wuxia genre and tackle some of the questions it raises. How should we look at movies such as Bichunmoo, the contents of which are

\(^9\) At the same time, wuxia and martial arts movies are two sides of the same coin, as in Hong Kong cinema, and in this respect the connection between 70s Korean muhyŏp and 2000s muhyŏp is real. To a certain extent, this contrast between the fairy tale quality of the classic muhyŏp and the gritty, magicless reality of the gangster movie is reflected in the differences between Bichunmoo, by all means a traditionally looking fairy tale muhyŏp, and Musa, which replaces the magic and levitation of Bichunmoo with severed limbs.

\(^10\) Some 70s muhyŏp were thinly disguised anti-communist propaganda flicks. Examples include Golden 70 Hong Kong Mission and Expo 70 Tokyo Frontline, showcasing the cinematic link in South-Korean cinema between gangsters and anti-communism.
often intensely national (and even nationalist), but which has been shot in China using Chinese directors and technicians? How does the (Chinese) form of the genre dictate its perception? The wuxia/muhyŏp genre is undeniably Chinese and it is a genre loaded with historical references and a sense of Chineseness:

“The wu xia pian genre, together with certain period movies, is assumed to offer a kind of cinematic cultural gravitas that efficiently embodies history and tradition. In other words, despite the genre’s varied permutations, which can incorporate humor and light-hearted elements, purists expect the genre to retain at its core a traditionalist, nationalist ideology of “Chineseness.””11

And perhaps most interestingly, what should we make of these pictures with a Chinese format, being shot in China, often with large Chinese investments, against the background of the intense revisionist struggle going on between China and the two Koreas over the contested historical legacy of Koguryŏ, the Manchurian state that ruled much of northern Korea, Manchuria and northern China until the seventh century CE?

The concepts of regionalized postmodernism and globalizing postmodernism as used by film scholar Stephen Teo are helpful analytical categories in this. If regionalized postmodernism implies a strategy adapted to local consumption, globalizing postmodernism in contrast:

“implies the process where narrative conventions of genre films are reconstructed to take account of a new global entertainment economy. This tendency allows for instant commodification of a foreign culture, where foreknowledge of such culture is not taken for granted.”12

I will argue that both concepts have a direct bearing on the way Korean adaptations of the Chinese wuxia genre have been made, signifying a double change in Korean cinema. With Bichunmoo the wuxia epic was again transplanted unto Korean soil, necessitating the adaptation of the genre to meet local expectations in South Korea. With Shadowless Sword 무영검 (2005), however, the now commercially proven (yet critically still doubted) muhyŏp genre ventured out in the new global entertainment economy, which effectively meant the re-transplant of the wuxia/muhyŏp genre unto international soil. As I will explain below, this double transplant of the wuxia/muhyŏp genre has had interesting consequences for the Chineseness of the genre in Korea and through Korean muhyŏp in the new global entertainment economy.

In this paper, I will take a closer look at the afore-mentioned Bichunmoo, which deals with the transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn in Korea and from Yuan to Ming in China, at Legend Of The Evil Lake which simultaneously deals with Silla’s emergence at the cost of the proto-Korean tribes on the peninsula and with Silla’s

downfall, at Musa, which is not a traditional muhyŏp in the strict sense of the word, but will nonetheless offer valuable insights and at the recent Shadowless Sword, a movie about the downfall of Parhae, which like Koguryo is hotly contested historical territory. Other Korean muhyŏp such as Sword In The Moon, The Duelist (including cross-over muhyŏp such as The Divine Weapon from 2008) and the muhyŏp TV series Dano ( đa노, 2003) and its many clones will offer useful material for comparison. When asked about the differences between Korean muhyŏp and Chinese wuxia, wuxia action director Ma Yuk-sing offered that “[a]ctually just about everything is different, even if only a little, from Chinese wuxia, from the story to the action.”13 It remains to be seen how significant those differences are.

The Wuxia in Korea
What do Korean muhyŏp look like? With the exception of the gangster muhyŏp movies from the 70s, the genre is young in Korea, only taking off with the high budget Bichunmoo, for which some of the greatest stars of Korean cinema and TV were contracted (Kim Hūisŏn, Shin Hyŏnjun and Chŏng Chiyŏng).14 Except for its Korean setting and its heavy emphasis on the melodramatic elements in the story, Bichunmoo is a fairly typical muhyŏp. It features a traumatized protagonist, a secret martial art contained in a secret book (the dance of the flying swords the title alludes to), long periods of training and healing and finally vengeance wreaked on the powerful villain who by murdering his family traumatized the protagonist. Due to the atrocious treatment this movie received in the editing room, the storyline is not always clear, but Bichunmoo more or less adheres to the basic rules of the muhyŏp genre. It is different from Chinese muhyŏp in three significant ways; the emphasis on the impossible love between the protagonist and the daughter of one of his enemies adds a strong melodramatic element to the story that is familiar to Korean audiences. Second, the protagonist of Bichunmoo is Korean and the background is a well-known part of Korean history, although the action takes place in a Yuan China that is about to collapse under the Ming onslaught. An important Chinese ingredient is the presence of renowned Hong Kong martial arts director Ma Yuk-sing. In order to clearly situate the movie in Korea (psychologically if not physically), the director resorted to a time-honored introduction of a historical movie: the movie starts with a zooming in on Korea on a map of East Asia.15 Third, the movie was based on a popular serial comic by Kim Hyerin (published in the late 80s), which increased recognition by the comic-crazy Korean audience. The melodramatic contents of the


14 The movie was successfully hyped before opening. The popular sports and entertainment daily Sip‘ŏch’u Chosŏn opined that the spectacular action and story of Bichunmoo guaranteed box office success (Sip‘ŏch’u Chosŏn, June 28, 2000), while Korea’s most popular newspaper, enraptured with the movie, headlined: “Two hours of losing oneself in spectacular martial arts effects and ‘a different world’” (Chosŏn ilbo, June 26, 2009). This marketing resulted in over 700,000 visitors in Seoul alone, which given the stiff competition the movie faced (JSA, Gladiator, MI 2 and The Foul King) was a very respectable number.

movie can be directly related to the original series which in its tagline described its own storyline as “the sadness of a people that lost their country and the repressed sorrow (han) of a love that cannot be.”16 As important for its melodramatic contents, or at least for the perception that this series is inherently melodramatic, is the fact that its author, Kim Hyerin, is female and describes this series as a “boy-meets-girl historical drama.”17 The author’s femininity is taken as automatically implying the presence of melodramatic elements, further emphasized by the author herself.

