

**School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry**

***Cinematic han and the Historical Film: South Korean Cinema  
and the Representation Of Korea's Geopolitical Conflict in the  
Twentieth Century***

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### **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number # HRE2017-0436

Signature: 

Date: 23/11/18

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## Thesis Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, Korea faced numerous periods of geopolitical conflict that shaped this nation's social, political and cultural landscape. These periods of military conflagration represented experiences of unfathomable oppression and suffering for the Korean people. It is often attributed to the cultural legacy of these experiences the development of the Korean cultural concept of *han*, which has been given widespread use in Korea to describe an intense feeling of oppression, anger and sadness, conjoined with hope, allegedly shared by all Koreans, which would also manifest in Korean art, literature and film. This thesis identifies a unique film aesthetic, deemed here as *cinematic han*, that embodies the complexities of this Korean cultural concept within South Korean historical films made between the 1950s and 2010s. South Korean historical films are found to evoke this aesthetic through narrative and style, depicting Korean characters as devoid of agency under an oppressive, external agent, while granting the representation of geopolitical conflict in Korea a prison-like appearance and atmosphere. The thesis finds this *cinematic han* to be consistent throughout the South Korean historical film genre despite the ongoing formal changes to this nation's film industry's structures, policies, discourses, and practices. The resulting representations of war and suffering are thus found to enhance the symbolic links between the cinematic text and its socio-cultural context of production, while enabling South Korean cinema's construction of historical knowledge about this nation's geopolitical conflict in the twentieth century. Utilising a methodology involving textual, historical and theoretical analysis, this thesis examines the evocation of *cinematic han* in South Korean historical films that depict the three main periods of armed conflict in modern Korean history: the Japanese Occupation of Korea, World War II, and the Korean War.

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## General Introduction

When I first experienced South Korean cinema as a teenager, my knowledge of that nation was limited only to the fact that they were connected to the brutal dictatorship of North Korea. One day, upon pure chance, I bought two South Korean films, *Oldboy* (Han, Kim, Kim, Lim, & Park, 2003) and *The Good, The Bad, The Weird* (Choi et al., 2008). While I adored both, with each being attributed to my subsequent love of this national cinema, the latter film initially confused me, leaving me to ask various questions throughout. Why was the film, a 1930s-period piece, based in Manchuria and not Korea? Why did the Korean characters appear so dishevelled and as if they were residents of a third world nation? Why were the Korean and Japanese characters so antagonistic to each other? I did not know at the time but this was my first encounter with the significant Korean geopolitical conflict of the Japanese Occupation of Korea, a topic that I had neither heard nor encountered through my own lived experience in Australia. Subsequently, my initial knowledge of such a vital period of Korean history came solely through the films that this nation had produced to represent it. However, I initially took the South Korean narratives and cinematic representations of the Japanese Occupation period at face value, naively believing the inherent nationalism and anti-Japanese standards of films such as *Modern Boy* (Kang & Jung, 2008) and *Private Eye* (Han, Lee, & Park, 2009). I either did not understand or care how highly structured, considered and, at times, political these representations could be. This first encounter with the past via film is not unique to my own experience, with countless audience members around the world initially encountering significant historical geopolitical conflicts, events and eras through the various representations of the past produced by national cinemas. In a sense, these period recreations in film act as a form of gatekeeper to these eras, picking and choosing what is and is not known about this event by international, and even domestic, audiences.

In the early seventeenth century, G.W.F. Hegel proposed that history is resigned to the pure description of the actions of people (Burrell, 1991) and is understood as a complete and unbiased account of the human search for and acquisition of freedom (Dudley, 2009), that is, a narrative professedly devoid of fictional approaches and author

interpretation. However, while the Hegelian ideal of an unbiased account of history may be desirable, it is not one that many contemporary historical theorists agree upon, as most have long debated the purpose and place of primary historical documentary evidence (henceforth ‘historical evidence’) from a position of uncertainty. In this thesis, the category ‘historical evidence’ will be used to refer to the primary sources of history, which are ‘sources from the time, place, and people under investigation’ (Miles-Morillo & Morillo, 2014, p. xiii) and can include the ‘official papers, diaries, letters, minutes, memoranda and taped interviews’, as well as photographs and archival footage of events that are produced by the culture of the historical period being studied (McDowell, 2002, p. 93). Primary sources can be divided into three categories: ‘narrative histories or chronicles’ of events created during a historical period; ‘records of government,’ such as the minutes of government, official decrees and passed or rejected laws; and ‘private or personal records,’ such as ‘wills and family letters’ (Rosenthal, 2012, pp. 1-2). Despite the availability of historical evidence, as Hsu-Ming Teo explains, it is ‘impossible to reach a consensus about the past, let alone the “truth” of the past, because history is a matter of competing genres relying on skewed sources’ (2015).<sup>1</sup> In spite of my desire to know the unaltered facts of the past via my engagement with the South Korean historical film, I have learned to accept that it is impossible to know absolutely what truly occurred (Nelson, 2015).

After nearly two centuries of debate, Hegel’s influential historical philosophy has been heavily criticised (Engels, 1841; Kojève, 1980; Pelczynski, 1984). Within contemporary social science, Hegel’s idealist historical ideas have been replaced with the recognition that history does not mirror fixed, irrefutable, factual events but is articulated through the personalised meanings historians place upon historical evidence in order for it to become relevant in the present (Kremmer, 2015; Peacock, 1991, p. 9). One outlet for such personal interpretation is the historical film. According to Robert Burgoyne, film ‘has somehow claimed the mantle of authenticity and meaningfulness with relation to the past - not necessarily of accuracy or fidelity to the record, but of meaningfulness, understood in terms of emotional and affective truth’ (1999). Under Burgoyne’s

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis in the original.

assertions, while the historical film is not an accurate record of historical events, it has been accepted to be an important historical resource, regardless. The popular understanding of the term ‘history’, as posited by Burgoyne, is impersonal, reducing the events of the past to facts and figures that could only occur outside of the individual’s archive of experience (1999). However, the historical film is not impersonal, but constructed as a ground where its representations of history become experiential and emotive through personification of historical cultures through visual content. For instance, in South Korean historical films, the South Korean infantry soldier is not an impersonal statistic, but an affecting representation of a human being that can be empathised with through the visual depiction of their experiences and emotions in battle. Through this affective connection, the visual images contained in the historical film become more meaningful to an individual’s understanding of historical events than the impersonal facts of history texts.<sup>2</sup>

A significant component in the construction of the historical film’s meaningful representation of the past is its inherent use of fictional elements, such as imagined narratives, characters, dialogue and scenarios. The acknowledgment that historical evidence and the fictional approaches used to convey it are always intertwined has provided the basis of much contention between theorists of history since the 1880s. Fiction has been a taboo subject within the field of history studies as it is believed that fictional elements could irrevocably alter the content of historical evidence and the ways

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<sup>2</sup> Theories that stress the historical film’s experiential and affective function, find significance and affinity within two alternative academic discourses: memory studies and spectrality studies. Memory studies is a multi-disciplinary field and ‘combines intellectual strands from anthropology, education, literature, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology’, in a space where theorists can examine various texts to determine how the memories of the past, specifically in regards to trauma events, have been disseminated on both an individual and collective level (Bosch, 2016, p. 2). The historical film is an arena where such memories can be narrated and contested; see: Hirsch, 2012; Landsberg, 2004; Sturken, 1997. The spectrality discourse posits that stories of ghosts and their hauntings act as ‘conceptual metaphors’ that have significant influence on both ‘global (popular) culture and academia alike’ (Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013, pp. 1-2). Metaphors of haunting and the various categories of ghost (Peeren, 2014, pp. 4-5), ‘perform theoretical work’ that can be used across humanities and social science discourses to theorise ‘a variety of social, ethical, and political questions’ involving history, tradition, memory, trauma, scientific processes, technology, gender and class (Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013, pp. 1-2); see: Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013a; Peeren, 2014; Lee, 2017. While memory and spectrality studies are important approaches to the study of cultures of the past, they are methodologically inconsistent with my specific study of the historical film and, therefore, are not implemented into this thesis’ analysis of the South Korean historical film.

in which these sources are perceived by the layman. For example, in his historical novel *Ivanhoe: A Romance* (Scott, 1911), author Laurence Templeton apologises to the reader for the perceived historical inaccuracies of his text, specifically the language he has characters speak and the behaviour he has cultures employ, stating that by ‘intermingling fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions, and impressing upon the rising generation false ideas of the age which I describe’ (Scott, 1911, p. XXII).<sup>3</sup> However, despite expressing remorse at betraying the historical accuracy of his text, Templeton goes on to defend his methods, explaining that the reason why he uses fictionalised modes of communication is so that the historical evidence of the past could be understood in his contemporary context and allow the past to be explored ‘in more sublime and emotional ways’ (De Matos & Nelson, 2015). In this thesis, historical accuracy refers to the differential between historical evidence and secondary historical sources in terms of information regarding historical events, eras and people. Secondary historical sources ‘consist of the interpretations of other researchers on the content of the primary sources’ and are usually published as written texts, such as ‘books, pamphlets or articles’ (McDowell, 2002, p. 93). Historical accuracy specifically refers to how close a secondary historical source mirrors the content of historical evidence, such as the names of locations, the dates of key events or eras, or the deeds and personalities of historical figures. Templeton’s justification of his text’s fictional elements reveals a dual purpose of fiction as it has been suggested within the academic theorisation of history (henceforth referred to as the ‘historical discourse’), namely, to allow the events of the past to be understood by an audience that did not experience them and to enable the audience to construct a more vivid imagining of the historical events (Scott, 1911, p. XXII).

One such national cinema where this fictionalisation of history occurs is the cinema of South Korea. Arguably, the historical beginning of Korean cinema can be located in three different periods. The first beginning can be said to have been in 1893 when the first film camera-projector was introduced to Korea (Shim & Yecies, 2011, p. 22),

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<sup>3</sup> Originally published in 1820, the novel’s accredited author’s name, Laurence Templeton, was in truth a pseudonym for Scottish politician Sir Walter Scott. In addition, Scott also published under the name Jedediah Cleishbotham and as ‘The Author of Waverly’ (Scott the Novelist, 2007).

shortly after Anglican missionaries had presented the magic lantern projector to Koreans and proto-filmic magic lantern shows were conducted accompanied by live *Byeonsa* narrators, who worked either from a script or from personal interpretation to instil a sense of emotion and narrative into the visual work (Shim & Yecies, 2011, p. 38).<sup>4</sup>

Between 1893 and the end of the Japanese Occupation of Korea in 1945, approximately 157 films were created in Korea.<sup>5</sup> However, due to the combined conflicts of the Japanese Occupation and World War II, few of these films remain in their original state or exist at all as most were improperly stored, destroyed by the Japanese, or censored beyond recognition (Rousee-Marquet, 2013). In addition, it is problematic to label the films produced in Korea during the early twentieth century as Korean cinema, given that the Japanese held total control over the Korean film industry. Korean filmmakers during this era were faced with restrictive film laws, harsh censorship, limited funding and inferior equipment (Kim, 2010).<sup>6</sup>

A second beginning of Korean cinema could be located on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the date of Korea's liberation from the Japanese by combined forces from the United States and the former Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> In the months that followed, the Korean government, alongside the United States Army Government in Korea (USAMGIK), established the Korean Film Council. The role of this council, the first in the nation's history post-liberation (Scott, 2005), was to monitor the production of Korean motion pictures and enact film regulation. The first fully Korean motion picture free from Japanese oversight was

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<sup>4</sup> Initially, the introduction of the magic lantern projector to Korea was thought to be in 1903 at the Korean royal palace during a celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Gojong. However, according to Ae-Gyung Shim and Brian Yecies, the magic lantern was instead introduced by British Anglican Missionaries at screenings held in Seoul and Chemulpo in 1893, in order to 'befriend, entertain, and educate Koreans' about 'modern' ideas and Western ideologies (Shim & Yecies, 2011, p. 22).

<sup>5</sup> The Japanese Occupation of Korea lasted between 1910 and 1945. During this period, Korea became a protectorate of Japan, with all of its domestic and foreign interests being controlled by this nation. Under Japanese rule Korean cultural expression was severely restricted and Koreans faced harsh treatment from their occupiers (Fuqua, 2011, pp. 42-43; Kim-Rivera, 2002, pp. 236-264). The Japanese Occupation, and its effects on the Korean nation, are discussed further in Chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of this control over the industry included the creation of a Japanese film bureau in the 1920s to censor communist ideology propagation and restrict Korean filmmakers from promoting an 'ethnic identity'. More extreme examples occurred during World War II. In 1939, Japan installed a film policy that made nearly all film production and distribution a governmental process. The Japanese government 'confiscated and nationalised' private filmmaking facilities so film companies would have plenty of advanced resources to produce 'pro-Japanese war time propaganda films'. If Korean filmmakers wanted access to the most advanced filmmaking equipment and facilities they had no choice but to make films under this nationalised Japanese film company (Kim, 2010, p. 27-28).

*Hurrah! For Freedom*, also known as *Viva Freedom!* (Choi & Choi, 1946). Directed by Choi In-kyu, the film was produced immediately after liberation and depicted the Korean freedom fighter Choe Han-jung rallying together a band of fellow Koreans to participate in an armed uprising against the Japanese.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, due to improper storage and censorship cuts, only 49 minutes of the original 69 remain.<sup>9</sup> With the production of *Hurrah! For Freedom* and the establishment of a film culture within Korea, for the first time in the nation's history fully Korean films were produced. This period of Korean cinema ended in 1948 and it is unclear how many films were made during this time, with film historians debating different figures. Jennifer Rousee-Marquet (2013), for example, argues that only five films were made each year between 1945 and 1948, while Ae-Gyung Shim and Brian Yecies (2011, pp. 184-185) state that Choi In-kyu made five films in 1948 alone. Regardless of the precise quantity, the films assembled during this three-year cycle remain the only known examples of Korean films that were produced while the nation was still officially unified.

The third conceivable beginning of Korean cinema can be located on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1948, when Korea was formally divided into the northern and southern sovereign states known today. Due to the closed nature of the northern regime and its isolation from the importation and exportation of popular culture products, including films, books and video games, North Korean cinema has never been a part of formal international distribution networks (Shaw, 2013).<sup>10</sup> Due to the absence of North Korean cinema in international film distribution circuits, for over sixty years the films recognised

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<sup>7</sup> This date is known in Korea as *Gwangbokjeol* or 'Restoration of Light Day' (Liberation Day, n.d).

<sup>8</sup> Prior to liberation, Choi In-kyu predominately made pro-Japanese films, such as *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* (Fujimoto & Imai, 1943). That Choi In-kyu's first film after liberation be anti-Japanese is described by Yii Hyo-in, the director of the Korean Film Archive, as 'ironic' (Choi & Choi, 1946a). Furthermore, as stated by Yii, Korean audiences did not care much about the plot of the film, but only wanted to see 'a movie made by a Korean director with Korean actors speaking the Korean language opposing the Japanese and fighting back' (Choi & Choi, 1946a).

<sup>9</sup> Due to the loss of 20 minutes of footage, the film has no ending, leaving it unclear if the uprising against the Japanese depicted in the narrative was successful. In the 1975 re-released edition of the film, the screen cuts to black and inserts a title card with the words 'thank you' upon it. Fortunately, the final few pages of the script are included in the Korean Film Archive's official DVD release. In this scripted ending, Han-jung's uprising is thwarted by a Korean who informs on him to the Japanese. Heavily wounded, he escapes from a Japanese hospital due to the intervention of his love interest, leaving his and Korea's fate unresolved.

<sup>10</sup> *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (Bonner et al, 2012), about a female North Korean coal miner who dreams of becoming a trapeze artist, is one of the few North Korean films to be distributed internationally.

worldwide as ‘Korean cinema’ have been made in South Korea, thus shaping international expectations regarding Korean cinema around South Korean themes, aesthetics and narrative.

It is this third beginning of Korean cinema that this thesis focuses upon. During this epoch four key cinematic periods occurred, the Golden Age of Korean cinema (1955-1962), the Dark Age of Korean cinema (1962-1987), and the First (1987-1996) and Second (1996-2010s) Korean New Waves (Kim, 2010; Palmer, 2015). This thesis specifically focuses upon the Golden Age and First and Second Korean New Waves, respectively.<sup>11</sup> Films made in each of these cinematic periods, when representing the same historical geopolitical conflict such as the Korean War or World War II, implement different fictional strategies to politicise the past, specifically by integrating an anti-communist agenda, a working-class perspective, or an increased focus on spectacle, irony and violence into the narrative and formal construction of each film. As a result, the representation of key geopolitical conflicts in South Korean cinema has never remained fixed, with the films produced in each period reflecting the socio-cultural context of the era in which it was produced. These cinematic periods can be divided into two distinct categories, films produced before 1987 and films produced after that year. For example, prior to the beginning of Korea’s democratisation in 1987, the Golden Age of Korean cinema used the historical film genre to contextualise historical conflict as a form of anti-North Korea, anti-Japan and pro-South Korea propaganda. The representation of the North Koreans and the Japanese within these films fluctuates between characters that are both insignificant and expected to be killed by South Korean soldiers, as shown in the film *Five Marines* (Cha & Kim, 1961), or sadistic and cruel, as visible in the film *The Sea Knows* (Kim & Kim, 1961). However, once the film policies and anti-communist agenda of the South Korean government were eventually eased after 1987, the South Korean historical film faced significant change as these archaic representations were radically altered. Suddenly, the North Korean and the

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<sup>11</sup> The thesis does not discuss the films of the Dark Age of Korean cinema (1962-1987) because the ideological precepts of this cinematic period are near identical to those of the Golden Age (1955-1962). As both contain a predominantly anti-communist agenda, as discussed further in Chapter 2, to avoid repetition, the study of the South Korean historical film prior to 1987 will focus solely upon the Golden Age.

Japanese characters were receiving as balanced a representation as the South Koreans, becoming moral equals, as evident in the film *The Front Line* (Jeong et al., 2011) and/or formidable adversaries, as demonstrated in the film *General's Son* (Lee & Im, 1990). However, despite the fact that the filmic representation of Korea's geopolitical conflict in the twentieth century has been in a state of flux for over sixty years, there are manifest elements of continuity in these films regardless of when they were produced; considered together, these elements come to constitute a specifically Korean cinematic aesthetic.

Throughout the twentieth century, Korea faced numerous periods of geopolitical conflict that shaped this nation's social, political and cultural landscape. These periods of military engagement represented experiences of unfathomable oppression and suffering for the Korean people. It is often attributed to the cultural legacy of these experiences the development of the Korean cultural concept of *han*, which has been given widespread use in Korea to label an intense feeling of oppression, anger and sadness, conjoined with hope, allegedly shared by all Koreans. *Han* has been described as 'the soul of Korean art, literature, and film' and, according to Korean studies scholar Roy Richard Grinker (1998), this cultural concept permeates throughout all of Korean artwork, regardless of its formal construction and production contexts (p. 78). Therefore, despite the aforementioned evolution of the South Korean historical film genre across each cinematic period, a uniquely Korean cinematic aesthetic has remained constant in the films, which in this thesis is given the name of *cinematic han*. This cinematic aesthetic, which as this thesis proposes, originates from the Korean cultural concept of *han*, informs the narrative and style of the South Korean historical film genre, particularly, its specific use of mise en scene, especially colour, costume and location, to imbue the film's narrative with affect. While 'aesthetic' generally applies to film style within the context of film studies, in this thesis the term will be adapted to include a film's general narrative approach, explicitly its use of key narrative tropes. Therefore, under the label of *cinematic han*, narrative and style, specifically mise en scene, will be considered as separate domains to be analysed equally.

This unique film aesthetic embodies the complexities of this Korean cultural concept within South Korean historical films made between the 1950s and 2010s. Under the

elements of *cinematic han*, Korean characters are depicted to be devoid of agency under an oppressive, external agent, while granting the representation of geopolitical conflict in Korea a prison-like appearance and atmosphere. As previously stated, the thesis finds this *cinematic han* to be consistent throughout the South Korean historical film genre despite the ongoing formal changes to this nation's film industry's structures, policies, discourses, and practices. The resulting representations of war and suffering are thus found to enhance the symbolic links between the cinematic text and its socio-cultural context of production, while enabling South Korean cinema's construction of historical knowledge about this nation's geopolitical conflict in the twentieth century. These links take the form of narrative developments, dialogue, character action, and visual and aural metaphors that allude to an aspect of the real world, such as a political group, historical occurrence or a societal fear or anxiety. For example, as discussed later in Chapter 5, the evocation of *cinematic han* in the Korean War film *The Front Line* transforms South Korea's oppressive, external agent—displacing its focus from the North Korean infantry to the South Korean military's own high command—to reflect South Korean society's newfound humanistic stance towards the North, which is a result of the South Korean government's Sunshine Policy in the 2000s. Historical knowledge in this thesis is defined as the expressive confluence of two distinct elements: on the one hand, the core historical information that a historical text contains, such as data, names and dates and timelines of events (for example, the start and end dates of a war, and when and in what order battles were fought), all of which is supported by archived historical evidence, and, on the other hand, the way in which a historical text has come to produce an understanding of the past it depicts. For example, the South Korean historical film *My Way* (Kang et al., 2011) contains historical information, such as the start and end dates of World War II, alongside depictions of actual historical battlefields, such as the Normandy beach landings, yet filters this information through fairy tale allusions, specifically to the classic character Pinocchio, to frame the oppressive Japanese high command as childlike and sympathetic. As a result of this approach, the film produces historical knowledge of World War II that is unique to this text and its cultural context of production.

Therefore, this thesis addresses the following central question: what is the significance of the Korean cultural concept of *han* for South Korean cinema's formal construction of historical knowledge of Korean geopolitical conflict? The thesis answers this research question through a methodology that involves the application of textual, historical and theoretical analysis to the examination of the evocation of *cinematic han* in South Korean historical films that depict the three main periods of armed conflict in modern Korean history: the Japanese Occupation of Korea, World War II, and the Korean War. The discussion of how *cinematic han* produces historical knowledge about South Korea's geopolitical conflict in the twentieth century through its enhancement of the symbolic link between the cinematic text and the socio-cultural context of its production, contains four key research objectives that are systematically followed. Firstly, a working definition of the historical film genre is established through the deployment of the theories of several key historical film theorists, such as Robert Rosenstone, Hayden White and Robert Burgoyne. This definition is implemented throughout the thesis to define the historical film more generally. Secondly, a working definition of the South Korean historical film is created in order to separate the historical films of this nation from the predominantly Western scholarship regarding the historical film. This is undertaken by merging the working definition of the historical film genre with the work of war film theorists, such as Martin Baker, Kathryn Kane and Eleftheria Thanouli. This definition is used throughout the thesis to refer to the historical films that were produced specifically by South Korea. Thirdly, through the historical and textual analysis of the evolving standards and practices of the South Korean film industry in the latter half of the twentieth century, the ideological precepts of the Golden Age of Korean cinema, and the First and Second Korean New Waves are established. Through this analysis, the elements of *cinematic han* are formulated via the analysis of the consistencies in narrative and style in the historical films of these cinematic periods. These elements define the *cinematic han* aesthetic that is unique to this thesis. Finally, a textual and theoretical analysis of eight South Korean historical films, *The Sea Knows*, *Nameless Stars* (Lee & Kim, 1959) and *Five Marines* from the Golden Age, *Nambugun* (Jeong & Jeong, 1990) and *General's Son* from the First Korean New Wave and *Assassination* (Shen & Choi, 2015), *Spirits' Homecoming* (Cho, Lee & Cho, 2016) and *The Front Line*

from the Second Korean New Wave is conducted to determine how each of these films evokes the elements of *cinematic han* despite their diverse narrative and formal construction under the ideological precepts of their respective cinematic period. From this analysis, it is determined that the evocation of *cinematic han* via their narrative and formal construction of the past creates symbolic links to the socio-cultural context of their production. Therefore, this thesis argues that the aesthetic of the Korean cultural concept of *han*, which can be identified within the South Korean historical film genre, enhances the symbolic link between the cinematic text and the socio-cultural context of its construction, and, as a result, enables the South Korean historical films' production of historical knowledge of this nation's geopolitical conflict in the twentieth century.

To demonstrate and illustrate its central proposition, the thesis' discussion and analysis is organised into five chapters. The first two chapters, which should be read together, outline the thesis' conceptual and methodological framework used in later chapters to analyse the South Korean historical film's production of historical knowledge via the evocation of *cinematic han*. Both chapters contain continuing discussion of the historical discourse, the historical film and the South Korean film industry, with each working towards defining both the South Korean historical film and *cinematic han*. The final three chapters apply these concepts into a textual analysis of the eight previously discussed historical films to determine how *cinematic han* enhances the production of historical knowledge in the South Korean historical film. These three chapters share the same methodology and structure as they outline how this aesthetic can be applied across varying cinematic periods as well as narrative and formal representations of different geopolitical conflicts.

Chapter 1, 'Historical Knowledge and the Fiction of the Historical Film Genre,' has five key areas of focus that contribute to the discussion of how the fictional, dramatic and narrative devices of the historical film may enhance this film genre's capacity to produce historical knowledge: to define what makes a film historical; to discuss the methods historical films utilise to construct their representations of the past; to interrogate the claims of film scholars that the historical film's primary function is to provide commentary on the socio-cultural context of the film's construction; to explore how the

historical film implements fictional strategies in the narrative and formal construction of its representation of the past; and finally, to collate the theories discussed throughout the chapter into a single working definition of the historical film that is used throughout the thesis. Using examples of South Korean films to frame this research, this chapter initially discusses how the definition of the historical film is a contentious issue, with the works of scholars such as Robert Rosenstone, Constantin Parvulescu, Natalie Davis and Thomas Keirstead being compared and contrasted to determine what defines a historical film. This discussion reveals how the historical film can be classified as a specific film genre as well as the place fictional and dramatic elements serve in the inclusion or omission of film from the historical discourse. Building off this discussion, the methods the historical film utilises to construct its representation of history, such as historying, monumental, antiquarian and critical history, as well as the concept of ‘the event’, discussed by Greg Denning, Marcia Landy and Guy Westwell, are explored. This discussion reveals two key points of discussion: each historical period has set historical knowledge that each filmic representation utilises to build its narrative and formal construction of a geopolitical conflict; and that the meaning and purpose of a film’s representation of the past is forever being changed and altered by the narrative and formal systems used to create it, specifically in the implementation of fictional and dramatic narrative devices.

