

Vicarious Politics: Violence and the Colonial Period in Contemporary South Korean Film

대리 정치: 현대 한국영화에 나타난 폭력과 식민시대 조선 代理政治: 現代韓國映画における暴力と植民地時代朝鮮

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Abstract

This article examines four recent South Korean action drama films dealing with the Japanese colonial period and the Korean nationalist resistance movement in particular - Chung Chi-u's *Modern Boy* (2008), Ch'ae Tong-hun's *Assassination* (2015), Kim Chi-un's *The Age of Shadows* (2016), and Hō Chin-ho's *The Last Princess* (2016). It explores the ways in which these films valorize armed anti-colonial resistance through a spectacular form of violence detached from real everyday politics during the colonial period and which hermetically seals such past political involvement from any corresponding activity in the present. The result of this, I will argue, is the repression not only of the memory of mass political mobilization under Japanese rule, but of the 1980s-era *minjung* or "people's" movement as well, having significant implications for how contemporary social movements may be imagined and represented.

Keywords: Film, Korea, Violence, Imperial Japan, Proletarian, Colonialism, Capitalism, Cinematic Escapism

Vicarious Politics

This article will examine four recent South Korean films dealing with the Japanese colonial period and the Korean nationalist resistance movement in particular - Chung Chi-u's *Modern Boy* (2008), Ch'ae Tong-hun's *Assassination* (Amsal, 2015), Kim Chi-un's *The*

Age of Shadows (Miljöng, 2016), and Hō Chin-ho's *The Last Princess* (Dōkhye Ongju, 2016). I explore the ways in which these action drama films valorize armed anti-colonial resistance - including, in the case of *The Age of Shadows*, the international anarchist movement of the 1930s - but in a manner that hermetically seals such political involvement from any corresponding activity in the present. That is, I frame the anti-Japanese violence in these films through what I call a "vicarious politics," in which a potential viewer may accompany militant anti-colonial activities through identification with the films' protagonists, but in such a way that any overlapping concerns, sympathies, or strategies would be unthinkable in the contemporary situation. At worst, the very concept of violence against the state exhibited in these films becomes something criminal rather than commendable when transplanted to the present (this becomes especially pronounced against the backdrop of the South Korean government's recent anti-terrorism legislation).¹ The politics on display then remain unavailable for contemporary audiences except through a sanctioned, cinematic surrogate. My definition of the term "vicarious politics" differs slightly from the related concept of "political escapism," employed, for example, in Azadeh Farahmand's reading of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's attempts to simultaneously evade government censorship and reach an international audience through acceptance at film festivals like Cannes.² Whereas Farahmand's concept largely applies to the avoidance in Kiarostami's films of

controversial themes or issues facing contemporary Iranian society, which parallels the director's own "escape" from censorship, I focus more on how political themes are reappropriated in the four films in question in such a way that consumption of these films may come to serve as a surrogate for active political involvement, akin to what Siegfried Kracauer once called the "distraction factories" of Hollywood, giving the potential viewer the opportunity to participate vicariously in the Korean independence movement, but without any tools or lessons with which to apprehend the role of political activism in the contemporary situation. I address how the films' revisionist histories of the colonial period replace the public's active participation with the antics of a select few action heroes. In my account, violence of the Hollywood Western or action thriller genres is indispensable to this process: the gun functions as synecdoche for mass uprisings, thus exemplifying a frequently noted association between the gun barrel and the camera lens, given their shared capacity for substitution, displacement, and deferral of individual experience and participation.

To clarify, I suggest that the films' underpinnings signal a broader historical rupture between the colonial period and after which is perpetuated in hegemonic national discourse, maintaining that overriding public concerns spanning the colonial period and post-independence South Korea bear no resemblance to one another in these two discrete historical moments. As I will explicate below, the only connection granted by this discourse as typified in the films is that between the contemporary South Korean state and the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea as its progenitor, an unbroken link the films in question strive to maintain by inserting provisional government command over each act of anti-colonial violence. Without meaning to deny outright creative autonomy and fiction's freedom to depart from the historical record, my approach takes issue with the potentially

regressive implications of the kind of history telling offered in these films. Firstly, performing this historical separation corroborates the Cold War division of the Korean peninsula, with the US-backed Republic of Korea assuming the mantle of rightful representative body over the Korean people. Secondly, erasing the history of popular resistance to Japanese colonial rule is at once the refusal to portray modes of political engagement that might contest this Cold War framework and its ensuing harms done to Koreans. The result of this is an exoneration of the contemporary South Korean state from complicity with modes of governmentality employed by the former colonial apparatus, and at the same time the validation of anarchist-style tactics only when subsumed under the umbrella of the proto-South Korean independence movement. This appropriation of resistance ensures that it remains remote from current events, given the teleological fruition of statehood, to be experienced only in art, not in life. Though this general claim may also be true of other South Korean popular entertainment which dispenses with political themes altogether, I am inclined to think that the active reworking of political involvement evident in these films actually exacerbates the problem by magnifying the gulf between escapist, fictional worlds and the contingencies of the real, substituting a politically innocuous, ultimately unrealizable superhero-like version of politics for the real thing. While this article is not the place to examine in detail the actually existing historical continuities across the rupture between the colonial period and after, a topic which is treated deftly in Carter Eckert's latest work,³ suffice it to say that these films potentially further this historical separation, a fact which could have significant ramifications for imagining current and future political mobilization outside the framework of the action hero narrative, given that the films provide few alternative glimpses of what such mass politics has already or might look like in the future. As I will demonstrate below,

however, this bifurcation is also predicated on the eclipsing of minjung-era popular mobilization against South Korea's successive military dictatorships in the 1970s and 80s. By representing only a narrow strand of activity within the colonial-era national liberation movement, managed and directed by the Provisional Government as the Republic of Korea in crystalline form, the films can register the floating signifier of independent statehood as a singular, totalizing objective, ostensibly resolving all other colonial contradictions. As a result, the films risk rendering the present a harmonious national community, repressing the memory of nationwide opposition to and struggle against military dictatorship and American neo-colonialism in the recent past by figuring the ostensibly successful mode of militant struggle against Japan incompatible with such mass mobilizations.

I wish to recognize from the outset the progressive, anti-colonial potential of these films, as allegories for the Korean underdog casting off the yoke of Japanese colonialism. As with the Zorro-like protagonist of Yun Sŏng-sik's 2012 drama series *Bridal Mask* (*Kaksit'al*), these films play with action genre conventions to narrate the collective liberation struggle through the escapades of individual, action-hero protagonists. For this reason, it may appear too uncharitable to criticize these films on the grounds of such violence alone, and I do not want to take the position, for example, of apologizing for Japanese colonialism by unfairly holding Korean cultural production to harsher standards than the often unsatisfactory reexaminations of Japan's imperial legacy presented in contemporary Japanese popular media. However, in this article I hope to demonstrate that on the one hand, such allegorical renditions cannot be understood outside the complex postcolonial relations between South Korea, Japan, and the United States, in which what Jin-Kyung Lee calls the "subimperial" South Korean state attempts to solidify its legitimacy to its own population as

well as deflect criticism onto Japan, its formidable business rival.⁴ On the other hand, as I will develop further, the discrepancy between the merits of such stylized allegories and realistic representations of the Korean independence movement's historical situation is a gap which poses significant questions about how to engage with the residue of colonialism and persisting inequalities in contemporary South Korea. For example, my critique of a teleological movement from Provisional Government to South Korean statehood is indebted to Janet Poole's careful reading of the late colonial period and its mixed postliberation reception in both North and South Korea. Poole describes this teleology as a "historicist logic" or a process "through which history is so often told as a prelude to the present, [and] which has exerted great influence on the ways in which late colonial writers and their works have been read."⁵ For Poole, what is actually to be found in late colonial period texts has often been overshadowed by caricatures of that historical moment influenced by the vicissitudes of the various presents from which history is remembered. While this article approaches the same problematics inversely, dealing with contemporary films about the colonial period, both cases should remind us of the continued relevance of historical and contextual readings of any given text. Which is to say that fictional worlds as presented in a text, no matter how far they deviate from the historical record or to what extent this was intended by the author, are never free from the historical mediations of their moment of production, and this article is an attempt to reflect on precisely those social conditions and imperatives in the present that contribute to the reproduction of the colonial period in a particular fashion. While I certainly do not mean to go so far as to say allegory as such is incapable of adequately rendering the *durée* of colonial period social dynamics, my contention here is that the overly indulgent, neoliberal model of the lone gunner in these films has more to do with fitting the demands

of the current South Korean state's ambivalent position vis a vis its colonial heritage and international competitors than it does with fidelity to the formation, character, and influence of the liberation movement itself.⁶ This alone warrants analysis of the particular representations of violence and social movements in these films and their consequences for negotiating the contemporary political terrain, which this article undertakes below.