**The Legend Of The Evil Lake**

*The Legend Of The Evil Lake* is another instance of a Korean interpretation of the *muhyŏp* genre. It is a remake of a movie from 1969 by director Shin Sangok. The story is set in Korea and begins with the victory of Silla founder Pak Hyŏkkŏse over a primitive tribe, whose chief curses Silla with his dying breath. Pak Hyŏkkŏse makes sure that the chief, whose prowess in magic was well known, cannot harm him by sealing his soul in a lake. But when almost a thousand years later, the Silla kingdom is about to succumb to internal strife and rebellion, the evil chief makes his re-entrance by possessing the body of Chaunbi (Kim Hyojin), the young woman the protagonist of the movie, general Piharang (Chŏng Chunho) loves. The melodrama of this *muhyŏp* really takes off when Queen Chinsŏng of Silla falls in love with Piharang. The stage is then set for impressive battles, feats of magic and drawn out scenes of unrequited love, while the Silla kingdom struggles to survive. Despite the prominent presence of melodramatic elements, the movie obeys the generic laws of the *muhyŏp* genre; its hero is suitably tormented, he has been taught in mysterious martial arts by an equally mysterious master, and the villain he has to vanquish is duly powerful and evil. Again, the historical background and the emphasis on melodrama set this Korean *muhyŏp* piece apart from its Chinese models. To any viewer familiar with Korean history or architecture, however, the opening scene of the movie, in which the victorious general Piharang enters the palace of the queen, feels incongruent: the buildings in the scene are too obviously Chinese.

The *muhyŏp* characteristics of *The Legend Of The Evil Lake* become more pronounced if we compare it to the original 1969 film which has the same Korean title, but a different one in English: *The Thousand Year Old Fox*. *The Thousand Year Old Fox* is a well-made traditional historical movie with much emphasis on the dramatic and adulterous relationship between the queen of Silla and her favorite general, but does not leave the confines of the historical genre. In the original version, the malevolent spirit which possesses the wife of general Piharang is also driven by a desire for revenge on Piharang and the queen for their betrayal of Piharang’s wife by having an illicit affair, driving her to her death. This adultery theme, too, firmly belongs to the (historical) movies from Korea’s Golden Age.18 It should not pass

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16 Kim Hyerin, *Pich’ŏnmu* 1 (Seoul: Tŏso ch’ulp’ān p’rintsŭ, 1988). The original manhwa was published in 13 issues between 1988 and 1991, republished in 11 issues in 1993 (by Ch’angmansa), again republished in an ever decreasing number of 6 issues in 1997 (by Tŏso ch’ulp’ān Taewŏn) and finally in 4 issues in 1998 (by Taewŏn Sshiai), in which format it is still obtainable (as well as in the 2005 special edition which comprises all issues in one book).

unnecessary. The presence of Zhang Ziyi is probably the reason for Teo to call the Hong Kong emphasis on training and initiation started to become a staple notion of Korean action movies.20

**Musa**

Musa is considerably different from the above-mentioned movies. Directed by veteran director Kim Sŏngsu, who made his name with gangster movies Beat 비트 (1998) and There Is No Sun 태양은 없다 (2000), it is much more of a gritty action movie, similar to Akira Kurosawa’s samurai movies and Sergio Leone’s spaghetti westerns. Nonetheless, it is still considered a wuxia epic by Hong Kong film critics.21 Director Kim Sŏngsu’s sudden shift from the gangster genre in which he was highly successful to the muhyop genre is indicative of the new-found prestige of the Chinese martial art epic, while his casting of his favorite actor Chŏng Usŏng, who starred as a young gangster in Beat and There Is No Sun, clearly indicates the afore-mentioned affinity of the muhyop genre with the gangster genre in Korea.

Before its release, Musa was anticipated eagerly as an opportunity to make up

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19 This may be a consequence of the fact that Korea’s best-known cinematic gangster fighters were also ‘real-life’ streetfighters such as gangster-turned member of parliament Kim Tuhan (1918-1972) and gangster-turned-minister Shirasoni (1916-1983). The fact that Korea does not have a tradition of chivalrous literature may also have contributed to this phenomenon.

20 This is borne out by the attention for training and initiation in the 2008 TV series version of Bichunmoo, a high-cost (30 million CNY/8 million USD) joint production between Korea and China. Except for the protagonists, the cast is mainly Chinese. It is a 33-part series which roughly adheres to the original story, focusing on impossible love, separation and vengeance. The action director of the original movie, Ma Yuk-sing, was also responsible for the action sequences in the TV series. See http://tv.sbs.co.kr/bichunmu/. Accessed on February 8, 2009.

21 Stephen Teo calls Musa a “cross-over imitation” of the wuxia category, implying that wuxia are necessarily Chinese. The presence of Zhang Ziyi is probably the reason for Teo to call Musa a cross-over imitation and not merely an imitation. Given the frequency with which Korean actors acted in Hong Kong action movies (wuxia pictures included), this seems a troublesome standard for judging a movie to be a cross-over. Often using the Cantonese pronunciation of their names on the credits of the movie, these Korean actors (who would also be dubbed) were not always recognizable as Korean actors. Perhaps the most famous Hong Kong Korean actor in the 70s and 80s was Hwang Jang Lee (황장리 Hwang Ch'ŏngli), also known as Wong Cheng Lee or Li (the IMDB database distinguishes as much as 33 variant Korean, Cantonese and Mandarin spellings of his name) who was famous for his kicking techniques and who starred in at least 60 martial arts movies. See Stephen Teo, “Wuxia Redux,” p. 203; http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0399007/. Accessed on February 9, 2009.
for the disappointing artistic values of _Bichunmoo_. Its historical background is, like _Bichunmoo_, the 14th-century transition from the Yuan to the Ming, which coincided with the transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn in Korea. In the movie, a Koryŏ embassy travels to the Ming, but as soon as it arrives all embassy members are arrested and sent into exile on charges of disloyalty. On the way to their place of exile, their Ming guards are killed by Yuan Mongols and the head envoy is killed. When the remaining members meet a Ming princess in need of help, they decide to help her, hoping that such a deed might gain them favor with the Ming court and restore relations between the two countries. _Musa_ stars tragic hero par excellence Chŏng Usŏng (the leading actor in _Beat, Born To Kill_ 본투킬, _There Is No Sun, A Moment To Remember_ 내미리속의 자유개 (2001) and prone to die in his most successful movies), veteran An Sŏnggi, Chu Chinmo and the Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi, who in the year before had had her international breakthrough in _Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon_. The movie was shot entirely in China; the music was composed by Japanese composer Sagisu Shiro. The art direction was in the hands of Huo Tingxiao, a Chinese art director who worked with Chen Kaige and received an Academy Award nomination for his work on _Farewell My Concubine_ (Bawang Bie Ji 藩王別姬, 1993). The major difference with the more traditional _muhyŏp_ movies is _Musa_'s realism; the fairytale magic of the standard _muhyŏp_ has given way to severed limbs, bashed heads and broken bodies. The excellent, even improbable fighting skills of the protagonists remain, which makes _Musa_ generically close to the traditional _muhyŏp_ movie. The presence of Zhang Zhiyi, though, is perhaps what gives _Musa_ its most intimate closeness to the traditional _muhyŏp_ genre; Zhang made her reputation by playing hard-fighting heroines in _wuxia_ movies and although her role here does not permit her to display here martial talents, she was cast because of her _wuxia_ reputation, a fact which the target audience knew well.

