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The Sacrifices of Youth: Historical Feature Films on South Korea's *Longue Durée*

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how some South Korean historical films over the past two decades comment on critical meta-narratives of the country's past, and in turn reflect the powerful presence of this history in South Korea today. Due to the directors' age as well as to the relaxing of film censorship in the 1990s, among other factors, these films have generally represented the liberal historical views that came to prevail in South Korea following democratization in the late 1980s. But the filmic expressions of this general understanding emphasize a variety of driving forces and elements in the nation's modern history. Beginning with an analysis of the recent hit, "Ode to My Father," this study examines approximately a dozen films as they illuminate three major historical themes: South Korea's turbulent origins; life under the rule of Park Chung Hee; and the struggle to overcome the burdens of the past. It finds that, on the whole, these films have featured young protagonists as symbols and vehicles of crucial historical moments, which results in a somewhat unbalanced, but nevertheless diverse range of historical perspectives.

Keywords: South Korea, cinema history, historical films, historiography, "Ode to My Father," youth, American influence, Korean War, Hŭngnam Evacuation, Park Chung Hee, anti-communism, democratization, Kwangju Uprising, Roh Moo Hyun.

Feature films set in the past seem to have hit a peak recently in South Korean cinema, if judged by the box office. The two most popular releases on record are historical films appearing in the past few years ("The Admiral" and "Ode to My Father"), and despite the consistent lament by social and cultural elders of the citizenry's lack of historical understanding, the popularity of historical films undoubtedly reflects the appeal of national history, at least among the movie-going public. But this is not a new phenomenon, as some of the best films in the very sophisticated South Korean film industry over the past two decades not only have been set in the past, but have provided definitive commentaries on the past and its connection to the present. And while not all of these movies hit box office gold, they have offered powerful reflections and interpretations of, and perhaps even interventions in, contentious debates surrounding the country's turbulent history, which have reflected major political and social divisions as well.

In this paper I wish to demonstrate how these historical films comment on meta-narratives of South Korea's past. I find that, on the whole, these films have featured young main characters as symbols and vehicles of major historical

moments, which results in a somewhat unbalanced, but still wide-ranging set of historical perspectives. Due to several factors, particularly the age of the directors as well as the relaxing of film censorship in the 1990s, these films have generally represented the progressive historical views that came to prevail following democratization in the late 1980s. But the filmic expressions of this general understanding emphasize a range of driving forces and important elements behind South Korea's historical development. As well-crafted, stimulating, and thoughtful dramatizations of core historical concerns, these popular films demonstrate at once the great capacity of this medium to recreate the past through the prism of the present. And although this essay is limited in its artistic analysis (as I am not a cinema scholar), it presents a historian's perspective on how South Korean historical films have skillfully illuminated three major themes: South Korea's turbulent origins, life under the rule of Park Chung Hee, and the struggle to overcome the burdens of the past.

The Sources of Epic National History: *Ode to My Father*

We can begin with the second most popular film in box office history, "Ode to My Father" (*Kukche sijang*; Yoon Je-kyoon 2014), perhaps the grandest of epics to appear in South Korean cinema in terms of the duration of the covered period, which extends from 1950 to the present day. But *Ode* is generally representative of the films featured in this study. Its storyline depends on flashbacks as a central element, in order to accentuate the connection between the past and the present.¹ While it does not frame South Korean history in an explicitly political manner, it is still substantially provocative, through its highlighting of personal sacrifices for the greater good and of the country's development in a global context. And it invariably comments on one of the central historical themes of South Korean history: the origins and meaning of national division. The latter two characteristics also prompt thinking about the occasionally telling difference between the Korean and English titles of Korean movies, which often provides an extra indicator of the broader historical message. Calling this film "Ode to My Father" highlights the tale's multi-generational sweep as well as the Confucian patriarchal ethos of familial responsibility and personal sacrifice, despite the "father" character's relative brief appearance in the film.² The original Korean title, "International Market" (*Kukche sijang*), is just as full of possibilities. While this references the famed bazaar in the harbor area of Pusan formed by Korean War refugees and migrants, the backdrop of the International Market also reflects one of the film's broader themes, that South

¹ According to Frances Gateward, this heavy reliance on flashbacks is characteristic of the "fragmentation" that has characterized narrative in recent South Korean cinema. Indeed, according to Gateward, "The majority of feature films, regardless of genre, rely on narrational strategies that deviate from the paradigm of linear progression." This observation might be an exaggeration, but the flashbacks themselves, as Gateward notes, are offered in a wide and complicated variety. This is true of the historical films surveyed in the present study as well. See Frances Gateward, "Waiting to Exhale: The Colonial Experience and the Trouble with *My Own Breathing*," in *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, Chapter 10, 193.

² In the documentary that accompanies the DVD of the film, director Yun states that the driving force behind the story is Tôksu's efforts to keep his promise to his father. Documentary, 17:00 minute mark.

Korea's emergence and development depended unabashedly upon its integration into the global order.

The film's opening sequence, set in contemporary times, establishes this tone with panoramic views of the harbor area of Pusan, filled with images of sleek tall buildings, construction cranes, and half-finished giant bridges reinforcing the inexorable progress of development. The elderly couple gazing upon this scene bear the worn features of having traversed this arduous path of modernization. But while the woman has found peace in her old age, the man, Töksu, the central character of the movie, is shown stubbornly clinging to his small shop in the International Market and nastily chasing away would-be buyers who want to upgrade it like the surrounding shops. We eventually discover that he is waiting, somehow, for his father, whom he last saw sixty years earlier and whose lingering spiritual presence signals the interconnectivity between the past and present that remains central to the narrative.