From this knowledge, the theories of Robert Burgoyne, Brian Le Beau, Michael Martin and David Wall are utilised to frame the discussion of the historical film being as much of a representation of the film’s socio-cultural context as it is about the past it is purporting to represent. Implementing examples from the South Korean film industry, it is discussed how the discursive imprint of the film’s production context is embedded within its narrative and formal construction, revealing significant information about the societal, cultural and political climate that produced it. In this discussion, implementing research by Keirstead, it is discussed how this discursive imprint may actively rewrite the popular understanding of a nation’s past. After this, the theories of scholars such as Phillip Rosen, Robert Raak and Hayden White are analysed to determine how a historical film’s inherent fictional elements and dramatic narrative devices can influence its narrative and formal construction and its production of historical knowledge. This

analysis is filtered specifically through discussions of propaganda and White's historiophoty concept to deliberate the importance, and dangers, of the fictional elements of the historical film. Finally, after this research has been conducted, the chapter concludes by determining a working definition of the historical film. This definition is divided into two conceptual areas: first, a generic delimitation of the historical film and, second, a theoretical explanation of the construction of the historical film's representation of the past. At the end of this chapter, this working definition is established and is used to inform the treatment of the term historical film for the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter 2, '*Cinematic han* and the South Korean Historical Film,' is a multifaceted chapter that has four key aims in which to discuss how the Korean cultural concept of *han* is a permanent aesthetic element in South Korean historical films despite the ongoing formal changes affecting South Korean cinema and this nation's film industry's standards and practices: to discuss the origins of the Korean cultural concept of *han* and how it has previously been implemented into South Korean cinema; to develop a working definition of the South Korean historical film by merging the working definition of the historical film discussed in Chapter 1 into war film theory; to discuss the history of the South Korean film industry prior to and after 1987 to explore the ideological precepts of the Golden Age and First and Second Korean New Wave cinematic periods and how they begin to develop a consistent aesthetic reminiscent of *han*; and finally, to collate the research of the chapter to establish the core elements of a unique aesthetic that this thesis calls *cinematic han*. This chapter begins with a general discussion of the Korean cultural concept of *han* specifically its origins, framed through the theories of Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, and how *han* has permeated throughout South Korean society since its inception. Using examples of the South Korean *minjung* movement, alongside two areas of Korean Christian theology, *han* is demonstrated to be a multifaceted concept that can change and adapt to the ideologies of those who use it. Furthermore, the work of theorist Kristof Boghe provides insight into how *han* has been previously used in South Korean revenge films such as *A Bittersweet Life* (Lee, Oh, Oh, & Kim, 2005) and *Bedvilled* (Lee, Lee, Lim, Seok, & Park, 2009). Boghe's research, along with the theories of Hye Seung Chung, inform my discussion of *han* in South

Korean historical cinema and why it is beneficial to collate the concept into a cinematic aesthetic for the purposes of this study. After this discussion, the war film genre and its infantry subgenre are explored, specifically in regards to how this genre is inherent to the South Korean historical film. Consequently, the working definition of the historical film established in Chapter 1 is further developed to create a working definition of the South Korean historical film, which merges historical and war film scholarship. The working definition of the South Korean historical film is used throughout the remainder of the thesis to inform the discussion regarding *cinematic han*.

The second half of Chapter 2 examines the history of the South Korean film industry, while also exploring the establishment of the ideological precepts of the Golden Age and First and Second Korean New Wave cinematic periods. The first section discusses the South Korean film industry prior to 1987, specifically in the Golden Age cinematic period, and explores how the South Korean government's anti-communist agenda and oppressive policies, such as the National Security Law and Motion Picture law, forced filmmakers to create films that had an anti-North Korean, anti-Japanese and pro-South Korean focus. These policies are also scrutinized for how they began to evoke key elements of *cinematic han*. The next section discusses the South Korean film industry after 1987 and explores how the removal or relaxation of these polices resulted in South Korean cinema's emergence onto the international stage and produced films that emphasised working-class narratives and *auteur*-realism in the early 1990s during the First Korean New Wave, before eventually evolving into a blockbuster model that accentuated spectacle, irony, and violence in the 2000s and 2010s during the Second Korean New Wave. Furthermore, these distinct cinematic periods are also examined for how key elements of *cinematic han*, reminiscent of those from the Golden Age, are present despite the significant changes to the South Korean film industry's standards and practices. The final section collates all of the theory discussed in the chapter to establish the six core elements of the *cinematic han* aesthetic. These elements, consisting of two narrative tropes and four elements of the *mise en scene*, are discussed in detail, emphasising how this aesthetic creates a historical narrative where the Korean nation has the appearance and atmosphere of a prison. Alongside this contextualisation, an exploration of how these elements also embody the cultural concept's element of hope is

conducted. Therefore, by the end of Chapters 1 and 2, three key concepts are defined which inform the theoretical analysis of the remaining chapters: a working definition of the historical film; a working definition of the South Korean historical film; and, most significantly, *cinematic han*.

Finally, Chapters 3, 4 and 5, entitled ‘The Japanese Occupation of Korea and the South Korean Historical Film’, ‘World War II and the South Korean Historical Film’ and ‘The Korean War and the South Korean Historical Film,’ respectively, utilise the theory of *cinematic han* established in the previous two chapters to inform their discussion on how the representation of specific groups of Koreans during significant Korean geopolitical conflicts makes evident these films’ evocation of *cinematic han*, which, in turn, enhances the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film’s representation of historical geopolitical conflict. In Chapter 3, the focus of this study is the representation of Korean resistance groups during the Japanese Occupation. In Chapter 4, the representation of the forced Korean participation in geopolitical conflict during World War II is focused upon. Finally, in Chapter 5, the representation of the Korean infantry during the Korean War is examined. Each of these chapters share the same three research foci: to examine how the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are present in the Golden Age, and First and Second Korean New Wave films studied in the chapter, despite the evolving ideological precepts of their respective cinematic period; to discuss how the mise en scene of the films being studied in the chapter evokes *cinematic han* and how they contribute to cinematically portraying Korea as a metaphorical prison; and finally, to conduct an analysis of how the representation of the chapter’s respective geopolitical conflict can enhance the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film through their symbolic connections to the socio-cultural context of the film’s construction. By conducting a thorough examination of how *cinematic han* is present in the films being studied and how its evocation can create these symbolic links, each chapter conducts a textual, historical and theoretical analysis, merging the concepts established in Chapters 1 and 2 into the analysis of specific South Korean historical films, to answer the central research question of the thesis.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Historical Knowledge and the Fiction of the Historical Film Genre**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

The complex interplay between historical evidence and the historical discourse's fictional elements has been debated in historical scholarship for over a century. The historical film genre is one area of discussion, with the medium's inherent fictional and dramatic elements being the ground of deliberation since the late 1980s (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 7). These fictional and dramatic elements include, but are not limited to, the three-act structure, fictional characters and dialogue, character arcs, dramatic pacing, and formally constructed scenarios, such as sequences of armed combat, all of which are required for a historical film to work as a complete and successful dramatic narrative. The main criticism placed upon the historical film's representation of history is that the historical film would not be an authentic depiction of historical events due to its use of fictional and dramatic, narrative devices and, therefore, its historical knowledge would not be as valid as that of non-fictional historical texts. However, it is under the dual purpose of fiction identified by Laurence Templeton (Scott, 1911, p. XXII), as discussed in the General Introduction, where the historical film's fictional elements can be argued to enhance the film's historical knowledge, making it a significant contribution to the historical discourse.

Historical knowledge is specifically produced by a relation of 'past thoughts to their present context', explicitly in terms of how the historical text interprets and constructs its representations of the past through concepts related to the present (Smith, 2007, p. 350). With the past no longer understood as an unbiased and unchangeable domain, the dual purpose of fiction emphasises the fact that history is only ever consumed in the present. Therefore, the fictional elements of a historical discourse are essential to enhance the scholar's engagement with history and the text's historical knowledge. As a result of the historical discourse's fictional elements, history is no longer relegated to a separate spatial and temporal plane, free from the biases of the present. Rather, it becomes engrained within a contemporary environment where the past and the present are perpetually in conversation. The historical film's representation of the past is

therefore always entrenched with symbolic connections to the socio-cultural contexts of its production, and as a result, historical knowledge and knowledge of the present are revealed simultaneously. Furthermore, the fictional, dramatic and narrative devices of the historical film genre reveal that history is not a fixed but a fluid discourse that adapts to the present of its construction (as detailed later in this chapter). Therefore, by critically considering the historical film's engagement with the past and the present via fictional, dramatic and narrative devices, this chapter argues that the historical film's fictional elements, far from invalidating it, actually enhance this film genre's capacity to produce historical knowledge.

This chapter is divided into five sections. Each section examines the arguments of a variety of theorists in order to demonstrate how the historical film genre's fictional, dramatic and narrative devices enhance the historical knowledge of the text. Following this introduction, the next section, 'Defining the historical film,' assesses the definitions provided by theorists that explain what makes a film historical. The following section, 'Methods of the historical film', evaluates concepts theorists have created to explain how the historical film constructs its representation of historical eras. The section 'The historical present and the historical film' interrogates the claim of some historical theorists that the historical film is primarily constructed to provide commentary on the present socio-cultural context of the film's construction. In addition, 'The fictional elements of the historical film' discusses the fictional strategies of the historical film. Finally, 'A working definition of the historical film' summarises the theories discussed in the chapter and develops a working definition of the historical film that is to be utilised throughout the thesis.

## **1.2 Defining the historical film**

To understand how the historical film genre's fictional, dramatic and narrative devices might enhance a film's historical knowledge, the attributes that define the historical film genre need to be specified. While the function of the historical film within the historical discourse has been widely debated amongst theorists, for example, Robert Raak (1983) and Brian Le Beau (1997), whose ideas will be discussed later in the chapter, the

question of what constitutes a historical film has rarely been addressed. As Constantin Parvulescu and Robert Rosenstone state, ‘Oddly enough, for all the scholarship on the topic, attempts to define the historical film have been few and far between’ (2013, p. 1). However, despite this glaring deficit in film and history theory, Parvulescu and Rosenstone posit that it is too early within the academic discussion of the historical film to be able to devise an accurate and comprehensive definition of this genre (2013). The debate over the historical film’s position within the historical discourse has been ongoing since the late 1980s and this lack of definition is troubling. If one were to define a historical film as, for example, any film whose narrative is set ten years prior to the film’s production, it should not be considered wrong, as the events depicted are objectively historical. However, this ten-year limitation is arbitrary, which is the point at which the lack of definition becomes problematic. As the historical film remains largely undefined, the distinction between films with or without historical value depends on the preference of the theorist, and as a result the definition of the genre continues to be vague (Peacock, 1991, p. 11). Despite the uncertainty of the field in relation to the articulation of a consistent definition of the historical film, it is still possible to identify patterns through the comparative analysis of definitions developed by various historians.

In its broadest sense, the term ‘historical film’ has been applied to any film that is ‘consciously set in a past, some time before the production of the specific work itself’ (Parvulescu & Rosenstone, 2013, p. 1). However, this broad characterisation does not assist in understanding the genre because almost any film, apart from films with stories set after the year of production, could be included. In contrast, a more specific definition is explored by Marcia Landy, who states:

Increasingly, cultural and media critics, filmmakers, television programs, and numerous novels and biographies are engaged in recreating and interpreting major crises of twentieth century life [...] As these events become more and more remote, they are re-examined and invested with great importance and intensity by filmmakers, television programmers, novelists, and museum creators. (2001, p. 1)

With such key words as ‘recreating’, ‘interpreting’, and ‘crises’, a more delimited idea of the historical film emerges in Landy’s statement, namely, that this is a type of film that cinematically represents a crisis event from history. These crisis events can either be major, such as the Korean War,<sup>12</sup> or minor, such as the battle of Incheon, which are then recreated in a film to re-examine and interpret what transpired by being inscribed into a fictional narrative and invested with emotion through characters and plot.<sup>13</sup>

In the vein of Landy’s statement, many theorists argue that history needs to be integral to the plot. The film cannot simply be set in the past but actively has to engage in historical discourse. According to Natalie Davis, the historical film’s narrative either has to be based on documented historical fact or have historical events play a centralised role within its story (2000, p. 5). To illustrate Davis’s definition in reference to South Korean cinema, films such as *71: Into the Fire* (Choi et al., 2010) and *Nameless Stars* (Lee & Kim, 1959) could be considered historical, as the first sets its narrative within a recreation of the battle of P’ohang-dong, an actual battle of the Korean War, and the second has a fictionalised plot that reinterprets the Gwangju Student Independence Movement of 1929, a key demonstration in the Korean resistance against the Japanese Occupation of Korea.<sup>14</sup> However, a film such as *Private Eye* (Han, Lee, & Park, 2009), which has a purely fictional plot set in 1910, the first year of the Japanese Occupation, would not be, by this definition, a historical film as it does not directly depict the historical event within its narrative. Davis’s definition has been shared not only by Parvulescu and Rosenstone (2013) but also Robert Burgoyne, who posits that the historical film is built upon ‘documentable historical events’ as the film’s narrative directly refers to relevant historical incidents (2008, p. 4). As Burgoyne elaborates: ‘The events of the past constitute the mainspring of the historical film, rather than the past simply serving as a scenic backdrop or a nostalgic setting’ (2008, p. 4). Both Davis and

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<sup>12</sup> The history of the Korean War, and its depiction in South Korean cinema, will be detailed further in Chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup> The battle of Inchon, as seen in the South Korean film *Operation Chromite* (Chung, Lee, & Lee, 2016), was an amphibious assault by 75,000 Korean troops to reclaim the city of Incheon. This battle also led to the Korean army’s recapturing of Seoul, the South Korean capital, which turned the tide of the entire conflict (Chisholm, 2011). While this film only details a specific conflict in the war, films such as *Taegukgi* (Lee, Lee, & Kang, 2004) use imagined characters to present a fictional plot that details numerous clashes and battles over the entirety of the Korean War.

<sup>14</sup> The historical period of the Japanese Occupation of Korea will be detailed further in Chapter 3.

Burgoyne state that the historical film has to include documented historical fact in their plots. However, they also stress that the plot around these facts can be imagined and constructed through fictional storytelling techniques. By allowing an imagined plot within the definition of the historical film, Davis opens the historical genre to a hybrid effect, that is, the union of the fictional and the non-fictional (Kremmer, 2015). It is in view of this hybridity that Rosenstone identifies two distinct kinds of historical film. The first kind is based on documentable historical evidence through which questions such as ‘how and why political decisions are made in different historical regimes’ can be critically examined (2006, p. 25). The second kind provides insights into family dynamics and the everyday, working life of a society through fictional characters and imagined narratives (2006, p. 25). In this second kind of historical film, fictional elements and narrative take precedence over historical evidence (Kremmer, 2015). This second type of film, as Rosenstone identifies it, would deviate from the theories of Davis and Burgoyne, because, instead of documentable historical evidence or a narrative that directly ties into historical events, its focus is the culture of an era and the way people lived and interacted with each other as depicted via the historical film’s use of fictional and dramatic elements through formal and narrative devices. As posited by South Korean director Lee Joon-ik, creator of numerous historical films, such as *The Throne* (Oh & You, 2015) and *Blades of Blood* (Jo, Oh, & Park 2010), while historical evidence is important to consider, the historical film’s fictional elements take priority when crafting a representation of a historical past. As director Lee states: ‘I mostly rely on related books when it comes to the research, and I normally read about ten historical books for reference. The research itself is to maintain a factual part of historical characters and events and then creativity comes into the daily lives and emotions of the characters’ (J. I. Lee, personal communication, November 12th, 2017).<sup>15</sup> Consequently, according to director Lee, the research that filmmakers should conduct into the era they are depicting would seek to create historical context, specifically in order to maintain a sense of the period through the use of historical information, including details about the personality of historical figures. However, the representation of the period, specifically

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<sup>15</sup> Interview conducted via email from Australia on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November, 2017, with the interviewee in South Korea (see full transcript in Appendix 1).

the daily lives and experiences of the characters and their narrative progression, is imagined with the aid of the creative techniques of the filmmaker. Thus, films of this second kind have an imagined plot that allows them to explore past cultures without being limited by the verifiable information of the historical discourse. As Rosenstone explains, ‘the past on the screen is not meant to be literal [...], but suggestive, symbolic, metaphoric’ (2006, p. 30). Rather than solely depicting warfare or using forms of epic filmmaking, these films can provide an intimate look at the people and culture of a historical period via wholly imagined characters and scenarios. While the definition of the historical film favoured by both Davis and Burgoyne is based purely on the film’s overt reference to critical historical events, Rosenstone’s rather focuses on what film can reveal about the culture and the lives of people in eras past through its fictional elements. These definitions make the line between historical and non-historical film blurry, and, in consequence, a historical film may be set at any point in history. In fact, to be considered as historical, films have to depict documentable historical events and/or insights into a culture, but are not required to be set in eras long passed.

As some scholars of the historical film have pointed out, in one sense every film ever made can be considered historical. According to Michael Martin and David Wall, while historical films do present particular versions of historical events, people and locations, a second and equally important function is that the films are also ‘documents of history in that they are the products of the historical and cultural moment from which they emerge’ (2013, p. 448). In terms of this explanation, every film ever made would then be a vessel of historical and cultural knowledge. Here the historical film is made to be in and of history insofar as it shows representations of history and is an artefact in history (Martin & Wall, 2013). For instance, the abovementioned film *Nameless Stars*, which was made in 1959, projects a vastly different outlook on the Japanese Occupation of Korea than the more recent *General’s Son* (Lee & Im, 1990), specifically in regards to the source of the oppression of the Korean populace: Japanese students and educators in the former, and Japanese gangsters in the latter (as it will be discussed later in the thesis). These differences are expressive of the South Korean cultural understanding of the Japanese Occupation at the time of production and, by comparing and contrasting these films, we see that they chart a change in culture over time. Indeed, while initially setting out to

represent specific past eras, all historical films also contain in some capacity the concerns of the time of their production (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 6). Yet these films prove that recorded history is not fixed and as these concerns change over time so do the historical film genre's understanding of history and its evolving representation. In this way, those films that first recreated an event such as the Korean War were the 'first draft of history' as they encapsulated the first reactions and cultural concerns regarding the war (Westwell, 2013, p. 384). As this 'draft of history' is constantly being revised and rewritten, the historical film acts as a palimpsest of history (Pramaggiore, 2013).<sup>16</sup>

For film and history theorists, such as Rosenstone and Parvulescu (2013), Davis (2000) and Burgoyne (2008), the historical film is a genre, in the sense that the films that are classified as historical have unique characteristics by virtue of which can be grouped together. Genre, as defined by Ann Imbrie, 'expresses human experience (subject matter) through an identifiable form (formal character) that clarifies or discovers the values in or attitude toward that experience (generic attitude)' (cited in Frow, 2006, p. 117). The subject matter, formal characteristics and generic conventions that define the historical film genre have been a point of contention within film and history scholarship and, as this chapter shows, are still being debated. However, under Imbrie's generic definition, it is clear that the films of the historical genre recreate an event or era in history by filtering them through identifiable cinematic symbols and attaching cultural and social attitudes of the film's present socio-cultural context onto their representation of that time period. Accordingly, Jeanine Basinger argues that what defines a certain genre, such as the western genre, war genre or historical genre, has two distinct types of definition: 'the basic assumed definition' and 'the evolving definition' (2003, p. 15). The basic definition, as Basinger asserts, establishes the basic building blocks of a genre, including items such as iconography, core problematics, settings and characters. However, under the evolving definition, these basic elements of a genre can 'construct new meanings for the changing times' (2003, p. 15). In turn, a genre becomes likened to a 'Lego set', as Basinger states, 'it is a bunch of pieces that stay the same, but out of

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<sup>16</sup> The historical palimpsest is the process of rewriting and revising previously established history into a new version of the historical event. Maria Pramaggiore compares the historical palimpsest to the 'parchment texts of late antiquity whose surfaces were carefully washed or covered over in order to be written on again and again' (2013, p. 37).

them you can build different things' (2003, p. 15). As a result, each genre has core elements that renders a film as identifiable with that genre, for instance, the gunslinger character in the western film or the infantry soldier in the war film. However, as it will be discussed later in the chapter, the historical film can change and adapt to its socio-cultural context, with the core elements of the genre being utilised to create specific narrative and thematic meanings reflective of the film's time of production. For example, in South Korean films that depict the Korean War, the generic elements of the war genre can be used to depict the South Korean military high command as either a saviour of the Korean peninsula or the enemy of the Korean people, as shown in *Five Marines* (Cha & Kim, 1961) and *The Front Line* (Jeong et al., 2011), respectively.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, films of the historical genre are not locked into a single genre descriptor as these films can encapsulate elements of other genres as well. For example, in South Korean films set during the Japanese Occupation of Korea, where one historical film contains aspects of the detective genre, as in *Private Eye*, another follows features of the gangster genre, as in *General's Son*, while a third utilises components of the heist genre, as in *Once Upon a Time in Corea* (Kang & Jeong, 2008). Due to its generic versatility, the historical film genre becomes a meta-genre, comfortably accommodating war, musical, action, comedy and other classic genres. Burgoyne further argues that the historical film can be sub-divided into five generic types. The first, the war film, depicts or comments on any historical war and contains both battlefield sequences and themes of courage, sacrifice and honour (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 50). The South Korean film *The Front Line* is an example of this generic type as it depicts infantry forces of two opposing nations living and dying on the battlefield, complete with scenes of the soldiers having mental breakdowns and committing acts of cowardice or self-sacrifice as a direct response to armed conflict. The second type, the biographical film, depicts the life of a significant figure in a nation's history (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 40), as is the case of the South Korean film *Dongju: The Portrait of a Poet* (Shin & Lee, 2015). The third type, the epic film, utilises massive and detailed sets, props and other elements of mise en scene, sometimes including hundreds of extras, to tell narratives of a large scope (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 34).

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<sup>17</sup> These films and their different representations will be analysed in detail in Chapter 5.

For example, the South Korean film *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (Kim & Kim, 2014) depicts the battle of Myeongnyang, in which twelve Korean warships achieved victory against a Japanese fleet of over three hundred vessels in 1597, through detailed recreations of period specific armour, weapons and vehicles (figure 1). The fourth of Burgoyne's sub-generic types, the metahistorical film, offers covert or overt critiques of the ways in which history is represented and constructed by showcasing characters that override other characters' accounts of historical events (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 46). The South Korean film *JSA: Joint Security Area* (Lee & Park, 2000) exemplifies this sub-generic type through its non-linear and contradictory narrative through which survivors of an incident at the Korean DMZ retell the same events through their differing perspectives, resulting in multiple opposing accounts of the same event. The final type of historical film that Burgoyne identifies is the topical film. Topical films are historical films that deal with specific events within, or in place of, grander historical narratives (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 43). For instance, the South Korean film *71: Into the Fire* follows a smaller battle, the battle of P'ohang-dong, in the grand scale of the Korean War. Thus, through Imbrie's and Basinger's film genre theory, alongside the generic types of the historical film identified by Burgoyne, it is possible to classify the historical film as a genre.



Figure 1: Screenshot of *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (Dir. Kim Han-min, 2014)

However, for some theorists the use of the term ‘historical film’ in the ways discussed thus far is wrong. Thomas Keirstead renames the historical film as ‘period film’, limiting the genre to films that depict past eras, specifically calling out the Japanese *Edo* period as an example (2013). In turn, Landy uses the term ‘heritage film’, stating that in this form of filmmaking the past is reflected through the intricate detail of period reconstruction (2001). Like Keirstead, Landy sets the narrative of historical films firmly in the past and is concerned with the recreation of period details. Both theorists evoke Davis’s and Burgoyne’s ideas of the historical film as being firmly representative of the historical discourse, but Keirstead and Landy also rigidly entrench the films within ancient rather than recent history. But the main criticism of the use of the title ‘historical film’ comes from Rosenstone. Coining the category ‘history film’, Rosenstone states that the term ‘historical film’ should be limited to the previously stated theory of film as a historical artefact, while the term ‘history film’ should be used to describe a film’s recreation of historical events and periods (2013). Rosenstone explains that ‘Metropolis’ is “historical” as the first great science-fiction epic, *The Great Train Robbery* as the first western, *The Jazz Singer* as the first talkie – but none of these is a history film’ (2013, p. 8).

72).<sup>18</sup> In Rosenstone's view, the adjective 'historical' should be reserved only for those films that have a place in film history, namely, those considered to be landmark films. At the same time, he adds, the category 'history film' should be used to focus only on films that are representations of the past. Rosenstone states that the history film is 'the fictional drama which not only devotes itself consciously to constructing a world of the past on screen, but in doing so manages to engage the discourse of history, the body of data and debates surrounding any historical topic' (2013, pp. 71-72). Rosenstone explains the differences between the history film and the historical film: the former is concerned with recreations of past eras through fictional and dramatic narrative, while the latter helps to chart the history of the development of certain genres and the cinematic medium (2013). While Rosenstone's distinction between the history film and the historical film seems to evoke the theories of Davis and Burgoyne, it does deviate from them in one crucial area. Davis and Burgoyne respectively argue that films to be classified as 'historical' have to evoke the historical discourse, their definitions are left open to the reimagining and subjective interpretation of the fictional content provided through the films' narrative. In other words, the historical film, as defined by Davis and Burgoyne, is equally concerned about how the historical information is constructed and organised within the film as it is with the information drawn from historical evidence. Therefore, in light of this distinction in Davis's and Burgoyne's definitions, the historical film allows for anachronisms and inaccuracies as per the demands of the genre's fictional and dramatic elements, as long as it ties itself to the historical discourse, however loosely. Conversely, Rosenstone's history film does not display this extent of flexibility and instead requires a more rigorous adherence to 'truth claims', namely, the degree of the film's observance of historical evidence (Rosenstone, 2013, p. 72). In a filmic form that is largely constructed through fictional strategies, the level of strictness of this requirement proves to be a significant limitation of Rosenstone's history film concept.