**Shadowless Sword**

_Sharless Sword_ is the latest movie of _Bichunmoo_ director Kim Yŏngjun. In a sense, it is a bigger, better and more expensive version of _Bichunmoo_. The movie again features some of Korea's hottest stars, the action was again directed by Ma Yuk-sing and the movie was again shot in China. The difference with _Bichunmoo_ is that the subject of _Shadowless Sword_ is significantly more historical; the movie deals with the fall of Parhae (668-926 BCE), a kingdom that considered itself to be the successor to the kingdom of Koguryŏ (37 BCE-668 BCE). The historical legacies of Koguryŏ and Parhae have been hotly debated by China and the two Koreas for several years.
now; both parties claim Parhae and Koguryŏ to be part of their own history.\textsuperscript{25} The release of \textit{Shadowless Sword}, featuring Korean actors and a Korean storyline, but shot in China, with a partly Chinese crew and a Chinese format, is in this respect interesting. The background of the movie is historical, but the storyline itself is completely fictional, counterfactual even, given the fact that it was written around a crown prince who in reality had been assassinated. After the murder of the entire Parhae royal family, a female warrior (played by Yun Soi from \textit{Arahan} 아라한 장풍대 작전, 2004) is dispatched to find the last surviving crown prince, under whose banner the people would unite and fight back the barbarian Khitan who had invaded Parhae.\textsuperscript{26} Like \textit{Bichunmoo}, \textit{Shadowless Sword} is a true \textit{muhyŏp} movie; the protagonists are traumatized, possess incredible martial and magical skills, and the theme of revenge is central to the plot. Although at first sight \textit{Shadowless Sword} firmly belongs to the second wave of Korean \textit{muhyŏp} movies, interestingly under the surface it preserved the key characteristic of the first wave of Korean \textit{muhyŏp} from the 70s: not only is the action tied to locales of Korean colonial resistance (the action is all set in Manchuria), but the movie also subtly refers to signifiers of Korea's colonial past, ingeniously equating Japan's imperialism with Chinese historiographical imperialism. I will return to this subject below.

**Representing a (Contested) Past**

These four \textit{muhyŏp} movies described above are noticeably different, but their format and historical themes are closely linked. The representation of the past is an indispensable element in all four movies. It is useful here to realize that historical movies are multivalenced: they have different stories to tell, both of the past and of the present, their worries, anxieties, hopes and values. At the risk of stating the obvious, representation is the key to the balance between the distant past as articulated in the movie and the present worries and ambitions that underlie the movie. As Marc Ferro put it:

> With distance, one version of history replaces another but the work of art remains. And so, with the passage of time, our memory winds up by not distinguishing between, on the one hand, the imaginative memory of Eisenstein or Gance, and on the other, history such as it really happened, even though historians seek to make us understand and artists seek to make us participate.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{26} The northern barbarian paradigm, according to which all peoples from the north (Manchuria) are necessarily and inevitably blood-thirsty barbarian nomads bent on destruction, is still firmly anchored in the popular consciousness and informs most if not all historical movies in which Manchurian peoples appear. A recent example is the movie \textit{Divine Weapon} (신기전, 2008), directed by Kim Yujin and produced by Kang Usŏk, in which Jurchen appear who seem only interested in fighting and killing and who rather look like members of a post-apocalyptic gang.

Although he does not mention it explicitly, Ferro implicitly recognizes the historiographical role that (some) movies can play. In a country which has a difficult relationship with its traumatic recent past movies with historical themes may be in particular burdened with such a role. One of the more obvious ways in which recent Korean historical movies have accepted this role (or were conceived of with this role – also – in mind) is the lavish material representation of the past which itself is presented as a faithful copying of the past. The sheer extravagance of a set becomes a statement in itself: not merely on the huge budget producers had access to, but also on the lavishness of the Korean past. Given the popular trauma related to the memories of the colonial period and the indescribable suffering and warfare that followed on Korea's liberation, the now widely held belief that before the Japanese intervention in Korean affairs, the nation could pride itself on impressive if now largely lost achievements is understandable (and essentially true). This notion from the popular imagination is (rather crudely) translated into cinematic terms as material opulence and cultural refinement. The direct link between romanticization of the past and the material opulence of the represented, as pioneered by Im Kwŏn-t’aek, has proved hard to break and is still a staple notion in Korean mainstream cinema (only mainstream movies can afford the huge budgets needed to construct elaborate sets), even if there have been movies lately that went against this trend.

Lavish material representation of the past and romanticization of that same past are two characteristics of the Korean muhyŏp. A movie such as Bichumoo projects an obvious fairytale feeling, as do The Legend Of The Evil Lake and Shadowless Sword. This fairytale quality is not shared by Musa, which if anything is an intensely gritty movie. Musa, though, is not averse to romanticization of the past either. The slave-master relationship between Chŏng Usŏng and his owner, the elderly assistant envoy, is hard to imagine to have existed in the 14th century, when society consisted of 30 to 40% slaves, but is more reminiscent of a modern and liberal employer-employee relationship, be it with considerable patriarchal overtones.

28 This is of course a rather recent development following (and not predating) the middle class's increasing wealth in South Korea.

29 In general, romanticization in Korean cinema of the pre-colonial past has been quite severe; relatively recent movies by Korea's most famous director Im Kwŏn-t’aek, such as Chi’wihason 취화선, Chunhyang 춘향전 and Low Life 하류인생 are perhaps esthetically the most obvious examples of this kind of filmmaking. All of Im's movies about recent Korean history are heavily romanticized and rely on historically naïve and morally obvious black-and-white storylines. His Son Of A General 장군의 아들 (1990), a fictionalized and heavily edited hagiography of Korean gangster Kim Tu-han (1918-1972) set a trend in this regard.