The viewer is then transported back to the first of several chapters in Töksu's life, his family's harrowing escape in the Hüngnam Evacuation of December 1950, just ahead of the advancing Chinese soldiers. This is when ten-year-old Töksu, in the hysteria of the mass scramble to board an American warship, loses his younger sister, Maksun, and then separates from his father, who instructs him to help his mother and other siblings find the store run by an aunt in Pusan, where they will all reunite after the father finds Maksun. The American commander's decision to jettison his military equipment in order to make room for the terrified Korean refugees signals the film's overall favorable depiction of the US, albeit not without some ambivalence. The impression of the multi-dimensional impact of America continues in the next chapter of Töksu's life, as his family struggles to eke out a living in the International Market district of Pusan. American GIs dangle chocolate to kids like Töksu on the street, while Koreans attached to the American military pass by, including a young entrepreneur named Chung Ju Yung, the founder of Hyundai.

Tellingly, Chung is more the face of South Korean historical development in the film, over political figures like President Syngman Rhee, whose temporary capital during the Korean War was located a stone's throw away from the International Market, or President Park Chung Hee, the main force behind the chaebol-led, export-oriented industrialization that elevated the standing of corporations like Hyundai. Rhee's only appearance is as a radio voice, and Park's not even that. Instead, the cameos come from economic or cultural figures attached to the outside world, like Chung, Andre Kim the famed fashion designer, or the pop singer Namjin, whom Töksu encounters in Vietnam. Töksu, as did Chung Ju Yung, Park Chung Hee, and many young Korean men of the time, treats the Vietnam War as a financial opportunity, a trough supplied ultimately by America's deep-pocketed Cold War interests but in this film simply the next step in Töksu's and South Korea's development. This episode's closing scene of desperate Vietnamese villagers being whisked away in a South Korean gunboat, with Töksu jumping into the water to save a little girl who had been separated from her old brother, is a replay of Töksu's own boyhood experience in Hüngnam and parallels unmistakably

the earlier American rescue of Koreans from Hŭngnam, as if South Korean soldiers were paying forward the good will ultimately originating in the US. This sanitized view of American power continues in the next major chapter of Töksu's life, dramatized masterfully to maximize the emotional magnitude, as he finally finds his long-lost sister Maksun, who has grown up in California after being saved (or snatched?) by Americans during the Hŭngnam Evacuation.

Director Yoon Je-kyoon could have rendered the United States a more indisputably positive force in South Korean history, but he chose to stop short of that, insisting that his motivation lay primarily in honoring the sacrifices of his father's generation.³ The jolting separation of Töksu from his sister Maksun amid the chaotic scramble to board American ships, her upbringing in the US as an orphan separated from her family as well as from her native country—as an adult she is shown having married a Caucasian and barely able to speak Korean—and even the siblings' ultimate reunion, are open to disparate readings regarding what this all suggests about America's place in modern Korean history. But unmistakably, the film is focused on South Korea's external connections, especially to the US, as the incubator and driver of modern change. Even the episode in which Töksu, together with his buddy Talgu, enlists as an emigrant coal miner to West Germany in the early 1960s, in a bid to finance his younger brother's college education, reiterates this point, for this is where Töksu—again, as a stand-in for the country as a whole—meets his future wife, one of the many South Korean nurses exported to West Germany at the time. That he also impregnates her there also carries significance, identifying the outside as the reproductive generator of South Korea's ongoing development. This story, however, begins pointedly with the Korean War, when the external world in the form of US-led UN forces established the basis of the country's subsequent growth and identity. Whether so intended, then, *Ode to My Father* reflects well the anti-communist, pro-Western view of most of the older generation of South Koreans today, who still consider the United States as the country's indisputable savior in the Korean War.

This is striking in many ways, not least because of the stark contrast to the general tenor of other recent historical films set in the Korean War, which have either downplayed—almost to the point of deliberate disregard—or condemned America's impact in South Korea's early history, and in fact appear to attribute national division itself to America's Cold War dominance. This has been a prevailing orientation in the plethora of Korean War movies that have appeared since South Korean democratization, beginning with “Spring in My Hometown” (*Arŭmdaun sijöl*, or “A beautiful time”; Lee Kwang-mo 1998). Set in the latter stages of the war in a village close to an American base, this film does not depict any military combat, instead focusing, with an intensely still camera, on the village's

³ In the DVD documentary, Yoon says that he very much regretted not having thanked his father before his passing in 2004. At other points Yoon states that, unlike his previous works, this was a film that he “wanted to make, not to see,” one that he “made with his heart, not his mind.” It was, in short, a very personal work honoring his father, and by extension his father's generation. Documentary, 1:00, 4:50, 5:30, and 58:00.

internal fissures and hierarchies based on attachment to the American military and to the anti-communist South Korean regime. The two lead characters, adolescent boys who are best friends, come from families on opposite sides of this duality. The father of the wealthier boy engages in illicit activity for the sake of American soldiers, which constitutes the basis for this family's privileges, while the poorer friend's father has been arrested, tortured, and ostracized as a communist, sealing the poor socio-economic standing of the boy's family. The events leading to the latter boy's tragic fate are literally sparked by his discovery of his desperate mother's incorporation into this unsavory hierarchy, which encapsulates the moral divide in the narrative between the unadulterated, purely Korean world of the children and the severely tainted realm of the adults bound ultimately to the American-led anti-communist order. To reiterate this point, the wealthier boy's older sister, after having established an amorous relationship with an unseen "Lieutenant Smith" at the base, becomes impregnated and is then abandoned by Smith. This is soon followed by the family's father himself being discarded by the Americans, who now consider his activities unacceptable.