Despite the existence of competing arguments about what constitutes a historical film, film and history scholars in general conclude that defining this genre is not their central

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<sup>18</sup> Emphasis in the original.

concern. In the introduction to their book *A Companion to the Historical Film*, Parvulescu and Rosenstone state: ‘None of the chapters in this collection aims to define (or limit) the historical film’ (2013, p. 4). Despite the fact that their book contains a large amount of theory regarding the place of film as a repository of historical evidence, the historical film, as the basis around which these theories are designed, is not only left undefined but the drive to find a definition is treated as an inconvenience. Parvulescu and Rosenstone argue that to understand how film and history work together, one should not be concerned with the problem of classifying films as either historical or not. Consequently, the definition of the historical film genre is not universal and each definition varies in different ways, with films described as historical by some, are not by others. This lack of agreement between film and history theorists has resulted in substantial contention and provided much of the groundwork of the arguments found within the debate concerning the relationship between film and history. However, despite the contention and lack of definition, the term ‘historical film’ continues to be used broadly within film studies.

### **1.3 Methods of the historical film**

While the definition of the historical film has proven to be a contentious topic, the place and purpose of the visual medium within the historical discourse, in comparison to the written historical text, has proven more divisive. As discussed by Eleftheria Thanouli in reference to the written historical text and the historical film:

As objects of study, the former are analysed by historians and theorists of historiography, while the latter are mostly examined by film theorists with a particular interest in the representation of history on the screen [...] For the vast majority of practicing historians, a historical film is a work of art, a figment of someone’s imagination. (2019, p. ix)

Under Thanouli’s assertions there is a clear separation between disciplines, with the written historical text being the domain of historians, and the historical film being that of film theorists. Due to this divide, the historical film is often omitted from the historical discourse. Therefore, traditionally, the commonplace source of primary and secondary

historical evidence has been the written text. It has been a belief of publics worldwide that in the meaning of these written words unmediated access to the past can be found (Nelson, 2015). Even though written history is not excluded from fictional modes of communication, the intuition that unbiased history would sit underneath written historical narrative holds fast. This belief can be extended to the representations of the past found in the historical film. Through the historical film's reconstruction of past conflict and events, as Leonie Naughton notes, the medium 'is more than capable of reconfirming, refining or challenging popular conceptions of the past' (1987, p. 124). However, while there might be vestiges of historical evidence in each historical film, specifically the elements used to contextualise the film's historical setting, such as key names, dates and figures, the historical film is constructed by using fictional narratives, themes and characters.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, there are risks that this blend of contextual historical evidence and fictional storytelling devices may result in the historical film's fictional elements being construed as historical truth. The widespread public availability of the historical film, through multiplexes and home video, is well known. As John O'Connor wonders regarding public historical knowledge in the United States: 'How many [...] are likely to subscribe to the *American Historical Review*, read a historical monograph, or even turn to more popular forms of historical writing, once they are finished with their required college history course?' (O'Connor, 1988, p. 1201). O'Connor's conclusion that 'even well-educated Americans are learning most of their history from film or television' (O'Connor, 1988, p. 1201) reaffirms the reach of the historical film via its commodification, as discussed by Alison Landsberg (2004). Consequently, it is important to understand how and why the genre builds its representation of history and culture in order not to misconstrue the film's fictional elements as factual historical evidence.

While the historical film and the written historical text hail from the same discourse, each has a unique focus in detailing history. Where the historical film is informed by historical evidence to construct a fictional representation of past cultures and events that

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<sup>19</sup> The historical film can also include primary historical evidence, such as archival footage and photographs, or dramatic recreations filmed at locations where the historical events actually took place, such as the aftermath of a warzone.

may generate empathy in the viewer, the written historical text structures the majority of its content by replicating and understanding historical evidence. Through their respective approaches, each historical medium has strengths and weaknesses in their representation of the past, specifically their attempts to depict past cultures, crises and events.

However, as Rosenstone notes, the medium of the written historical text does not capture the life experiences of those in the past, adding that the historical accounts produced by scholars have mainly comprised ‘soundless, colorless, motionless, and largely emotionless world of words on a page’ (2013, p. 71). Rosenstone further explains that this writing style does not provide close access to historical subjects, clarifying that ‘their days, the powerful and jarring experiences and encounters, the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that had so affected their attitudes and lives’ are out of bounds in written history (2006, p. 7). Many history textbooks acknowledge this difficulty and discuss the benefits of fictional narrative methods, such as narrative construction and historical interpretation, in an effort to detail the culture of certain historical periods.<sup>20</sup> Written historical texts excel at providing comprehensive overviews of historical events, offering detailed descriptions of cultures, societies and events in place of engaging with history at a personal level.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, through the historical film’s fictional narrative structure and overarching theme (as it will be detailed later in the chapter), one is likely to develop deeper personal connections to culture and life in specific historical periods and locations through the cinematic text’s images and sounds. As Rosenstone elaborates:

We see bodies, faces, landscapes, buildings, animals, tools, implements, weapons, clothing, furniture, all the material objects that belong to a culture at a given historical period, objects that are used and misused, ignored and cherished, objects that sometimes help to define livelihoods, identities, and destinies. Such

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<sup>20</sup> For examples of such texts, see: Thomas, 1992; Morley, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> For examples, see: Park, 2015; Hastings, 1987. In Park (2015), religious systems and organisations are explored in detail, using the culture of Korea during the Japanese Occupation as context. In turn, Hastings (1987) uses both prose, tables and numerical figures to provide a broad overview of the Korean War, including the military cost of both the South Korean and US armies. Both texts provide depth into their subject yet the cultural and human context of the events and facts they detail becomes distant and impersonal due to their chosen writing styles.

objects, which the camera demands in order to make a scene look real [...] are a part of the texture and the factuality of the world on film. (2006, p. 16)

Through cinematic form, specific information about a historical culture, such as the appearance and function of period specific tools or the body language shared between a slave and their master, is captured in a matter of seconds on film (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 12). In other words, film would not just capture what these cultural items are and how they are used, but also how they are valued. What tools are commonly used and which ones lie forgotten? What animals are used for food and farming and which ones are cherished pets? Whereas both written texts and historical films answer questions such as these in their own ways, film is more efficient in its presentation of cultural information. The greater competence of film is due to its use of the visual image and soundscape and its intimate connection to place, culture and character.

The efficiency of the historical film to intimately represent historical cultures through the visual image is a significant element in the ongoing contention towards whether or not a film can be considered historical despite its largely fictional construction. As Eleftheria Thanouli affirms, 'To argue that *Schindler's List* has fundamental formal and conceptual similarities with any written account of the Holocaust would be considered ludicrous, if not blasphemous' (2019, p. ix). The downplaying of the purpose and function of the historical film within the historical discourse is inherent, with the historical information a film contains often being dismissed through the historical film genre's fictional elements. However, as demonstrated through the comparison between written historical texts and visual historical texts, it can be argued that history has no structure unless given one by the historian or creative practitioner. Written historical texts are as equally structured and organised as the historical film (Rosenstone, 2013). However, despite this equality, visual history as a whole, as conveyed, for example, in photographs, paintings, murals, and propaganda flyers, in addition to historical films, has always played a secondary role, whereby it is often found to have value only if it complements written history. Hayden White acknowledges this fact:

We are inclined to treat the imagistic evidence as if it were at best a complement of verbal evidence, rather than as a supplement, which is to say, a discourse in its

own right and one capable of telling us things about its referents that are both different from what can be told in verbal discourse and also of a kind that can only be told by means of visual images. (1988, p. 1193)

As a result, White proposes a separate discourse for visual history because, as he claims, some history can only be transmitted through visual historical evidence (1988). It is in view of this separation of the visual from the written that White coins the notion of ‘historiophoty’, which is ‘the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse’ (1988, p. 1193). According to White, through historiophoty visual history is no longer secondary and becomes equal to written history in what it has to reveal about the past. As most historical artefacts are as visual as written and oral, under historiophoty, visual artefacts, such as the iconic photograph of the raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima, are given equal importance within the historical discourse as written journals, reports, oral testimonies and eyewitness accounts (White, 1988). The historical film is one of the various types of visual history described by White, in that the representations of historical events and eras always form a ground where ‘our thought about’ the past is constantly being affirmed and contested (1988, p. 1193). The creation of a representation of history, White argues, is similar in methodology to the use of grammar and sentence construction in written history (1988). Like grammar and sentence construction, the methods used to construct a representation of the past are meticulous, yet can be implemented in diverse ways that allow the depictions of the same historical event to change from film to film.

While the historical film is made up entirely of visual images and sound, film is not simply a series of tableaus and as such meaning has to be drawn from its frames and soundtrack for it to become a plausible depiction of history. The process of production of this meaning has been called ‘historying’, which is defined by Rosenstone as ‘a mode of thinking that uses traces of the past and turns them into a coherent and meaningful narrative’ (2013, p. 83). Thus, the verbal phrase ‘historying’ denotes an active process of history making (Dening, 2006). As Greg Dening specifies, ‘Our historying is as idiosyncratic as our fingerprints’ because each text that reflects historical information is unique in its construction, interpretation and use of historical evidence (2006, p. 6).

Interpretation, as expressed by Rosenstone, is essential in the process of historying (2013). The historical film's representation of past events is formed through the visual and sonic images that are created and organised not just to construct an optical and aural representation of a historical culture but to create a particular meaning. This representation of historical events, eras and people can therefore be expressed differently from film to film. Two different films can be about the same historical occurrence, yet contain a vastly different representation of the event.

As Burgoyne theorises, the process of image construction through 'editing, cinematography, lighting, sound, and narrative design' is how a representation of history is formed, and, by extension, is the source from which the audience draws the film's historical knowledge (2008, p. 12). How this formal construction effects the historical knowledge of a past event can be observed in the South Korean film *Nameless Stars*. The film's first image is of the memorial of the Gwangju Student Independence Movement of 1929, while an authoritative voiceover praises the Korean students who sacrificed their lives during the rebellion against the Japanese Occupation (figure 2). This visual and sonic depiction imposes the patriotic ideal of heroic sacrifice and the notion that rebellion against an oppressor is a noble gesture. As a result, the representation of this rebellion is shaded under the dual emotions of sorrow and hope through the scene's simultaneous depiction of grief and loss via the image of the memorial and the hope of a better future via the voice over. Accordingly, this sequence aligns the following cinematic text under this emotive viewpoint, and, as such, shades the film's representation of the Korean student independence movement under the same empathetic lens.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the process of historying places a discursive emphasis on the film's narrative and formal elements.

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<sup>22</sup> This opening scene, and *Nameless Stars* more generally, will be discussed further in Chapter 3.



Figure 2: Screenshot of *Nameless Stars* (Dir. Kim Kang-yun, 1959)

Adapting Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of three dominant forms of historical construction to the analysis of the historical film, Landy (2001) posits that cinematic historical representation can be unpacked into three categories: monumental, antiquarian and critical history. Landy theorises that monumental history depicts important and influential historical events and figures through fictional methods and heightened portrayals. Antiquarian history instead, Landy adds, details the objects of a historical period, such as machines, tools and clothes, and illustrates how the depicted society used and interacted with the objects of day-to-day life (2001). The concept of monumental history, therefore, is used to analyse important historical events explored in a filmic text. This approach to the study of history on film centres on representations of the crises of history, that is, the events that shaped the foundations of nations and the contemporary world. This approach focuses on fictional, narrative film depictions of large scale events, such as the two World Wars, the Japanese Occupation of Korea, and the Korean War. At the same time, this approach also favours cinema's fictional depictions of highly significant historical figures, such as, in the case of Korea, Kim Doo-han, who was an influential member of the Korean resistance during the Japanese Occupation. As Landy expresses, historical figures are intrinsically linked to their historical age; through each, the 'moral and social' climate of the period can be emulated and elaborated upon (2001).

p. 3). Thus, historical figures in a monumental historical text serve to embody the time and place they occupy. By recreating on screen significant individuals and the periods and events that defined them, the historical film constitutes a monumental depiction of history.

Antiquarian history, on the other hand, does not concern itself with either historical events or figures. Instead, a specific focus on the historical film's depictions of the objects and customs of the period, such as the vehicles used in Japanese Occupied Korea during the 1930s and the dress habits of South Korean citizens during the Korean War, can create a detailed impression of a period's culture. As explained earlier, in regards to Rosenstone's two distinct kinds of historical film, the historical film provides significant detail of past cultures through depictions of their objects and actions (2006, p. 30).

Antiquarian history provides this insight by removing the focus from historical events and placing it onto how people lived in a specific period. Representations of cultural items, such as the customs and habits of the nation, along with the 'ancestral goods' of the period, are revealed in 'minute detail' (Landy, 2001, p. 3). Through the lens of antiquarian history, an object acquires great importance in what they can reveal about the culture and customs of the recreated historical period. Objects seen in South Korean historical cinema, such as the standard issue military rifle of the Korean infantry during World War II or the ornamental tea set used within the Japanese tea ceremony, represent purpose within the culture and detail something specific about the owners. For example, the rifle's condition, if it was in disrepair or an inferior model, can suggest a lack of care by the Japanese towards its Korean infantry soldiers. It is through such details that the cultural artefacts recreated on screen enter into a cycle. The artefacts reveal the culture of the period, through depictions of the way in which items were used, treasured or discarded; and the culture shows the purpose of the artefact, what it did and what value it had within that society. By showcasing the cultural nuance of the objects used in a historical period, the history shown in a historical film is deemed antiquarian.

Consequently, both monumental and antiquarian history are used to construct the historical film's representation of historical events, eras and people.

The third approach to understanding history that Landy identifies is a critical approach that is concerned with how filmmakers have used monumental and antiquarian history to craft historical evidence into representations of history. Critical history is primarily interested in examining the methods behind a filmmaker's representation of the past instead of the representation itself (Landy, 2001). In this regard, films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (Aitken, Griffith, & Griffith, 1915), which glorifies the actions of the Ku Klux Klan, are not studied solely to examine the content of their controversial representations, but rather to scrutinise the filmmaker's methods that were used to repurpose the film's historical evidence and representation to support the film's historical knowledge. Likewise, a South Korean film such as *Empire of Lust* (Kim & Ahn, 2015), which details the *Joseon* dynasty through graphic scenes of sex and violence, would not be studied through a critical history perspective for its depiction of this particular historical era, but for the ways in which the filmmaker used film style and fictional narrative elements to repurpose the historical evidence and shape the film's representation into this specific depiction of Korean history. However, this approach to history has the potential to make those utilising the method question how all history is constructed. As Landy notes, through the process of challenging established history one can lose sight of why these representations of history were constructed the way they were. As a result, a historian may end up suspicious of the entire historical discourse and find themselves 'refusing to understand and accept imperfection and injustice' within any historical account (2001, p. 3). Under this approach any creative flourish within the representation of history, such as the historical film's themes, imagined dramatic narratives and characters, is critically analysed. Yet, as history is largely constructed by virtue of fictional strategies chosen by historians, all historical accounts, written or cinematic, would embody such imperfections, and, therefore, a critical approach is important to the historical discourse. In order to understand the evolution of representations, before and after a significant socio-cultural event, a critical analysis of how said representation has been constructed is crucial to understand the historical information conveyed in cinema.

Through the genre of the historical film certain historical periods have been subjected to many retellings. In South Korea, the Korean War has been the focus of over 20 films

since the conflict ended and has provided a thematic backdrop to many more. Each of these films reshapes and reinterprets the conflict in order to tell its own dramatic narrative. However, as each new filmic depiction of the same period emerges, certain historical information stays consistent, such as the dates in which the war began and ended. Consequently, knowledge about the historical period tends to become rigid, turning it into what Guy Westwell identifies as ‘event’. As Westwell details:

The commonsense use of the word “event” presupposes that historical occurrences are discrete entities that possess their own intrinsic and unalterable structure. According to this view, events happened the way they did, and not otherwise, and it is the business of historical representation to identify this unalterable structure and to describe it by using the resources of language and narrative in an analogous way. (2013, p. 384)<sup>23</sup>

According to David Lowenthal, knowledge of historical details can become locked to a particular way of thinking. Just as the outcomes of historical battles and the birthdates of historical figures are unalterable knowledge, historical periods become similarly static entities (cited in Westwell, 2013, pp. 394-385). Due to this method of thinking, historical events tend to be represented as unalterable. History becomes a collection of discreet, identifiable events that films either capture or do not. These events become discernible as eras, ages or crisis periods, such as, in the case of Korea, the *Joseon* dynasty or the Korean War. In this way, each event solidifies as an object of history, archives where all of the common knowledge of said event can be placed into and can be figured as blocks of meaning. In this regard, Westwell proposes that it is the views of a multitude of historians that have given these historical events ‘shape and structure’ (2013, p. 398). The countless representations of historical periods have shaped the collective understanding of the event. All the written and visual historical depictions that detail an event come together to establish an all-encompassing view. A timeline is created, key players are identified, and the overall tone is established. For example, texts that give accounts of the Korean War establish significant and influential battles as temporal boundaries. South Korean President Rhee Syngman and North Korean

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<sup>23</sup> Emphasis in the original.

President Kim Il-Sung are described as authoritative figures in starting the conflict and instituting the reasons why the war was fought. The combination of historical literature and historical films set the tone as tragic and significant, placing emphasis on the fracturing of the relationship of two nations. Historical texts have set these parameters, which over the years have become the basis of every subsequent historical text and film on the Korean War. It is within this framework where the basic historical evidence of the historical film is established; every film that depicts the same historical event has to contain certain historical information to be classified as a representation of that historical period. For instance, crucial historical information, such as the start and end dates of the Japanese Occupation of Korea (1910-1945); key cultural groups, such as the Korean resistance movement and the Japanese colonial government; and societal constructs, such as the social inequality between the Koreans and the Japanese, are nearly always present in South Korean films that depict the Occupation. Thus, from a common foundation of historical knowledge, each film's unique representation of a particular historical period is built. As a result, a fixed, unified representation of an event is constructed less from documented historical evidence than from the common understanding of said historical event in contemporary times. As Dominic Lees asserts, 'The spectator will accept a cinematic portrayal of history as probably true if its depiction reflects common assumptions about the period' (2016, pp. 202-203). As a result, the importance of the historical evidence contained in the historical film genre is diminished, while the film's fictional and dramatic elements are given prominence.

The event is constructed upon the narratives that are told about it and these viewpoints are used to build the understanding of the event. In the case of the historical film, the event and the film are separate entities, but each informs the other. As Louis Mink explains, the event and its representations are intrinsically and irreparably linked since the event is 'not the raw material out of which narratives are constructed; rather an event is an abstraction from a narrative' (cited in Westwell, 2013, p. 385). The majority of historical films build upon the collective or public knowledge of an event, using it to establish the historical representation's mood, themes and timeline. The content of the historical film subsequently adds to the pool of information that constitutes the collective knowledge of the event. However, in establishing the veracity of this process,

it is crucial to ask which historical details are selected and which ones are omitted from the event (Landy, 2001). Thus, a key weakness of Westwell's concept of event is the assumption that the event is factual. As historical knowledge is primarily constructed through interpretation of historical evidence, the received view of a historical event could be built upon misinformation, which newly found evidence would correct. Yet due to the constant reinforcement of certain information by historical texts, dominant versions of history are solidified within the historical discourse and misinformation becomes harder to identify and contest.

Concepts such as historying and monumental, antiquarian and critical history, as well as the notion of the event, aid the understanding of the methods the historical film uses to construct its representation of history. Yet not all theorists of history agree with these concepts. It is the fictional aspects of these methods that provide the major point of contention. As Teo details, history can never be objective or infallible as each account relies on the ability of their author and their perception of the historical event (2015). Yet, the creators of many historical films did not experience the depicted events either, nor are they a part of the culture they are cinematically representing. As Elie Wiesel details: 'just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz [...] Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge' (1989). Yet Wiesel's position has many problems. How many historians were present at the events they discuss? If they were, should their historical account be valued over others? Should all representation of historical events end with the last living witness? While the concern Wiesel raises is justifiable, so that events such as the Holocaust are not trivialised, it is not a viable approach within the broader field of historical studies. To eliminate the texts that contain personal interpretation and fictional approaches would be to dismiss the majority of the historical discourse. While it may seem simple to know about events that happened in the past, creating meaning amongst it all is a different position altogether, which is where the strength of film lies (Keirstead, 2013). However, as described earlier, the meaning of film does change depending on the time the film was produced. The aforementioned techniques that construct the historical film's representations of past events encourage different interpretations of historical eras and cultures depending on

the period the text was created. It is within these different interpretations where the socio-cultural context of the film's production becomes significant.

#### **1.4 The historical present and the historical film**

A historical text is the result of much research using, among other kinds of sources, books, manuscripts, photographs, paintings and film and video recordings, of both the primary and secondary kind (Elena et al., 2011). In order to create historical texts, historians utilise what is known as the historical archive methodology to analyse primary and secondary sources for relevant information on their chosen historical period (Elena, 2001, p. 4). Naturally, while historical sources were created in the past, when the historian studies them they are necessarily interpreted in the social and cultural context of the present. For example, a Japanese propaganda film produced during the Japanese Occupation of Korea which is seen in the twenty-first century will be unavoidably associated with the knowledge of South Korea's and Japan's ongoing struggle to reconcile atrocities perpetrated during the Occupation, such as the so-called 'comfort women' crisis.<sup>24</sup> In regards to the historical film, the socio-cultural context of production has an impact on the filmmakers, the creative works and those who analyse the films. The filmmakers, when producing their creative work, may be influenced by their contemporary environment and include symbolic connections between the historical period the film depicts and the socio-cultural context of the film's production. This would result in representations of the past that could, either deliberately or inadvertently, politicise its depictions of the past to include allusions to the present political hegemony. An example of this is the South Korean film *Nambugun* (Jeong & Jeong, 1990), which can be interpreted as recontextualising the Korean War as a 'people's struggle' in order to reflect the dominant *minjung* ideology in early 1990s South Korea (as it will be discussed in Chapter 5). However, film analysts may also be affected by their own socio-cultural context, potentially imparting historical foresight and their own political ideals onto the text, influencing how the film is discussed. For example, a film analyst studying the anti-communist South Korean film *Five Marines*

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<sup>24</sup> The South Korean comfort women crisis will be explored further in Chapter 4.

could be critical of the demonised depiction of North Korea due to their knowledge of 2000s Sunshine Policy through which South Koreans became largely sympathetic of North Koreans (as it will be discussed in Chapter 5). Furthermore, as cultural codes change, so does the interpretation of history presented in historical films. Therefore, the impact and influence of the socio-cultural environment on both the creative practitioner and the film analyst will inevitably anchor both the historical film and its interpretation in their respective present. Focusing upon the creation of the historical film, André Bazin expresses, ‘soon as it is formed, the skin of History peels off as film’ and the films that are created to reflect the idea of history are permanently conjoined in the context of the films’ production (cited in Burgoyne, 2008, p. 1). Since all films are artefacts of the present in which they were created, the cultural landscape, the ethics, values and concerns of the period of production are discernible within the narrative and style of the historical film (Vonderau, 1999). As a result, while the historical film’s representation of historical events and eras, as generated by its formal construction, may present itself to be an unbiased depiction of the past, the film always contains symbolic connections to the present socio-cultural context in which it was produced. In other words, the historical film’s function is to give meaning to history; to make past events relevant in the present. Yet, at the same time, the film acts as a commentary of the period of its production.

Brian Le Beau affirms that some films:

were not regarded as historical when they were released, but, like *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), explore social or cultural themes of the times. Similarly, films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), although explicitly historical, are included less for their historical content than for what they say about the era in which they were made (1997, p. 152).

While historical films may not attempt to do so, they have as much to say about their present as they do about the past they depict. This is because each historical film contains symbolic links to its present socio-cultural context, which can be revealed through an analysis of its fictional and dramatic elements. In this sense, the past cannot be separated from the present (Nelson, 2015). On the contrary, the two are highly

intertwined, and while the present gives meaning to the past, the past also gives meaning to the present.