30 Lately, though, there has also been another trend with regard to historical movies. While movies about the colonial period are as opulent as ever, some movies now depict that period without the until now habitual approach that emphasized the suffering of the Korean people. Instead, other sides of the period are shown, often in a comedy-like setting. Radio Days 라디오 데이스 (2008) is one such movie, Once Upon A Time 인스 오푼 이 타임 (2007), a colonial period Indiana Jones spoof that is not entirely successful, another. Epitaph 기람 (2007), a horror movie set in the colonial period, quite sensationaly treats the colonial situation as a mere given and does not pay any special attention to it. At the same time, the representation of the pre-colonial past has also undergone dramatic changes. The rather static representation of the Choson period (which made it difficult to determine whether a story was set in the 16th, 17th, or 18th century) has given way to an approach that is both more historical in its particulars and freer in its interpretation. Recent examples include Untold Scandal 스캔들 (2003), The Duelist, The King And The Clown 왕의 남자 (2005) and Forbidden Quest 음란사생활 (2006), dealing respectively with illicit sexual relations, corruption and counterfeiting, homosexuality and pornography during the Choson period.
A noteworthy aspect that these four movies have in common and that begs attention is the fact that the historical background of these movies are periods of transition, both domestically and internationally. The Yuan-Ming/Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition is featured twice (Bichunmoo, Musa), while the Silla-Koryŏ period of transition forms the background for The Legend Of The Evil Lake and Shadowless Sword, although in the case of Shadowless Sword the actual transition shown is the conquest of Parhae by the Khitan. In 926, when Parhae succumbed to the Khitan conquest and ceased to exist, Koryŏ was busy unifying the peninsula, in which it would succeed in 935 when the last Silla king surrendered to Koryŏ. The same emphasis on transitional periods can be found in Chinese wuxia movies, in particular on the Ming-Qing transition.31 Periods of transition, then, seem to attract the attention of the makers of historically inspired movies. An obvious explanation is that these periods afford the filmmaker much freedom and room for spectacle and action scenes. More important, though, than these periods of transitions themselves are the chances they afford to highlight tensions in the societies under scrutiny, or, as in three cases here, their foreign relations and the tension these generate. The Korea-China relationship plays a central role in Bichunmoo, Musa and Shadowless Sword; in Bichunmoo much of the tension accompanying the collapse of Koryŏ and the Yuan is sublimated in the melodrama of the relations between the central characters. In Musa, the consequences of the distrust between the Ming and Koryŏ are directly felt; punishment, exile and death for the Koryŏ envoys. And in Shadowless Sword, Parhae is so thoroughly Koreanized that its relations with the Khitan and with China may be considered as readings of the Korea-Khitian and Korea-China relations. In The Legend Of The Evil Lake, Korea’s relations with foreign states are not central to the story. Nonetheless, given the fact that the entire movie has been shot in China, against a Chinese background and using Chinese buildings to pass as Silla buildings, the entire production process of the movie becomes an indirect comment on Korea-China relations underscoring the importance of China for Korea, not to be missed by viewers familiar with either Korea or China (or both).

The relationship of each of these movies to the historical past is necessarily somewhat tenuous. Bichunmoo’s depiction of the past is fairly idealized, romanticized and resembles a fairytale, but this may be expected from a muhyŏp, which inhabits its own world where the rules are slightly different from the past historians study. The beginning of Bichunmoo is a case in point: the first scene introduces protagonist Shin Hyŏnju in a battle scene that is replete with wire kungfu (fighting scenes in which the actors are aided by wires to help them jump and fly), special effects and virtually no blood, despite an impressive body count. Musa, which is set in the same time period, but which feels like a completely different universe, gives significantly more attention to the historical past. As mentioned before, its depiction of the troubled Koryŏ-Ming relationship true to fact. Due to Koryŏ’s intimate ties with the Yuan dynasty (Koryŏ kings were both sons of and husbands to princesses of the imperial Yuan house), the new rulers of the Ming explicitly distrusted Koryŏ.

Although the movie depicts a fictional embassy to the Ming court, in historical reality the humiliations Koryo and later Choson envoys had to bear when they reached the Ming court were as intense as depicted in the movie. In this sense, the movie’s portrayal of the hazardous duty of the envoys is realistic. The attraction of the narrative of Musa, though, does not lie in its realism, but in the more contemporary issues that can be read into it, of which more later. *Shadowless Sword*, finally, offers a mix of history and fantasy; its production values firmly place it in the *muhyop* genre. It has spectacle, high production values, magic, incredible feats of swordsmanship and heroism and so forth. It is a co-production of Korean company Taewon Entertainment and big American player New Line Cinema; moreover, the movie consciously aims at an international audience. Its subject touches upon something quite different. At first sight, a movie about the destruction of a little known Manchurian state over a thousand years ago which did not leave any successor state does not seem to deal with any contemporary issues bar archaeological ones. This changes radically if the ongoing historiographical struggle between the two Koreas (who are quite unified on this subject) and China about Koguryo’s historical legacy is recalled. In July 2004, China launched a claim that the Manchurian state of Koguryo (37BCE-668) was an integral part of Chinese history, as was the state of Parhae (668-926) which occupied part of the same territory and which incorporated many of refugees and survivors from Koguryo. This first move was part of a concerted effort on the part of the Chinese government to mobilize its academics to prepare a claim towards the histories of Koguryo and Parhae; a claim to their territories was not necessary, since most of the lands these two states once possessed are now Chinese.

The Chinese claim came forth out of a sense of anxiety about the increased tears the multi-ethnic society of China has been showing for some years. The inclusion of the histories of Koguryo and Parhae would mean the symbolic inclusion of the descendants of the peoples that made up these states; Manchurians, in other words, and the inhabitants of modern day Yanbian (where many ethnic Koreans live). Moreover, the official recognition of Koguryo and Parhae as part of Chinese

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32 According to the director, different tastes were taken into account when making the movie: “The taste of a Korean audience is different from the taste of a Western audience. Korean viewers like a reality with restricted possibilities, while Hong Kong viewers are used to over-the-top action. American viewers seem to like action that is in between these two extremes. We had to rack our brains how to regulate the level of action in the movie.” See http://www.cine21.com/Article/article_view.php?mm=00501001&action_id=32351. Accessed on February 7, 2009.

33 See Peter Hays Gries, “The Koguryo Controversy,” p. 4

34 For a useful chronology, see Gries’ article “The Koguryo Controversy.”

35 UNESCO was put in an awkward position by this Chinese claim, because it was at that very moment deliberating whether Koguryo tombs now on Chinese and North-Korean territory should be recognized as world heritage sites and if so, as the heritage of what nation. UNESCO chose for a compromise, recognizing the tombs on Chinese territory as ‘Chinese Koguryo sites’ and those on North-Korean soil as ‘Korean Koguryo sites.’ See Gries, “The Koguryo Controversy,” p. 3.

history would signal the inclusiveness of the Chinese state with regard to minorities. Chinese historical sources, however, flatly contradict this government-led academic initiative. Koguryo and Parhae have since old been regarded as little more than barbarians and were treated as such. The dynastic histories of the Manchurian Liao and Jin states maintain a separate genealogy from both Chinese and Korean states in which Koguryo and Parhae are designated as their predecessors; a fact which is incidentally confirmed by contemporary Chinese Song sources. The Chinese dynastic histories, which span over three millennia, make no exceptions in judging people from Koguryo and Parhae stock to be different from the Chinese.