Along similar lines, not Lieutenant but rather a "Captain Smith" represents America in another major Korean War film, "Welcome to Dongmakgol" (Park Kwang-hyun 2005), which replicates *Spring in My Hometown's* moral position but actually shows Captain Smith as a real character whose awakening to his country's destructive impact leads to the film's denouement. Before that, North Korean and South Korean deserters stumble separately upon a pristinely isolated village whose inhabitants have no idea that a war is raging and, with a few exceptions, have little to do with the modern advances of the 20th century. Just as the realm of the children represents the innocent autonomy of the nation in *Spring*, this village, as signified by a joyfully naive girl, constitutes the utopia of a united Korea uncorrupted by the outside world, or at least by its corrosive ideologies and interests. The original instruments of that externally-derived destructive force—the crashed fighter pilot Captain Smith and, more importantly, the Korean soldiers who initially treat each other with menace—all undergo purification through an embrace of the village's cooperative spirit, just as the village "welcomes" them to the realm of goodness. *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, then, presents an idealized—and highly stylized—Korean landscape absent of internal political boundaries but fiercely separated from the evils of the larger world, the force that imposes artificial divisions and rains devastation in the form of indiscriminate American bombing.

Even "Taegukgi—the Brotherhood of War" (*Taegükki rül hwinallimyö*; Kang Je-gyu 2004) and "The Taebaek Mountains" (*Taebaek sanmaek*; Im Kwon-taek 1994), arguably the two best-known Korean War flicks, abide by this insistence on treating the conflict as properly an internal matter, but unlike *Dongmakgol*, hardly any foreign forces make an appearance, aside from an extraordinary computer-generated scene in *Taegukgi* of swarms of Chinese soldiers crossing into Korea in late 1950. These two films instead emphasize the Korean War as a civil war, and more specifically a fraternal war, by deploying the trope of alienated, opposing brothers as the overarching metaphor for their respective story lines. Unlike *Spring*

and *Dongmakgol*, however, these dramatizations remain uncommitted in regard to the impact of global interests, choosing instead to maintain their focus on the intricate ways the myriad divides among Koreans led to the vicious cycles of bloodshed. And while *Taegukgi*, like *Ode*, deploys flashback to affirm the present by confirming the sacrifices of the past, like *Taebaek Mountains* it depicts the originating conflagration of national division, and of South Korea, as foremost a matter of terrible sins perpetrated by Koreans against each other. An intervening external force was neither necessary nor, one presumes, desired.

Such introspection, though not entirely absent, remains difficult to find in *Ode to My Father*. Whether for good or bad—but ultimately good, it appears—every major episode in Töksu's life has an indelible foreign connection: the Hüngnam Evacuation via American warships, his coming of age in the International Market area, his life-changing experience as a coal miner in West Germany, his adventures in the Vietnam War, and finally his tearful reconnection with his long-lost baby sister calling from Los Angeles. The uncertainty of whether the sister was originally rescued or abducted by an American hand in 1950 corresponds to the ambiguity surrounding whether her separation from the rest of her family during her American upbringing ultimately benefited her. But whether or not so intended by the director, the film's framing of Töksu's development, and that of South Korea's, by external forces gives the impression of remaining oblivious to the more discomfiting realities within the country, particularly the struggle against oppression, although hints of it appear here and there in the harsh treatment meted out by power holders like street bullies or local businessmen. Less vaguely perhaps, two satirical scenes show people reflexively jumping to attention whenever the South Korean national anthem is invoked. In the latter such scene, Töksu's wife Yöngja, while forced to follow along, grits her teeth at this trite exercise of authoritarian regimentation, and not only because it interrupts—symbolically as well—her efforts to convince her husband not to go to Vietnam. Töksu thinks he must go, because he has to earn money for his sister's dowry and to save their family's store, but also because he must do his patriotic duty as deemed by the country's political leadership, which pointedly warrants barely even a mention in the film.

Unnamable, but Fully on Display: The Park Era

The refusal to even utter the name of Park Chung Hee appears to have become a trope in historical films, regardless of their political positionality. His absence and those of his successors in *Ode to My Father* allows the filmmaker to evade the sensitivities surrounding the dictatorship era, if not the thorny issue of politics itself. But plenty of filmic treatments of South Korean history have tackled these issues head-on, and they amplify their critique of the Park era precisely by not mentioning his name, or even by assigning false names. This cinematic ploy of showing everything about a historical setting, from events and historical figures to accurately detailed sets and settings, except for the explicit appearance or utterance of the ruler's name, at once accentuates the commentary on the lingering impact of military authoritarianism and acknowledges the ongoing contentiousness

surrounding that period and its dominant political figure.

Although relatively under-viewed despite its star power, “Once in a Summer” (*Kū hae yōrūm*; Jo Keun-shik 2006) well represents this type of filmic treatment that emerged *en force* in the opening decade of the 21st century, ostensibly in response to the Park Chung Hee nostalgia accompanying the re-emergence of Park Geun-hye in public life. Like *Ode to My Father*, *Once in a Summer* is a tear-jerker about loss and sacrifice stemming directly from the painful trials of South Korea’s past, revisited in flashbacks in order to highlight the decades-long consequences of the separation. But unlike *Ode*, *Summer* does not shy away from politics, even if its commentary is relatively subdued and veiled, with the story anchored in melodrama. And although not epic in scope—as the film’s title suggests, the main narrative is limited to one year, 1969—*Summer* exudes an epic feel through its comprehensive treatment of that year’s historical significance: the mass protests against Park’s attempt to revise the constitution in order to run for a third consecutive presidential term; the urban youth culture, and its contrast to the under-developed rural areas; the ferocious power of anti-communism, wielded by the state and dispersed throughout society, that shapes both urban and rural life; the domination, entitlement, and abusive hold of big business; and, yes, the inescapable American impact, as wielded through popular culture and technological prowess. In a scene of villagers gathering around the communal television set to watch the moon landing, for example, one of them asks, “Does America now own the moon?”