I would also like to stress that the following analyses are not meant overall to suggest that these are "bad" films, in terms of artistry or otherwise. Although *The Age of Shadows* and *The Last Princess* are clearly not the most artistically accomplished films, *Assassination* in particular is a highly polished and successful work in its genre and deserves recognition in that respect. Instead, to reiterate, my readings center on the political consequences of the historical revisions presented in each of the films, or, for example, in the case of *Assassination*, with what this admittedly captivating and sleek, stylized action is doing politically. I do occasionally make formal observations where relevant to my argument, but this article is ultimately concerned less with aesthetic evaluation and more with the films' historical fidelity and political implications. Each of these four films is loosely based around an urban experience of Japanese colonialism that precipitates the protagonists' enlistment in one way or another in a secret attack mission on key colonial government figures or installations. *Modern Boy* tells the coming-of-age story of wealthy playboy Yi Hae-myŏng (Pak Hae-il) who joins the Korean independence movement after falling for Laura, the dancer disguise of resistance fighter Cho Nan-sil (Kim Hye-su). To prove his love for Laura and the nation, Yi is eventually willing to risk his life in a suicide bombing of a Japanese colonial gathering.

Assassination weaves together multiple

narratives converging on an attack on a high-ranking Japanese official and his loyal Korean collaborator Kang In-guk (Yi Kyŏng-yŏng), who turns out to be the father of An Ok-yun (Chŏn Chi-hyŏn), an expert sniper recruited by the resistance for the mission, and her estranged twin sister Michiko (also played by Chŏn Chi-hyŏn). The film introduces the Korean guerrilla resistance in Manchuria, the hitmen duo Hawaii Pistol (Ha Chŏng-u) and his motorcyclist sidekick (O Tal-su), the former resistance fighter-cum-collaborator and Japanese police officer Yŏm Sŏk-jin (Yi Chung-chae), and the family of upper-class collaborator Kang, whose twin daughter Michiko is engaged to marry the Japanese military officer Kawaguchi (Pak Byŏn-ŭn). *Assassination's* portrait of colonial Korea is colored by veteran director Ch'ae Tong-hun's recurring fascination with gambling and killers-for-hire, and his penchant for action-packed, gripping plot twists.



Promotional poster for *Modern Boy*. The tagline reads, “Independence or collaboration, why bother? The incarnation of romance, isn’t he fabulous?!”

Promotional poster for *Assassination*. The tagline reads, “1933, A mission to assassinate a collaborator. Their choice was out of the ordinary.”

The *Age of Shadows*, directed by Kim Chi-un, is based loosely on the true story of an ethnic Korean officer in the Japanese colonial police who eventually sides with the resistance and carries out secret espionage activities on their behalf. In the film, detective Yi Chŏng-chul (Song Kang-ho) first faces off with his rival Kim U-chin (Kong Yu), an independence fighter masquerading as a wealthy antiques dealer, before he is persuaded to join the nationalist cause, transforming into a double agent in Japanese uniform. The film culminates in Yi’s instrumental role in bombing a reception party

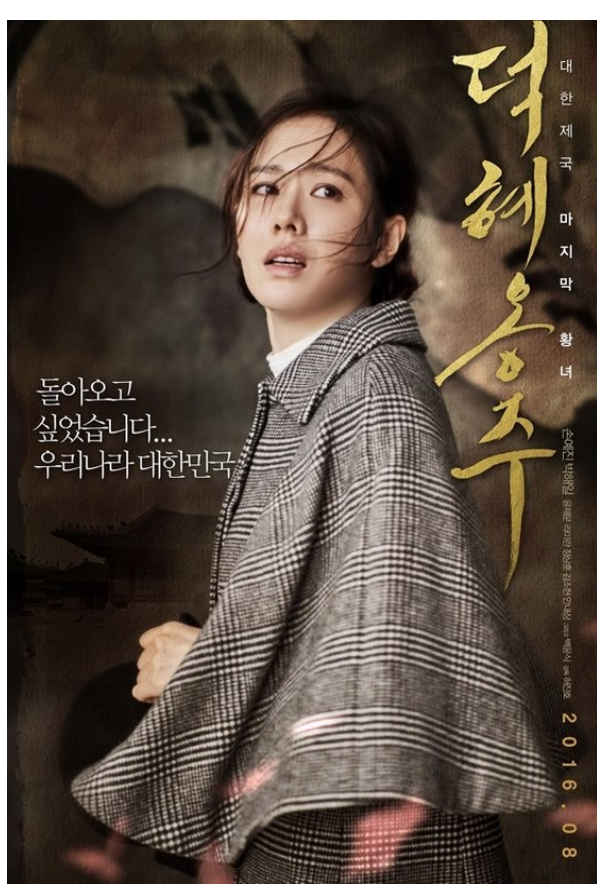
held by leading members of the colonial government and police force, including his former superior, Higashi (Shingo Tsurumi).



Promotional poster for The Age of Shadows. The tagline reads: "Infiltrate and Deceive."

Chang-han (Pak Hae-il). Chang-han is on Provisional Government assignment to protect the royal family by doubling as a Japanese military officer posted as a personal bodyguard at their luxurious manor in Tokyo, before he carries out his real mission to smuggle the Princess and her family to Shanghai where, it is presumed, they will be reunited with the Provisional Government and eventually reinstated as symbolic and/or political leaders of an independent Korea. Of course, in historical fact no such plans ever materialized, nor can we say that the royal family was considered a more pressing political exigency for the Provisional Government or the wider umbrella of anticolonial resistance than the livelihood of millions of ordinary or impoverished Koreans. But by situating the royal family of a then-deposed monarchical government, rather than the ordinary - albeit heroic - citizen protagonists of the other films, *The Last Princess* relies on a feudal, elitist conception of national belonging and caste-like hierarchy, much at odds with the struggle for a modern, democratic independent nation-state represented in the other films.

The Last Princess, based on Kwŏn Pi-yŏng's 2009 novel of the same name, departs drastically from the historical record in situating Princess Dŏkhye, daughter of Emperor Gojong, head of the short lived Empire of Korea (Taehan Chae-guk, 1897-1910), along with her extended royal family exiled to Japan, as a central preoccupation of the Provisional Government and independence movement. The narrative figures Princess Dŏkhye (played by Son Ye-jin) as steadfastly antagonistic to Japanese rule and secretly collaborating with resistance fighter Kim



Promotional poster for The Last Princess. The tagline reads, “I wanted to return...our country, the Republic of Korea.”