The Chinese initiative came as something of a shock to both Korea's. Suddenly, the Koguryo tombs on Chinese soil, which were under consideration to be listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, were off limits to Korean academics. UNESCO refused to take sides and decided to recognize both the Korean Koguryo tombs and the Chinese Koguryo tombs. The public and official outrage that followed occasioned a massive popular launch aimed at reclaiming Koguryo and Parhae history. Newspapers wrote angry editorials and South Korean citizens went to the internet en masse to set up websites that categorically stated Koguryo and Parhae to be inalienable parts of Korean history. Funds were speedily made available to counter the Chinese claims. In 2004, the Koguryo Research Foundation was established to fund research into Korean history and in particular its relations with the Manchurian states. Koguryo has been considered a peninsular Korean state since the composition of Korea's earliest extant history, the 12th century Samguk sagi (Histories of the Three Kingdoms). Koguryo's inclusion in Korean history has never seriously been doubted. Parhae history is slightly different. The idea that Parhae history formed an integral part of Korean history is much more recent, dating from the late Chosön dynasty (late 18th century). Nonetheless, the idea that Parhae history would be part of

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37 There seems to be a broad consensus on how China's historiographical moves should be understood: as anticipatory moves towards more claims and a confirmation of time-honored Chinese leadership in the region. Although most commentators tend to greatly exaggerate and essentialize the extent to which China the ultimate power in the region in pre-modern times, these analyses that stress the politically changeable nature of the Chinese position are not without merit. The only analysis to view China's position as permanent and as a consequence of Chinese and Korean identity politics is represented by Gries.


40 The Koguryo Research Foundation (Koguryo yon'gu chaedan) has since been merged into the larger Northeast Asian History Foundation (Tongbug-A yolka chaedan). This is its mission statement: “The Northeast Asian History Foundation was founded with the goal of establishing a basis for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia by confronting distortions of history that have caused considerable anguish in this region and the world at large, and developing a correct understanding of history through comprehensive long-term research and systematic and strategic policy development.” See http://english.historyfoundation.or.kr/?sub_num=9. Accessed on February 2, 2009. Another statement on the foundation's website is even more concrete: “China has been attempting to distort the history of the Northeast Asian region in a purposeful and methodical manner, through a long-term project that is surprisingly meticulously planned out. Accordingly, what is most important for developing effective counterarguments to refute false historical claims by China is gathering accurate facts about systematic attempts of distortion made by the latter and analyzing them.” See http://english.historyfoundation.or.kr/?sub_num=88. Accessed on February 2, 2009.

Chinese history is an even more recent concept; it belongs to this millennium.

The popular campaign to show China and the rest of the international community that Koguryo and Parhae were Korean states has had (and still has) much attention in the media. Internet sites defending Korean history have sprung up, TV documentaries and drama series have been devoted to it, research projects on it have been started and it has been on the agenda of diplomats and statesmen alike. A Korean audience that views Shadowless Sword, then, will automatically and unavoidably associate the story of Parhae's destruction with the recent Chinese attempts at what Korea considers to be the destruction of Parhae's history and indeed Korea's history. For the Korean viewer, Shadowless Sword is not only inextricably tied to the historical revisionism practiced by China, but perhaps even considered to be a product of it. In this sense, Shadowless Sword is an intensely national(ist) movie, retelling the story of Parhae's destruction from a Korean point of view, with Korean actors and spoken in Korean. The end of the movie is particularly informative: the rightful heir to the throne of Parhae, once restored to it, leads his people to Koryo, a place where they will find refuge. It has been widely accepted by historians of Korea that the ruling stratum of Parhae and the inhabitants of Koryo shared so many cultural and linguistic (and even genetic) characteristics that assimilation was achieved very quickly. A powerful symbol of the appropriation of Parhae and Koguryo history by Korea in Shadowless Sword is the prominent place of the stele of

42 The MBC TV series Chumong 关于 the legendary founder of the Koguryo state was the best watched TV series of 2006 and 2007 in Korea. Interestingly, it was sold to Asia Television in Hong Kong (the series was sold to eight different countries – Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines – at an unprecedented price of 8 million USD dollars), which had it translated in Chinese. The translation changed the original in sensitive places, mistranslating place names and elevating the status of the Chinese Han dynasty, which gave rise to an international scandal. This flipside of the Hallyu phenomenon is as interesting as the Korean Wave itself, for it encapsulates many historical issues as they are engrafted in the popular consciousness. For the Chinese side of the story, see http://worldjournal.com/ wj-ch-news.php?nt_seq_id=1484279. Accessed on February 36, 2009. The 2007 MBC TV series The Legend 历史永恒的人物 is a historical drama with fantastic elements as it blends the legend of Tan'gun with the legend of the historical figure of Koguryo King Kwanggaeto. As if to prove that form comes before content, this series was also sold abroad and broadcast in Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines in apparent defiance of its overtly Korean nationalist contents.

43 For a different opinion, see film scholar Kyu Hyun Kim's article in the on-line newspaper Oh My News: http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?menu=c10400&no=326320&rel_no=1. Accessed on Februari 8, 2009. Kim, however, misses the entire debate raging about Koguryo and Parhae precisely when Shadowless Sword was released. The official site for Shadowless Sword (http://www.balhae2005.co.kr) clearly indicates with its address what message should be given to (Korean) viewers. A book released concurrently with the movie underscored this: with the title Mayonggomy: Parhae-ui kihoe 복명감: 발해의 기억 (Shadowless Sword: Memories of Parhae), the book and the movie are firmly pushed into the realm of historical nostalgia. The realm where in other words the lost achievements (or territories and in this case histories) of the nation are mourned. The book was written by Kim Taegwan and published by Chipsajae in November 2005. In an interview the director stated that “we have not learned much about Parhae. It was a country with a short history of just over 200 years. The strongest state after Koguryo had perished. If you study its history, there is a record that says that its crown prince was assassinated. What if he had not been assassinated? The movie was made from the counterfactual idea what would have happened if he had survived, if there had been a king who could withstand the Khitan." In the same interview, the interviewer also remarked that "the history of Parhae is uncharted territory for the audience and reconfigured into a hypothetical history. When the controversy surrounding Tokto became ever more of an issue, the fantasy to rebuild Parhae gained persuasiveness." See http://www.cine21.com/Article/article_view.php?mm=005001001&article_id=32351. Accessed on February 8, 2009.