As in *Ode*, the retrospective contemplation of the lead character, Sōgyōng, leads him to ponder the meaning and ultimate value of personal sacrifices compelled by the country’s troubled past. The film begins in contemporary times with an aged, frail Sōgyōng, a well-established college professor in his 60s, being visited by one of his former students who works for a television show that finds long-lost friends and lovers. Her request to the professor to name such a person in his past triggers a flood of memories. The opening flashback sequence to 1969 then shows college student Sōgyōng with little interest in a campus rally against Park, whose name is nevertheless not mentioned, and it turns out he lacks generally an awareness of the politics, youth zeitgeist, or much of anything else, and for this he is shown being harangued by his father, a wealthy businessman, who demands that he shape up. To escape all of this Sōgyōng joins a student “farm outing” (*nonghwal*) to a remote village to help the locals and spread the accoutrements of modern life. This is where he falls in love with a village girl, Chōngin, who has an uneasy, distinctive standing in her community. She is one of the few literate adults, for one, and therefore staffs the local library, but more importantly, in a setting in which one’s identity remains firmly tied to one’s family, she has none. Chōngin was orphaned by her parents, both leftist guerrillas or activists who were either killed or ended up in the North following the Korean War, but in any case having unwittingly bestowed upon their left-behind daughter an ostracized status. In the film Chōngin is shown participating in anti-communist military drills while brandishing a wooden toy rifle, a ludicrous image signaling her perpetually fragile existence as an outsider. In a telling scene that brings together different strands of the militarist culture, she must tell an illiterate village leader that his son had

been killed some time ago while serving in the army, a fact that Chŏngin had kept hidden in order to protect the man. He immediately explodes with invective that dredges up her background.

Despite the communal responsibility over her that the villagers have taken, then, Chŏngin remains an internal alien. In turn, she symbolizes the precarious condition of anyone associated with the enemy ideology in the anti-communist frenzy of post-liberation South Korea, a human object of intense oppression, surveillance, re-education, manipulation, and exploitation. All of these vulnerabilities come to a head when Chŏngin finally takes leave of the village by following Sŏgyŏng to Seoul. Sŏgyŏng, stricken by love and a hero complex, is determined to rescue her, despite warnings from his student group leader that her background, and their enormous class difference, would make his plans untenable. This comes true almost immediately, as the pair gets ensnared in a roundup of student protestors in Seoul. In their separate and brutal interrogations, Chŏngin's family ties are of course quickly introduced, but Sŏgyŏng's own family ties are offered as a chance to evade further incarceration if he formally denies having associated with her, or even knowing her. He makes this choice, thus joining society at large in situationally abandoning Chŏngin. His subsequent redemption, by begging his powerful father—tellingly, at the construction site of his father's company—to intervene in gaining her release, ultimately does not result in his desired outcome, for she chooses to slip away from him and disappear into the mass of developing South Korea.

Pondering what motivated Chŏngin to make that decision raises in the viewer the larger question of why these lovers could not possibly have stayed together in the South Korea of that time. In turn, the broader historical judgement on the Park era comes to the forefront: For whom and by whom did the intensive anti-communist, industrializing system operate? What was the underlying basis of the stark differences in social or class identity? *Once in a Summer* suggests, as do progressive historians today, that association with the militarist, developmentalist state, the roots of which extended back to the colonial-era divides, and the vicissitudes of one's family connections together determined one's privileges or vulnerabilities. And this unequal, unjust, and corrupt delineation of power relied solely on the larger structures of anti-communism, dictatorship, and militarization that reflected the personal priorities and ruling approach of the man who, at least in the movies, shall remain unnamed.

A focus on the structures and cultures of the Park Chung Hee era more than on the man himself characterizes even those films that are ostensibly more about him, two of the most provocative of which are "The President's Barber" (*Hyojadong ibalsa*; Chan-sang Lim 2004) and "The President's Last Bang" (*Kŭ ttae kŭ saramdŭl*; Im Sang-soo 2005). In neither film does Park's name get mentioned. In the former, the Park character is given another name, and in the latter, he is referred to only by the informal code name of "harabŏji" ("grandfather") or simply "Kakha" ("His Eminence"). Kyung Hyun Kim suggests that this denial of real names is part of the filmmakers' larger rejection of historical verisimilitude in their respective re-tellings of history.⁴ Or, it might have been the case that the

filmmakers simply wished to avoid legal action. *Bang* acknowledges as much in its opening sequence, which was supposed to have shown real documentary footage but deleted it in accordance with a judge's order following a lawsuit by Park's son. The sensitivities of the opening years of the 21st century surrounding the Park legacy are here clearly on display, but these films are not necessarily concerned with commenting on the man himself as much as on the enveloping system, encompassing mentalities and social behaviors, that he imposed and led. In this sense the English renderings of the film titles do the works a disservice; the more accurate titles are the original Korean ones. "The Barber of Hyoja-dong District" more firmly anchors the film in the life and surroundings of a simple man becoming hopelessly entangled in the inner workings of a militarist governing order due to his geographical proximity to the presidential Blue House. And "Those People in Those Times," a play on the title of a hit song ("Kū ttae kū saram": "That Person, Then") at the time of Park's assassination (the singer of which was present, as shown in the film, at the dinner gathering where he was killed), captures the enveloping mood toward the end of 1979 while drawing attention to the people—or rather, the kinds of people—who surrounded the reclusive president increasingly beset by a siege mentality.