Thus, the historical film is never an unbiased depiction of the historical period or event it is attempting to represent. But this is not as obvious a statement as it may sound. As previously established, the purpose of the historical film is to concede meaning to the past. Often this meaning is exceedingly contemporary and of only fleeting relevance to the time the film was created. In this way, the past may be depicted on screen through mise en scène, for example, clothing, objects, body language and architecture, but the film's fictional, dramatic narrative is purposely contemporary, as conveyed through political ideas, cultural values and concerns. For example, while the South Korean historical film *The Sea Knows* (Kim & Kim, 1961) creates a representation that is sympathetic of the historical struggles of Korean soldiers in the Japanese army during World War II, thematically the film, it can be argued, is also about the call for warring nations to coexist peacefully. Indeed, the film was made in 1961, that is, eight years after the end of the Korean War, a period where the tension between South Korea and North Korea could have resulted in continued warfare. Therefore, while the film may present itself to be about the past that it is depicting, it also creates symbolic links to the socio-cultural context of its production by embodying contemporary societal and cultural concerns, fears and anxieties. The past is largely signified through the film's formal components, while the politics of the present are generally conveyed through the film's narrative content. In this way, the film's formal construction can be analysed to be representative of both the past and the present, enhancing the historical knowledge of the historical film as a result. A similar occurrence is commented upon by Burgoyne:

The historical film, like the mythic figure of Janus, looks both to the past and the present. On the one hand, Hollywood historical films carefully and insistently cultivate a sense that they faithfully represent the past, in some cases by using documentary images of the actual occurrences and figures [...] On the other hand, every historical film constructs the past in a way that is shaped and informed by its own context, its own way of imagining the past. (2008, p. 11)

The method of temporal narration that Burgoyne describes has consequently come to be referred to by historical theorists as ‘Janus-faced’ because it would allow the past and the present to speak concurrently through the historical film’s representation of past events. This method certifies that both historical information, through the visual and sonic depiction of historical events, and contemporary concerns, through the film’s narrative and themes, can be voiced simultaneously (Kremmer, 2015). Ron Burnett alternatively denominates this method of temporal narration as ‘present-past’ (1987). The present-past method of narration, a process of representing the past in the present, is in this sense founded upon the idea that historical knowledge can only be created by placing information about historical events in a present socio-cultural context (Landy, 2001). The claim that the historical film is less about the past than it is about the present does not make the film’s representation of history any less relevant, but it does change its focus. For example, the fact that the representation of the Korean War varies between pre-democratisation and post-democratisation South Korea does not dampen this representation. Instead, this change gives these historical films a dual focus. These South Korean films not only provide historical details on the war but also on the films’ time of production, such as South Korea’s pre-1987 anti-communist policies and their removal after 1987.<sup>25</sup> By comparing and contrasting the narratives of films from different eras that depict the same historical event, the Janus-faced or present-past method of temporal narration can reveal vivid details of how society and culture evolve over time.

As previously established, as a representation of the past, history is not entirely objective, nor entirely authentic, but the constructed result of an ongoing negotiation. Historians, and by extension, filmmakers, have always utilised their own context and personal interpretation to select and omit details from the historical archive to give shape to their narratives. This interpretive narrative can include commentaries on contemporary conflicts or criticisms regarding the present treatment of minorities. As Fuat Firat stresses, it is impossible to understand ‘the past directly, without the interruption of “interpretation” based on the perspectives and the consciousness of the

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<sup>25</sup> South Korea’s anti-communist policies and its progression from a military dictatorship to a democratic political system will be detailed further in Chapter 2.

present' (1987).<sup>26</sup> The historical film is not free from interpretation, yet within its images the imprint of the present is not easily identified. As a result of this imprint, representations of the same historical event can be vastly different due to the constantly evolving cultural codes of the society that produced these texts. Regardless of the specific year of production, if two films that are made in separate decades depict the same historical event, their antiquarian history will remain similar. For example, two South Korean films that depict the Korean War, namely, *Five Marines* and *The Front Line* possess different narratives but both provide the image of soldiers working under an established military command hierarchy in the standard South and North Korean infantry uniform, while fighting against a Korean landscape (figure 3 & figure 4). Consequently, given that the mise en scene and iconography of these films are near identical, the visual information that can be drawn from these texts is virtually the same. Due to this commonality, the discursive imprint of the present, as perceptible in the historical film, is predominantly found within the film's fictional narrative and thematic content, which encompasses the majority of the differences that are discovered between historical films of the same topic. Once the film's connections to its present socio-cultural context has been determined, such as the abovementioned call for peaceful coexistence in *The Sea Knows*, the representation of the same past events found in films made decades apart can be compared and contrasted. Through this comparison, similarities and differences in terms of ideals, cultural values, and ethics can be identified between two different eras. For example, while *Nameless Stars* and *General's Son* contain, respectively, an optimistic and pessimistic outlook on the Korean rebellion against the Japanese, a common factor in both is the demonisation of the Japanese in response to their treatment of the Korean people during the Occupation. Thus, an understanding of a society's cultural change over time can be formed through the examination of the differences between each film's representations of the same history. In fact, the process of comparing and contrasting *Nameless Stars* and *General's Son* provides an insight into how the history of the Japanese Occupation has been shaped, and as a result, a commentary develops on how South Koreans view Japan today. The comparison of these two films can illuminate how certain ideas have evolved through

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<sup>26</sup> Emphasis in the original.

South Korean culture in order to make meaning in the contemporary world. Consequently, historical meaning in film is not static but changes depending on the context in which it is produced (Vonderau, 1999). Nevertheless, it needs to be stressed that while films from two different eras can represent identical historical events, two different versions of history can be drawn from them and, thus, the idea of the historical film as an artefact both in and of history is evoked (Martin & Wall, 2013).



Figure 3: Screenshot of *Five Marines* (Dir. Kim Ki-duk, 1961)



Figure 4: Screenshot of *The Front Line* (Dir. Hun Jang, 2011)

Upon exploring the similarities and differences between the representations of the same historical period as found in older and more recent historical films, the social and cultural changes that can be recognised within a nation's history can also be used to identify how the cinema of this nation has reshaped and, potentially, rewritten the memory of that past. Similar to Burgoyne's theory of the cinematic rewriting of history in relation to the film *Forrest Gump* (Finerman, Newirth, Starkey, Tisch & Zemeckis, 1994), over a given period of time, certain aspects of a nation's history, society or culture can either consistently gain a greater focus or be downplayed or omitted within an increasing number of films (1999). Thomas Keirstead readily identifies this tendency in the Japanese Samurai film, which, as he articulates, 'centered on the warrior class and its values: self-abnegation, honor, sacrifice, suicide, unquestioning obedience, violence' (2013, p. 426). The Samurai period film came to represent the Japanese historical film broadly, even though the iconography associated with it, such as clothing, architecture, the tea ceremony, and the samurai and his sword, represents only one era of their past, namely, the *Edo* period (Keirstead, 2013, p. 426). As a sizeable number of Samurai films saturated the Japanese historical genre, now the image of the Samurai and the history of Japan are irreparably linked; as a result, the image of Japanese history no longer exists without the character and customs of the Samurai (Keirstead, 2013, p. 426). However, as

Keirstead continues, at the onset of the twentieth century, before this cultural process started, the common view from the international community was rather that Japan was passive and feminine (2013, p. 427). The flood of Samurai films from Japan since 1912 has over time rewritten this view into one where Japanese culture is associated with masculine honour. When this type of cultural process is identified in a Korean context a similar result can be observed, but in this case it is neither as drastic nor as patriotic. For example, in *Nameless Stars* and other films produced prior to the beginning of South Korea's democratisation, the Korean rebellion against the Japanese is elevated to a position of reverence and victory is almost assured. The films of this period place Korea in a position of power and express a belief that this nation was never truly under Japanese control. Conversely, the films produced after democratisation, such as *General's Son*, remove this sense of power from their representation of the rebellion, portraying the Koreans as foolish and naïve for resisting the Japanese. In addition, in these more recent films, Japan's eventual departure from Korea is not ensured. Even though the representations of the films of both periods reshape perceptions of the past, Korean films made prior to 1987 place Korea in a position of strength and dignity—not unlike what the Japanese Samurai films did for Japan—while those made after 1987 position Korea within a framework of passive acceptance and nihilism.

The consistency of the Japanese Samurai film in their reshaping of the nation's history is curious. While historical films contain the filmmaker's unique approach to the representation of historical periods, there is no way of directing this vision into a coherent, consistent history (Raak, 1983). In other words, there is no national council of filmmakers deciding what is and what is not appropriate in terms of shaping a collective perception of history. As Rosenstone specifies, filmmakers neither envision nor create their own theories about historical events, they only create films (2006, p. 19). Once produced, a film stands alone and embodies all the historical and cultural information that can be drawn from it. The reshaping of history that Keirstead identifies epitomises the films of Japan. Collectively these films create a body of work that forms the identity of the cinema of Japan, displaying the specific themes and narrative approaches favoured by their cinema. Every national cinema employs certain stylistic and narrative approaches and changing historical influences contribute to shaping the film styles and

narratives a national cinema prefers. For example, contemporary Korean cinema often contains extreme violence, drab interiors, gangster characters and downbeat endings. However, as it will be discussed in the next chapter, South Korean cinema pre-1987 was defined by anti-communist ideologies and also by the inability to criticise the South Korean government. These films showcased the good of the Korean lifestyle, often containing patriotic overtones and narratives that led the main characters to embrace the South Korean nationalist ideology. In comparing earlier South Korean films to their contemporary counterparts, as mentioned previously, it becomes evident that as the country's cinema evolves so does the nation's representation of history. According to South Korean filmmaker Lee Joon-ik, a historical film's multi-generational audience can potentially open a dialogue about the depicted historical period. As he states: 'A modern society witnesses a bigger gap and difference between the generations as people live a longer life. Having the different generations living in the same era watch a historical film together, I believe that it can help promote intergenerational understanding and communication' (J. I. Lee, personal communication, November 12th, 2017). Consequently, through a multi-generational audience, the past and the present can be further put into conversation, potentially forming a reflexive, critical understanding about how films construct representations of history and why these depictions change over time.

As an effect of the links that can be drawn between the historical film and the socio-cultural context of its production, the meaning placed upon the historical film's representation of the past does not remain unchanged. As the temporal distance between the present and a historical event grows, the historical film's representation of this past event is always being refocused. For the historical film genre, this means that while mise en scene and historical iconography remain largely consistent across films that depict a single historical event, the narratives and thematic representation of the event is not static and differs from film to film. Consequently, the historical film's representation of past events is always connected in some way to the present through symbolic links created by the film's narrative and formal construction of history. As Maria Pramaggiore stresses, older accounts of the past will always be overridden by newer accounts (2013). One only needs to examine pre- and post-1987 South Korean films, as the next chapter

will do, to realise the extent of this cinematic process of historical revision. The process by which the historical film comments on the present, through its fictional and dramatic narrative, transforms the genre from a static vision and fixed historical information to a present-past palimpsest of great complexity. Consequently, the films' historical knowledge, as granted by the concept of historiophoty, includes these symbolic connections between the historical film and its socio-cultural context. Considering the theories discussed in this section, it is clear that the dual purpose of fiction is emphasised in the historical film, specifically in that the historical film is constructed to represent events of the past to an audience that did not experience them and that historical films may encourage specific emotional responses to that past. Consequently, the depictions of the past generated by the historical film's formal and narrative devices create a representation of the past that can be both understood and emotionally engaged with in the present, which in turn demonstrates how the historical film's fictional elements enhance its historical knowledge, as discussed in the next section.

### **1.5 The fictional elements of the historical film**

The representation of a historical period within the historical film genre often favours a fictional and dramatic narrative, with the historical evidence primarily serving to contextualise a film's depicted past period. Within its representation, historical events and eras are imprinted with the film's socio-cultural context of production to create a version of history that is unique to it. Therefore, within the historical film's narrative and formal construction, fictional elements and historical evidence are intertwined. This intertwining of fact and fiction plays out not only in the historical film but in all historical texts, overlapping and often fighting each other for dominance (Griffiths, 2015). This process is so intricate that theorist Phillip Rosen has compared the construction of history to that of science fiction. He explains:

As a motif whose time came in the late nineteenth century, the literary device of time travel embodied an imagination of being able to be “in” the past, to witness and participate in a former time. Science fiction is sometimes defined as the construction of alternative universes. But at a formal, compositional level, there

need be little to differentiate future settings of a science fiction tale from the past settings of a historical fiction, once the science fiction is submitted to practices of literary verisimilitude or probabilities. And if science fiction can serve as the basis for constructing utopic and dystopic universes, as well as metaphoric or even allegorical parallels to the present, so can constructions of the past [...] The crucial point is that both propose a narrational or epistemological stance that transcends its own “real” temporal location in the present. (2001, p. 80)<sup>27</sup>

The past and the future do not exist as parts of a spatial plane, yet historical fiction, through the historical film and historical novel, does. Through the images on the screen and the words on the page the audience can metaphorically return to an imagined past that is both lived in and interacted with. Subsequently, the construction of this imaginary world, despite being largely fiction, creates a represented space where the historical era can be imagined and affectively experienced as if it were a reality. However, within the historical film genre it is evident that the historical reality represented is inauthentic, simply a creative construction of the past in the present. Through its visual, sonic and narrative construction of history, the historical film, as Rosen alleges, should have no greater claim to truth than science fiction as both are similarly imagined and constructed (2001, p. 80). Yet, since the historical film is often perceived and recalled as an image of historical reality, filmmakers can become accidental (or deliberate) propagandists given that the fictional elements presented may be construed as truth (Peacock, 1991, p. 12). While possibly most filmmakers do not set out to make propaganda films, some have undoubtedly used the truth claim of the historical film to politicise and propagandise its representation of the past. Film history is filled with instances of history being misconstrued to further political agendas or incite audiences into action. Deliberate propaganda is utilised heavily in war time to justify the reasons behind the war and to rally citizens behind a party in the conflict. A famous example of a propaganda film is *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl & Riefenstahl, 1935), produced by Germany’s Nazi party to justify their expansionist nationalist project which lead to World War II. The film frames Germany’s defeat in World War I as a national tragedy proposing a new

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<sup>27</sup> Emphasis in the original.

world war as a form of redemption.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, many South Korean historical films made prior to 1987 can be viewed as propaganda, specifically due to the extreme censorship and government policies directed towards South Korean filmmakers after the Korean War (as it will be discussed further in the next chapter). Examples of this kind of South Korean propaganda film are *The Marines Who Never Returned* (Mart, Won, & Lee, 1963) and *8240 KLO* (Park & Jeong, 1966), which detail the sacrifice of South Korean soldiers during the Korean War. In both films, the South Korean soldiers are portrayed as fun, vibrant, valiant heroes who are systematically killed by North Korean soldiers, in turn represented as faceless, violent and brutal thugs. This type of representation reflected government mandates that South Korea was not to be shown in a negative light on screen (Shin, 2008, p. 17). However, the first fully fledged Korean propaganda film was *Seongbyeog-eul ttulhgo* or *Breaking the Wall* (Kim & Han, 1949), a film that depicts two brothers-in-law violently clashing over their political ideals. The film ends with the communist brother brutally shooting the other to death as he refuses to give up his beliefs. Made in 1949 the film was staunchly anti-communist in its themes, narrative and characters. Modern South Korean films such as *JSA: Joint Security Area* and *In Love and the War* (Kim, Han, Park, & Park, 2011) can also be argued to contain propaganda elements due to their treatment of the theme of North and South Korean reunification.

Since film may create either deliberate or inadvertent propaganda, Robert Raak argues that audience members need to ask: ‘how am I being given the information?’ as not everything the historical film presents is meant to be taken as historical fact (1983, pp. 424-425). As White discusses, when authors write history they embody the techniques of an ‘orator or poet’ (1978, p. 122). Therefore, a historical film’s viewer has to acknowledge that the imagined dramatic narrative and formally constructed representation are more important in the formation of the historical film than the presentation of historical evidence. By extension, a historical film has to favour its dramatic content and stylistic approach before any elements of historical information, or it will risk to fail as a narrative film. While there is no limit to how the images and audio

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<sup>28</sup> For texts that detail *Triumph of the Will* and the propaganda film more broadly, see: Taylor, 2006; Reeves, 1999; Hoffman, 1996.

used by a film are organised, for instance, structured either linearly or in a fragmented fashion, the narrative needs to be cohesive in its themes and meanings. Narrative films can juxtapose images and sound, centre on either likeable or unlikeable characters, or be a series of scenes, but regardless of how they are structured each creative decision needs to cohere into the overall narrative meaning. Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (Geisler et al., 1998), for example, has a disconnected narrative, but the fragmented nature of the film ultimately builds to a universal 'war is hell' theme. Likewise, the South Korean film *The Front Line*, which depicts the Korean War, has a linear narrative that juxtaposes boardroom scenes of the South Korean military high command with combat scenes of the South Korean infantry, which in turn promotes the thematic idea of the futility of war. If coherent historical meaning cannot be drawn from a historical film's narrative the film is likely to fail as an effective vessel of historical knowledge. At the same time, for a film's narrative to create historical meaning, historical evidence may need to be adapted into a dramatic narrative. Actions of historical figures may need to be altered, dialogue added, and timescales reduced to meet the needs of the narrative. After all, the historical film is not meant to be a literal but a metaphoric image of the past (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 9). This metaphoric tendency is due in large part to the changes the historical film has to make to the narrative in order to give it coherence and readability.

The process of adapting historical evidence into a fictional, dramatic narrative is further elaborated by Rosenstone:

The mode of telling the past in a story with a dramatic arc, created so as to get and hold the viewer's attention; the demand of drama for a plot that condenses a large number of characters into a few, in order to highlight certain political or social positions; the wholesale invention of dialogue, or the creation of symbolic figures or situations that bring together characters who never actually met in the past (intellectual historians do the same when they bring into debate the ideas of people who lived centuries apart) – all such moves must be seen not as mistakes, as a falling away from the (supposedly) purer truths of written history [...] They are, rather, a necessary part of the fictional structure that allows a film to put the

world of the past on the screen in the form that has made sense to the West (perhaps to the whole world?) ever since the time of Herodotus: that is, as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. (2013, p. 84)

Historical evidence does not often make a compelling narrative. People do not always act in dramatic ways. Interpersonal dialogue is not always interesting. Sometimes so many people are present in an event that no one can be considered as the central character. A line has to be drawn between the adherence to historical evidence and narrative concerns. A film that attempts to be as reflective of historical evidence as possible through a detailed period-based recreation of behaviour, language and social types, could potentially make the text dull and impersonal. Rather, a film can present imagined dialogue, situations and characters that, while not adhering absolutely to historical evidence, are able to capture the idea of the historical event and place meaning onto it that is informed by the film's present socio-cultural context. Through these changes to the historical narrative, historical films have a greater chance than written historical texts or documentaries to reach an audience due to this fictionalisation and the development of the dramatic narrative. Should a historical film sacrifice an enticing narrative to replicate historical evidence, or alter the historical evidence to make it fit into the film's desired representation? Most history is already written with a heavily structured narrative and detailed characters (Ham, 2014). Since the majority of historical films already follow this methodology, the fictional, dramatic, narrative content becomes the film's predominant focus, while, as explained earlier, historical evidence mainly serves to contextualise the era or event in which this representation is set.

White often compares the historiophoty discourse, specifically the historical film, to the historical novel. He argues that unlike written historical texts and documentaries, the historical film and the historical novel do not hide the fact they are constructed, fictional entities (1988). The narrative is brought to the forefront of the text and is its main focus. The narrative of the historical film and novel act as the skeletal foundation of the text as it provides it with structure and stability. In fact, it is the narrative that gives the historical information contained in these texts meaning and coherence. Therefore, the historical film's formal and narrative devices are crucial elements of historiophoty as

without it, the historical information of the text would lie as a collection of meaningless fragments. Furthermore, the historical film and the historical novel have the same goal: to present a historical reality through fictional approaches. As De Matos explains, ‘Fiction gives you power, control and freedom that is lacking in academic history [...] Academic historians are placed in a straightjacket by evidence. Writing fiction you can alter the evidence to suit the story’ (2015, p. 13). Instead of being shackled by historical evidence, imagined plots can take the strands of history and develop narrative, theme and character. The presence of these imagined plots within the historical film and novel allows each text to expand upon certain historical experiences and encourage an emotional response from the audience, thus furthering the potential for an affective engagement with the specific historical period as a result (Landsberg, 2004). As explained by Rosenstone, film does not seek purely to showcase the eras of the past, but actively to make the audience imaginatively experience both the pleasure and pain of what it must have been like living in certain historical periods (2006, p. 16). The historical characters presented within the narrative are not depicted as long dead figures of history, but as living, breathing individuals, whose struggles the audience can understand. As such, the historical film, through its fictional elements and dramatic narratives, endeavours to make the audience establish affective connections towards the depicted historical period and historical characters (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 16). The historical event, brought to the forefront through historical detail via fictional elements, is brought to meaningful, vivid life on screen.

The meaning that the historical film’s representation places upon the depicted historical event is more substantial than what can be provided through historical evidence alone. Through the expansion of certain details and the removal of others the importance and emotion of historical events can be emphasised or deemphasised. As fiction is permanently intertwined with fact, the historical film’s representation of the past changes as a result. Yet the fiction of the historical film expands historical details through its use of imagined narratives, characters and dialogue to give them relevance and ensure the lessons of the past are always relevant in a present socio-cultural context, thus enhancing the film’s historical knowledge.

## **1.6 A working definition of the historical film**

The theories presented throughout this chapter encapsulate the diverse ways in which the historical film constructs its representations of history and how the inherent fictional, dramatic and narrative devices of these films can create symbolic links to the present socio-cultural context of the film's production. As this thesis examines the historical film genre in relation to the South Korean historical film, it has been beneficial to analyse theories of the relationship between film and history in this chapter in order to adapt some of these concepts into a working definition of the historical film. This working definition is articulated in terms of two conceptual categories: first, a generic delimitation of the historical film and, second, a theoretical explanation of the construction of the historical film's representation of the past. Firstly, in order to determine which films are to be described as historical films, this thesis will acknowledge that the film's narrative has to contain one or more historical events or periods, such as the Korean War, or one or more historical figures, such as Kim Doo-han, as its central narrative focus. If a film does not meet these expectations, it will not be classified as historical in this thesis. This classification does not determine precisely when the film was produced in relation to the historical event it depicts. The events of the film could have taken place not long before the film's production and it can still be considered as historical as long as the film contains a representation of the period as well as a narrative that contains a historical event or historical period at its centre.

In addition, the theories of Rosenstone, Dening, Burgoyne, and White, among others, will be applied to define how the historical film constructs its representation of the past. With the aid of concepts such as historiophoty, historying and monumental, antiquarian and critical history, it is possible to understand the means by which the historical film constructs its representation of a historical period under the influence of the socio-cultural context of the film's production. Each narrative and thematic element of a film is impacted by the social, cultural and political climate of the time it is made, and, as such, these elements are irrevocably entwined within the film's representation of history. As a result, while certain elements of historical evidence may stay consistent

across all subsequent representations of a historical event, period or figure, such as pivotal dates and the outcome of battles, the representation of a historical period changes from film to film due to the influence of its present socio-cultural context. Furthermore, historical events and figures are often altered to benefit the fictional narrative's themes, pace and plotting. For instance, important events may occur out of order, anachronisms may be present and historical figures who actually never met may share a scene, in order to assist narrative progression or enhance certain thematic elements.

### **1.7 Conclusion**

The above discussion has demonstrated this chapter's central argument that the inherent fictional and dramatic elements produced through the formal and narrative devices of the historical film far from invalidating the filmic text's historical knowledge, enhance it. Under the dual foci of the fiction of the historical discourse, the historical film theories discussed in this chapter show not only that history is neither fixed nor unbiased, but also that the historical film's representation of the past is constantly evolving to allow historical events to be reckoned with imaginatively and affectively by audiences that did not experience them. The historical film's fictional and dramatic elements, along with its significant connection to the time and place of its production, transforms its cultural representation of history from static visions of a distant past, to a multilayered palimpsest in which the past and the present are voiced simultaneously. Consequently, the historical knowledge of the historical film is vivid and complex.

These theories regarding the historical film have been collated into a working definition that establishes what constitutes films of this genre and how they construct their representation of the past. This classification will be utilised in Chapter 2 to develop a working definition of the historical films of South Korea specifically. Furthermore, in the following chapter, this designation of the historical film will be used to assist in the discussion of a cinematic aesthetic in the South Korean historical film derived from the Korean cultural concept of *han*, which is found to be persistent throughout the films despite the ongoing changes to South Korea's socio-cultural environment and this national film industry's standards and practices.

## **Chapter 2**

### ***Cinematic han and the South Korean Historical Film***

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Significantly, each of the possible beginnings of Korean national cinema, previously described in the General Introduction, commenced around a time of conflict, respectively, the Japanese Occupation of Korea, World War II, and the Korean War. Indeed, the cinema of South Korea has not had a smooth history, always challenged by creative freedom restrictions and the intervention of outside forces. Shortly after the division of North and South Korea, the South Korean government introduced numerous film policies that censored and restricted the creative freedom of filmmakers, along with anti-communist polices that were designed to combat the indoctrination of their citizens by North Korea, China and the Soviet Union. Both of these types of policy affected the creative output of South Korean filmmakers, who were forced under threat of imprisonment to produce films designed to meet arbitrary quotas, praise an idealised South Korean lifestyle and demonise communism (Kraft, 2006; Yecies, 2007, p. 4). Therefore, many South Korean films of this period were created from a position of oppression. The films most affected by these policies were those that depicted historical conflict, specifically the South Korean historical films that portrayed the Japanese Occupation, World War II and the Korean War. Anti-communist polices made it impossible to create a complex portrait of historical conflict and instead forced portrayals into black and white moral standings (Mitchel, 2014; Shin, 2008, p. 17). In these films, the South Koreans were always represented as righteous characters in pursuit of freedom for all of their fellow citizens, while their enemy, most often the Japanese and North Koreans, were only seen as wanting to oppress the South Koreans in grotesque ways.

The repressive nature of the film policies and anti-communist policies permeated throughout South Korean cinema for over forty years. However, the start of South Korea's transition to a democratic political system in 1987 marked the alleviation, if not removal, of these policies, which allowed for social criticism and reflexive representations in films that explored historical conflict. While this transition resulted in

an evolution in the representation of South Korean historical conflict in terms of narrative and themes, this development also marked a significant change in the historical film's formal construction. As the South Korean film industry began to enjoy greater creative freedom from 1987, the formal cinematic elements of the historical film—mise en scene, editing, sound and cinematography—increased in both complexity and detail. Prior to 1987, the South Korean historical film's formal elements, specifically in terms of its battle sequence construction, was rudimentary. Scenes often were heavily built around stationary wide, mid or close up shots, with straight continuity editing and stock sound effects. In addition, the battle sequences of the South Korean historical film were either constructed entirely from stock footage of historical warfare or had simple staging that lacked movement, spectacle and violence. This formal construction is evident in the South Korean films *Nameless Stars* (Lee & Kim, 1959), *The Sea Knows* (Kim & Kim, 1961) and *Five Marines* (Cha & Kim, 1961).