In an historical irony, the Republic of Korea’s contemporary imperative to cast its origins in the feudal Empire of Korea as a basis for its legitimacy, as exemplified by *The Last Princess*, becomes something arguably more regressive than, for example, colonial period Marxist intellectual Sŏ In-sik’s conversion to imperial Japanese nationalism and his apologetics for the “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere.” In Travis Workman’s reading, Sŏ’s about-face to imperial nationalism nevertheless remained rooted in his intellectual preoccupation with modern social formations and their determination in the contradictions of capitalism, which he misguidedly came to believe could be resolved through equality of citizenship in the pluralistic cultural geography

of the Japanese empire.⁷ In this way, he opposed right-wing supporters of the Japanese emperor system and mythic notions of national belonging and origins for their timeless, essentialist character. In contrast, the contemporary variant of nationalism exhibited in *The Last Princess* mostly steers historical analysis away from the problematic of capitalist modernity through recuperation of a “blood and soil” nationalism legitimating feudal hierarchy and thus little different in content, if so in context, from those very essentialist communal ties predicated on the Japanese emperor-system and giving way to the imperial fascism against which the Korean independence movement was fighting.

It would be inaccurate to characterize these films as merely action blockbusters, however. For example, despite its participation in the current trend rendering colonial Seoul (Kyōngsŏng; in Japanese, Keijō) a glamorous site of consumption and frivolity,⁸ shared with other colonial period themed films like Ha Ki-ho’s *Radio Dayz* (2008), *Modern Boy* features an unsettling cinematography which approximates the boiling pressure of colonial rule through its claustrophobic backrooms and the red and black art deco palette of dimly lit venues. It is no coincidence that it is under this damp lighting of the club venue specifically the eponymous “modern boy” (modan boi) undergoes his political transformation.



Colonial Seoul as shopping extravaganza. Pak Hae-il and supporting cast in Modern Boy.



Color postcard of a commercial street in Honmachi, Keijō. Compare with fig. 1. left.



Modern boys and girls out for a stroll. Mari (Kim Sa-rang) and Lloyd (Ryu Sŭng-bŏm) in *Radio Dayz*.

Laura (Kim Hye-su) under oppressive limelight, in *Modern Boy*.

Much of *Modern Boy* is shot in cramped domestic spaces like Yi Hae-myŏng’s bedroom, Cho Nan-sil’s tailor shop, the dance club at which she (under the name Laura) performs, its secret backstage tunnel used for the resistance’s clandestine movements, and the derelict prison cell in which Yi is betrayed and tortured by his best friend, the government official Hidaka Shinsuke (Kim Nam-gil). These interior spaces are only occasionally interrupted by panoramic views of colonial Seoul, relying heavily on computer generated images, or bustling city streets replete with decorative signboards and neon lights. The interior scenes are frequently filmed by handheld camera, producing a dizzying effect, and a substantial portion of the film is comprised of dialogue between Yi and Cho filmed with close-up and extreme close-ups often shot with a convex lens, in which much of the surrounding space is blurred. Interspersed pillow shots of private belongings – wristwatches, neckties, buttons and fabric – make similar use of this convex effect, which visualizes the domestic “illusions” of Walter Benjamin’s private individual, given the camera’s disorienting focus on these commodity objects to the exclusion of everything else.

In this regard, *Modern Boy*’s innovative cinematography defamiliarizes the expected, transparent view of colonial society, foregrounding the ideological inversion that fixes upright a topsy-turvy world. One could draw an analogy here with that striking image of the trolley magically split in two in Ch’ae Tong-hun’s earlier film *Jeon Woo-chi: The Taoist Wizard* (2009), the rising sun flags prominently displayed and doubled in what is surely a metacritical commentary on the incongruity between ideal and real conditions of imperialism. There is also friction between *Modern Boy*’s often long takes accommodating the domestic tension between the two would-be lovers and the plot elements which drive the

story forward in content – Yi’s stumbling onto Cho’s secret resistance activities and being swept up in the process. Because it shares overlapping themes concerning the Korean independence movement, I have chosen to include *Modern Boy* in this discussion, even though its cinematography and the slow pace at which its love story develops differs from the more conventional techniques, suspenseful movement, and extended gunfights of *Assassination*, *The Age of Shadows*, and *The Last Princess*. In what follows, then, my discussion of the action genre specifically pertains primarily to the latter three films, though I will include specific reference to episodes of violence and other overlapping elements in *Modern Boy* whenever applicable.

Shadows is noteworthy for its similarly cramped back-alley stage sets and its frequent use of drab, gloomy tones – the deep grays, browns and blacks of colonial-era architecture in Shanghai and Seoul, as well as the many austere uniforms and economical civilian outfits. Many of the action scenes are filmed at night or on overcast days marked by a palpable foreboding. The camera work is more restrained and inconspicuous, for the most part avoiding the extreme close-ups which dominate *Modern Boy* in favor of smoothly tracked, more expansive shots suitable for the many action sequences. The titular shadows of the film’s fitting English translation of *miljŏng* (密偵 literally “secret agent”) make a not-so-subtle point about despair under colonial rule, even if the protagonist in the resistance, Kim U-chin, is by no means financially disadvantaged. While the interior décor of the luxury passenger train in the suspenseful, extended middle section of the film punctuates the film’s predominant monotones, even this opulence is distanced and othered, for our heroes are always already excluded from high society as secret agents on a bombing mission. *Shadows* derives its aesthetic in part from *Assassination*’s similar, though less pronounced, juxtapositions of darkness and splendor across the Japanese

colonies, for example in the eerie dens of Shanghai, the nighttime street scene after An Ok-yun and her team arrive in a chilly Seoul, and the emerald and gold brilliance of the Mitsukoshi department store, site of the lavish wedding turned gratuitous gunfight later in the film.



A still from the Shanghai set in *Assassination*.



Kim U-chin (Kong Yu) in *The Age of Shadows*.

The Last Princess makes a notable attempt to engage with the question of working class oppression and poverty in the Japanese empire, unlike the other three films. A thread throughout the film is the terrible conditions of

Korean workers in Japan, as communicated early on through discussion of a newspaper report during a meeting held by underground resistance members in Japan to which Princess Dōkhye (as Yi Dōkhye) is invited. In a moving scene later on, the Princess is pressured to deliver a pro-Japanese speech to a crowd of ragged, suffering Korean workers. Afflicted by a guilty conscience, the Princess abandons the Japanese-language speech prepared for her a few lines in and speaks directly from her heart to the workers in Korean, telling them to keep faith in returning to an independent Korea and reciting a variation of the title of Yi Sang-hwa's famous resistance poem, "Will Spring Returns to Stolen Fields?" (Bbaeatgin tūlaedo pomūn onūnga, 1926).⁹ The workers applaud and, in a moving demonstration of national solidarity, one older man begins singing Arirang and another demands they be brought back to Korea. The authorities, unable to understand Korean, nevertheless realize what has transpired and begin breaking up the crowd, attacking the poor workers with fists and clubs. Meanwhile Princess Dōkhye is quickly ushered by Chang-han away from the commotion to safety in her nearby escort vehicle, but not before the vile collaborator Han Taek-su (Yun Chae-mun) drags her out of the car, slaps her to the ground, and proceeds to mercilessly beat her servant Pok-sun (Ra Mi-ran). On the one hand, this scene can be interpreted less favorably as a gesture to compensate for the film's elitist, exclusive treatment of the royal family's exile at a Japanese manor as if it were equivalent to the oppression of ordinary Koreans. However, on a more sophisticated level, this scene can be interpreted as papering over class antagonisms through a reactionary brand of nationalism, providing stewardship for oppressed Korean workers in Japan under the Korean monarchy and defusing their class frustrations through an abstract (or "ambiguous," as Balibar and Wallerstein would say) national identification. The progressive tropes of Korean national solidarity against capitalist exploitation - signaled metonymically

with the dirt-smeared clothes and faces of these workers - are contained and inoculated by the Korean emperor-system, ideologically presupposing that such factory exploitation would not come from Korean bosses.



Chang-han (Pak Hae-il) escorting Princess Dōkhye (Son Ye-jin) to safety, in *The Last Princess*.