The President's Last Bang, set in one 24-hour period beginning on October 26, 1979, can be considered in fact a character study not of Park but rather of Kim Chaegyū, head of the KCIA and hence the chief enforcer of the Yusin dictatorship of the 1970s. The irony of such a man killing Park is of course extraordinary, and hence teeming with potentiality when attempting to dramatize the event within its broader context. For the latter, the viewer gets a glimpse of the brutalities of the dictatorship through the activities of a (fictional) assistant in Park's KCIA security detail, played by Han Sökkyū, who commandeers women for Park, checks on the condition of the KCIA torture chambers, and like other KCIA operatives is shown liberally spouting vulgarities in a preening display of his summary power, and all this in the few hours before the fateful dinner gathering of October 26. In the meantime, we find Kim worried about his failing health and how this might leave a bad impression on the president, who seems increasingly wanting to distance himself from Kim. For his part, Kim, enraged at the grip on Park held by his widely-despised chief bodyguard, the boorish buffoon Ch'a Chich'öl, has been pondering for a while whether, to get rid of Ch'a, he should kill Park. This would also address the ongoing unrest in the southeast of the country, something that Park sees as little more than a nuisance, protected as he is in Ch'a's cocoon. Such a mishmash of realizations, rationalizations, and connections mirrors the confusing disjunction between the Yusin mechanisms of oppression, shown in the film as falling far short of constituting a disciplined or well-ordered apparatus, and the unsettling discontent and volatility outside Park's inner circle.

Fittingly, Kim's shooting of Ch'a and Park at the dinner in the KCIA safe

⁴ Kim suggests, rather, that in a "postmodern maneuver," the historical Park is "processed as a simulation or a hyperreality," in a demonstration of the films' "resistance against realism." Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era*, Chapter 3, locations 1107, 1182.

house that evening is depicted as a farce, featuring jamming guns, flying digits, shorting circuits, screaming yet nurturing young women, and a groveling former general taking refuge under the dinner table. But as chaos ensues with the outbreak of violence, Park himself is shown calmly bewildered by what's going on. Earlier at the dinner, rather than a commanding presence Park had appeared indeed as a meek, needy “grandfather” wondering how to clamp down on the ungrateful students and opposition politicians. Leading up to the dinner, the movie had further cut him down: like his lieutenants, he displays a fondness for speaking Japanese, listening to Japanese songs, and uttering Japanese aphorisms, and perhaps most damningly, he is shown personally engaging in the petty corruption that lubricated the authoritarian system. But true to form, he remains unfazed until the very end, as Kim delivers the *coup de grace* while cursing Park in Japanese. And in highlighting the explosive potentiality of this act, the director presents a visual commentary in the form of a blood-splattered folding screen that appears uncannily like a plum flower painting by the revolutionary 19th century artist Cho Hüiryong:



The political overtones are not as graphic in *The President's Barber*, but they are just as damning. As with *Bang*, the focus is not on Park himself but rather on the violent structures and vulgar cultures of the Park system. And as with *Bang*, *Barber* highlights the spiteful rivalry between Kim Chaegyū and Ch'a Chich'ol—both, like Park, given different names.⁵ This time, the lead character himself is fictional, a barber whose life takes an absurd, then appalling turn as he finds himself an unwitting eyewitness to major historical moments. (Indeed *Barber* is the closest replica in South Korean cinema of *Forrest Gump*.) Like *Ode to My Father*, though not covering as long a period, *Barber* deploys the central character's life as a sharply calibrated lens into broader historical change. The story actually begins in 1960, the year before the coup through which Park took power, with a dramatically comical recreation of the April 19 student revolution that overthrew

⁵ Neither Kim nor Ch'a took their respective posts until the mid-1970s, during the Yusin period, but in the film both characters who represent them appear already in the 1960s.

Syngman Rhee. This also marks the birth of the barber's son, Nagan, who narrates the story in voiceover. Over the course of his upbringing, Nagan ("joyous peace") is portrayed symbolically as the pure yet stifled yearning for democracy and hence the allegorical counterpart to Park, references to whom include "yongan" (literally "dragon face," or "royal countenance"), which the barber is sternly warned not to nick when he shaves the president. The more frequent reference to Park is, as in *Bang*, "Kakha," which the Ch'a Chich'öl character equates with the similar-sounding "kukka" ("country" or "state"), a refrain—appearing also in *Bang*—that he forces the barber to recite while doing military-style push-ups as punishment for the hapless man's ignorance.

In such a way crude violence breezily infuses the manifestation of authority visited upon the barber. In a disturbingly amusing parallel, the Kim and Ch'a characters, both of whom are using the barber as a pawn in their machinations against each other, take turns in different scenes kicking the barber in the shin in a fit of rage—a behavior, again, shown also in *Bang*. Currying favor with the president is the reason they do this, but they are generally given free rein to abuse their power, for ultimately it comes from the dictator, who himself keeps his hands clean, distanced from the unpleasant, petty details of the enforcement of his reign. The barber, having garnered the president's confidence through his regular visits to the Blue House, eventually comes face to face with the horrors of such proximity, when Nagan becomes ensnared in a scheme to nab political opponents as communist spies. The barber, however, is too intimidated to even mention to the president that Nagan has been abducted by the security apparatus. What follows is an extraordinarily unsettling scene, barely mitigated by its comical undertone: Twelve-year-old Nagan undergoes mild torture through electric shock, although he remains happily unaware of what is happening to him, just as the casual torturer himself is unable to act upon his doubts about what he is doing. Nagan is eventually released, but his ordeal has left his legs paralyzed. The rest of the film follows the barber, carrying his son on his back, as he desperately searches for a cure, which he finds only when he travels far away from the geographies of power, after the president has died, and after the barber finally confronts, in his own bemusing way, the next dictator, Chun Doo Hwan (though not so named, his bald head is enough to give him away).