However, after decades of oppressive censorship and a dearth of resources that reduced much of South Korean cinema into cheaply produced near-propaganda, post-1987 South Korean cinema saw notable change that elevated the industry, making it internationally competitive. As the film policies and anti-communist policies began to be eased in the early 1990s, South Korean financial conglomerates began to invest large sums into film production (Paquet, 2007) and blockbuster filmmaking was embraced by the industry. As a result, as the budgets and creative freedom increased, the formal construction of the South Korean historical film began to evolve. Cinematography, editing, and sound as well as battle scene construction grew more complex and the mise en scene and iconography became more detailed. The camera gained more movement, the editing began to introduce elements such as slow motion, discontinuity, and non-linear storytelling, and the sound department improved the quality of its foley with no two sound effects entirely the same. Furthermore, as the 1990s progressed, South Korean battle sequences slowly transformed into showcases of epic action. By the early 2000s, battle sequences had become energetic, fluid, violent and focused on spectacle, which included elaborate fight choreography, graphic injuries and ceaseless explosions and gunfire. This type of formal construction is portrayed in the South Korean films *The Front Line* (Jeong et al., 2011), *Assassination* (Shen & Choi, 2015), and *Spirits'*

*Homecoming* (Cho, Lee & Cho, 2016). As a result of the cultural democratisation of South Korea, the formal construction of war in South Korean cinema transitioned away from the basic structures that defined the industry's emergent decades to the more detailed and complex productions that defines the South Korean historical film in the 2010s.

Despite these changes to the South Korean film industry's standards and practices, upon close examination of films made in notable, influential periods in South Korean cinema's history, such as the Golden Age of Korean cinema (1955-1962), and the First (1987-1996) and Second (1996-2010s) Korean New Wave periods (Kim, 2010; Palmer, 2015), a cinematic aesthetic of the Korean cultural concept of *han* is always present in the films, despite the significant changes affecting South Korean cinema during these formative decades. As discussed in the General Introduction, this aesthetic is identified as *cinematic han*. The depiction of geopolitical warfare in South Korean cinema is thus imbued with this aesthetic, regardless of the year a film was made or the military conflict it depicts. Accordingly, this chapter argues that *cinematic han* is a permanent aesthetic in the South Korean historical film genre despite the ongoing formal changes affecting South Korean cinema and this nation's film industry.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The next section, 'The Korean cultural concept of *han*', defines this notion and discusses how it may have been implemented into prior studies of South Korean cinema. The following section, entitled 'The South Korean historical film,' continues the discussion of the previous chapter in regards to the definition and methods of the historical film by exploring how the historical films of South Korea are synonymous with the war film genre and also how *cinematic han* is integral in how the historical films of this national cinema are defined. The section 'The pre-1987 South Korean historical film' details how the South Korean film industry was shaped by film policies and anti-communist regulations from its inception in 1948 until the late 1980s and how these policies introduced an aesthetic of *han* into South Korean historical cinema. Then, the section entitled 'The post-1987 South Korean historical film' discusses how South Korea's emerging democratic system eased film policies and anti-communist regulations, and how these policy shifts allowed the South Korean

historical film to claim a more detailed and complex representation. This section also discusses how an aesthetic of *han* is maintained despite changes to the South Korean film industry. The chapter's final section, '*Cinematic han*', defines this unique cinematic aesthetic, which is to be applied to the analysis of all the South Korean historical films discussed in the remainder of this thesis.

## 2.2 The Korean cultural concept of *han*

As late as the end of the *Joseon* dynasty (1392-1897), *han* (한) did not exist in Korean culture (Kim, 2017, p. 254). This cultural concept was in fact imposed upon the nation by the Japanese during the Occupation as they encountered Korean artwork. According to Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, in 1920 Yanagi Muneyoshi, a Japanese expert on Korean ceramics, theorised a specific aesthetic for Korean artwork which he labelled as the 'aesthetics of sorrow' (2017, p. 260).<sup>29</sup> Yanagi described Korean art as embodying an essence of loneliness, sorrow and superstition, contrasted against the Japanese style of optimism and playfulness (Kim, 2017, p. 260). This aesthetic emerged from Yanagi's identification of the colour white in *Joseon* ceramics and Korean clothing, which he defined as 'sorrowful beauty' (2017, p. 260). In 1922 Yanagi wrote, 'The people, by wearing white clothing, are mourning for eternity [...] Is not the paucity of color true proof of the absence of pleasure in life?' (cited in Kim, 2017, p. 260). In turn, this aesthetic reflected the Japanese stance towards the character of the Korean people, who the former saw as forever entrapped by their sorrow. The aesthetic of sorrow came to define all Korean art produced during the Occupation, from ceramics and paintings, to music, which was described to include an 'eerie, overarching pathos', alongside 'bitter irony and sardonic wit' (Kim, 2017, pp. 260-261). The permeation of sadness in Korean artwork, in turn, served the Japanese to justify the Occupation. The Japanese believed that the melancholy of the Koreans naturalised their suffering under colonialisation as 'inherent and inevitable' and also as linked to an apparent entrenched helplessness and

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<sup>29</sup> This section relies substantially on the theory of Sandra Kim in relation to the origins and key elements of *han*. Apart from the fact that there is scarce scholarly literature on this concept's origins, Kim's theory links *han* to an artistic, aesthetic quality. Therefore, in the establishment of the aesthetic of *cinematic han*, Kim's theories are the most relevant to this thesis.

naiveté, which was used to rationalise the Japanese authority over the nation (Kim, 2017, p. 261). In short, the perceived sorrow of the Korean people, as revealed through their melancholic artwork, justified Japan's belief that the nation needed 'superior leadership' (Kim, 2017, p. 261).

However, cultural theorist Nayoung Aimee Kwon argues that the loss of Korean culture under the Japanese Occupation fed a desire amongst Koreans to construct symbols of Korean-ness as 'a fetishistic placeholder for the absent nation' (2015, p. 108). As a result of this desire, the aesthetic of sorrow identified by the Japanese evolved to become a broader Korean cultural concept, known as *han*, which was incorporated into the Korean ethnonational discourse as an attempt to distinguish Korea from the Japanese in an 'essential, biologicistic way' (Kim, 2017, p. 264). *Han*, in this sense, would give expression to the desire of Koreans to distance themselves from Japan during the Occupation and maintain an affect of being Korean. Ironically, by basing this cultural difference upon *han*'s aesthetic of sorrow, the Koreans defined themselves under their 'colonisers' words' (Kim, 2017, p. 263). Therefore, whilst *han* originally emerged as a concept coined by the Japanese to define Korean-ness, it eventually came to prominence as a visual aesthetic that Koreans embraced and imprinted onto all artworks produced to reflect the nation.

As a culturally specific concept, *han* has been regarded as untranslatable outside Korean culture. As Korean to English translator David Bannon expresses, 'not all concepts can be translated' (2008). Accordingly, many Koreans, and also foreigners interested in Korea, believe that only Koreans are able to feel *han*, tied as they are to it through genealogy (Kim, 2017, p. 255). This essentialist understanding of *han* is widely accepted in popular and institutional engagements in English with Korean culture and history, for example, as illustrated in the television series *The West Wing* (Ahern Jr. et al., 1999), in which a fictionalised version of the President of the United States says of *han*, 'There is no literal English translation. It's a state of mind. Of soul, really. A sadness. A sadness so deep no tears will come. And yet still there's hope' (Glionna, 2011).

*Han* is in this sense described as an affective experience, like love and hate (Huer, 2009), that refers to both the collective 'deep-rooted grief, bitterness, and longings that

Koreans experience as the result of a long history of oppression and injustice' and the pain Koreans suffer on an individual level in their everyday lives (Kim, 2017, p. 255). Thus, this idea of *han* both describes the collective grief for the Japanese Occupation and the Korean War, as well as the anger and sorrow for the injustices each Korean suffers in their own lives, in relation to their government, employers, families and friends (Huer, 2009). As Jon Huer asserts, *han* ‘is the sense of having been “wronged” by a superior agent. Naturally, the agent varies. Sometimes it is fate and fortune, sometimes it is the government, sometimes it is business, sometimes it is family roles, that exercise “unjust” power upon oneself’ (Huer, 2009).<sup>30</sup> *Han* is also used to name a bitterness, angst, endurance and yearn for revenge that engulfs a person’s soul (Glionna, 2011), as well as an intense suffering that ‘implodes and collapses into a condensed feeling of pain’ (Lee, 2016). Additionally, the notion of *han* is used to define a certain condition of Koreans’ bodies; believed to inhabit the blood of Koreans, *han* is imagined as flowing through them in perpetuity (Kim, 2017, p. 254). Korean theologian Suh Nam Dong states that *han* is felt in the guts and bowels, which in turn makes the body writhe and squirm under the pressure to seek revenge and ‘to right the wrong’ of the injustices committed against the self (cited in Lee, 2016). There are also clinically diagnosable diseases that are attributed to *han* in Korea. One of these is known as *hwabyeong*, which is an ‘anger syndrome’, with the physical symptoms of ‘insomnia, fatigue, panic, fear of impending death, indigestion, loss of appetite, difficulty breathing, palpitations, generalised aches and pains, and a feeling of fullness in the abdominal region’ (Kim, 2017, p. 256). Contained in medical textbooks, such as *Kaplan & Sadock’s Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* (Sadock, Sadock & Ruiz, 2009), *hwabyeong* is believed to be an example of an ‘intergenerational transmission of emotions’, as a physical manifestation of *han* (Kim, 2017, p. 256).

However, far from univalent, *han* is more accurately conceived as a complex expression of yin and yang, with both negative and positive valences within it seen as intertwined and inseparable. As a result, the notion of *han* is also used to refer to a form of hope that

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<sup>30</sup> Emphasis in the original.

would silently endure within the more strident emotions of sorrow and anger. Korean novelist Park Kyong-ni, at a keynote address in 1994, said of *han*:

If we lived in paradise, there would be no tears, no separation, no hunger, no waiting, no suffering, no oppression, no war, no death. We would no longer need either hope or despair. We would lose those hopes so dear to us all. We Koreans call these hopes Han. It is not an easy word to understand. It has generally been understood as a sort of resentment. But I think it means both sadness and hope at the same time. You can think of Han as the core of life, the pathway leading from birth to death. (cited in Kim, 2017, pp. 253-254)

The hope included in *han* has been described as ‘an ability to silently endure hardship and suffering in a relatively small nation with a long history of being invaded by more powerful neighbors’ (Glionna, 2011). Thus, the hope in *han* would be perceived as a reflection of the endurance and resilience of Koreans against foreign occupation and the twentieth century. In consequence, as a cultural concept *han* can be defined as a specific Korean aesthetic that describes an intricate balance of deeply engrained emotions of sorrow, anger, fear and hope derived from the conflict and turmoil of modern Korean history. Understood by Koreans as a complex, ambivalent affect, *han* is believed to permeate Korean cultural life, ‘from the nature of domestic films and literature to national reactions against tragedies’ (Lee, 2016), spreading wide and deep reaching all Koreans, regardless of their social position, and influencing not only their creative works but their lives on a daily basis. In fact, *han* is also believed to be experienced differently by every Korean, and, therefore, expressed by each in their own, individual way.

An important Korean social movement of protest against the South Korean government, known as *minjung* (to which this chapter will come back later), includes *han* as a key component of their ideology. However, contrary to the perceptions of the yin and yang nature pointed out earlier, the *minjung* define *han* as a national evil. Following Christian theology, the movement’s understanding of *han* is balanced by the *minjung*’s inclination towards the virtuous notion of *dan*. Thus, the movement believes *han* to be an obstacle that ‘stood between the *minjung* and their abundant life’ (Park, 1987, p. 3), and which primarily stems from their perception of being oppressed by the South Korean

government. According to the *minjung* poet, Kim Chi-ha, *han* is ‘the Minjung's anger and sad sentiment turned inward, hardened and stuck to their hearts. Han is caused as one's outgoingness is blocked and pressed for an extended period of time by external oppression and exploitation’ (cited in Park, 1987, p. 3). A key example of this version of *han*, as posited by A. Sung Park, was the ‘deeply internalised lamentations and anger’ of the families of the victims of the Gwangju uprising of 1980.<sup>31</sup> This *han* is then turned upon the South Korean government and used by the *minjung* to fuel their demonstrations. As Kim argues, the *minjung*'s *han* is the ‘emotional core of anti-regime action’ (cited in Park, 1987, p. 3). *Dan*, alternatively, is the opposite of *han* and believed to be a concept that could eliminate the violence the *minjung* committed under *han*. *Dan*, as Park asserts, means to ‘cut off’ and it is a form of self-control on a personal and social level, to stop the ‘vicious cycle of Mingjung's Han and revenge’ (1987, p. 3). As Park elaborates: ‘If Minjung's Han explodes destructively, the Minjung will hate, kill, or revenge their oppressors endlessly. Dan is to overcome the vicious circle of Han’ (1987, p. 4). Therefore, the give and take of the *minjung*'s simultaneous desire to seek revenge and peace ensured that while the *minjung*'s *han* affirmed that a governmental overthrow was the key to live without oppression, their *dan* ensured they would not resort to mass violence to achieve this. For the *minjung*, their unique definition of *han* was integral to how they structured their rebellion against the South Korean government. Yet, the *han* and *dan* distinction of the *minjung* is only one example of how *han* can be conceived and experienced in different, unique ways in Korea.

*Han*, with all the positive and negative valences with which it is associated, has been argued to be an essential element in the spiritual growth of Koreans. In fact, under a Catholic Korean perspective *han* is often posited to be a gift from God, and that all of the trials and tribulations that *han* places upon an individual in their lives would be a way for them to seek divine redemption. Bishop Paul Tchang Ryeol Kim expands on this notion, stating that ‘God uses *han* to shake us up, to wake us from our sleep, and

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<sup>31</sup> On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1980, protest broke out opposing the martial law Chun Doo-hwan had imposed on the citizens following his coup against former president Choi Kyu-hah (Szczepanski, 2018). Government troops were sent to break up the protest, yet the citizens resisted. Between May 18<sup>th</sup> and May 27<sup>th</sup>, over 800,000 citizens of the city of Gwangju fought against 3,000 elite paratroopers who stemmed from three different branches of South Korea's Special Warfare Command (Choi, 2006, p. 1). The official death toll stands at 170, while unofficial estimates believe the toll to be as high as 2,000 (Kingston, 2014).

thus He makes us realise the vanity of life, the ultimate emptiness of the things of this world. Through *han* He prevents us from finding satisfaction in earthly things and stimulates us to search for the absolute and everlasting' (1986). In this view, *han* becomes a way for Koreans to disconnect from the world and connect with God. In consequence, the injustices and oppression the individual faces in life are not only unavoidable but also desirable. Due to this catholic rendering, Bishop Kim states that *han* makes the Korean people a 'blessed race' (1986).<sup>32</sup> However, the spiritual usage of *han* elsewhere in Korean society is not wholly negative. In fact, for some Koreans *han*'s spiritual connections are believed to make the person more mature and selfless.

According to Dr Hyun Jin P. Moon, the experiences of *han* that average Koreans face in their day to day lives helps them to internalise their intense feelings of injustice and anger rather than projecting them through physical, violent actions (2016). Moon states that this internalisation makes the individual wrestle 'with difficult emotions', in turn, allowing them to 'attain a deeper understanding of the human condition and a new level of spiritual maturity' (2016, p. 118). Through this deeper understanding, Moon goes on, the individual can learn to 'forgive, love and embrace those who have done us wrong' (2016, p. 118). Thus, according to Moon, the negative aspects of *han* are integral to the growth of the individual. Rather than being an intense emotional state that immerses the average Korean in anger and feelings of injustice for their entire lives, under this spiritual recontextualisation *han* becomes a rite of passage for the individual to mature into a more loving, forgiving person. In other words, the experience of *han* 'transforms all the bitter indignities and disadvantages we see in both history and personal experience into opportunities to become ever more compassionate, mature and we might even say – more human' (What is Han?, 2018). As a result, the connection between the concept of *han* and spirituality is dually focused. In the first focus, *han* is utilised by Catholic Koreans to further their personal connection to God. The second focus allows Koreans to grow spiritually in order to become loving, wholesome people. While the essentialism of this spiritual definition of *han* is clearly limiting, it is also unequivocal that the use of *han* in this spiritual sense is diverse, illustrating how this cultural concept can adapt and change to fit the groups or individuals who utilise it in Korea.

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<sup>32</sup> Bishop Kim also asserts that the strong influence of *han* has inspired catholic martyrs (1986).

Due to the multifaceted nature of *han*, the discussion regarding how it has been expressed in South Korean cinema is therefore contentious. As *han* can adapt to a vastly diverse array of discourses, and as there is no single accepted way *han* can be expressed, defined or understood, there are also numerous ways it can be interpreted in South Korean films. For example, *han* can be argued to be present in the South Korean horror film *The Host* (Choi et al., 2006), through the perceived anger and sorrow of the Korean characters at being assaulted by a genetically modified monster created by the United States. Another film in which *han* can be argued to be present is the South Korean thriller *No Mercy* (Kang & Kim, 2010), through the hate and sorrow a father feels at being tricked by a psychopath into performing an autopsy on his daughter. Kristof Boghe provides an insightful analysis in regards to how *han* can be identified in the depiction of revenge in South Korean cinema (2013). The revenge film, Boghe asserts, is a prominent genre in contemporary South Korean cinema, being witnessed in films such as *A Bittersweet Life* (Lee, Oh, Oh, & Kim, 2005), *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* (Lee, Lee, Lim, Seok, & Park, 2009) and *Bedeavilled* (Han et al., 2010). Boghe argues that the cultural concept of *han* is integral in how the act of revenge has been depicted in South Korean cinema, stating that the meaning of revenge in these films can be understood:

- (1) as a means of catharsis to let loose of the vengeful emotions hidden in the everyday experience of han,
- (2) a more direct identification with this experience of han, as revenge in Korean cinema often seems impossible or unsatisfying and
- (3) a deconstruction of classical Western morality where there's a clear distinction between good and evil. (2013)

These three criteria assist in the task of understanding the way in which *han* has influenced the depiction of the act of revenge in South Korean cinema. As Boghe asserts, in the traditional Western revenge film, the diegetic world in which these actions take place establishes a universe where good always triumphs over evil (2013). While the protagonist performs horrific actions in their search for revenge, as the narrative separates the protagonists and antagonists into a black and white morality, suggests Boghe, the revenge is justified and achieved, as their actions are performed against

purely evil characters (2013). However, in South Korean revenge cinema, this traditional construction is subverted. In the abovementioned South Korean revenge films, characters do not always receive absolution after their quest but are often killed in their single-minded pursuit, leaving the act of revenge incomplete or unaccomplished. Due to this occurrence, Boghe asserts that this is reflective of *han*, specifically that ‘the incapability of restoring the balance of justice is impossible, hence the need to internalise and accept these feelings as part of the human condition’ (2013). But the view that the inability of these characters to achieve catharsis through revenge would be an expression of *han* reflects an essentialist narrative of nation. According to the latter, Koreans need to ‘accept the fact that they can’t act vengeful upon all those who inflicted harm upon them’ and therefore must internalise their grief in order to operate in society, otherwise their lives will become consumed with the endless pursuit of justice and revenge against those who oppressed them (Boghe, 2013). In addition, Boghe stresses that the idea of *han* is integral to how revenge is constructed and depicted in South Korean cinema, noting that in these narratives, ‘those who try to fight monsters will eventually become monsters’ (2013), asserting that the intense pain, oppression and sense of injustice characteristic of *han* will irrevocably alter the characters affected by it.

However, while the identification of *han* in South Korean films via textual analysis consists in the identification of the source and effect of the protagonist’s pain and oppression within the narrative, this approach limits this concept to only a few basic characteristics, removing its ties to Korean culture as a result. The potential limitations of the textual analysis of *han* in South Korean cinema is commented upon by Hye Seung Chung (2005). In her analysis of how *han* manifests in Korean melodrama, Chung claims that ‘Korean melodrama hinges upon the national sentiment of *han*, a slippery and subtle term that, depending on context, denotes everything from “resentment” and “lamentation” to “unfulfilled desire” and “resignation”’ (2005, p. 121). It thus is possible in textual analysis of South Korean film and television to reduce this multifaceted cultural concept into easily identifiable notions of affect, which, as Chung notes, are not inherently unique to Korea. As she posits:

The overlooked transnational valency of the concept becomes salient once we examine the etymological roots of this monosyllabic Sino-Korean character.

According to a Chinese-English dictionary, “*han* is *hen* (‘hate’) in Chinese, *kon* (‘to bear a grudge’) in Japanese, *horosul* (‘sorrowfulness’) in Mongolian, *korosocuka* (‘hatred,’ ‘grief’) in Manchurian, and *hàn* (‘frustration’) in Vietnamese.” Although similar concepts exist throughout East and Southeast Asia, only *han* has emerged as a privileged marker of national culture and identity.’ (2005, p. 122)

Therefore, any analysis of *han* in South Korean cinema that reduces this concept to terms such as hate, sorrow, and hope removes its unique Korean-ness. Chung argues that what is unique about *han* in Korea is not the kind of affect it might represent for this nation but rather its aesthetic connection to Korean culture (2005, p. 122). The identification of *han* in South Korean cinema is then not reducible to the simple task of identifying expressions of emotion, such as grief and hate, within the film’s narrative, for example, in the shot of a wailing Korean man in *The Piper* (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2015) or the scene of a child dying in front of their grieving mother in *The Villainess* (Moon & Jung, 2017). Instead, as posited by Chung (2005), an analysis of how *han* has come to envelop characters and their experiences within a film’s narrative must not focus on action or plot alone but principally on atmosphere and mood as created through the film’s stylistic approach.

Consequently, an appropriate way to analyse *han* in South Korean screen culture would involve a return to the concept’s cultural origins and to establish an aesthetic understanding of *han* that is unique to South Korean cinema. Under the lens of a *cinematic han*, the analysis of the South Korean historical film genre can then avoid both essentialisms, generalisations, and cultural homogenising. Rather than focusing upon how elements of *han* might be reflected through the films’ narrative progression and characters’ actions, the analysis of a cinematic aesthetic of *han* will instead focus on the films’ formal generation of a historical narrative through a specific focus upon narrative tropes and *mise en scène*, in which the Korean characters both personify and are immersed within a relentless atmosphere of oppression. As this chapter argues, despite

the ongoing changes reshaping the South Korean film industry's structures, discourses, standards and practices between the early 1950s and late 2010s, certain narrative and formal elements remain consistent in all the historical films produced during these decades, in which *cinematic han* can be identified. As anticipated in this chapter's introduction, the final section offers a definition of the concept of *cinematic han*, a category unique to this thesis' analysis of South Korean historical films, which is then used to facilitate the close film analysis of the chapters that follow.

However, before detailing how *han* became a permanent aesthetic of South Korean historical cinema despite the ongoing policy shifts regulating the film industry in this nation, the next section will continue the discussion started in the previous chapter addressing the question of what defines and gives shape to the South Korean historical film. Specifically, the next section will discuss South Korean historical films by applying theorisations of the war film genre and its infantry subgenre. As a consequence of this discussion, *cinematic han* will be placed into the context of the South Korean historical film genre.

### **2.3 The South Korean historical film**

Chapter 1 established what defines the historical film genre and what methods historical films implement to construct representations of the past. However, while this definition can be applied to the historical films produced in South Korea, it does not encapsulate the South Korean historical film genre in its entirety. The historical films of South Korea near universally depict eras of geopolitical conflict through either portrayals of warfare against an external, oppressive agent or through narratives that detail the daily life of Koreans during the period of armed conflict. South Korean historical films primarily focus upon three historical periods: the *Goryeo* dynasty, 918-1392 (Sasaki, 2011, p. 544); the *Joseon* dynasty, 1392-1897 (Nardini, 2013, p. 25); and the twentieth century. The films that represent the latter can in turn be subdivided into three groups, each addressing one of the geopolitical conflicts that this thesis focuses upon: the Japanese Occupation of Korea, World War II, and the Korean War. Overall, South Korean historical films are set during periods of war and social upheaval in which the Korean

populace is either under or resisting oppression. Examples of these films include *The Great Battle* (Goo, Kim, Jang, & Kim, 2018), set during the *Goryeo* dynasty; *Kundo: Age of the Rampant* (Han et al., 2014), set during the *Joseon* dynasty; and *Once Upon a Time in Corea* (Kang & Jeong, 2008), set during both the Japanese Occupation and World War II. Historical conflict is inherent to the South Korean historical film, with narratives and representations of historical events and eras that are not war or social upheaval being in the minority. As a result, the South Korean historical film evokes two genres simultaneously: the historical genre and the war genre. Consequently, the label of ‘South Korean historical film’ becomes synonymous with both of these genres. Therefore, to understand how the Korean cultural concept of *han* has become a permanent aesthetic of the South Korean historical film, a discussion of the war film genre is required, in conjunction with the working definition of the historical film as devised in Chapter 1.