Ken Kawashima has examined the differential practices of the Japanese state toward resident Korean workers in Japan. In some cases, such as the Korean welfare organization Sōaikai, a form of ethnic identification was even encouraged among Korean workers as a means to preclude or forestall radical anti-colonial activity or, importantly, class struggle through solidarity with fellow Japanese workers in various communist-oriented proletarian organizations.¹⁰ Kawashima's analysis provides an important counterpoint to the situation portrayed in the film, even if Princess Dōkhye's

relation to the workers is not identical to that of the Sōaikai, for example. The rallying call made by the princess itself constitutes a display of anti-colonial sentiment that cultural institutions like the Sōaikai sought to avert. Yet the structural homology between both Korean and Japanese elites should not be overlooked. Both seek to displace class struggle with an apolitical national affiliation. Here I do not mean to deny outright the progressive role of anti-colonial nationalism historically, which is evident in the case of China, Vietnam, Algeria, and elsewhere, but rather to point out the function such nationalist ideology serves at present, given that the film is a contemporary cultural product; it is not coterminous with colonial period nationalism. Rather than cultivating a more sensitive appreciation of the intersectionalities of race, class, and coloniality, the film seeks to remedy these compounded forms of oppression through the reimplementing of a stratified Korean national belonging vis a vis Japanese colonialism, disregarding the persistence of class dynamics in postcolonial conjunctures and the unmasked brutality of feudalism alike. And rather than providing a forum for Korean workers and intellectuals thinking seriously about the problematic of class struggle within a colonial situation, the film upholds a figure of the deposed monarchy as a paragon of Korean sovereignty and liberation, silencing those in whose name the Princess purportedly speaks (again, bracketing the historical question of whether the Princess in fact ever did give such a patriotic speech).

In each of these four films, a sensationalized violence structures and conditions the events portrayed, as the pressure slowly builds over the course of the narrative, as if anticipating an explosion. With the exception of *Modern Boy*, this violence repeatedly appears through the staples and conventions of the spy or action thriller genre, compromising the films' fidelity to historical events. The heroes engage in long shootout sequences in which bullets never run

out, attempt lone-gunner rescues, survive large explosions or multiple gunshot wounds, and maintain disguises despite unnervingly close calls. Borrowing heavily from Hollywood gangster and detective films, the spectacular violence renders the confrontation with colonial power through sporadic shooting sprees or bombing attacks and not a day-to-day struggle involving thousands of ordinary colonial subjects. One particularly distasteful scene set in a crowded Seoul Station in *The Age of Shadows* has Kim U-chin (Kong Yu) fire a pistol round point blank through the face of an oncoming Japanese soldier and into the head of a second standing directly in the line of fire.



Hawaii Pistol (Ha Chōng-u), in Assassination.



An Ok-yun doubling as Michiko (Chōn Chihyōn) at Mitsukoshi department store, in Assassination.

During the chaotic firefight on the second floor of Mitsukoshi department store in *Assassination*, heavyweight Chu Sang-ok (Cho Chin-ung) at one point fires a tommy gun across the wedding banquet hall filled with decorated tables under which civilian invitees cower. It is unlikely that with so many rounds unloaded per minute innocent bystanders were not killed, but the film's quick takes never bother to glance back. The result of this, whether intended or not, could not be further from American director David O. Russell's stated objective in *Three Kings* (1999) to have every bullet fired on screen accounted for. That the young Japanese couple seated in the dining car in *Shadow's* train sequence are not permitted to exit and inevitably killed in the crossfire is also regrettable, especially if contrasted with the Korean bar girl who is spared thanks to the wide drink counter. In the climactic segment in which Yi Chŏng-chul avenges his imprisoned comrades by bombing a large reception party for Japanese officials, the triumphal march-like score drowns out any consideration that poor Koreans as well as Japanese may be staffing the butlery; the audience is merely expected to enjoy the overblown fireworks to which Yi toasts his champagne glass.

those of flanking officers, foreshadows his subsequent conversion.

The same goes for Cho Nan-sil's tragic death by suicide bomb blast at an elite concert gathering in *Modern Boy*, by which scores of attendees are also pitilessly annihilated. This massive scale scarcely resembles the selective, targeted attacks on high officials witnessed in the colonial period – somewhat more accurately represented in *The Last Princess's* “New Era Celebration” scene in which the charismatic bomber Kim Pong-guk (Kim Tae-myŏng) sacrifices himself – thereby obeying the “bigger is better” Hollywood imperative rather than responding to any sense of accountability to the legacy of the independence movement. With such scenes, the films divorce the protagonists' actions from the realm of ordinary, everyday struggle by suggesting that political awakening is as simple a matter as picking up a bomb or gun, thereby threatening to reduce the plurality of the anti-colonial movement to a group of incredible marksmen (and women). To bring these points into starker relief, one could reference in contrast the more sober, textured and gripping account of anticolonial violence in, for example, Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 masterpiece, *The Battle of Algiers*.



Detective Yi Chŏng-chul (Song Kang-ho), center, in hot pursuit of a resistance fighter, in *The Age of Shadows*. The restraint keeping his pistol fixed in its holster, unlike



Chang-han (Pak Hae-il) holding down the fort despite several bullet wounds, in *The*

Last Princess.

In these films, nameless Japanese soldiers are callously rendered enemy cannon fodder rather than historicized as bodies forcibly mobilized, like many ethnic Koreans, albeit differentially, by imperial Japan's war machine. A helpful counterpoint in the field of literature is Kuroshima Denji's 1930 novella *Militarized Streets* (*Busō seru shigai*), which provides an insightful account of Japanese soldiers as proletarians having more in common with the Chinese peasants they are brutalizing than their Japanese employers.¹¹ Through such violence, the nationalist tenor of the films distances Koreans from Japanese characters, as opposed to internationalizing a shared sense of precarity within an historical process of combined and uneven capitalist development which overdetermines national or colonial boundaries, an inclusive solidarity proletarian writer Kobayashi Takiji termed "plurality" (*tayōsei*).¹² An exception to this is the character Kimura (Kim In-u) in *Assassination*, a Japanese man who has been living in Korea aiding the resistance alongside the owner of the bar *Anemone* (Kim Hae-suk) from which An Ok-yun and her team launch their operation, but his role is minor and he is killed off shortly after he is introduced.

I do not mean here to bypass entirely the national question as it pertains to the Japanese proletarian movement and Japanese-Korean solidarities, or the extent to which international solidarity could or could not adequately address problematics of racialization, imperialism, and national liberation. Scholars such as Baek Moon Im, Samuel Perry, and Nayoung Aimee Kwon have thoughtfully contributed to these debates.¹³ While I take the somewhat more controversial position that it is possible and indeed necessary for such "pluralistic" solidarity to come to terms with race and imperialism, my reading pertains to contemporary cultural productions dealing with