However much the director, Chan-sang Lim, sought to demonstrate viscerally the banality of violence under the Park regime, showing a boy undergoing torture seems to have crossed a line into the blatant embrace of shock value. But as Lim noted while conceding the lack of any evidence of this having actually occurred, every one of the young men or women who really was tortured by the state was, in the end, someone's child.⁶ Indeed, each of these three films on the Park era was directed by a member of the 386 generation (Chan-sang Lim, Im Sang-soo, and Jo Keun-shik) and released, in the mid-2000s, at the height of the 386 generation's political and cultural influence. This generation came of age in the

⁶ Director Lim made these remarks at a Q&A session following a screening of the film at Yale University in 2006, at which the author was present.

throes of the Yusin and Chun dictatorships, when its outlook and social conscience were forged by the democratization struggle. As auteurs these 386 directors, in amplifying what they recall from their adolescence and young adulthood, express their generation's sense of victimhood and sacrifice through the youthful characters in their movies. Like Nagan, whose upbringing in the Park era represents democracy repressed and violated by the state's culture of violence, Chŏngin's early life in *Once in a Summer* is distorted by the demands of anti-communist developmentalist dictatorship, resulting in a loss suffered by both Chŏngin and Sŏgyŏng, in their own way, at the most critical stage of their early adulthood. Even the young men and women who populate the realms of power and privilege in *The President's Last Bang* are portrayed as severely corrupted, exploited, and ultimately scarred or killed by the Yusin system.

The Birth Pangs of Democracy

Traumatized young people being robbed of their peak years, as well as the collateral damage from such experience, are used as allegories also for the painful struggle to achieve a lasting reckoning following the Park era. These filmic treatments paint the long ordeal of military dictatorship as a recurring challenge to overcome, whether through intensive contemplation or through the bitter lessons that come, again, from personal loss. Not surprisingly, these films center on flashbacks that connect the past either to the present or to the concluding resolution of the story, and they tend to begin the narrative journey with the signal moment of the democratization struggle, the Kwangju Uprising of 1980.

There have been numerous cinematic recreations of Kwangju, including two from director Jang Sun-Woo: the wrenching "A Petal" (*Kkonnip*, 1996), a portrayal of Kwangju's devastating and horrific impact on a teenaged girl, based on an extended short story by Ch'oe Yun; and "May 18" (*Hwaryŏhan hyuga* 2007), which like *Taegukgi* is a straightforward dramatization of the events through a focus on a particular family—and even featuring, like *Taegukgi* but in a different way, the trope of separated brothers. These films' adherence to stark realism extended the spirit of the first such explicit depiction of Kwangju, appearing on a television miniseries of early 1995, "Hour Glass" (*Morae sigye*), which in fact might have spurred the wave of epic cinematic portrayals of modern Korean history that appeared thereafter. In this section, I wish to focus on two of those films, "Peppermint Candy" (*Pakha sat'ang*; Lee Chang-dong, 1999) and "The Old Garden" (*Orae toen chŏngwŏn*; Im Sang-soo, 2007), which like *Hour Glass* depict the extended consequences of the Kwangju Uprising. Unlike the TV series, however, these films do not show the intense violence of the actual event, but rather allude to its effects on the main characters over two decades, thereby offering commentaries on the deeper undercurrents of Kwangju in the post-Kwangju period, and on the unshakability of traumatic memory.

When *Peppermint Candy* was released its backward narrative immediately drew attention, with individual episodes connected by footage, run in reverse, of railroad tracks as seen from the caboose of a moving train. This signals the connections in the adult life stages of Yŏngho, the main character, and reinforces

the train as the film's central symbolic motif. And sure enough, the originating chronological point in Yŏngho's two-decade journey is a rail depot in Kwangju in May of 1980, when as a fresh recruit he is sent down to the city as part of the military suppression of the uprising. In the backward narration of the movie, however, this episode comes at the end. The film begins with a very different Yŏngho, around forty years in age, who staggers into a reunion party, held at a riverbank under a railroad bridge, of his former factory work group from his pre-military youth. The revelers, however, discover that the innocent and happy Yŏngho they once knew has been replaced by a nasty, confused, bitter, and ultimately suicidal middle-aged man who soon meets his end by climbing onto the tracks and confronting, with open arms, an oncoming train while shouting, "I want to go back!"

This is the train, we find, that had set his life on the course of increasing depravity, venality, and all-around unpleasantness, ever since that moment in Kwangju two decades earlier, when he mistakenly shot to death a school girl. Each succeeding episode in the film goes further back in time, demonstrating the cumulative experiences that corrupted Yŏngho's character: his struggles after having lost everything to the 1997 financial crisis, as he is visited by the husband of a long-lost, discarded love, Sunim, who is now clinging to life in a hospital bed; which was preceded by Yŏngho's life as a philandering and abusive petty businessman in 1994; which was preceded by his work as a dirty cop who readily tortures captured dissidents in the spring of 1987 while the mass democracy demonstrations are taking place; which was preceded by his initiation into the brutalizing police force of the military dictatorship in 1984, when he also callously rejects Sunim; which was preceded by his experience in Kwangju in 1980, just as his wholesome affection for Sunim was developing, as symbolized by his hoarding of peppermint candy pieces that she sent him as he was beginning his military service; which was preceded by his meeting Sunim for the first time at a picnic gathering of his work team along the same riverbank and railroad bridge of the opening episode. The film presents, then, a painful portrait of how an unadulterated young man was transformed into a monster by his environment.

As noted above it is the train, or the railroad, that constitutes the metaphorical centerpiece of this character degeneration. A train, sometimes if only as a passing roar and lights, makes an appearance in each of the episodes, complementing the brief interludes of a backward-moving train that connects them. The train hence seems to signal inexorability, Yŏngho's incapacity to dodge, through derailment, his life's doomed path once the train has left the station, so to speak, from Kwangju. But Kwangju does not hold exclusive determinative power; each successive stage in Yŏngho's life introduces historical forces that layer more destruction upon his original sin and hence lead to the next stage: military dictatorship, brutality and corruption, and the culture of greed and expendability. Over these two decades, South Korea undergoes democratization, but this hardly registers in Yŏngho's life, so bound is he to the violent structures and mentalities of military authoritarianism. Despite his fervent attempts to overcome his

memory,⁷ such remnants of the past are too strong—overwhelming, in fact, particularly since the ethos of developmentalist capitalism, now in the guise of neo-liberalism, continues even after political liberalization. Indeed the train represents not only the relentless power of trauma but also the extraordinary industrialization and material transformation, fully realized in the backdrops of the separate episodes, that South Korea was driven through by the techno-nationalist dictatorship, the remnants of which continue to hold sway.