King Kwanggaet’o (r. 391-413) in the website of the movie, its trailer and the movie itself. 45 This stele has been at the center of an academic dispute between Korea and Japan for over a century, because of its opaque meaning. There is also a strong popular suspicion of the inscription, which has been damaged at some time in the past, was damaged and even partially forged on purpose by colonial Japanese scholars. 46 Kwanggaet’o was one of Koguryo’s most famous and certainly most expansionist rulers; the stele was established in his memory by his son and records his exploits. 47 An exact replica now has a most prominent place in front of the War Museum in Seoul. 48 The difficulties modern-day scholars face, however, in the interpretation of the stele’s text has led scholars to radically different conclusions. During the colonial period, the contents of the stele were used to prove that in ancient times Japan had already possessed a colony on the Korean peninsula, which provided a legitimation of sorts for Japan’s recent annexation of Choson Korea. 49 Korean scholars have always furiously denied this claim and interpreted the stele in quite another way; the prominent display of the stele in Shadowless Sword is an unambiguous reminder of Korea’s experience with imperialist historiography and the struggle against the distortion of Korean history by foreign powers as well as celebrating the glories of Koguryo’s and hence Korea’s expansionist past. 50

Rethinking the Present

Seen through the lens of historical revisionism, we have arrived at a different reading of Shadowless Sword, one that is in principle only accessible to the Korean and Chinese audiences. Is the same possible for Bichunmoo or Musa? Too much of Bichunmoo’s story line has ended up on the floor of the editing room to answer this question with any certainty, but for Musa such a case can be made. The entire movie has as its main theme the struggles of a small country’s envoys against the seemingly arbitrary orders of two larger countries (the Ming and the Yuan). The Koryo envoys are virtually continuously at the mercy of the Ming or the Yuan. From their arrival in the Ming capital until the final battle at the deserted fortress, the Koryo embassy reacts and has little chance to act on its own accord. The tension this generates within

45 Unfortunately, the website of Shadowless Sword is no longer online, but the prominent place the stele occupied in the website is also visible in the trailer accompanying the movie and the video accompanying the song from the soundtrack Kiude kyo-t-aro performed by KCM.

46 Although largely discredited in academia now, this theory (launched by Japanese-Korean scholar Yi Chinhui and elaborated by South Korean scholar Yi Hyonggu) is still believed to be fact by many people. See Yi Chinhui, Kokaito-o ryohi no kenkyu (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1972); Yi Hyonggu, Kwanggaeto-wang mingshi shin yon’gu (Seoul: Tonghwa ch’ulp’angsa, 1986).


50 So unambiguous in fact that one netizen advised potential viewers of the movie ‘to just read an ethics primer from school instead,’ because its (nationalist) contents were similar to the points made in the movie. See http://www.cine21.com/Community/Netizen_Review/review_read.php?no=52061. Accessed on February 12, 2009.
the Koryô group, constantly losing people to attack or exhaustion, makes its members reject the authoritarian leadership of general Ch’oe Ch’ong who had taken over command after the death of the chief envoy. The group chose a new leader (Chillip) whose style of leadership is more democratic and consensus-seeking. The scene in which the remaining members of the embassy choose Chillip to be their leader is eerily reminiscent of the cinematic representation of 1980s meetings of dissident students. A constant thorn in every one’s side is the presence of the arrogant slave Yosol (Ch’ong Usông), whose tragic heroism sits ill with Chillip’s realism and the group’s desire to survive. Apart from the fact that the way the group dynamics have been depicted show a definite modern and romanticized touch, the odyssey of the small group of Koryôans lends itself for another reading, one that puts Musa in another category as a movie. Seemingly, an epic about the tribulations of men who get caught between the political machinations of the great powers, the situation depicted in this movie is reminiscent of how Koreans have come to view the situation of their own country in the 20th and 21st centuries. After the division of the peninsula in 1945 under pressure of the US and the Soviet Union, the popular perception that Korea was like ‘a shrimp caught between two fighting whales’ grew to the extent that it has become a staple notion when referring to Korea’s international position. Whether Korea is really as dependent on the big powers (which are now the US and China) as is thought in Korea remains open to debate, but it is beyond doubt that the idea that Korea is a plaything of the superpowers plays an important role in popular discourse. If we look at Musa from this perspective, the parallels between the small Koryô group and Korea’s perceived position in the international world immediately draw our attention. The powerlessness of the embassy in the face of the Ming decision to send them into exile is a reflection of the powerlessness of the Korea’s to influence American and Chinese policy. This parallel is most explicitly expressed in the scene when Yuan Mongol troops attack the group as it travels under the guard of Ming soldiers to its place of exile. The Mongols ruthlessly massacre the Ming detachment, but the reason that the Koryô group does not share their fate was merely the Mongol commander’s estimation of their partisanship and potential danger: “We have no quarrel with Koryô,” the Mongol commanders states before slaughtering the remaining Ming soldiers. The Koryô embassy itself had little to say about it, in other words. Even so, during the attack, several members of the embassy were killed or wounded, symbolizing the sad fact that no matter the decision taken by the superpowers, Korea pays a high price. Although it is tempting to identify the newly established Ming dynasty with the rising influence of the People’s Republic of China and the waning Yuan with the declining influence of the US in East Asia, this would probably go too far. It is important, though, to see this dimension of Musa in relation to the international state of affairs in East Asia at the dawn of the new millennium and to realize that Korea’s historical luggage of having suffered under the unilateral decisions of Japan, the US and the Soviet Union left its traces in the popular imagination. As such, the odyssey of the Koryô embassy becomes a micro-history of modern Korea. The leadership struggles within the group and the shifting power balance, according to which the authoritarian leader is removed from power in favor of a more democratic one can hardly be called subtle; the way in which
it is achieved, moreover, is an anachronism that clearly stands out. It seems to be a clear allegory for the democratization movement in South Korea. This metaphorical reading holds good, particularly so when it is realized that relations with the outside world (Ming and Yuan in the movie and the US, Japan, China and the Soviet Union in recent history) were the touchstone of a leader's suitability. When South-Korean society no longer tolerated the increasingly authoritarian rule of Generals Chun Doohwan and Roh Taewoo, it revolted and chose a more democratic leader instead. Similarly, when the Koryo group no longer trusted General Ch’oe to make the right decisions about the group’s strategy for survival, the general was removed and Chillip, a man of common descent and not a member of the privileged class like General Ch’oe, was instated as the new leader of the group. The ultimate moral of the movie, in which the only survivor is the wily and experienced Chillip, also seems to involve an endorsement of South Korea’s chosen path, despite the inevitable troubles it faces in its neighbors and other intervening powers. It is possible, and plausible, to read Musa on two different levels; as a rather straightforward and realistic movie about the tribulations of a Koryo envoyship and as an allegorical interpretation of contemporary Korea’s relationship with the superpowers. In this sense, Musa is certainly a movie with strong nationalized contents.