Japan after the fact, and not products of the proletarian movement itself, which is a somewhat separate matter. In this way, Baek Moon Im's postcolonial criticism of Japanese socialist filmmakers' "ethnographization" (*chongjokji*) or allochronous rendition of colonial Koreans as lagging behind the more civilized Japanese socialists is entirely valid and not incompatible with my objections to the ease with which Japanese are killed in contemporary Korean films.¹⁴ I also do not wish to make an unconditional case for non-violence through some kind of liberal humanism that equates Japanese colonial violence with the resistance portrayed in these films. I follow Fanon in recognizing the right of the colonized to militant liberatory action, and that responsibility for violent acts of resistance begins and ends with the colonial situation, with the colonizer. Nor am I making a prescriptive claim about what politics should look like, or which method was the most effective at repulsing Japanese forces during the colonial period. I draw attention to these gratuitous scenes rather to critique the ways in which such sanitized, desensitized media violence intensifies objective, structural violence today by cultivating a blasé attitude toward killing and destruction inextricably linked to capitalist expansion, what anthropologist Allen Feldman has called "cultural anaesthesia."¹⁵ To clarify, there is in this respect little difference between the Korean case and that of callous, stylized Hollywood action, and I do not mean to suggest that Korean films are somehow more deserving of this familiar critique than other commercial filmmakers worldwide. But while the elimination of nameless enemy Japanese on screen may seem innocuous for an audience familiar with the traumas of the colonial period, less immediate is the relationship between such cinema violence, irrespective of its object, and nationwide militarization of the sort that once aided the US intervention in Vietnam and that today contributes to the interminable US "war on terror." The prevalence of such hyper-reified

violence in video games and their advertisements in contemporary South Korean society as well is not unrelated to the increasing militarization of the Korean peninsula brought to a head with the ongoing THAAD missile crisis. This symbiosis between media and state-sponsored carnage is what I gather from Paul Virilio's chiasmus war is cinema and cinema is war, in which battlefield logistics draw from visual technologies made possible by cinema as much as cinema comes to serve as the decisive propaganda tool for the military-industrial complex.¹⁶

In what follows, I wish to advance an historical claim about how politics on the ground during the colonial period and after diverges sharply from the hyperbolic representations found in these films. I do so with two interrelated propositions. The first, stronger claim is that the style of militant resistance presented is inadequate to the intensity of political violence as it actually transpires, resorting instead to action hero caricatures. The second claim is that the films' exclusive focus on the militant resistance backed by the provisional government avoids non-violent forms of mass politics widespread in colonial Korea, thus isolating the site of struggle from the majority of the population and, as I hope will become apparent, from contemporary audiences as well.

As for the first proposition, one could point to how the action sequences forcibly impose a kind of equivalence between the colonized and colonizer via the violent confrontation. While outnumbered in terms of soldiers and overpowered in terms of weaponry, the protagonists' escapades render the fight a fair one, even if the overall narrative is meant to show the unjust oppression of colonial Korea. Turning the resistance fighters into action heroes capable of holding their own in combat situations, the films do a disservice to the courageous and collective nature of such surprise attacks by Korean independence

fighters, and misrepresent the odds of struggle with an inflated optimism or even nonchalance typical of slick action flicks. Such a sanguine outlook can only come through retrospection from a present moment in which South Korean business and geopolitical power is on par with that of Japan. Progressive political struggle coeval with its opponent cannot be rendered with the same bravado in real time. Anarchist-style bombings and attacks like those of the courageous An Chung-kŭn hardly resemble the dramatized instances found in these films. The emotional spectrum spanning the excruciating agony, fear, and resolve of these fighters is poorly interpreted when protagonists go up, sometimes single-handedly, against ranks of Japanese soldiers, survive grenade blasts, or fall from buildings like An Ok-yun's daring escape from her second-story hideout during the first attack scene at the gas station in *Assassination*.

In each of the films, an incisive, sober appreciation of the concrete colonial situation and possibilities for resistance is replaced by a rather shallow attack strategy fitting conveniently within a two-hour narrative frame. And the unmitigated anguish under colonialism is rendered superficial, capable of being matched and overpowered by a handful of lone-gunners. Indeed, the experience of colonialism for ordinary Koreans is almost entirely absent from these films; instead the film's diegetic worlds encompass the exploits of the action heroes almost exclusively. The constant anxiety of being apprehended by the authorities is better conveyed in the elongated train sequence in *The Age of Shadows*, climaxing in the quite visible alarm on the faces of the protagonists standing in line at customs during the Seoul Station scene, but even this erupts into an implausibly balanced firefight between countless Japanese soldiers and only a handful of Korean gunners. The economy of apprehension is feminized in the film, with the character of Yun Kye-sun (Han Chi-min) forced to loosen the buttons on her blouse in the

luxury passenger seat as a means of disguise in hopes that detective Hashimoto (Um T'ae-gu), combing through the cars of the train one by one, won't recognize her. Further, the photogenic smile by Yi Chŏng-chul during the climactic bombing scene, and his confident gait at the film's end as he walks alone down a country road, individualize and trivialize the collective nature of struggle against colonialism, imputing a self-assurance that too easily glosses over the cautiousness learned by such fighters through trying experience. As noted above of the films' allegorical qualities, a few superstars are meant to embody the entire society's desire for liberation. But to what extent this anti-colonial allegorical work regresses into something else, a kind of hyper-individualism of the neoliberal, self-regulating variety, remains open to question. Through such a line of reasoning, the action hero becomes simply the dialectical mirror image of the obedient office worker trying to make ends meet, a double life satirized in such South Korean films as Kim Chi-un's *The Foul King* (Panch'ikwang, 2000).

A formal means by which the films' violence is sanitized and shielded from the harshness of lived experience is the rushed temporality of the action sequences in *Assassination*, *Shadows*, and *The Last Princess*, given the constraints of the action-thriller genre, which is not always favorably suited for capturing the longevity and abrasiveness of struggle as it played out across the colonial period and after. This acceleration is accomplished by the fast pacing and quick cuts, contrasting with the meditative long takes of such countervailing colonial-era themed films like Yi Chun-ik's *Tongju* (2016) or Chŏng Bŏm-sik and Chŏng Sik's *Epitaph* (Kidam, 2007), as well as those of *Modern Boy*, which allow for a sense of unease, of an oppressive colonial atmosphere, to materialize. Among all the films, this tendency reaches its fullest expression in *Assassination*, the long wedding action scene of which consists of nearly uninterrupted shooting for

over five minutes. But the film is punctuated throughout with riveting sequences, like Yŏm's first assassination attempt at the outset, or the daring motorcycle rescue of Hawaii Pistol and An Ok-yun later on. When the action quickly cuts from one take only a few seconds in duration to another, we are not typically shown the aftermath, nor are we given a cinematic-temporal analog to the slow, excruciating pain of a bullet wound. In one exceptional return to the wreckage after Laura's suicide blast in *Modern Boy*, blood is nowhere to be seen amidst the smoky debris. The action is swift and clean, making it safe for viewers to imagine themselves alongside the protagonists in the anti-Japanese movement, while it has little to do with the vulnerable corporeality of real political struggle. The question of whether or not this playfulness or departure from historical veracity was intended is avoided here - it is the potential reception and political consequences of such films which are at stake for my argument.

Admittedly there is a tension here between my claim that the violent anti-colonial resistance portrayed in the films is inadequate to the historical situation of everyday political organizing on the Korean peninsula, in Manchuria, Shanghai, or elsewhere, and that the structural violence of the colonial project itself is inaccurately or only partially represented. Given that the films do not presume to provide an accurate historical account, this judgment may seem somewhat misguided. But again, this begs the question of how to gauge an artwork's historical significance, or measure the political consequences of certain techniques, tropes, or perspectives, and I will maintain that such historical readings remain valid despite objections of creative freedom or authorial intention to the contrary. As I will develop further below, I suggest that the freedom to retrospectively deviate so drastically from the historical record is itself a sign both of the purported liberation from Japanese rule with

ROK statehood and of South Korea's increased geopolitical influence vis a vis Japan and other Asian nations in recent years. While my emphasis is put primarily behind the claim about the incongruity between the films' representations and politics in the historical real, I maintain that the two are ultimately inseparable, and I am not finally convinced that the structural determinations are sufficiently represented either, given the at best merely cursory attention paid to and at worst false mediation of social antagonisms stemming from capitalist inequality, such as the fleeting images of itinerant rickshaw drivers scuttling around our protagonists, or my above discussion of Korean workers in Japan as treated in *The Last Princess*. At least in content, one need only recall the overt episodes of fascist aggression to surmise that the films largely fail to deliver a critique of colonial capitalism as a coherent totality, frequently substituting shocking and horrendous instances for the whole - Hashimoto, the antagonist of *Age of Shadows* repeatedly slapping a subordinate, or the all too convenient technique to rile the audience, Kawaguchi's ruthless killing of the young Korean flower girl in *Assassination*.