What to make of this legacy, and more importantly of the legacy of the democratization struggle, constitutes one of the central themes also of “The Old Garden” (*Orae toen chŏngwŏn*), Im Sang-soo’s adaptation of Hwang Sok-yong’s famed novel. Just as Töksu in *Ode to My Father* ponders the value of the hardships he has endured, *The Old Garden* poses questions regarding the human toll of engaging in the anti-dictatorship resistance. But unlike *Ode*, the main lead characters in *Garden* find little comfort in the broader progress that resulted from their sacrifices, for their personal loss cannot be counterbalanced by a redeeming resolution; rather, as in *Once in a Summer*, the separation from one’s love interest is made permanent. There is no glory in the fight for democracy and its great breakthrough in 1987, which overthrew the military dictatorship of the 1980s that had perpetrated the Kwangju massacre. Instead *The Old Garden* questions the ultimate significance of sacrifice for the greater good when the costs of that sacrifice extend beyond one’s self. It is, in sum, a mournful allegory on the larger meaning and value of South Korea’s democratization and modernization as a whole.

As with the other films surveyed here, *Garden* depends considerably on flashbacks, and in fact the seamless back-and-forth between the present and the past, separated by nearly two decades, continues throughout the narrative. The movie begins with the male protagonist, Hyönu, who has spent 17 years in solitary incarceration for his role in the anti-dictatorship resistance of the 1980s, finally gaining release from prison in the closing years of the 20th century. Having been completely stripped of any contact with friends or family, he is stunned to find that his mother has become a wealthy real estate speculator and his siblings enjoy unimagined material comforts. He also learns that his beloved, Yunhüi, has died, and he becomes overwhelmed by emotion after first not knowing how to respond to this news, so numb and blinded had he become to what was taking place outside the penitentiary walls. His lack of awareness stands in sharp contrast to the time when, as a young man, he was perhaps too sensitive to what was happening around him, and thus begins the flashbacks, starting with that familiar setting: Kwangju, May 1980.

As in *Peppermint Candy*, the violence of Kwangju is hardly shown; rather, the devastation comes through in a scene in which Hyönu visits, in the opening

⁷ Two further motifs signal Yöngho’s struggle to erase his past: a camera that he had given to Sunim but which she later left for him, the film in which he destroys; and a gunshot wound in his leg from the Kwangju episode, which acts up at inopportune moments to remind him of that originating trauma. For more on the mnemonic function of these two motifs, see Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, “*Peppermint Candy*: The Will Not to Forget,” in *New Korean Cinema*, edited by Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: NYU Press, 2015), Chapter 11, 165-66.

days of the uprising, a makeshift morgue in a Kwangju gymnasium overflowing with cries of grief, blood-stained plastic body bags, and crude coffins. He is suffused with rage and thirst for retribution, but as a wanted man he must flee, and a year later he finds sanctuary and love in a remote cottage that is the home of Yunhüi, a schoolteacher and artist. But Yunhüi tells him resolutely that, while she is sympathetic to the cause, she is not an activist. This ambivalence becomes important to the story, as Yunhüi later acts as the voice of skepticism about “the movement” as well as a caretaker of younger activists in Hyönu’s stead. Both roles heighten her position, ultimately, as another victim—not only through her death from cancer, but also through her forced separation from Hyönu. For a blissful few months, they build a homestead in that mountainside cabin, tending to their vegetable patch and wondering how long they can remain isolated from the troubles of the outside world. Alas, Hyönu hears that most of his fellow resisters have been captured, and so, racked with guilt, he decides to return to Seoul, where he, too, will inevitably be nabbed. But this urge to sacrifice himself invites a rebuke from Yunhüi, who, like Yöngja, the wife of Töksu in *Ode to My Father*, wonders aloud in agony why he cannot, for once, do things for himself (and the couple) instead of for others.

The implications of this line of questioning escalate to broader issues surrounding the value of the democracy movement as a whole. In the present day of the film’s story, Hyönu reconnects with his former fellow agitators, all having been freed but suffering in their respective ways—from bankruptcy, alcoholism, mental illness, and other after-effects. Such outcomes are shown even in the scenes of the mid-1980s, at the tense height of the democratization struggle following Hyönu’s arrest, when Yunhüi acts as a senior advisor of sorts to a new generation of students and workers. Clashes between their determined resistance and the casual savagery of the security forces are interspersed with comparably fierce debates within the movement about how to proceed, a reflection of the internal ideological fissures that arose in the 1980s, in the aftermath of Kwangju. Yunhüi eventually grapples with the same internal struggle, trying to raise her daughter, the product of her brief time with Hyönu, while suffering from a serious illness. The girl grows up without a father and eventually without a mother, for Yunhüi, after repeated denials of visitation rights or even correspondence with Hyönu during his incarceration, passes away before ever seeing him again. She leaves for him a drawn portrait that places a young Hyönu, in his high school uniform, side-by-side with the older Yunhüi, with her head bald from cancer treatments. This temporal disjuncture, like the centrality of the frequent flashbacks in the story, establishes the recurring overlap between the past and present, as does the daughter, who as a glam teenager at the end of the film finally meets Hyönu in the middle of bustling, gleaming Seoul. As much as the new society as a whole, she is the fruit of the “old garden” cultivated by the struggles of her parents’ generation. Like the boy Nagan in *The President’s Barber*, she might also symbolize the resilient spirit of democracy, but what remains elusive is a sense of propriety and historical justice, given what had driven her father to make his choice and her mother to suffer from his decision.