The South Korean historical film genre routinely depicts historical events as warfare, regardless if the depicted event involved armed conflict or not. A key example of this recontextualisation are the South Korean films that represent the Japanese Occupation of Korea (henceforth referred to as ‘Occupation films’). While representation of the Korean War has occurred, filmic depiction of the Japanese Occupation has been significantly greater throughout the history of South Korean cinema. Dozens of films between 1945 and 2015 have set their narratives in the 1910-1945 period, including *Femme Fatale: Bae Jeong-ja* (Kim & Jeong, 1973), *Mulberry* (Lee & Lee, 1986), *Private Eye* (Han, Lee, & Park, 2009) and *The Silenced* (Kim, Shim, & Lee, 2015). Yet most of these films only utilise the Occupation as an antiquarian historical background and the most controversial issues of the era, such as the ‘comfort women’ and the suppression of Korean culture, are rarely depicted, other than via occasional cursory references in the narrative.<sup>33</sup> Comparable to how Japanese national cinema altered its content to make the Samurai the dominant figure in Japanese cinema history (Keirstead, 2013), via the process of historying and the implementation of fictional, dramatic and narrative devices, Korean national cinema has altered the historical knowledge of this nation’s

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<sup>33</sup> Exceptions to this are the films *Spirits' Homecoming*, *Tuning Fork* (Cha & Choo, 2014) and *The Last Comfort Women* (Kim & Lim, 2015).

past to ease out such conflicts from its own representation. Furthermore, while the films' antiquarian history remains true to form, with the Korean alphabet absent from films, posters and texts, and Japanese paraphernalia dominating most frames, the films' monumental history is altered to a new version of historical truth. Significant figures in the history of the Occupation, such as the freedom fighter Kim Doo-han, become attached to one ideology. The complexities of the real-life figure are replaced with a single-minded goal, with their subsequent on-screen persona defined by how they defy, maim or kill Japanese characters. The history of the Occupation is filtered through characters such as Doo-han and, consequently, the film's narrative and formal construction is restructured and aligned with the placement of Koreans in a position of power over their occupiers. Through Korean national cinema, the event of the Occupation is turned from an internal conflict into an external one, where warfare is inherent to the Japanese Occupation (Westwell, 2013). Historically, this geopolitical conflict was depicted in South Korea as one of cultural change and oppression, yet since the inception of Korean cinema, due to concepts such as historying and monumental history (which were discussed in Chapter 1), it has instead been represented as a war, with clearly defined battlefields, armies and weapons.

Given that the war-like representation of the Japanese Occupation has been present in South Korea since the mid-twentieth Century, with films such as *Hurrah! For Freedom*, *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* (Lee & Im, 1990), and *Assassination*, the Occupation film has become likened to the war film genre more generally, with one side pitted against another to defend or acquire territory. Therefore, as previous discussed, the South Korean historical film can be viewed to evoke the historical film genre and the war film genre simultaneously. At its most refined, the war film genre, as defined by Clayton Sheffield, can be characterised as films in which the depiction of the military and armed forces is the central focus (2001, p. 4). An armed conflict does not have to be the core of the film as it can instead serve as the setting or location in which the narrative takes place. Under Sheffield's broad definition, films with themes such as returning veterans or civilian life under occupation can be included. However, as he points out, hundreds of films would then have to be considered as war films (2001, p. 4). Yet efforts to narrow this definition have proved to be limiting. Kathryn Kane defines

the war genre as films that represent US uniformed soldiers undergoing armed conflict against uniformed enemy combatants during World War II (1988). Kane's definition is problematic, as by limiting the narratives to the military activities of the United States in World War II, countries such as South Korea, Australia and England, who cinematically depict their actions during war time are dismissed from the genre. According to Kane's definition, a film representing any international conflict that was not fought by the US in World War II, for example South Korean conflicts, be it the Occupation or the Korean War, is not a war film. In addition, Kane argues that films that deal with espionage, the home-front or any war other than World War II are not to be considered as war films (cited in Eberwein, 2010, p. 42). Kane's definition limits the films to depictions of the battlefield, with armed conflict raging for the entirety of the runtime. While some films have done this successfully,<sup>34</sup> limiting the genre through such restrictions inhibits the meaning that can be drawn from cinematic reflections on war. Under Kane's narrow definition, modern concerns and ideals on why war is fought cannot be reflected through contemporary conflict, instead being forced to filter its meaning through an event that ended over seventy years ago.

While lacking the typically grand warzone scenes that Kane's definition requires from the genre, the Occupation film takes on the guise of a number of war film subgenres. The war film genre has numerous subgenres that detail several facets of the war experience. The core subgenre, the combat film, comprises of elaborate battle sequences fought by both sides of the depicted warring nations. However, alongside this subgenre, Eleftheria Thanouli identifies others such as the espionage film, the occupation film, and the home-front drama (2005). The home-front drama depicts civilian life in war time, far away from the front line (Basinger, 2003, pp. 34-35). The Japanese Occupation film embodies three of these subgenres, namely the home-front drama, the occupation film and the combat film. These South Korean historical films often occur in Korean villages or cities, depicting everyday activities of the average citizen often far removed from scenes of armed combat. However, simultaneously these people are depicted as oppressed by the Japanese occupying force, often being treated as second class citizens

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<sup>34</sup> See the South Korean film *The Front Line*, as an example.

through beatings, unfair imprisonment and lack of resources. This oppression is also routinely witnessed through the film's use of colour, of which the spaces the Koreans occupy are often dour and lifeless, with a colour palette consisting of dull browns, greys, blacks and whites, making the environment appear perpetually dirty and in ill repair due to the conflict. This colour palette can be witnessed in *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination*. In turn, in the Occupation film, war and conflict not only envelops the Korean characters through narrative developments, but through the film's formal construction, establishing an atmosphere where armed conflict is ever-present and baked into the visual aesthetic of Korea. This is a key aspect of *cinematic han* discussed later in the chapter. Furthermore, elements of the combat subgenre also occur due to regular depictions of armed resistance against the Japanese through scenes of brawls, sabotage or gunfights. As a result, the Occupation film depicts scenes of life at the home-front during a military conflict, representations of occupied territories both visually and narratively, and sequences of combat, simultaneously embodying these three subgenres. The Korean War film *In Love and the War* (Kim, Han, Park, & Park, 2011) is an example of these simultaneous subgenres as it depicts a South Korean village occupied by North Korean forces, where the South Koreans attempt to co-exist with the North Koreans in order to survive. The only difference between this film and *Nameless Stars*, a film about a group of Korean students forming their own resistance group against the Japanese during the Occupation, is the historical period in which the narrative is set. Yet according to the above definition of the war film genre one of these films could be classified as a war film while the other could not.

Within the narrative of the Occupation and Korean War films, scenes of armed combat are plentiful. According to war film theorists, combat scenes are an essential requisite for the genre. Without scenes of combat, it appears that a film cannot be deemed to be a war film. Kane states this claim explicitly (1988). Additionally, Steve Neale postulates that 'scenes of combat are a requisite ingredient and these scenes are dramatically central' (1999, p. 125). By extension, Jonathan Rayner asserts that combat scenes are as important to the war film genre as music is to the musical film genre (2007, p. 4). Therefore, combat scenes are postulated as what holds the narrative together and are subsequently the most important scenes within the film. The South Korean historical

film does not have any visible objection to this fact, as the narrative and formal representation of both the Japanese Occupation and the Korean War are constructed to contain scenes of two opposing forces engaging in, often bloody, combat. However, by emphasising the spectacle of combat, the theorists of the war film seem to focus on a superficial narrative element. As discussed earlier, the war genre provides an ideal ground for contemplating the very nature of war, and, in the process, examine the human desire to participate in and witness violent conflict (Westwell, 2006, p. 5). Yet most war film theorists do not touch upon this function of the genre. For example, Kane discusses the war genre by its generic antiquarian content and narrative archetypes, such as the soldiers' uniforms and their participation in combat. As a result, the shell of the war genre is detailed, but lacks true depth as to why the genre has been constructed the way it has. Others, such as Barry Langford, discuss the importance of the historical facts that each film presents, but this is no more than a timeline of events (2005, p. 106). In reality, war does not occur because of combat. Combat is a by-product of the conflict and as such, while unquestionably an important aspect of the war genre, scenes of combat should not be as crucial to the genre as these film theorists submit. Scenes of combat supplement grander themes and contemplate war rhetoric. For example, the Korean War film *The Front Line* is built around one specific battle, namely, the battle of Aerok Hill. Combat is used frequently throughout the film, but not just as spectacle. Scenes of the South Korean high command and the banter between the soldiers are juxtaposed against the combat scenes in order to highlight the futile, petty and repetitive nature of the battle along with the heavy psychological toll it has on the infantry. However, the overall approach to combat scenes by war film theorists is encapsulated by Thomas Doherty and Jeanine Basinger. Doherty states: 'combat action figures all, they are overwhelmed by the clash of combat and the choreography of carnage' (2005, p. 218). Similarly, Basinger states: 'if there's no blood and guts, there's no glory' (1998).<sup>35</sup> Thus, combat is elevated but purely for the sake of spectacle, which tends to override historical meaning.

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Edwards states that war films 'create their impact by means of action and adventure emphasising noise and spectacular events' (1997, p. 2). He goes on to state that the war film is not concerned with commentary or social criticisms, but instead spread its message through the actions of the soldiers during combat.

Like the historical film, as outlined in Chapter 1, the war film is designed to tell a narrative first and be a composite of historical information second (Schatz, 1998).

Within the narrative of the war film lies an opportunity to ponder questions regarding the impact of war on humans. These narratives can often be positive towards the armed conflict or highly critical of the reasons behind it, and provide a ground where an overall sense of the conflict is ‘worked out, articulated and sometimes contested’ (Westwell, 2006, p. 5). The manner in which these questions are answered within the text can potentially alter how the conflict is perceived. As the majority of people receive historical information mostly through film and television, the historical war film genre shapes the events of the armed conflict and in turn the historical knowledge surrounding it (O’Connor, 1988). For many viewers, historical films may be their first and only encounter with information about certain historical conflicts, such as the Japanese Occupation of Korea, and this fact will tend to shape their historical knowledge of the conflict. In line with the working definition of the historical film established in the previous chapter, as the narratives and depictions change between pre-1987 and post-1987 South Korean historical films, the historical knowledge of the historical events represented changes with them. For instance, during South Korean cinema’s Golden Age (1955-1962) (Kim, 2010), it was common for films to frame the war as a conflict to halt North Korea’s attempt to instil communism throughout the peninsula, as seen in a film such as *Five Marines*. In subsequent generations, however, specifically during the Second Korean New Wave cinematic period (1996-2010s) (Palmer, 2015) this war was understood to be fought by a North Korean army comprised of soldiers who joined the military to save their families from the Southern army, not to spread a political ideology, as seen in the film *Taegukgi* (Lee, Lee, & Kang, 2004). In turn, which perspective is embraced in the historical film’s representation of this conflict depends heavily on the era in which the film was produced and, by extension, the era in which it was viewed.

While the definitions of the war film provided by scholars such as Sheffield and Kane limit the definition of the genre, preventing historical events such as Japan’s Occupation of Korea from being included, the definition given by Barry Langford (2005) not only allows the Korean conflict to be incorporated, but makes it intrinsic to the genre.

According to Langford, a comprehensive account of a historical conflict is needed to provide the event with depth. For this purpose, the war film genre not only involves the politics behind the war, representations of life both in military bases and at the home-front, and narratives of espionage, but most importantly the films must detail the events that lead to a nation becoming involved in international conflict (Langford, 2005, p. 106). While the Japanese Occupation of Korea was not war in a traditional sense, it needs to be emphasised that Korea was still under Japanese rule when World War II began and as a result of these circumstances Koreans fought on the side of Japan. Under Langford's definition, the decades between the beginning of the Occupation and the start of World War II need to be taken into account in order to understand Korea's place in the war and by extension, Japan's. In other words, Occupation films can be considered as war films because they contextualise the reasons why Korea entered World War II and depict how Japan utilised the Korean military during the war, despite the fact that these particular films lie outside of previously established definitions of the war genre. As a result, the South Korean Occupation film becomes a subgenre of the classic war film (World War II), and it can be viewed in the same vein as the French resistance film, such as *Army of Crime* (Barneaud & Guédiguian, 2009), or the Polish occupation film, such as *In Darkness* (Beszta et al., 2011), that is, as a film about one country resisting the rule and oppression of another. Langford's definition transforms the perception of the Occupation from a conflict with only domestic repercussions into an international conflict with worldwide relevance. Without the Occupation, Korea would not have been forced to aid Japan during the war, potentially altering the tactical choices of the Japanese. Thus, this newly found relevance, coupled with the aforementioned externalisation of the conflict into full scale armed combat, transforms the understanding of pre- and post-1987 South Korean Occupation films into a war film generic framework, in terms of both the visualisation of combat and the chronicling of the origins of Korea's role in World War II. Therefore, through this definition, and the previously discussed justifications for the inclusion of the Occupation film in the war genre, both the conventions of the latter and of the historical film genre are evoked simultaneously in films that depict this geopolitical conflict. As a result, the Occupation

film serves as a key example of how the South Korean historical film is synonymous with both genres.

It has thus far been established in this chapter that the South Korean historical film is characterised by the integration of elements of both the historical film genre and the war film genre. However, the war genre is broad, encapsulating many different sub-genres, each depicting various aspects of both the war experience and the branches of the military. Aside from the previously discussed home-front, espionage and combat subgenres, the war film also includes the tank film, such as *Lebanon* (Bikel et al., 2009); the aviation film, as visible in *Red Tails* (Johnson et al., 2012); the military command film, as seen in *Valkyrie* (Adler et al., 2008); the navy film, as evident in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (Arnow et al., 2003); and the home-front military film, as witnessed in *The Manchurian Candidate* (Axelrod, Frankenheimer, Koch, & Frankenheimer, 1962). In turn, a more precise description of many South Korean historical films would picture them as a combination of the historical film genre and the war film infantry subgenre. The infantry film, such as the South Korean historical film *71: Into the Fire* (Choi et al., 2010), follows the soldiers through their experiences of war. Many South Korean historical films, no matter which historical era or event they depict, such as *Goryeo*, *Joseon* or the Japanese Occupation, portray units of armed Korean soldiers or resistance groups carrying out armed assaults against an oppressive agent. The infantry film, more than the other subgenres, reveals that the soldiers fighting the wars are not faceless grunts, but complex individuals, filled with fear, bravery, brutality and kindness (Hoffman, 2014).

The infantry subgenre is unique in the fact it follows the exploits of the average, often conscripted, soldier. The aforementioned *The Front Line* is another South Korean infantry film that depicts a South Korean soldier struggling to survive with his wits, his gun and the men fighting beside him, unaided, and often hindered, by the armour of a tank or the distance of a fighter plane. This shift in focus places the narrative and the audience directly on the front lines of the Korean War, unavoidably providing the soldiers a name and a voice, creating unique portrayals of the men fighting.

Furthermore, Korean infantry films, such *My Way* (Kang et al., 2011), *Taegukgi* and *The*

*Front Line* often follow one or two primary protagonists as they experience geopolitical conflict, specifically World War II and the Korean War. Through their unique perspective the struggles of the infantry soldier to adapt to the battlefield, such as learning to pitch a tent or sleep in a bunker, along with their ethics and morals in battle, such as running to or from their injured comrades, are witnessed first-hand. However, these protagonists are often placed within a small unit. Within this unit, the protagonist and their fellow Korean infantry soldier experience collective grief at the loss of their comrades, concern at each other's injuries and a universal relief at the conclusion of combat. As a result, the experience of war is depicted on both an individual and collective level, each providing unique perspectives towards the experience of warfare. Consequently, the conflict is made to be intensely personal, but also universal to the Korean experience under the oppression of their opponent. This dual perspective is later shown to be a key element of *cinematic han* as discussed later in the chapter. Furthermore, due to this dual perspective, the infantry film is the war film subgenre that has the most capacity to portray anti-war rhetoric, showcasing the human cost of war through the soldiers' struggles and, often, violent death. The infantry film's depiction of the average soldier grounds the geopolitical conflict and instead of glorifying the dogma of war, represents it as tragic and futile.

The infantry film is not concerned with the elements of military strategy behind the battle, but, as previously stated, shows small, closely knit units of soldiers, each with unique social hierarchies as they undertake missions and participate in conflict (Langford, 2005, p. 107). In the grand scheme of a war, infantry groups constitute a significantly small element of the overall war effort. Yet the infantry film is dramatically appealing. In the infantry subgenre, while the narrative is anchored around a specific factual historical battle or cultural event, such as the battle of P'ohang-dong or the Japanese Occupation, the narrative and characters built around this factual event are predominantly fictional. Through this fictional approach, the threat of imminent death or crippling injury makes every detail of a soldier's life important. Dull moments are intensified and happy moments are accentuated with tragedy all due to the possibility of death that hangs over the soldier (Edwards, 1997, p. 2). However, the main dramatic appeal of the infantry film is that the majority of the soldier's actions involves combat

and, due to the squad's small size and manoeuvrability, their combat scenes become dynamic and highly cinematic through fast movement, hand-to-hand combat and gunfights (Langford. 2005, p. 107). As a result, these films show the mechanics of combat, not the reasons behind it. The personal struggles of the individual soldier are shown in place of the grand picture of the war, as the goals of the conflict are simply too great for the soldier to overcome within their small combat units. As a result, the narrative and formal elements of these films entwine historical events with a fictional narrative to create a heightened version of the past in which fictional, emotionally vivid characters move quickly between action sequences that are based upon factual historical events.

In South Korean historical films that evoke the infantry subgenre, no film shows the war or conflict ending as a direct result of the actions of the main characters. Whether their battle is won or lost, it nevertheless contributes to the overall war effort. The war may continue or end at the conclusion of the narrative but this does not depend on the characters themselves. As a result, the narrative and thematic focus is placed onto the characters and their actions and reactions to the geopolitical conflict, not the war itself. As discussed in Chapter 1, Hayden White argues that a crucial element of historiophony is the narrative, which provides structure and stability to the text's historical information (1988). Therefore, the characterisation of the infantry soldiers provides this structure to the film, as it is through these people that the discursive imprint of the present, and the film's subsequent historical knowledge, can be found. For instance, if the infantry states positive reinforcement of the war in their dialogue, as in the Korean War film *Five Marines*, it can be concluded that Korean society had a positive view on the military and the war in general. However, if the soldiers complain about the purpose of the war, and subsequently die by the conclusion of the film, such as in the Korean War films *Nambugun* (Jeong & Jeong, 1990) and *The Front Line* (discussed further in Chapter 5), their fate effectively signifies the meaninglessness of the war. In turn, this narrative repositioning of the Korean War indicates that at the time of these films' production South Korean society viewed these conflicts in a negative light. Furthermore, when historical figures are present in these films, the cinematic text's monumental history is altered to reflect this discursive imprint. For example, in the South Korean film

*Operation Chromite* (Chung, Lee, & Lee, 2016), the factual historical figure of US General Douglas MacArthur is shown both interacting with the film's fictional characters and sharing their anti-war sentiments through his respectful mourning of the death of the film's main character. As a result, the South Korean historical film simultaneously evokes the historical genre and the war genre by conjoining the infantry subgenre with concepts such as historiophoty, monumental history, and the discursive imprint of the film's socio-cultural context, which are components of the working definition of the historical film established in Chapter 1. The analysis of these films demonstrates that the South Korean historical film both crafts a fictional representation of geopolitical conflict that is dramatically appealing but also uses the South Korean infantry as conduits for the social, cultural and political climate of the film's socio-cultural context.

Yet, the depiction of the soldiers is ambivalent. While the infantry subgenre characterises the soldiers more than other war subgenres, this characterisation is sometimes positive but can also sometimes turn dark. As Martin Baker states, a sense of what it is like to be a soldier, how they react, interpret and participate in the conflict surrounding them is invested in 'every frame of the film' (2011, p. 31). The question of what defines the national soldier, what they have to become in order to survive, and what drives them to participate in the bloodiest conflicts is the narrative thrust of the infantry film. The narrative explanation behind each soldier's decision to join the war is similarly linked to the previously discussed discursive imprint of the present. For example, in positive representations of warfare, such as the aforementioned *Five Marines*, this reasoning is based within patriotic ideals and the noble sacrifice for national interests. Yet in films with an anti-war perspective, such as *The Sea Knows*, this reasoning is often based upon conscription and forced participation in the conflict. Regardless of the film's pro or anti-war slant, within these portrayals of the infantry soldier, the horrific actions that the soldier perpetrates, such as the brutal tactics used by the South Koreans to stop the North Koreans as well as the murder and rape of civilians, are absolved by the narrative. For example, during the climax of *In Love and the War* a village filled with South Korean civilians is shelled and fired upon without warning. The confrontation's aim was to kill or drive out all of the North Korean occupiers of the

village, but it results in the violent death of a significant number of civilians. The narrative positions the event itself as tragic, through use of slow motion, close ups and emotional music, yet does not place the blame of the attack on anyone. The soldiers shoot and leave, they are not lingered upon or provide the focal point of the scene. The infantry committed the atrocity act but are not presented through the construction of the sequence as being responsible for it. On the contrary, the soldiers are absolved of responsibility for their actions because they are fighting the North Koreans, while the civilians killed are depicted as collateral damage. Regardless of the film's discursive imprint or how sadistic, sexist or racist the soldiers are, according to Baker, as soon as they engage in combat they 'become innocent, bewildered and desperate' and, therefore, portrayed as not responsible for their actions (2011, p. 32).

The removal of responsibility from the soldier is an element of the South Korean historical film's process of historying, as the narrative and formal construction of the South Korean historical film splits the representation of the conflict into a black and white morality. The protagonists are portrayed not just as innocent, but as oppressed, who are prevented from their morally right goal by morally evil antagonists who want to stop them, most often portrayed as the military enemy. As a result, South Korea is always narratively positioned as a small, insignificant force resisting a superior, oppressive force. The result of this binary morality is the separation of the sides of the conflict into 'our' and 'their' side, with the conflict starting from external factors rather than internal ones. For instance, most South Korean historical films begin either in medias res with the war already begun, as seen in *Operation Chromite*, or starting abruptly one insignificant morning, as portrayed in *Taegukgi*. Furthermore, whilst many of these films do not show the end of the conflict, most end on a theme of hope, implying that South Korea will progress onwards to an inevitable victory against the North, as witnessed in *Five Marines*. Therefore, while the narratives of the South Korean historical films that evoke the infantry subgenre begins and ends with South Korea underfoot of an oppressive, external agent, namely Japan or North Korea, each concludes with a thematic shift towards an inevitable victory and hopeful future. This thematic shift is another key element of *cinematic han* that will be discussed later in the chapter. As a consequence of the 'our side/their side' mentality, along with this thematic

shift, the protagonists are always absolved of having initiated the conflict. For example, within the South Korean historical film the Korean War is represented as a conflict that occurred without warning, unprovoked by South Korea. Therefore, North Korea is nearly always depicted as the invading force, with South Korea depicted as the nation being invaded. However, a detail never mentioned in these films is that the North invaded the South in order to undercut Rhee Syngman's plan to invade Pyongyang (Kim, 1989). The South is as guilty a party as the North for the war, yet this fact is generally absent from representations of the Korean War. The omission of these historical details allows the South Korean historical film to position all of the atrocities the South Korean military and government committed during the war as an act of defence and, as a result, absolves both parties from taking responsibility for their actions.

The war film genre is wide and complex, with nearly every nation having their own filmic representation of their historical armed conflicts. South Korea is no different. Through the various characteristics that define the war film, and its infantry subgenre, discussed in this section, it can be witnessed that this genre of film is defined by its dark mood, violent combat sequences, and the simultaneous thematic elements of the futility of war, hopelessness, and nihilism. In addition, the aforementioned examples of the South Korean historical film present a narrative environment where the South Korean nation is always under siege by an oppressive, external agent, whether it be under the rule of the Japanese during the Occupation or under the merciless assaults performed by the North Koreans during the Korean War. In turn, the South Korean army is never represented as the aggressors in the conflict, creating an environment of Korean oppression through the genre's specific narrative tropes and stylistic elements, such as violence, colour palette and infantry combat. Significantly, this common theme of oppression by an external agent in the South Korean historical film genre becomes an integral element of *cinematic han*.

This section has endeavoured to demonstrate how the historical films of South Korea not only evoke the historical film genre discussed in Chapter 1, but also how the historical films of this specific nation are synonymous with the war genre. As a result, the working

definition of the historical film discussed in the previous chapter and the aspects of the war genre discussed above can be collated into a more specific working definition that pertains solely to the South Korean historical film. Like the historical film, more broadly, the working definition of the South Korean historical film can be divided into two conceptual categories: a generic delimitation of the South Korean historical film and a theoretical explanation of the construction of the South Korean historical film's representation of the past. Firstly, in order to determine which South Korean films are to be described as historical films in this thesis, it will be acknowledged that the South Korean historical film needs to be set amongst one or more historical Korean geopolitical conflicts and contain a central narrative focus upon either civilians, soldiers or independence movements that endure or resist the oppression of an external agent, such as Japan or North Korea, in some form, for example armed combat. Secondly, the theoretical explanation of the construction of the historical film outlined in the previous chapter is conjoined with the theories of war film scholars such as Barry Langford, Thomas Doherty and Jeanine Basinger to define how the South Korean historical film constructs its representations of the past. With the aid of concepts such as historying and monumental history, the narrative and formal construction of the South Korean historical film must include depictions and narrative justifications for sequences of combat, whether it be the armed clashes between infantry forces or civilians attempting to fight their oppressive agents. Furthermore, the narrative and formal construction of the film's representation of the past divides the representation of the Korean geopolitical conflict into a black and white moral standing through which Korea is always represented as the inferior force in relation to a superior external agent. Furthermore, through the depiction of the Korean infantry forces (which can be defined as both military forces and guerrilla/resistance movements), a discursive imprint of the socio-cultural context of the film's production is present in their actions and dialogue. Therefore, through these theories, a working definition of the historical film that specifically pertains to South Korea can be articulated that combines the historical genre and the war genre under one cohesive title and definition.