In terms of other social experiences and the broader structure of feeling - like the prototypical K-pop singers and dancing, shopping at extravagant department stores or vibrant street markets, and the rigid military hierarchy and discipline - the representations found in many such colonial period-themed films do not differ from those of postliberation South Korean capitalism much more than to the extent that Japanese flags are flying and an exoticization of Japanese cultural influence and the going fashion is evident. Factory work, backbreaking farming, compulsory prostitution, domestic labor: these images, which are also commonly found in postliberation South Korea, are replaced by selected instances of violence amidst otherwise abundant markets and signifiers of progress like the telephone,

locomotive, and automobile. One could do a frame-by-frame comparison between, say, the city streets and Japanese/South Korean militaries treated in *Modern Boy* and Pak Sujin's *Ode to My Father* (Kukjae sijang, 2014), respectively, to illustrate the contiguous underlying sensibilities between contemporary blockbuster films treating the colonial period and postliberation South Korea. This presents a curious "return of the repressed," as it were, insofar as a certain continuity with the colonial period - which I have been claiming is otherwise denied in these films - becomes apparent on the level of consumer culture, exhibiting the same commitment to capitalist development (minus explicit reference to its concomitant inequalities) shared by the Japanese colonial project and the postliberation South Korean state. That these two may possibly share the same draconian approaches to governmentality, however, is inadmissible; hence the abandonment of this cultural or economic continuity on the level of politics as represented explicitly in the films. But the superficial manner in which the Japanese colonial project is taboo in these films should be sufficient to trouble any easy conflation of the Cold War division system and true democracy or liberation.



Colonial Korean labor under Japanese supervision.

Regarding my second proposition, allow me to

turn to the question of mass political mobilization during the colonial period subtending and empowering the limited acts of violence described above (and, in turn, being reenergized by them). Theodore Hughes observes that the literary and cultural field in Cold War South Korea relied on the erasure of the colonial period proletarian movement and its contribution to anti-colonial resistance, given that any association with communism or those who went North after liberation was in strict violation of the national security law.¹⁷ Accordingly, the idealized violence of these films as well as the explicit representations of the anti-colonial movement deliberately avoid imagery associated with the proletarian groups or communist guerrillas active at the time. Even the eruption of “spontaneous” mass protests is of too grand a scale for the action film’s impatient generic demands. With the exception of *Assassination*’s finale, a street demonstration does not appear in any of the films. Labor organizing, strikes, peasant revolts, leafletting, tedious study sessions and tactical or theoretical debates – none of these themes, which were central to works of committed (*ch’amyō*) literature in the colonial period and after, appear in the films as significant components of the wider independence movement. Instead we are overwhelmed by the adrenaline rush of digestible combat. The films largely eschew a structural account of class divisions in colonial society, for such an account would quickly find parallels in the postliberation moment.

In this way, the foundational repression of proletarian politics in contemporary South Korean representations of the colonial period becomes visible. The films accomplish this repression by treating the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, established in April of 1919, as the exclusive representative of Korean desires for independence throughout the period, as though the Provisional Government naturally and inexorably evolved into the present South

Korean state. The manner in which contemporary South Korean foundational narratives are cast backward to a mythical past is not difficult to perceive here. In so doing, a teleological movement toward present-day South Korean nationhood is posited in the colonial period, marginalizing alternative voices, internal splits, competing political factions, as well as the popular struggles against the UN partition and national division in 1948. The films are thus as indicative of contemporary misremembering of the liberation period and its legacy through a Cold War framework as they are of the invention of tradition in the colonial era. Perhaps one exception to this is the conclusion of *Assassination*, when the villainous Yōm Sōk-jin walks free from a post-liberation courtroom trial for collaboration activities, and is met with an oncoming march of demonstrators against the division at the 38th parallel. The warm greeting given him by his fellow post-independence Korean police officers suggests the sinewy networks of former Japanese collaborators and their continued influence in the post-liberation South Korean government, even if Yōm himself is finally paid his due at the end of the film when An Ok-yun and her comrades mortally wound him. This is underscored by the film’s frame narrative, which occasionally jumps between the postliberation moment during which Yōm is being investigated and the colonial period setting proper. But there is not necessarily a contradiction between this investigatory method and the search underway for former collaborators (*ch’inilp’a*) endorsed, at least nominally, by the New Right as much as by moderates and left-wing critics, and thus the film’s subversive potential arguably remains limited.

Similarly, *The Last Princess* employs a frame narrative through which an older Chang-han, now a reporter in 1960s-era South Korea, attempts to find the missing Princess and bring her back to South Korea, against the interests

of the military government. Chang-han's professed opposition to the then current government satisfies the contemporary need for the South Korean state to distance itself from its difficult recent past, without forfeiting its capacity to root itself in the more remote past, as a legitimate successor to the Empire of Korea embodied by Princess Dōkhye. In a later scene, the older Chang-han puts his career on the line and even risks the threat of torture by government agents to protest the continued enforcement of Syngman Rhee's ban on members of the royal family from returning to the newly established Republic of Korea. At that time, Rhee's insecure hold on power amidst competing factions and the threatening reality of the divided peninsula compelled him to exile any remnants of the former dynasty, fearing they might seek positions within the government as legitimate heirs and weaken his autocracy. But in the present moment, the royal family poses no such danger. What was once a threat has now become an essential source of historical legitimation, after the tumult of national division and the unrest of the military dictatorship period shook the government's very foundations. For a South Korea oriented toward export in a multicultural niche-market driven, neoliberal world, as John Lie discusses in his work on K-Pop,¹⁸ such cultural heritage becomes a precious commodity. Yet it is almost unimaginable that during the dictatorship period reporters, students, or other activists would have risked or undergone torture on behalf of a monarchy figure over aspirations for a democratic Korea liberated from American military occupation. The link produced through this frame narrative therefore further obscures, rather than clarifies, the historical relationship between the colonial period and after. Chang-han's enduring faithfulness to the Princess only further removes the present neoliberal moment - with its nostalgia for feudal origins - from mass politics and ordinary Koreans' aspirations in the colonial period and after.



A young Princess Dōkhye (Shin Rin-a) with her father, Emperor Gojong (Paek Yun-sik), in *The Last Princess*.

With an unbroken linear trajectory moving from the Provisional Government to the present Republic of Korea operative in these films, only a limited, state authorized historical connection is established with the colonial period. On the popular level, no such correlation can be made beyond the auspices of the provisional government. To reiterate why finding such a correlation is necessary, the reader will recall my claim at the outset that the Cold War division of the Korean peninsula risks naturalization if the historical continuities between the colonial period and after are denied. If only an officially sanctioned connection is permitted, Cold War South Korea becomes the teleological culmination of a very limited faction within the Korean independence movement which scarcely conveys its true plurality and diversity of opinions and strategies. According to this teleological view, the militant tactics employed in the movement are no longer warranted after independence. Militant resistance is only recuperated by these contemporary films because it can be subsumed retroactively, via the aforementioned teleology, within the contemporary state's "monopoly on the legitimate use of force," as Weber would say. The logic of violence in these

films then is one means by which the state narrative exerts its hegemony over colonial period activities, excluding and repressing forms of resistance which either do not fall under the provisional government's jurisdiction or which are potentially disruptive to the authorities at present. Anti-colonial violence is sanctioned when applied to the right enemy - the former Japanese colonizer - but becomes strictly taboo when a potential viewer attempts to refashion contemporary anti-state or anti-capitalist politics in the same image. Furthermore, focusing exclusively on militant action ensures that other forms of non-violent, mass mobilization witnessed in the colonial period will not spill over into the present. Thus, by championing a mode of anti-colonial struggle under the direction of the provisional government and therefore no longer imaginable today, the films nurture a kind of vicarious political involvement, one decidedly removed from today's pressing exigencies and experiences.