In perhaps reflecting the view of many South Koreans regarding their recent

past, *The Old Garden* stays ambivalent, even while lamenting the unevenness of the sacrifices demanded by the relentless drive toward political and social progress. It is telling that, even after the 1987 breakthrough to democratization, Hyönu spends more than a decade in jail, as if, like Yöngho in *Peppermint Candy*, he is chained to the formative past of his youth, regardless of the formal transformations in the structures of authority. Without necessarily trapping these characters in the grip of history, such portrayals reflect the ongoing difficulties of arriving at a secure understanding of the democratic transition's longer-term significance.

At times this discomfiting uncertainty is expressed as skepticism over the lingering domination of the ethos of breakneck developmentalism, which produced economic growth but also established precarious constructs, often in the most literal sense, that would haunt the country long after political liberalization. Such a theme is explored, for example, in “Traces of Love” (*Kaül-lo*, “To Autumn”; Kim Dae-seung 2006), a melodrama of separation and loss arising from the tragic collapse of the Samp’ung Department Store in 1995, which took over five hundred lives. The political undercurrents are unmistakable: The separated couple consists of a budding young prosecutor fighting a culture of corruption within the legal system, and his fiancée, a television documentary producer named “Minju,” presumably meaning “democracy,” who dies under the rubble. Nevertheless, *Traces of Love* does not become preoccupied with denunciation, which is self-apparent in any case, but rather quietly grounds the story’s resolution in the ancient spiritual solace of regeneration and renewal (this movie, like so many others surveyed here, is heavy on Buddhist sentiment), with tacit hopes for a fuller, broader flowering from the seeds of youthful sacrifice.

Such a framing of the painful past in the unspoken promises of the future also pervades “The Attorney” (*Pyönhoin*; Yang Woo-suk, 2013), which became a record-setting box office hit and by far the most popular filmic treatment of the democratization struggle. A dramatized commemoration of former president Roh Moo Hyun’s deeds as a civil rights attorney in the early 1980s, when he helped defend a group of students falsely charged with communist subversion, *The Attorney*, like *Traces of Love*, relies on flashbacks internal to the storyline but that do not connect those retrospectives to the present day, unlike most of the other films in this study. The reflection of the past in the present is rather left implicit, although the film seems to have come directly in response to the conservative political turn beginning in the late 2000s following Roh’s term in office (and his shocking suicide of 2009). The film, furthermore, does not strive to condemn the military dictatorship period, which would be passé and facile, or even to claim that the triumphs of Roh and others like him determined subsequent history, as much as to issue reminders that one should vigilantly locate the past, however fraught with difficulty and contention, in the present and the future. At the same time, these filmic treatments of history also demand that the viewer locate the present in the past.

Conclusion

Due to their proximity in release dates, *The Attorney* and *Ode to My Father* have

been taken as dueling interventions in the meta-narratives of South Korean history that ultimately reflect opposing political stances. This is understandable, given that *The Attorney* seems to celebrate Roh Moo Hyun's origins as a human rights activist against the abuses of the military dictatorship, while *Ode to My Father*, by overlooking the oppressive political forces of the past and glorifying material development and American influence, seems to represent the conservative, triumphalist view of South Korean history as an imperfect but ultimately rewarding success. This in itself would mark these two works, both extremely popular, as a manifestation of the fundamental divides today in South Korean society and politics, expressed through the cinema. As this study has shown, however, neither is as clear-cut in their respective positions, and in fact both works, particularly *Ode*, contain enough ambiguity to question such a ready judgment.

Having said this, it is difficult to avoid the impression that, along with perhaps the two Korean War movies *Taegukgi* and *Taebaek Mountains*, *Ode* stands as somewhat of an outlier in the historical films under review. Most of these works, which are all masterful cinematic explorations of the impact of history on both the (understanding of) the past and the present, are "liberal" in their outlook, which likely reflects the rush toward reevaluating longstanding received understandings in the wake of democratization in the late 1980s and of the loosening of censorship in the 1990s. In the three themes explored in this study, these films, except for *Ode*'s more sanitized gloss on American power, tend to present a critical view of American influence in South Korea's early period. Likewise they also offer a critical depiction of the Park era, but do so less directly—through comedy and farce, through a focus on the structures and cultures of the period rather than on the man himself, and through the convention of not naming Park despite the clear recognizability of the man and his system. And for dramatizing the aftermath of the military dictatorship era and the country's democratic transition, these films deploy youth as a reflection and vehicle for rumination on the costs and ongoing consequences of the traumatic past.

This emphasis on youth pervades all three themes and nearly all the films analyzed in this study. Not coincidentally, almost all of the directors, including Yoon Je-kyoon of *Ode to My Father*, come from the 386 "democracy generation" that carried the torch and bore the scars of the long battle against dictatorship. These films thus feature young main characters, while often in conventional stories of melodrama, whose formative years are powerfully shaped, and often taken away, by this struggle. Not only young romantic relationships (*Once in a Summer*, *The Old Garden*, *Peppermint Candy*, *Traces of Love*), but whole lives become victimized by the nation's political history, and they are almost all young people, including, notably, children: the boys in *Spring in My Hometown*, the village girl in *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, the barber's son in *The President's Barber*. Even *Ode to My Father* begins with the traumatic separation of two young children, the main character Töksu and his younger sister Maksun, who are eventually reunited in their middle age, but not before becoming shaped predominantly by that harrowing experience. *Ode* does not necessarily view these characters as victims, but the audience very well could.

Beyond this orientation, however, the filmic treatments in this study are marked just as much by variety and ambiguity, a reflection of differences in comprehending the long-term results of democratization over the past three decades, and in turn of the reconsideration of the extended arc of the country's history as a whole. These disparities in turn find expression in a range of artistic engagements with the undoubtedly powerful impact of the nation's past, but almost always with a clear signal of the formidable presence of this history in South Korea today.

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