However, using these theories to define the South Korean historical film can be problematic. Even though these theories are accurate in their descriptions of the South

Korean historical film, they are formulated by Western scholars and cannot fully encapsulate what separates this national cinema from Western films of the same genre. It is in this deficit that the previously mentioned *cinematic han* becomes integral to the South Korean historical film. This aesthetic is birthed from a Korean cultural concept and is what makes the South Korean historical film unique when compared to other national cinemas. In turn, the Western focused theories of the historical and war genres that the South Korean historical film evokes are unified under a specific South Korean lens due to the presence of *cinematic han*. Consequently, *cinematic han* becomes the third aspect of the working definition of the South Korean historical film, as this aesthetic is inherent to this national cinema's historical films. Due to this, it is important to discuss the various cinematic periods of South Korean cinema and how *cinematic han* can be identified as a permanent aesthetic despite the many formal changes that constantly reshaped South Korea's cinema and film industry, in order to comprehensively define the South Korean historical film.

## 2.4 The pre-1987 South Korean historical film

Between 1948 and 1987 South Korean cinema was restricted by the film policies and anti-communist policies instilled by the government. It was under the influence of these policies where the pre-1987 historical film developed its narrative and thematic approach, and where the first instances of a *cinematic han* can be perceived within South Korean cinema. However, the anti-communist policies were not a by-product of government rulings, but the basis on which they built their political platform. From the beginning of the South Korean nation, political and cultural policies stemmed from the paranoia of communist forces overthrowing the government, as well as the ideological influence these forces may have had on South Korean citizens. The key figure in the introduction and evolution of the anti-communist policies was South Korea's first president, Rhee Syngman, whose entire political career was defined by his staunch opposition to communism.<sup>36</sup> Rhee ruled South Korea from 1948, installed by the US

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<sup>36</sup> Rhee was so opposed to communism that he initially refused to sign the armistice that ended the Korean War. He demanded North Korea to relieve themselves of their communist political system and reunify

General Douglas MacArthur, to 1960 when he was removed from power by the Korean people.<sup>37</sup> Yet even though it was the United States who had installed Rhee, due to their common opposition to communism, it was apparent that this nation was not assured he was the right candidate for such a high ranking position. In March, 1948, the CIA described Rhee and the Korean leadership issue in the following manner:

The Korean leadership is provided by that numerically small class which virtually monopolizes the native wealth and education of the country... Since this class could not have acquired and maintained its favoured position under Japanese rule without a certain minimum of “collaboration”, it has experienced difficulty in finding acceptable candidates for political office and has been forced to support imported expatriate politicians such as Syngman Rhee and Kim Ku. These, while they have no pro-Japanese taint, are essentially demagogues bent on autocratic rule. (Cumings, 2007, p. 284; Rang, 2000; Victoria, 2004, p. 109)

Rhee’s potential, and eventual realisation, to rule South Korea under a dictatorship was well known by those who had backed his rise to the top of the political hierarchy. Yet, in the aftermath of World War II the United States was undergoing its own battle against communism and the Cold War was in its early days. Any potential allies in the fight against the Soviet Union, China, North Korea and other communist countries were supported by the United States, no matter how radical and dangerous the candidate’s policies were (Vang, 2009).<sup>38</sup>

The South Korean film industry prior to 1987 is defined by two key cinematic periods, known as the Golden Age (Kim, 2010, p. 2) and the Dark Age (Park, 2009, p. 45). The period of the mid-1950s to 1962 marked a period known as the Golden Age of South Korean cinema and was influenced by two significant elements: Rhee Syngman’s government and the US military. When the Korean War ended, much of the film

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with South Korea under a capitalist system. Rhee was so paranoid about communist invasion that only after the United States promised to sign a security treaty with South Korea, ensuring that the United States would continue to build up South Korea’s army and overall military strength, did Rhee sign the armistice (Harrison, 2002, p. XIV).

<sup>37</sup> It is reported that Rhee fled the country with 20 million dollars of stolen government funds with the aid of the CIA, while barely outrunning mobs of angry South Korean citizens (Rang, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> The United States also backed guerrilla groups and resistance fighters in countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, assisting them in overthrowing their communist governments (Vang, 2009).

infrastructure built during the Occupation and during the time of the United States Army Government in Korea (USAMGIK) had been destroyed or depleted. In fact, all that was left of the South Korean film industry was: four film laboratories, 12 film cameras, 16 lights, four 35 mm and 16 mm recording machines, basic raw film stock and a ‘few’ editing machines (Kim, 2010, pp. 35-36). During the Korean War, nearly all film equipment was controlled by the American Army Public Information Bureau who centred all of their filmmaking efforts on making ‘war-time propaganda, anti-communistic films, and war-time documentaries’ (Kim, 2010, p. 36).<sup>39</sup> In order to gain access to this equipment, filmmakers had to line up outside of the bureau and take turns using the limited equipment. To gain funding to produce a feature film, filmmakers had to have connections inside the military bureau. Or, alternatively, they had to find enough money independently (Kim, 2010, p. 36). After the war ended, there was a movement by Korean filmmakers to create a single, nationalised film industry which led to the emergence of the so-called Golden Age. During this time, the anti-communist rhetoric of the Rhee administration was a widely accepted societal stance with many newspapers, magazines and radio broadcasts parroting this ideal. Upon realising the potential power of cinema to push this agenda further, the South Korean government removed all taxation from the industry in 1954 to endorse filmmakers to produce South Korean films and establish a national cinema. This removal of taxation from the industry resulted in the incremental increase of film production. In 1950, only five South Korean films were produced. After taxation was removed, film production peaked in 1959 with 111 films produced that year, encouraging a competitive South Korean box-office domestically (Rousee-Marquet, 2013). The Golden Age is considered to have officially began in 1955 with the production of South Korea’s first blockbuster film *The Story of Chunhyang* (Lee & Lee, 1955). Within two months of this film’s release 200,000 people had seen it, close to 10% of the total population of Seoul at the time (Rousee-Marquet, 2013). The film’s success prompted many businesses and individuals to invest in the industry. During this period, domestic films exceeded foreign films at the

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<sup>39</sup> Many early South Korean filmmakers first entered the industry by producing propaganda films for the US military. Notable filmmakers, such as Kim Ki-young, were hired by the United States in order to produce content that challenged ‘any claims about America’s total control over Korean media.’ (Park-Primiano, 2015, p. 340).

box office demonstrating for the first time in the nation's history that South Korean film was commercially viable (Kim, 2010, p. 41). In 1957, three major Korean film studios were constructed with government assistance (Kim, 2010, p. 52), establishing this era as the most successful the South Korean film industry had ever encountered.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the boom of the South Korean film industry during the 1950s and early 1960s, the period ultimately ended in 1962. The first indication of the end of the Golden Age occurred in 1960 when the government restored taxation onto the industry. The second, which marked the end of this cinematic era, was the introduction of the Motion Picture Law (MPL) in 1962. The MPL was South Korea's first policy that specifically targeted filmmaking since Korea's liberation from Japan. The MPL was designed to make the country's producers, directors and distributors follow the government's ideal direction for their film industry, namely, a movement towards 'industrialisation and modernisation' (Yecies, 2007, p. 4). The government wanted to model the South Korean film industry after Hollywood's industrial model. To do this the MPL was designed to restrict independent production and move the industry into a centralised studio system. As a result, the MPL introduced a licensing system that required all production companies to be approved by the government. In order to get this approval the production company had to meet a minimum standard of studio space, production equipment and employees (Standish, 1994, p. 73). On top of these provisions, each company had to produce a minimum of 15 films a year. In the first year of this licencing system only four companies managed to reach this quota (Standish, 1994, p. 73). On top of this the MPL also introduced the Screen Quota System (SQS), which established the number of days locally made films were required to screen each year. For instance, if the number of days prescribed was 65, it was mandatory for cinemas to screen South Korean films for a combined total of 65 days that year (Yecies, 2007). The SQS cut foreign film exhibition down to a third of the number of South Korean films being screened. The official reason behind this system was to allow South Korean cinema to develop a wide and loyal domestic audience. Allegedly the SQS was also implemented to restrict the influence

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<sup>40</sup> These studios were the Samsōng Studio of Samsōng Cinema Production, the An'yang Studio of Sudo Cinema Production, and the Chōngnŭng Studio of the Association for Korean Film and Culture (Kim, 2010, p. 42).

that Western culture had on South Korean citizens (Kim, 2000). The number of days the SQS enforced began at 90 days in 1966 (Yecies, 2007), fell to 30 days in 1970, but rose to 146 days in the late 1990s (Kim, 2000). In order to meet this quota, South Korean movie studios had to create the films to fill it, resulting in many small to mid-tier studios going bankrupt in the years following the implementation of the MPL. It is reported that the number of studios in South Korea dropped from 71 to 16 within a year of the MPL's conception (Rousee-Marqet, 2013).

While the MPL and the SQS were implemented to boost the exposure and revenue of South Korean films, it had the opposite effect. While film production did increase in the years following the MPL's introduction, from 113 in 1962 peaking at 231 in 1970, the films produced from 1962 to the early 1980s became notorious for their low quality. A provision in the law allowed foreign films to be screened up to 245 days a year and the ratio of foreign to domestic films allowed to be shown was one to three (Standish, 1994, p. 73). As a result, many cheap and low quality films, known as 'quota quickies', were swiftly produced in order to fill this ratio (Park, 2009). These films were then given very short runs in domestic cinemas, allowing more time for the foreign films to be shown. As these foreign films made up over half of the cinema's annual box office takings, there was no incentive to produce quality Korean cinema as they were neither profitable nor granted much time for exhibition (Standish, 1994, p. 73). On top of these restrictions, in 1973 the Park Chung-hee government made an amendment to the film law that required filmmakers to produce films directly related to the government's *yusin* system.<sup>41</sup> These films came to be known as 'formality films' (Standish, 1994, p. 74). Along with these films, licensed production companies were also required to produce 'national policy films' and 'quality films'. Of these two types of films, according to Park

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<sup>41</sup> In 1972, South Korean president Park Chung-hee declared a state of emergency over the nation declaring an invasion from the North was imminent. As a result, all previous 'democratic rights and civil liberties were suspended' and the '*yusin*' social order was implemented. According to Isolde Standish, under this new system, 'Park established himself as dictator. The National Assembly became a mere rubber stamp; unions, universities, churches, and the media were put under surveillance by the Korean CIA, the riot police were used to control the students, and a network of spies infiltrated the population to control public opinion' (1994, p. 68). After much protest against these reforms, in 1975 Emergency Measure No. 9 was implemented which made criticisms of Park and *yusin* a criminal act. Following its introduction many citizens faced 'arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, forced confessions taken under torture, sham trials, and executions' (Standish, 1994, p. 69).

Noh-chool, ‘the first was a propaganda genre designed to proliferate ideas of anti-communism and industrialism, while the second was to espouse national ideologies and showcase traditional culture’ (2009, p. 50).<sup>42</sup> The mid-1960s through to the early 1980s came to be labelled as the ‘Dark Age’ of Korean cinema. Due to the mandates of the MPL and the rise of the quota quickie, the industry was reduced to three main genres: melodrama, misogynistic and erotic ‘hostess’ films, and action films.<sup>43</sup> Each of these carried the anti-communist agenda of the South Korean government. During the Dark Age of South Korean cinema audience attendance fell to their lowest numbers since the industry began (Yecies, 2007, p. 7).

Occurring simultaneously with these cinematic periods was the rise of South Korea’s National Security Law (NSL). The NSL was the primary influence over the establishment of the key elements of the *cinematic han* aesthetic during the Golden Age, heavily influencing South Korean cinema’s narrative and cinematic content and restricting filmmakers’ creative freedom pre-1987. Established in 1948 by the Rhee Syngman government (Kraft, 2006), the NSL was implemented to enforce severe punishments to individuals and associations whose intentions were to disrupt the actions of the government or disturb national interests (Kraft, 2006). Yet while this was the official stance of the NSL, it was often used to suppress humanitarian views and aid to North Korea, and to prosecute any of those who criticised Rhee’s rule. Under the NSL it was not only illegal to publically praise North Korea but to also question the South Korean government’s stance on issues pertaining to North Korea, such as the suppression of communication between these two nations and the decline of humanitarian aid South Korea offered the North (Sirotkin, 2012). Between 1948 and 1949 over 118,000 people were arrested or convicted for violating the terms of the NSL. Amongst these were members of approximately 130 political parties and social organisations and close to 9,000 members of South Korea’s military (Lee, 2007, p. 82). Between the years 1981 and 1987 over 1,500 people went to trial over NSL violations.

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<sup>42</sup> Park elaborates on the term quality film by stating, ‘The term ‘quality’ refers to content emphasising traditional and nationalistic values that the government wanted to promote, and has less to do with cinematic creativity’ (2009, p. 50).

<sup>43</sup> Of the 229 films made in 1969, ‘103 were melodramas and 55 were action films’ (Park, 2009, pp. 46-47).

Amongst those tried, thirteen were sentenced to death and twenty-eight were sentenced to life imprisonment (Lee, 2007, p. 82). The NSL was one of the foundations on which South Korea as a nation was built and in turn became an integral part of how the films of South Korea came to be defined pre-1987.

Under the NSL there are several cases of South Korean films being censored, banned or resulting in the imprisonment of their filmmakers. The first film to be censored by the NSL was *Piagol*, directed by Lee Kang-cheon (Kim, 1955). The film follows a North Korean partisan unit, left stranded on the South Korean mountain Mt Jiri, after the signing of the armistice that ended the Korean War.<sup>44</sup> The North Koreans within the film were neither demonised nor canonised, but instead portrayed as flawed, unique individuals. Since no South Korean character is present during the runtime, the North Korean characters became the surrogate voice for South Korean concerns after the Korean War, through both their actions and their vocalised opinions about the conflict.<sup>45</sup> As a result, the film was banned under the NSL for its humane and sympathetic portrayal of North Korean partisans, despite the shocking depictions of violence perpetrated towards them throughout the film (*Piagol*, 2006).<sup>46</sup> The film was prevented from being screened in any shape until several changes were made. One of the most significant changes was to the final shot, which shows the last surviving North Korean partisan, Ae-ran, walking across a deserted beach towards an ambiguous fate. The government ordered the filmmakers to superimpose the South Korean flag over this shot unambiguously to state that the character was defecting towards South Korea, both geographically and ideologically (Mitchel, 2014). These changes altered the film's narrative from a complex analysis of the infantry experience to a simple moral that portrayed South Korea as superior to North Korea (figure 5). As a result of this minor change, a dark and violent narrative that begins and ends with the North Korean

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<sup>44</sup> Uniquely for a film depicting the Korean War, *Piagol* has no scenes of combat between Southern and Northern forces.

<sup>45</sup> Through these actions, *Piagol* provides a more balanced and fair criticism towards communism than most films of the era.

<sup>46</sup> Throughout the film, the North Korean characters are seen committing savage acts of violence towards each other. The depiction of violence includes several instances of gun violence, one man getting his head crushed with a rock and another with a gun, a baby burning to death, a prisoner being killed with a bamboo spear, a partisan being forced to jump off a cliff to his death, strangulation, a backstab, two instances of rape and one instance of implied necrophilia.

partisans oppressed and beaten by the South ends on a hopeful note, specifically that Ae-ran will find salvation through her defection. The occurrence of this narrative and thematic shift from oppression to hope at the film's conclusion can be witnessed in other historical films made during the Golden Age, specifically in *Nameless Stars*, *The Sea Knows* and *Five Marines*. Despite these films largely being showcases of Korean oppression and torture under an external agent, such as Japan or North Korea, each of these film's final scenes switch their, at times, borderline nihilistic themes, into themes of hope. For example, in the Korean War film *Five Marines* despite all but one of the main characters dying violent deaths, the film concludes on scenes of the South Korean infantry decimating the Northern forces, implying an inevitable Southern victory. These last minute thematic shifts can be argued to be linked to the influence of the NSL, as these themes of hope are curiously conjoined with the thematic abolishment of communism from the peninsula, such as the defeat of North Korea or the literal destruction of the Japanese nation. The occurrence of this thematic shift in each film's finales will become crucial when discussing the key elements of *cinematic han* later in the chapter.



Figure 5: Screenshot from *Piagol* (Dir. Lee Kang-cheon, 1955)

The film *The Seven Female POWs* (Kwak, 1965), directed by Lee Man-hee, resulted in Lee's becoming in 1965 the first South Korean filmmaker to be imprisoned under the

prescriptions of the NSL. The film is about a North Korean officer escorting seven South Korean nurses from North Korea to South Korea in order to protect them from physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the Chinese and other North Koreans. The government censors stated that the film contained ‘sentimental nationalism’, depicted the South Korean soldiers as inefficient, glorified the North Korean military and exaggerated the suffering of South Korean women at the hands of the US military (The Truth of Korean Movies, n.d.). Lee was released on probation shortly after his arrest under strict instructions to cut or delete the problematic scenes of his film and to change the title which the censors felt positioned the North Korean characters as the focus of the film in place of the South Korean characters (The Truth of Korean Movies, n.d.). Once the title was changed to *The Return of the Female Soldiers*, the film was released.

A final example of censorship under the NSL is found in the film *Aimless Bullet* (Kim & Yoo, 1961). The film was officially banned due to a character’s constant use of the phrase ‘let’s go!’, which the government believed could be interpreted as ‘let’s go to the north’ (Korean Anti-Communist Films During the Cold War, n.d.). Yet, commentators such as Shin Ki-Seub believe that the film, which did not praise communism, was banned because it showed the loss of South Korean society after the war when the film laws only allowed filmmakers to ‘show the bright side of life in South Korea’ during this period (2008, p. 17). However, this ideal of only showing South Korea in a positive light is repeatedly witnessed to be opposed by the stylistic elements of the Golden Age films, which conjoined its formal elements with an anti-communist rhetoric. In the Golden Age films analysed in this thesis, specifically *Nameless Stars*, *The Sea Knows* and *Five Marines*, while the characterisation of the Korean characters and their interactions with each other are indeed positive, the oppression of the Korean populace under a communist oppressor is routinely showcased visually. In these films, the locations inhabited by the Koreans, along with their costumes, are noticeably inferior to their communist agents. Korean locations are routinely depicted as smaller and cramped (figure 6) in comparison to the larger and more accessible locations occupied by their oppressor (figure 7). Furthermore, the costumes worn by the Koreans are noticeably of a cheaper material and in a state of ill repair when compared to their oppressors, with the Korean costumes appearing dishevelled, filthy and overall, inferior to those worn by

their external agents, noticeably through elements such as patchy and worn clothing. Therefore, whilst the narratives of these films were forced to portray South Korea positively, the stylistic elements of each subtly showcased the oppression of the Korean populace under a communist threat. These elements will become integral to *cinematic han* as discussed later in the chapter.



Figure 6: Screenshot from *Five Marines* (Dir. Kim Ki-duk, 1961)



Figure 7: Screenshot from *Five Marines* (Dir. Kim Ki-duk, 1961)

In 1961, the Grand Bell Awards, South Korea's equivalent of Hollywood's Academy Awards, was established (Lee, 2000, p. 49). To reflect the anti-communist stance that the industry was expected to take, several new categories were added in 1962, such as 'Best Anti-Communist Film' and 'Best Anti-Communist Screenplay', which were designed to be awarded to the films that best reflected the government's regulations on communism (Paquet, 2005; Scott, 2005). The first film to be awarded for 'Best Anti-Communist Film' was *A Brave Soldier Without Serial Number* (Lee, 1966). The film tells the story of two brothers who, after dismissing their anti-communist father as a reactionary, join the South Korean air force out of guilt for betraying their father's beliefs (Edwards, 2010, p. 96). Ironically, this film was director Lee Man-hee's next film after *The Seven Female POWs*, and was his first effort to follow the regulations of the NSL (Shin, 2008, pp. 110-111). These awards were furthered in 1967, when the South Korean government began to endow the production company of the winners of the Anti-Communist categories the right to screen one international film free from the restrictions of the SQS, vastly increasing their revenue that year (Korean Anti-Communist Films During the Cold War, n.d.).<sup>47</sup> Through these incentives, the government gave just cause not only for the creation of anti-communist films, but also furthered their production indefinitely.

It was this censorship and reward system of the NSL that caused anti-communist rhetoric to become a mainstay of South Korean cinema until its easing post-1987. The above examples show that the films produced pre-1987 were affected in one of two ways. The films were either heavily edited by the government censors to conform to their anti-communist ideals or the filmmakers were both forced and incentivised into shaping their film's narrative to fit under the guidelines of the NSL. Within these mandates, key elements of a *cinematic han* aesthetic begin to emerge under the industry's focus upon anti-communism, including the previously discussed thematic shift from oppression to hope, as well as its formal use of costumes and locations. In

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<sup>47</sup> According to Kim Chung-kang, the right to screen a foreign film was a highly desired reward. As he states: 'The rationale for this policy lied in the higher admission fee for foreign films. With the admission fee for a foreign film three times higher than that of a national film, the film production company could make much more money' (2010, p. 40). This type of reward was also introduced to the industry in 1958, awarded to the year's most 'good film' (2010, p. 40). The right to screen foreign films during the pre-1987 period was thus a clear incentive for South Korean filmmakers to abide by the government's film laws.

turn, a narrative and visual depiction of the oppression of the Korean populace under communism is established, creating an environment of sorrow and loss of Korean agency as a result. In the Golden Age historical film's the primary oppressive, external agent, specifically Japan or North Korea, become embodiments of communism. Additionally, this agent could be represented either through an individual or through a collective force. For example, in *The Sea Knows*, one of the main Japanese antagonists, a soldier named Mori, uses Japanese social customs, which the film symbolically links to communism, to justify his oppression of the main Korean protagonist (to be discussed in Chapter 4). Furthermore, in *Five Marines*, the entire North Korean army, whose soldiers remain anonymous throughout the film, are labelled as 'unrighteous ones' and the Korean protagonist's will to fight this enemy stems directly from the death of a colleague within this oppressive environment (to be discussed in Chapter 5). This occurrence, is another key element of the *cinematic han* aesthetic. Pre-1987 no film was left untouched by the NSL. Consequently, the anti-communist rhetoric of the NSL policies became one of the defining features of how the historical film's representation of history was constructed during the Golden Age and Dark Age of South Korean cinema. However, once the anti-communist regulations were eased after 1987, this cinematic aesthetic of *han* was still evident in South Korean cinema, not as a result of constrictive film policies, but through the conflict between the South Korean citizenry and their government.

## **2.5 The post-1987 South Korean historical film**

During the 1980s and 1990s South Korea saw significant change to both its film industry and national political landscape that continues to affect it in the contemporary world. These changes came to define South Korean cinema's narrative approaches and representation of historical geopolitical conflict since 1987, as well as further developing the *cinematic han* aesthetic that began to mature during the Golden Age and Dark Age cinematic periods. Between 1948 and the early 1980s South Korea was ruled by a series of military regimes. After Rhee Syngman's government was overthrown, many of the presidents that followed him carried on his anti-communist legacy. The aforementioned

Park Chung-hee (1963-1979), Choi Kyu-hah (1979-1980) and finally Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988) (Presidents of South Korea - an overview and timeline, 2009). The regime eventually came to an end under the guidance of Chun Doo-hwan's successor Roh Tae-woo. Roh was a four-star general in South Korea's military, who was appointed by Chun Doo-hwan to continue the military regime. Roh's appointment was met with many protests from the social movement collectively known as *minjung*, mentioned earlier in this chapter. The *minjung* movement represented the underprivileged working class of Korean society, mostly made up of university students, factory workers, and middle class citizens repeatedly oppressed and subjugated by the policies and rulings of the military regime. During the latter half of the twentieth century, South Korean politics and, consequently, the film industry were significantly shaped by the opposition between the military regime and the *minjung* movement.<sup>48</sup> After the implementation of the *yusin* order, the *minjung* movement became firmly established as 'an underground political and cultural opposition to the dominant ruling hegemony' (Standish, 1994, p. 69). According to Shin Seung-hwan, the *minjung* movement revolved around the central belief that 'people are the true subjects or protagonists of history and history should be understood from their point of view' (2014, p. 21). Essentially, the *minjung* movement was an attempt to reclassify Korean history, and present concerns and anxieties, through the lens of working people (Standish, 1994, p. 86). Furthermore, the movement was defined by two central questions: 'how to represent or establish solidarity with the *minjung* and how to resurrect the distinctive and subversive cultural traditions of the *minjung* that have been disqualified or subjugated under colonialism, cultural imperialism, and authoritarianism' (Shin, 2014, p. 21). While the South Korean government was concerned with crushing communist rhetoric and controlling popular discourse, the *minjung* movement was focused on the Korean people, specifically the way in which they could overcome the government's oppressive rule.

From its inception, the *minjung* movement carried out numerous protests against the government, resulting in frequent significant clashes that led to countless civilian

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<sup>48</sup> In fact, it was the result of much protest and outcry from South Korean students that led to Rhee Syngman's forced removal from political office in 1960 (Standish, 1994, p. 66).

deaths.<sup>49</sup> The most significant of these protests led to the aforementioned Gwangju uprising of 1980 (Jameson, 1991). When Roh was announced as Chun's successor, it was feared he would follow his predecessor's example of extreme violence and neglect towards the average citizen. Consequently, between June 10<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, 1987, many rallies and protests were held by hundreds of thousands of Korean citizens, calling for a constitutional revision, specifically a reform towards democracy and for Chun to resign. This period of protest was collectively known as the 'June Struggle for Democracy', often simplified to the 'June Struggle' (Paik, 2007). To the surprise of many, Roh did not share the anti-communist stance of his predecessors and instead supported the protestors. On June 29<sup>th</sup>, after weeks of protest, Roh announced that the Korean government would revise the constitution, establish a free and democratic election for the South Korean presidency, provide amnesty for *minjung* leaders, and to create laws that would 'protect the civil rights and liberties of the South Koreans' (Lee, 2007, p. 265). Along with this election, Roh promised that if he was elected he would begin the process of bringing democracy to South Korea, abolishing the military dictatorship once and for all. The election was held in December 1987 with the significant change Roh vowed winning him the election, taking 36.9% of the total vote (Shaw, 1992). Roh kept his word and in the early 1990s, South Korea began the process of becoming a democracy.