This appropriation of anti-colonial resistance is brought into marked relief when contrasting the action-hero model of struggle presented in these films with South Korea's 1980s-era minjung or "people's" movement, the massive nation-wide mobilization which brought an end to decades of military dictatorship. Observing the ways in which fiery debates about the "social formation" (sahoe kusongch'ae) of capitalism in Korea broke out in the 1980s, and how officially banned colonial period texts circulated in student activist circles, we may recognize that there was indeed a connection decisively established between mass political organizing in the minjung movement and the colonial period, from which the former drew much inspiration. Nonetheless, in these films, forms of everyday struggle available to thousands of students, factory workers, farmers, immigrants, domestic laborers, prostitutes, homeless and others is replaced with the fashionable gunslinger persona, making the two moments incompatible. This

exemplifies the contemporary state's compulsion to evacuate collective political organization from the public memory and render all citizens loyal, passive, and self-disciplining neoliberal subjects. The lone action hero figure stands as merely a typification of the alienated individual of late capitalism, at once an unrealizable escape from modern drudgery and its very symptom.

One need only compare cultural texts produced in the wake of the minjung struggle to note a discrepancy with the indulgence and superficiality of the colonial period-themed action in question. The harsh factory labor of Pak Kwang-su's film *A Single Spark* (Chŏn T'ae-il, 1995) and Chŏng Chi-yŏng's film adaptation of An Chung-hyo's novel *White Badge* (Hayan Chŏnjaeng, 1992), interspersing images of South Korea's subimperial aggression during the Vietnam War with police brutality at minjung demonstrations, each provide a much more reserved, somber and delicate treatment of structural violence and resistance. More recent representations of the 1980s also deserve mention here. For example, Yi Chang-dong's *Peppermint Candy* (Bak'a sat'ang, 1999) is an emotionally devastating account of a student activist-cum-police detective and his tribulations across the minjung period, and, together with Yang Wu-sŏk's *The Attorney* (Byŏnhoin, 2013), reproduces the viciousness of police torture in a much more effective and repulsive way than the surgical, painless violence of the colonial era-themed films in question.



The trauma of the era expressed through Yongho's (Sŏl Kyŏng-gu) suicidal tendencies. Peppermint Candy.



Seoul funeral procession for Yi Han-yŏl, a university student killed by a tear gas canister during a minjung demonstration in 1987.

The leap from the present over the minjung movement back to a contrived colonial period performed in these films then exposes a second fundamental repression to be added to Hughes'

formulation: not only colonial period proletarians but minjung as well must be disavowed. Like the provisional government's violent resistance, South Korean democracy ostensibly renders the struggle against the military dictatorship (and Namhee Lee reminds us it was much more expansive than this¹⁹) a thing of the past, having outlived its necessity with the introduction of open elections in 1987. In this way, the return to the colonial period as a site of entertainment, of thrill, becomes possible: instead of serious historical reflection on the continuity between colonial period concerns, minjung, and the present, from the comfortable vantage of democracy, history can now be appreciated for its kicks. Because we know the winner, so to speak, Korean militant action against the Japanese government becomes something of a sport. It no longer figures as a life or death struggle facing audiences today; hence the grounds for personalizing and dramatizing collective resistance discussed above. Yet the "Hell Joseon" of rising unemployment, the recent presidential scandal, the THAAD missile deployment controversy, or the menace of Fukushima-style nuclear meltdown movingly portrayed in Pak Chŏng-u's debut film Pandora (2016) are only a few examples of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" as they characterize South Korea's late capitalist moment. That films such as Pandora covering similar topics have trouble getting through government censors only makes the avoidance of such topics in other films more pronounced.²⁰ As this article hopes to establish, one such means of evasion characterizing contemporary Korean cinema is fixation on the colonial period in an historical vacuum, reflecting hegemonic narratives while oblivious to present demands. Does this context not pose certain limits to the ideology of a putatively achieved democracy undergirding such colonial period representations? What then of exploring what art historian Sohl Lee describes as the "reiterability" of minjung under present conditions, or, to play with Habermas, minjung

as an “unfinished project”?²¹

Certainly, other recent films featuring comparable action sequences set in the colonial period could be included in this discussion, notably the striking (and improbable) assault by Korean cowboys on a Japanese convoy in Kim Chi-un’s *The Good, The Bad, and the Weird* (2008), or the similar rich city boy-turned resistance fighter themes shared between *Modern Boy* and the KBS television drama series *Scandal in Old Seoul* (2007) directed by Han Chun-sŏ. This genre finds one precursor in *The Matrix*-inspired, slow-motion pistol-firing dives of Yu Yŏng-sik’s debut film *Anarchists* (*Anak’isŭt’ŭ*, 2000). But this film allows more room for debate about politics and strategy and interestingly begins from the standpoint of 1949, shortly after former provisional government leader Kim Gu, also featured in *Assassination*, was killed by a member of the Syngman Rhee government with alleged US involvement. The frame story thereby gives, like *Assassination*’s finale, a potential afterlife to the film’s conclusions, even if Kim Gu is now rehabilitated as a national hero and his murder downplayed, while the contemporary South Korean state distances itself from the Rhee regime’s authoritarianism without sacrificing its core foundations vis a vis Japan and North Korea. However, as Jinsoo An demonstrates through his discussion of Vietnam War-era “Manchurian Westerns,” anti-Japanese violence is nothing new to South Korean cinema.²²

A final shootout with the police. Kang Chihwan and Ryu Chin in *Scandal in Old Seoul*.

Conversely, there are several recent productions which avoid the action-thriller sensibility in favor of a more nuanced relationship to the period, such as Yi Chun-ik’s thoughtful *Tongju* (2016) about the tragic life and death of celebrated poet Yun Tong-ju. Pak Hŭng-sik’s *Love, Lies* (*Haeŏhwa*, 2016) about a soured friendship between two gisaeng aspiring to become popular singers provides an intelligent meta-commentary on the limits of recreating the past, even if much of the film is guilty of liberally reconstructing its soundscape to highlight the creative talents of its cast and crew (aside from the film’s recurring theme, Yi Nan-yŏng’s “Tears of Mokp’o”). The moving scene in which So-yul (Han Hyo-ju) tries unsuccessfully to accompany Yŏn-hi’s (Ch’ŏn U-hŭi) superior voice playing through the phonograph speakers delimits the private sphere of musical appreciation engendered by mechanical reproduction, what Adorno called the gramophone’s “pregnant stillness of individuals,” while it also communicates how new technologies may alienate and sever the most intimate of social relations through the reification of listening, given So-yul’s parallel, plot-changing betrayal of Yŏn-hi to the Japanese authorities. The rediscovery of the very same long-lost LP in the 1991 radio station scene speaks to both the immediacy as well as the distance and anonymity of the past preserved by recording equipment since replaced by newer digital technologies, paralleling the proximity yet infidelity to the period exemplified by the film’s own recording from the standpoint of the present. And like *Radio Dayz*, Kim Hyŏn-sŏk’s *YMCA Baseball Team* (*YMCA Yagudan*, 2002) takes a lighter approach, using humor to defamiliarize the absurdities of Japanese colonial rule and express support for the Korean independence movement through comic relief.





So-yul's bittersweet success bought by the Japanese brass shining behind her. Han Hyo-ju in *Love, Lies*.