The Legend Of The Evil Lake is a bit of the odd one out in this context, since it deals with Korea’s domestic situation, rather than its relations with China. Its format, though, is wuxia. The Legend Of The Evil Lake is a profoundly Chinese film in execution, production and background. And as such, an alternative reading of the movie can proceed through looking at its production background. The film's lack of content dealing with China may offer a clearer perspective of the importance of format in comparison to content. Surprisingly perhaps, The Legend Of The Evil Lake is a Korean-Chinese co-production; Korean production company Sidus joined hands with the China Film Co-Production Corporation, based in Beijing. If this circumstance is added to the fact that a significant number of the important crew members were also Chinese, the domestic orientation of The Legend Of The Evil Lake must be seen in another light. The Legend Of The Evil Lake is a loose remake of the 1969 Shin Sangok movie with the same Korean title (Ch’ónnyónho), but with the English title Thousand Years Old Fox. Shin’s movie was a purely Korean production, though, made for the Korean public and made with Korean money, whereas The Legend Of The Evil Lake, like almost all Korean movies nowadays, was meant to profit from the Korean Wave or Hallyu phenomenon. If the Asian market as a whole is targeted, as is usually the case with Korean big budget projects these days, bringing in foreign capital makes excellent sense, especially if it comes from companies with specialized local knowledge. Bichunmoo received an investment of 500 million won in return for which the director had to hire Chinese actors, extras and technicians, and give the Chinese investors a say in the production process, something which director Kim Yongjun later said he regretted. In the same manner, Musa was also co-produced by three Chinese companies; the China Film Co-Production Corporation, the Beijing

51 This information can be found in the database of the Korean Film Archives: http://www.kmdb.or.kr/main_min.asp. Accessed on February 2, 2009.
Film Production Corporation and the Beijing Film Corporation. *Shadowless Sword* is also an international co-production; its partner is not Chinese, but it is the company behind the *Lord Of The Ring* series, New Line Cinema. This cooperation between Korean production companies and a major player on the American market is a first.

The relationship between Korea and China has turned out to play an important role in Korean *muhyop*. China is not only important as the country where the *wuxia* genre originated, but also in the storylines of the movies. The relationship between the two countries in its diverse aspects is absolutely central to *Bichunmoo*, *Musa* and *Shadowless Sword*. But as *The Legend Of The Evil Lake* has shown, the same relationship also plays an important role in the making and conception of these movies. This is moreover a publicly known aspect of these movies. With the *Hallyu* phenomenon covered in detail in the Korean media, attention for Korean-Chinese cooperative efforts in the arts and entertainment industry has accordingly soared. Apart from this, the presence of Zhang Ziyi in *Musa*, the Chinese (and very un-Korean) backgrounds and sets in *Bichunmoo*, *The Legend Of The Evil Lake* and *Shadowless Sword* have not escaped the Korean audience's attention. Public awareness of the large presence of Chinese elements is significant and is enlarged through high profile Chinese movies starring Korean *Hallyu* stars, such as Chang Tonggon in Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (*Wuji* 無極, 2005), Kim Hōison in Jackie Chan's *The Myth* (*Shenhu* 神話, 2005) and An Sŏnggi in the 2006 *Battle Of The Wits* (*Mo gong* 墨攻) by Jacob Cheung. While internationalization in many other South Korean industries is eyed with a mixture of distrust and anxiety (as the heavy Korean involvement in the 2005 WTO riots in Hong Kong clearly show), the internationalization of Korean cinema is celebrated as a source of national pride. A revealing instance of this pride was the Korean decision to build a large movie studio complex and theme park outside of Seoul in Kyŏnggi-do and call it 'Hallyuwood', both in recognition of the popularity of Korean entertainment in Asia and as a challenge to Hollywood (and Bollywood), showing the maturity of South Korean cinema.

There is, then, a clear public awareness of, and even pride in, the fact that these movies, considered to be the flagships of Korean cinema in terms of planning, production, star power and of course budget, are for a significant Chinese (both mainland and Hong Kong) or, as in the case of New Line Cinema, American. This awareness, however, is at clear odds with the often national(ist) contents of these

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52 Perhaps on account of the contents, but partially also because of director Kim Yongjun’s bad experiences with cooperating with Chinese investors, *Shadowless Sword* was made in China with a mainly Chinese crew, but these were freely hired workers and not part of a coproduction deal as before. See http://www.cine21.com/Article/article_view.php?mm=005001001&article_id=32353. Accessed on February 9, 2009.

53 Presumably partly also because the Korean cinema press paid relatively much attention to the hardships suffered by the Korean crew members who had to spent more than five months in the south of China during the shooting of the movie, exoticizing and reifying an altogether rather common experience. See for example the report of a reporter from Cine21 who visited the Chinese set: http://www.cine21.com/Article/article_view.php?mm=005001001&article_id=32350. Accessed on Februari 9, 2009.

54 Although the decision to build was made in 2005, the 3,000 billion won complex has not been finished. According to the website, it will open in 2012, presumable when most people will have forgotten what *Hallyu* was. See http://www.h-wood.co.kr/index_eng.php. Accessed on February 9, 2009.
movies. Shadowless Sword is the most outspoken example of a movie with nationalist contents, aimed against Chinese historical revisionism, but Musa and The Legend Of The Evil Lake are also movies preoccupied with the narrative of the Korean nation. And even in the case of Bichunmoo, one could argue that by starring Korean actors and actresses and shooting the dialogues in Korean, a significant part of Chinese history is appropriated and drawn into the sphere of Korean history. There is a clear tension, in other words, between on the one hand the narrative contents of the movie and the way these movies have been marketed (Shadowless Sword has for instance been marketed as the cinematic resurrection of Parhae as a Korean kingdom with the slogan “the rebirth of Parhae!”) and on the other hand the production process of these movies and the way in which the internationalization of Korean cinema is celebrated and applauded. The question then is how to interpret this tension. Does the awareness of Chinese elements in a movie such as Shadowless Sword in any way undercut the nationalist message of its narrative? Are we being confronted with subversive readings of the history and actuality of the relationship between Korea and China? Should movies like the ones mentioned above rather be seen as artistic works with strong satirical, ironical and even cynical contents, pretending to retell the story of the nation in the rhetorical language associated with the nation, while in fact they tell completely different stories that are at odds with their contents?

In order to try and answer this question, we have to go back to the beginning of this paper and reconsider the muhyŏp genre. As mentioned before, this genre is originally Chinese and has only been marginally adapted by Korean filmmakers; most notable perhaps is the inclusion of more explicit melodramatic elements. The muhyŏp genre distinguishes itself from other genres by its depiction of a world peculiar to the genre, the ‘rivers and lakes.’ In its magical world, extraordinary feats of martial prowess, heroism and self-sacrifice are possible, expected even. In this sense, the Korean version of the wuxia genre is not significantly different. Nonetheless, as we have seen, there is a clear tension present in these movies between the story they tell and the way the story is told. The narrative of the nation in Musa, Shadowless Sword and The Legend Of The Evil Lake contrasts sharply with the fact that these movies have been shot in a Chinese format, in China, with a Chinese crew, Chinese extras and actors and that two of them are Chinese co-productions.