It also goes without saying that sensationalist violence of the “pew-pew”²³ variety is not the only mode through which the brutality of the Japanese colonial system has been represented in recent films - consider the rendition of the torturous medical experiments on colonial Koreans through the horror genre in *Epitaph* (2007), about whose “uncanny spaces” of postcolonial memory Kyung Hyun Kim writes “make us shudder like a bad dream,” and Yi Hae-yŏng’s *The Silenced* (Kyŏngsŏng hakkyo 2015), a topic which is also treated briefly with the injections administered to the incarcerated poet in *Tongju*.²⁴ Pak Tae-min’s *Private Eye* (Kŭrimja salin 2009) recounts a disturbing serial murder case in which the colonial government is potentially implicated. And Pak Hun-jŏng’s remarkable film *Taeho* (2015), in spite of its exaggerated rampage scenes, glimpses a possible posthuman solidarity between a formidable Korean tiger and hunter Chun Man-duk (Ch’ae Min-sik) and uniquely delineates the biopolitical incorporation of human and non-human animals under imperial Japanese control. Moreover, a comparative study of the divergences between South Korean and North Korean cinema representations of the colonial period has yet to be done. In any

case, my selection of these four blockbusters is not intended to be entirely representative of South Korea’s collective memory of the colonial period. Instead, I understand these action dramas as one prominent tendency, given their commercial success and circulation, within the vast and complex terrain of historical memory available to representation, one which surely raises the stakes of recollecting the past.



Promotional poster for *Tongju*.

Allow me to conclude by turning to Pak Ch’an-uk’s *The Handmaiden* (Agassi, 2016), also set during the colonial period, as an alternative to the spectacular violence of the other films. The plot, inspired by Sarah Waters’ 2002 Victorian England-themed novel *Fingersmith*, develops in three segments, each of which tells parts of the same story from the perspectives of the three

main characters of the film, Lady Hideko (Kim Min-hŭi), a wealthy Japanese heiress living in colonial Korea; her newly hired maidservant Suk-hŭi (Kim Tae-ri); and Count Fujiwara (Ha Chŏng-u), in truth a common thief posing as Japanese nobility in order to marry Lady Hideko and swindle her fortune. Politics as a collective phenomenon is largely supplanted by psychic interiority and a suspenseful interrogation of the disturbing ends to which Lady Hideko's uncle Kouzuki (Cho Chin-ung) puts his rare collection of ukiyo-e pornography and forbidding torture chamber. Breaking gendered conventions while simultaneously reproducing the male gaze, the film climaxes in an erotic lesbian romance between the two female leads.



Lady Hideko (Kim Min-hŭi) and Suk-hŭi (Kim Tae-ri) in *The Handmaiden*. Suk-hŭi's servile posture and the class discrepancy between the two women, per their difference in dress, suggest the "feudal remnants" further entrenched, not eliminated, by the colonial project.

These points aside, I am interested specifically in the trope of the blinking lightbulbs in Lady Hideko and Uncle Kouzuki's secluded manor which recurs throughout the film as a metonym for the uneven modernization of Korea by the Japanese colonial project. A formal device dramatizing some of the most suggestive

moments of the film - for example, at the crescendo of Lady Hideko's erotic story recitation to a lustful male audience - the metonym of electricity cutting out also tangibly evokes the impartial nature of imperial Japan's purportedly complete modernization. While suggestively silent about the turmoil outside, the hinterland of the film's remote manor setting also accentuates the spatial limits to the Japanese colonial development of Korea as isolated to specific urban centers and industrial nodes as opposed to a geographically even incorporation of city and country together. The oscillation between darkness and illumination in the figure of the blinking lightbulb also draws meta-critical attention to the medium of cinema itself, as the moving frames of the analog film reel flickering against the projector are now threatened by the sleek, abstract violence of the digital era. This corresponds to the contemporary political situation in South Korea as much as it does to burgeoning digital technologies in contemporary film production, such as the CG recreation of Seoul Station, the Japanese provincial government building, and nearby colonial landmarks in the sweeping panoramic shots in many of the aforementioned films. This metonym of uneven development and the medium-specificity it highlights then intimate a mode of historical thinking and attendant awareness of the means of representation themselves, a mode which may resist the naturalization of violence and compartmentalization of history characteristic of the counterpoint action films.

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Notes

¹ See for example, “[South Korea lawmakers pass contentious anti-terror bill after record filibuster ends](#),” *The Japan Times*, March 03, 2016.

² Azadeh Farahmand, ‘Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema’; Richard Tapper (ed.) - *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, 86-108. See p. 99 in particular for Farahmand’s definition of “political escapism.”

³ Carter J. Eckert, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism 1866-1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

⁴ Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

⁵ Janet Poole, *When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 2.

⁶ By “ambivalent position,” I mean to draw attention to how the South Korean government is, for example, wedged between mediating popular protest against Japan over the “comfort women” (wianbu) issue and pushing through unpopular treaties at the behest of Japan and the US, forcing it to downplay its own criticism of Japan for the latter’s colonial legacy. A similar balancing act is performed vis a vis the US, whose ongoing military presence in the country is facilitated by the South Korean government but unpopular among many citizens.

⁷ Travis Workman, “Sō In-sik’s Communism and the East Asian Community (1937-1940),” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 21.1 (2013): 133-160. See especially pp. 151-154.

⁸ I credit this observation to Han Sang Kim and Andy Sanggyu Lee, respectively, and thank them both for edifying conversations about these and related films.

⁹ I thank Gowoon Noh for pointing this fact out to me.

¹⁰ Ken C. Kawashima, *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. See especially ch. 5, “The Obscene, Violent Supplement of State Power: Korean Welfare and Class Warfare in Interwar Japan.”

¹¹ An English translation of this story can be found in Kuroshima Denji, *A Flock of Swirling Crows and Other Proletarian Writings* (trans. Zeljko “Jake” Cipris), Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005.

¹² Kobayashi’s term is translated and introduced by Samuel Perry, in *Recasting Red Culture in Proletarian Japan: Childhood, Korea, and the Historical Avant-Garde*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014, p. 5. The Korean pronunciation of this term is tayangsōng (多様性). I am inspired here as well by Asad Haider’s defense of multi-racial unity in the context of the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, antiblack state violence, and Afro-pessimist theory in

the United States, which resonates with Kobayashi's parallel concept from almost a century before. See Haider, "[Unity: Amiri Baraka and the Black Lives Matter Movements](#)," *Lana Turner Journal* 8 (2016)

¹³ Baek Moon Im, *Im Hwa ūi yŏnghwa* (Im Hwa's Cinema), Seoul: Somyŏng Ch'ulp'an, 2015; Samuel Perry, *Recasting Red Culture in Proletarian Japan*; and Nayoung Aimee Kwon, *Intimate Empire: Collaboration and Colonial Modernity in Korea and Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

¹⁴ See chapter 1 of Baek Moon Im's *Im Hwa ūi yŏnghwa* (Im Hwa's Cinema), "P'urollaet'aria yŏnghwa wa chongjokji (ethnography) sai aesŏ" (Between proletarian film and ethnography).

¹⁵ Allen Feldman, "From Desert Storm to Rodney King via ex-Yugoslavia: On Cultural Anaesthesia," in Seremetakis, C N. *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory As Material Culture in Modernity*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

¹⁶ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, London: Verso, 1989, p. 34. Italics in original.

¹⁷ Theodore H. Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

¹⁸ John Lie, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015.

¹⁹ Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

²⁰ Nam Eun-ju, "[After Choi Sun-sil scandal, blacklisted movies coming into the light](#)," *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 18 December 2016

²¹ Sohl Lee, *Being Political Popular: South Korean Art at the Intersection of Popular Culture and Democracy, 1980-2010*. Seoul: Hyunsil Pub, 2012, p. 45.

²² Jinsoo An, "War as Business in South Korea's Manchurian Action Films," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 23.4 (2015): 785-806.

²³ Alan Scherstuhl, "[The Tyranny of Pew-Pew: How Fun Fantasy Violence Became Inescapable](#)," *The Village Voice*, 23 April 2015

²⁴ Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 79.