This is what distinguishes these movies from other Korean muhyŏp dramas,
such as *Sword In The Moon*, *The Duelist*, *The Divine Weapon* and the hugely popular TV series *Damo* and its many clones, which have been produced in Korea, with Korean money and depict Korean issues. These movies and TV series are in an important sense traditional or classic. Inspired by the commercial success of Hong Kong action cinema, and by its Korean adaptations, such traditional historical movies underwent a (mainly structural) transformation: they adopted the format but not the contents of the *wuxia* epic. These movies look like *wuxia* epics, they have action sequences which look like they have been done by *wuxia* martial arts directors, they may even have wire *kungfu* flying warriors, as in *Damo*. But they are completely traditional in the sense that the storyline and the background are thoroughly Korean and do not venture over the Korean border.\(^{57}\) And this should be taken quite literally, because these movies (and TV dramas) hark back to the golden age of the Korean historical movie in the 60s—even if some elements of the storyline are very contemporary—in the sense that the world outside of Korea does not really exist.

As we have seen, *The Legend Of The Evil Lake* is a remake of a classic historical drama of 1969, which exclusively dealt with Korean issues. *Sword In The Moon*, a 2003 movie set in the middle of the Chosŏn dynasty, is despite its very modern-looking special effects and fighting sequences a continuation of the classic historical drama. These movies are classic, because the way Korea is depicted is solipsistic; in *Sword In The Moon*, for instance, the northern border, which always played a prominent role in maintaining Korea’s safety, is shown and its importance emphasized by assigning the best soldiers there, but there is no visible enemy, nor does it become clear who this enemy might be. Such descriptions reinforce the idea that Korea is a universe on its own, where troubles are internal and where the external world does not really figure. It is telling that when the frontier troops finally have to fight, they are called in to fight in the capital and against their own countrymen. The danger, in other words, comes from within. This is the largest contrast with the legendary world created in *muhyŏp* movies; even though a movie such as *Bichumnoo* or *Shadowless Sword* depicts a world which obeys only its own rules and where warriors fly through the air and wield magical weapons, the world of the Korean *muhyŏp* is infinitely more open than the world of *Sword In The Moon* or the 1969 *Ur*-version of *The Legend Of The Evil Lake*. In the world of the *muhyŏp*, different worlds meet; both in the storyline and in the production process South Korean cinema is firmly placed in an international and cosmopolitan world, while in the world of *Sword In The Moon*, the Korean world remains the sole visible world.

Tension between the narrative of the nation in a movie such as *Sword In The Moon* and its production and financing processes is completely absent. The concept of the nation underlying *Sword In The Moon*—the nation as exclusive, delimited, essential and contained—is in complete agreement with its production values and

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\(^{57}\) As for the contents, it can be argued that the professional re-evaluation of the splendour of Chosŏn history, which was led by SNU historian Han Yongu, was largely responsible for the positive popular perception of this period. Han Yongu and his students re-emphasized the enormous positive heritage of the Chosŏn dynasty, in particular the many archival drawings series and illustrated guides (*hŭigwe*) they introduced in easily accessible books and documentaries. It can also be argued that the introduction of visual Chosŏn culture to the public has sparked popular interest in movies that recreate the realities of Chosŏn life.
financial investments. In the muhyŏp movie, on the contrary, the production values, the background and sets, and the financial investments challenge the narrative of the nation as a contained and exclusive unit. In these movies, a narrative is produced that contests the traditional national narrative, even if it superficially seems to comply with it and confirm it. These movies challenge their own structural elements. Shadowless Sword is perhaps most explicit in this aspect; while telling a story of a lost Korean kingdom that is still fought over today by the two Korea's and China, it undercuts its own nationalist narrative by explicitly adopting the foreign wuxia format, using foreign investments, Chinese sets and a Chinese crew. And, what is perhaps most significant, the producers actively promote this international aspect, together with the nationalist rhetoric of the story. What effectively happens, is that movies such as these, of which Bichunmoo was a pioneer, make it possible for the audience to imagine an international and intercultural space that transcends the national space and only indirectly challenges it. It certainly does not negate or deny it. The constitutive elements of these movies are international, diverse and different, both in their historical narratives and in their conception, production, and execution. Movies such as this make the impossible possible, which is the imagining of the nation in an international environment in which the nation takes an active role and is influenced by its contrastive environment, as well as influences this environment.

**Conclusion**

The transplantation process of the wuxia onto Korean soil can be understood as a process in which the regionalized postmodernism apparent in Bichunmoo saw the wuxia-turned-muhyŏp accept strategies adapted to local consumption. The importance of the melodramatic element in the story and the historical background of the story can be considered as such. External and structural elements consisting of the Chinese format, investments, locale, technology, and manpower simultaneously reoriented the movie towards a subversion of the local consumption strategies, particularly so because the prestige carried by successful international co-operation offset the nation-centered rhetoric of the historical narrative. The tension between these two contrasting presences in Bichunmoo is also present in roughly the same form in The Legend Of The Evil Lake. In Musa, however, and in Shadowless Sword, it is clear in both intention and execution that the director and producers aimed at a global audience. Hence, rather than resorting to strategies suited to promote local consumption of partly foreign movies, the narrative conventions of the movies as well as their structural elements anticipate an audience that has no foreknowledge of the cultures depicted. The resulting commodification of the depicted cultures and histories all but ensured international commercial success. The shift from regionalizing to globalizing postmodernisms is in short the history of the wuxia in 21st century Korea; the wuxia epic changed into a muhyŏp while developing from aiming at a domestic audience into aiming at a globalized, culturally diverse audience, inspired by the commercial success of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Interestingly, this process proved to have remarkable consequences for the multivalenced nature of these movies, in particular with regard to its depictions of Korean history which in Bichunmoo, The Legend Of The Evil Lake and Musa were only contested in a domestic setting, but which in
Shadowless Sword became an international issue.

Perhaps unwittingly, Bichunmoo was the first movie to attempt to realize the potential of this tension between narrative contents and production processes. In these movies, something happens that has not received much attention as of yet. While employing the rhetoric of the nation, and sometimes quite subtly so, the nation is simultaneously transcended and cemented into place, which creates an insolvable contradiction. It takes an art form (which muhyŏp movies are, despite their commercial aspirations), to firstly create and then sustain an incommensurable expression such as this. In doing so, these movies in a way ‘rearm’ and reinforce the narrative of the nation, which has become weaker and weaker in recent years, but in the process, they redefine it in, contradictorily, an international, diversified way. The narrative of the nation is radically altered just under the surface; at first sight, Korean muhyŏp easily and predictably reconfirm Korean identity and Korea’s perception of its history. They do so, however, by placing this identity in a completely different context, preparing the way for a new imagining of the Korean nation, one that includes rather than excludes. The tiger of Korean nationalism is toppled; the dragon of Chinese nationalism devoured and the animal that emerges is a different creature entirely.

GLOSSARY

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