Once the steps towards democracy began in 1987, significant change started to occur within the South Korean film industry. These changes installed new rules and regulations that altered previously established narrative and thematic approaches and, consequently, came to define the post-1987 South Korean historical film. However, prior to the establishment of these modified cinematic approaches, significant change had already been occurring in the South Korean film industry throughout the 1980s, starting with the Fifth Amendment to the MPL in 1984 (Choi, 2010, p. 3). This amendment allowed film production that was independent of the film studios.<sup>50</sup> As a

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<sup>49</sup> Examples of these violent confrontations include the death of university student Pak Chong-chol, who in 1987 was tortured to death by the government for his participation in protests. In 1991 a student was beaten by police with an iron rod, which led to six students performing self-immolation in protest (Standish, 1994, p. 72).

<sup>50</sup> Previously, independent film production was illegal as it was much harder to monitor its content (Paquet, 2007).

response to this increase of independent film production, the number of production companies and studios rose from a small number of large companies to a large number of smaller companies throughout the 1980s (Paquet, 2007). In 1986 the MPL's Sixth Amendment allowed the direct distribution rights of South Korean films to Hollywood studios, which meant that these films had the opportunity to be shown in mainstream cinemas across the United States (Choi, 2010, p. 1). This amendment also saw the import quota and tax imposed on foreign films to be removed, allowing an unlimited number of foreign films into the South Korean market (Choi, 2010, p. 7). The amendment led to Hollywood companies such as Twentieth Century Fox, Disney, Warner Brothers and Columbia to open up distribution offices around South Korea between 1988 and 1993, with the expressed purpose of handling the distribution of Hollywood productions into South Korean cinemas. This however was met with much disdain from the domestic film industry.<sup>51</sup> The opening of the market to Hollywood negatively impacted South Korean film production, with the market share dropping to all-time lows after its introduction (Shin, 2014, p. 2).<sup>52</sup> Despite the adverse reaction to the introduction of Hollywood films into South Korea during this time, this development marked a significant step in introducing the international community to the South Korean film industry.

In February 1988, President Roh enacted a new constitution to outline the democratic agenda for South Korea. Article 22 of this constitution allowed all forms of Korean media, 'the right to artistic freedom' (Standish, 1994, p. 75). Shortly thereafter political censorship was eased in all mediums (Paquet, 2007). In May of that year the MPL was revised to include this right and 'all government agencies were removed from the censorship board' of Korean cinema (Standish, 1994, p. 75). It was around this time where the cinematic period known as the Korean New Wave began. Separated into two distinct categories, called the First and Second Korean New Waves (henceforth referred to as the FNW and SNW respectively), each progressively transformed the South

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<sup>51</sup> The first Hollywood film to receive distribution under this amendment was *Fatal Attraction* (Jaffe, Lansing, & Lyne, 1987). After decades of censorship and government control, Korean filmmakers saw this amendment as a threat to the establishment of a strong Korean national cinema. As a result, the film's release was subject to much protest, with Korean filmmakers demanding this new distribution model to be blocked and the amendment revised (Cho, n.d.).

<sup>52</sup> The market share dropped to 18.5% in 1992 and 15.9% in 1993 (Shin, 2014, p. 2).

Korean film industry from low quality films designed for domestic exhibition to highly praised films with a dedicated international following. As a direct result of this easing of censorship and increased creative freedom, the FNW (1987-1996) was birthed with the ideal to move the industry away from the nationalistic, anti-communist films of the Golden Age and Dark Age to repurpose it to reflect the previously taboo ideals of the *minjung* movement (Standish, 1994). However, despite this progression away from the anti-communist rhetoric that had defined early South Korean cinema, the *cinematic han* aesthetic was maintained. The FNW is alternatively referred to as ‘*minjung* cinema’, as the films made during this period repositioned the narratives of South Korean films from ‘politically - and socially-informed cinema’ that reflected the South Korean government’s political stance, specifically in regards to national division and North Korea, to personal narratives that spoke about the South Korean working class experience (Shin, 1994, pp. 20-21).<sup>53</sup> The working class of South Korea became the protagonist of the FNW, and their struggles and experiences in day-to-day life became the focal point of the narratives. As Isolde Standish posits, the FNW came to be defined by the ‘new’. Free from oppressive government censorship and mandates, filmmakers included ‘new characters (the working classes, radical students), new settings (the factory, slum houses) and new problems (the north/south division, urbanisation, industrial unrest, and family breakdown)’ (1994, p. 77). One of the first films to take advantage of this easing of political meddling and embrace this sense of the new was *Chilsu and Mansu*, directed by Park Kwang-soo (Lee, 1988). The film evoked imagery of street protests and demonstrations against the South Korean government and while images such as these may have resulted in the banning and censorship of the film under the NSL, for the first time a film containing overt criticisms of the South Korean government was distributed without alterations.

Yet, despite these elements of the ‘new’, old narrative and stylistic elements were carried over from the pre-1987 era, specifically the key narrative tropes of *cinematic han* established during the Golden Age. With the new found narrative focus on the working

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<sup>53</sup> An example of this shift is the aforementioned transition from the demonised depiction of North Korea contained in pre-1987 Korean War films, which reflected the South Korean government’s anti-communist rhetoric, to the more sympathetic depictions of North Koreans contained in post-1987 films, such as *Five Marines* and *Nambugun*.

class individual, FNW narratives began to reflect a structure that centred on an individual, working class Korean who operated within a larger social environment. Therefore, the uneasy social environment of the new democratic Korea was depicted both on an individual and collective level. Whilst the individual would endure minimum wage jobs, low income housing and personal issues such as the breakdown of family units, this personal narrative would occur against a backdrop of the universal struggle of the Korean working class, specifically in depictions of street protests, mass unemployment and general depictions of societal decay. For instance, in the FNW film *General's Son*, the film's protagonist, Kim Doo-han, struggles to establish territory for his gang during the Japanese Occupation against a backdrop of Korean society that resorts to hostess jobs and sex work in order to survive. In turn, the FNW film maintains this key narrative trope of *cinematic han*, but adapts it to fit into the cinematic period's newfound *minjung* perspective.

It was during this period of cinematic revitalisation that numerous notable South Korean filmmakers emerged, including Lee Myong-se, Bae Yong-gyun, Park Jong-won, Chang Kil-soo, and the aforementioned Park Kwang-su, who made *Gagman* (Lee & Lee, 1989), *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (Bae & Bae, 1989), *Kuro Arirang* (Park & Park, 1989), *Silver Stallion* (Han & Chang, 1991) and the previously mentioned *Chilsu and Mansu* (Standish, 1992, pp. 111-112). During the 1980s, these filmmakers either participated in or experienced first-hand the political and social upheaval brought about by the conflict between the *minjung* movement and the military regime. The films made by these directors attempted to reposition the working class as South Korean cinema's main protagonist, a group who were previously marginalised by state-controlled cinema (Standish, 1992, p. 112). To reflect this shift, the formal and narrative construction of the FNW films created a clear division between the working class and a form of ruling class, primarily through the use of the key elements of *cinematic han* established during the pre-1987 cinematic period, such as the use of specific narrative tropes and elements of the mise en scene, specifically colour, costumes and locations. These elements, in turn, create a historical narrative in which the working class are kept under the control of the ruling class in perpetuity. For instance, the narrative of the FNW film *Nambugun* begins and ends with North Korean partisans, the

film's protagonists, underfoot of the South Korean army, despite the South Koreans being largely absent for the majority of the film. Similar to the narratives of the Golden Age, this film maintains the climatic thematic shift towards hope through the implied continuation of the North Korean ideology despite the deaths of the film's main characters. The film's stylistic elements complements this narrative oppression by using dull, desaturated colours such as greys, browns and whites in the environment, depicting the partisan's costumes as inferior to the South Koreans through their often bloody, worn and ruined clothing in comparison to the Southern clean and maintained uniforms, as well as the partisans inhabiting locations that are often small and rundown. All of these stylistic elements combine create a morose environment through which the protagonists are continually visually inferior to their oppressors. In turn, by embodying the key elements of *cinematic han* established by the Golden Age cinematic period, the films of the FNW period reflect the marginalisation of the Korean working class under a form of ruling class through its aesthetic qualities.

Aside from the newly acquired *minjung* perspective and the key elements of *cinematic han*, the films of the FNW do not share universal stylistic techniques, nor do they have cohesion in how they approach the *minjung* ideology. However, there are broad narrative and thematic strokes that can loosely define this cinematic period. These features include: characters are placed in 'strange, often extreme settings, that serve to emphasise the character's isolation' such as a mountainside, billboard or single street; characters often 'fail to communicate with each other', either through lying, manipulation or general silence; when the family structure is depicted 'it is always presented as being in a state of crisis and disintegration', through infighting or forced separation due to war; finally, the narratives externalise the 'blame for the national division and for the current social and political problems onto anti-government and anti-American sentiments alluded to in the subtexts' (Standish, 1992, pp. 112-113). Prior to 1987, these factors were either not present or significantly toned down by political censorship or due to the rulings of the NSL and MPL. However, with the increased creative freedom, *minjung* perspective and the key elements of *cinematic han*, Korean society as depicted in cinema became isolated, divided and, ultimately, bitter towards the government who oppressed the working class for nearly half a century.

Emerging from the formalised propaganda films of the pre-1987 era, the FNW began heavily to emphasise an aesthetic of realism. However, the realism of the FNW had less emphasis on film style and more on narrative construction. The definition provided by Raymond Williams regarding realism in eighteenth century literature can accurately describe the films of the FNW. Williams states that realism in drama should be contemporary, secular and be inclusive of all social classes (cited in Standish, 1994, p. 77). This definition of realism describes the aim of *minjung* cinema: to bring the narrative down to the level of the working class. In turn, this can also be parlayed into depictions of soldiers during historical conflict, as long as these characters embody the low-level working class Korean, for instance, by either being conscripted soldiers or volunteers.

Furthermore, during the FNW, this style of realism became joined with the term *auteur* to become *auteur*-realism. However, the definition of the *auteur* in the context of the FNW does not refer to films as art or filmmakers as the sole cinematic author, but is linked to the filmmaker's defiance of the Korean filmmaking style of the pre-1987 period (Moon, 2006, p. 39), specifically, its adherence to anti-communist filmmaking. The FNW films attempted to capture the *minjung* experience unfiltered, allowing the setting and character action to elaborate on the film's main thematic focus, namely, the day-to-day experiences of the underclass, both individually and collectively. As a result, the formal elements of these films became more detailed and complex than that of the pre-1987 period. Instead of a reality filtered through anti-communist rhetoric, the historical narrative of the FNW films are symbolic of the social experience of Korean citizens during the 1990s. Post-1987, the stereotypical flawless South Korean character and the demonic North Korean and Japanese characters of the pre-democracy period began to withdraw from most South Korean historical films. Consequently, these narratives began to reflect an increased focus upon the complex morality of twentieth century South Korean warfare, coupled with a rise in flawed and vulnerable characters on both sides of the conflict.

Through the FNW's *minjung* perspective, the formal construction of South Korean cinema's representation of war evolved to be filtered through the point of view of the

average Korean soldier, rather than of an invincible war hero. As such, reminiscent of the previously discussed elements of *cinematic han*, the representation of the historical conflict became grounded on personal experience, as the infantry subgenre became less focused on the battle itself and more upon the depiction of the struggles that the individual conscripted Korean soldier faced within a unit on the battlefield under the threat of an oppressive, external agent, namely, the Japanese and North Korean armies. The FNW's *minjung* perspective lowered the narrative and cinematic perspective of geopolitical conflict from army generals and politicians, who oversee the nation's entire war effort, to civilians and infantry soldiers who only participate in small skirmishes and melees. Through this reduction in scope, the oppressive, external agents of these films are represented by a small number of insignificant soldiers or gangsters that stand in for Japan or North Korea. These agents are often low level infantry soldiers or thugs of no notable position who do not pose an overt threat to the South Korean nation. For example, their actions do not shape the geopolitical landscape of either nation, such as ending the war or annihilating entire civilian populations. Instead, these smaller agents pose a significant physical threat to the Korean civilians, as their actions can influence an individual's life through acts of extortion, murder or property damage.

Consequently, through this narrative repositioning, another key element of *cinematic han* can be ascertained. Within the formal construction of the FNW films, the actions of the film's background characters visibly change when in the presence of these oppressive agents. For instance, in the FNW film *General's Son*, when Japanese characters are absent, the Korean background characters are shown bartering with street vendors, developing romantic relationships and celebrating with alcohol. However, when the Japanese are present, these characters only perform passive actions such as walking, staring or scratching their bodies. Due to the reduction of the oppressive, external agents to individual soldiers or gang members, the actions of the individual Korean characters are witnessed to be directly affected by their presence. When applied to the anti-communist films of the Golden Age, such as *Nameless Stars*, *The Sea Knows* and *Five Marines*, this formal element is also present. In scenes where the external agent is absent, the background characters eat buns, board rickshaws and discuss unheard dialogue in pairs. However, when the agent is present, these characters are perform

passive actions, either walking in a straight line or remaining motionless throughout the scene. Therefore, the FNW establishes a key element of *cinematic han* that can be applied retroactively, unifying each cinematic period through these consistent formal elements.

Additionally, in the South Korean historical films produced under this *minjung* perspective, the sites of armed conflict are primarily civilian areas, such as houses or restaurants, and the South Korean characters are often characterised to be poverty stricken, with costumes consisting of old, worn civilian clothing. Furthermore, as a result of this oppression, the locations occupied primarily by Koreans are routinely depicted as small, cramped and dully coloured in direct contrast to the large, decadent and vibrantly coloured locations occupied by the film's oppressive, external agent. This division is witnessed in the contrast between the Korean streets (figure 8) and Japanese houses (figure 9) depicted in *General's Son*. For instance, in figure 8 the primary colours of the Korean street are dull, murky oranges, browns and greys. Additionally, the buildings are grouped in a tight formation, with the street floor being littered with debris, appearing to be wet and cracked. As a result, this location appears small, compact and has a worn, cold form and atmosphere. Conversely, the Japanese house, as seen in figure 9, consists of deep, vibrant greens, blues and pinks. The house is noticeably larger than any of the buildings depicted in figure 8 and, significantly, is the only building in the frame. Furthermore, the house appears immaculately preserved with no crack or blemish visible on its exterior. Consequently, this location appears large and open, with a warm and inviting look and feel. Therefore, the contrast between these two locations establish a clear divide between the spaces occupied by both nationalities, with the Japanese locations being visually superior to those inhabited by the Koreans.



Figure 8: Screenshot from *General's Son* (Dir. Im Kwon-taeck, 1990)



Figure 9: Screenshot from *General's Son* (Dir. Im Kwon-taeck, 1990)

Like the previous Golden Age and Dark Age films, the films of the FNW contain an oppressive, external agent that antagonises and threatens the dominant perspective of the respective cinematic period, anti-communism in the former and *minjung* in the latter. Consequently, in FNW films, the grief, anger and loss of agency of the South Korean characters stems directly from their interactions with this external agent. Therefore, the

narrative and formal construction of the FNW films under the *minjung* perspective can be witnessed to embody the key elements of the *cinematic han* aesthetic, whilst also establishing new conventions in the process.

As the 1990s progressed, the South Korean film industry continued to evolve, resulting in significant changes to South Korean cinema's production and content. One of the most notable changes to the industry was the complete removal of film censorship by the Korean Constitutional Court in 1996. While governmental censorship was relaxed during the FNW, under the Kim Young-sam government South Korean cinema was finally free to be unrestricted by government mandates (Shim & Yecies, 2016, p. 2). Another major development occurred in 1992 when numerous Korean conglomerates (collectively known as *chaebol*), most notably Samsung, saw the commercial viability in Korean cinema and began to invest in film production (Cho, 2015).<sup>54</sup> These companies introduced a 'vertically integrated system' of film production where 'the financing, production, exhibition, distribution, and video release of films were all controlled by a single company' (Paquet, 2007). As a result of the investment by the *chaebol*, the production budgets of each film increased. However, in 1997 many of these companies began to distance themselves from film production due to the Asian Economic Crisis, removing the production arm of their business to focus on distribution and exhibition (Smith, 2010).<sup>55</sup> As a result of this exodus, a small number of companies, as well as the vertically integrated system of production, remained to produce films throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, and are still major film companies in the 2010s (Paquet, 2007).<sup>56</sup> However, as a result of this acquisition of the film industry by the *chaebol*, along with the South Korean government's increased investment in film production, South Korean cinema began to make a shift away from *auteur*-realism towards more crowd-pleasing

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<sup>54</sup> The four biggest Korean conglomerates, known as 'the big four' are 'Hyundai Motor Company, SK Group [...] Samsung and LG' (Cho, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> The Asian Economic Crisis of 1997 began on July 2<sup>nd</sup> due to the Thai baht falling to 20% against the US dollar in response to the instability of Thailand's property market. Within weeks of this occurring inflation increased around Asia and the currencies of numerous Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea all showed significant declines in their value, up to 70%. In late 1997, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) provided a bailout to Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea, up to \$110 billion USD in order to stabilise the economies in the region. In order to obtain this bailout, the IMF made each country to raise taxes and interest rates, reduce public spending and privatise state-owned businesses (Kuepper, 2017; Richardson, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> The companies that remained were CJ, the Orion Group and Lotte (Paquet, 2007).

genre fare in order to become more commercially viable to ensure a return on investment. Consequently, in the SNW the focus of the industry shifted from providing social commentary to being grand spectacles for mass consumption in order to maximise profit. As these changes were occurring in the industry, a new generation of filmmakers were beginning to emerge. Unlike previous generations, many of these young filmmakers were trained in international universities to learn new and diverse filmmaking styles and techniques. Many of these filmmakers travelled to the United States and learnt their craft under the Hollywood system. As Joe Palmer states, ‘These budding filmmakers saw violence and sex in America and returned to strict family values in Korea’ (2015). As a result, a new Korean film style developed that merged the commercially charged genres and narratives of Hollywood with the socially conscious style of the FNW, alternatively described as the East meeting the West. With this new style, South Korean filmmakers were able to meet industry demands for spectacle-driven, commercially viable films while still carrying out the FNW’s legacy of *minjung* narratives, along with social and political commentary. For example, a film such as *The Terror, Live* (Jeong, Lee, & Kim, 2013) combines elaborate sequences of action and destruction with overt commentaries regarding the wilful ignorance of the South Korean government towards the poverty of its working class. Within a period of five years (1996-2001), over twenty filmmakers emerged, taking advantage of the new spectacle driven industry, along with its increased budgets, to produce genre bending films that the SNW came to be known for. The filmmakers who emerged during this period were: ‘Hong Sang-so, Kim Ki-duk, Im Sam-so, Kang Je-gyu, Lee Chang-dong, Park Chan-wook, Hur Jin-ho, Kwak Jae-young, Song Hae-sung, Bong Joon-ho, Ryoo Seung-wan, Song Il-gon, Lee Myung-se’ (Garcelán & Fernández, n.d.). The filmmakers of the SNW, alternatively dubbed ‘the 386 Generation’ (Choi, 2010, p. 4), were the first wave of filmmakers completely free of government intervention.<sup>57</sup> Under this new wave of Korean filmmakers the South Korean film industry experienced an unprecedented boom. In 1999, Kang Je-kyu’s *Shiri* (Byun & Lee), collectively regarded as South Korea’s first outing into blockbuster filmmaking (Choi, 2010, p. 31), became a landmark

<sup>57</sup> The 386 Generation is not just limited to filmmakers, but is a label that applies to a specific demographic of South Korean society: every citizen in this classification was in their 30s, engaged in protests against the military regime in the 1980s, and born in the 1960s (Lee, 2000).

success, attracting 6.2 million viewers domestically.<sup>58</sup> For comparison, James Cameron's *Titanic* (Cameron et al., 1997) only drew 4.3 million viewers in South Korea (Byrnes, 2016).<sup>59</sup> The domestic box office continued to climb so that by 2001 'the 60-70 Korean films made each year sold significantly more tickets than the 200-300 Hollywood and foreign titles that were released' (Paquet, 2007), and Korean films exceeded 50% of the market share, with some films drawing in over 10 million viewers (Moon, 2006, p. 38). In addition, South Korean cinema received attention from overseas audiences. In 2002, Lee Chang-dong received the Best Director award at the Venice Film Festival for his film *Oasis* (Cho et al., 2002). In 2004, Park Chan-wook won the Grand Jury award at the Cannes Film Festival for the seminal *Oldboy* (Han, Kim, Kim, Lim, & Park, 2003). Director Kim Ki-duk won awards at the Berlin Film Festival and the Venice Film Festival for his films *Samaritan Girl* (Bae et al., 2004) and *3-Iron* (Choi, Kim, Suh, Suzuki, & Kim, 2004), respectively (Garcelán & Fernández, n.d.). No longer was the South Korean film industry relegated to anti-communist films or quota quickies. Under the developments and filmmakers of the SNW, South Korean cinema quickly became a major figure internationally. While the boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s eased around 2005, South Korean cinema has become a mainstay in the international film community. In the 2010s, the number of South Korean and Hollywood co-productions have increased,<sup>60</sup> South Korea routinely creates advanced and influential technology for the film medium,<sup>61</sup> and domestic releases continue to outpace

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<sup>58</sup> Kang Je-gyu went on record stating that his goal when making the film *Shiri* was to equal Hollywood in terms of style and narrative structure, but also to combat the preconceived notion that South Korean cinema had grown stale and lacked entertainment value, presumably as a result of the anti-communist focus and quota-quickies of the pre-1987 period (Choi, 2010, p. 28).

<sup>59</sup> *Shiri*'s success is also notable in that the film is about North Korean terrorists planning a major attack in Seoul. Amongst the large scale action set pieces and frantic pace, is a romantic subplot between a South Korean agent and his wife, a North Korean double agent, who questions her loyalties to her mission. The film was a sell-out with domestic audiences, in spite of its sympathetic portrayals of North Koreans, something that would have been taboo in the pre-1987 industry.

<sup>60</sup> In 2013, iconic South Korean directors Park Chan-wook, Kim Jee-woon and Bong Joon-ho made their Hollywood debuts with *Stoker* (Costigan et al., 2013), *The Last Stand* (Di Bonaventura et al., 2013) and *Snowpiercer* (Back et al., 2013), respectively. All three films featured A-list Hollywood actors such as Nicole Kidman, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Chris Evans. In 2016, Kim Jee-woon's *The Age of Shadows* (Choi & Lee, 2016) became one of the first Korean films to be fully financed by a Hollywood company, in this case, Warner Brothers. In 2017, Netflix financed and distributed Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* (Bong et al., 2017) for \$50 million USD (Chou, 2016).

<sup>61</sup> In 2017, South Korea's Lotte Cinema debuted the world's first projector-less LED cinema screen, dubbed the 'Super S'. According to Jean Noh, the screen, produced by Samsung, has '96 LED cabinets

Hollywood imports at the Korean box office each year.<sup>62</sup> The SNW marked an unprecedented resurgence for the South Korean film industry and the films produced by the 386 Generation both reshaped the industry and continues to influence the style, content and genre of South Korean cinema long into the 2010s.<sup>63</sup>

The collective film style of the SNW is more cohesive than that for the FNW. Continuing the narrative scale that came from the influence of the *minjung* movement during the FNW, the SNW continued to reject grand narratives in place of smaller, intimate stories of the individual.<sup>64</sup> As a result, the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* that was introduced in the Golden Age and furthered in the FNW, are still present in the SNW. Films such as *Assassination*, *Spirits' Homecoming* and *The Front Line* each continue the climatic thematic shift away from oppression to hope, along with a narrative focus of the individual operating within the collective. For instance, the narrative of *Spirits' Homecoming*, which depicts both the horrific conditions of Korean comfort women under the Japanese alongside depictions of the psychological conditions of the survivors later in life, concludes this dark narrative with the spirits of the deceased being released into the afterlife. In *Assassination*, the film's primary protagonist, Ahn Okyun, operates within a larger assassination team in Japanese Occupied Seoul, depicting the oppression of the Korean populace on both an individual and collective level.

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making up the 10.3m x 5.4m screen, the Super S has a brightness of 146 foot-lambert (FL) – about 10 times that of the typical projection lamp – and supports High Dynamic Range (HDR)' (2017).

<sup>62</sup> For example, in 2015, six of the top ten highest grossing films of the year were Korean. In the top five, only one Hollywood film, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Alonso et al., 2015) was featured, being beaten by the films *Veteran* (Jeong et al., 2015) and *Assassination*. In fact, between 2012 and 2016, the highest grossing film of the year has been a South Korean film with *The Thieves* (Ahn et al.) in 2012, *Miracle in Cell No. 7* (Kim et al.) in 2013, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (Kim & Kim) in 2014, *Veteran* in 2015 and *Train to Busan* in 2016 (Kim, Lee, & Yeon) (Byrnes, 2016; Box Office: Yearly, n.d.).

<sup>63</sup> The top 20 highest grossing South Korean films of all time were released after 2003. As of June, 2018, the top five highest grossing are in ascending order: *The Admiral: Roaring Currents, Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds* (Choi, Kim, Kim, Won, & Kim, 2017), *Ode to My Father* (Stojáková & Youn, 2014), *Veteran* and *The Thieves*.

<sup>64</sup> According to Moon Jae-chol, this smaller scope was due to historical events that occurred during the late 1990s. These events included the advent of democratisation, which caused the 'political fervor to slacken dramatically'. Also, 'the conflicts following integration in a global system, and the economic crash symbolised by the IMF bailout' caused much 'societal confusion'. Moon posits that 'The shift in interest within Korean film from grand narrative to smaller stories has a deep connection with this historical situation' (2006, p. 42).

The SNW differentiates itself from the previous cinematic periods due to the influence of the Hollywood filmmaking style. SNW filmmakers were able to meld genres, resulting in films that were able to balance spectacle, melodrama and black comedy more effectively than any previous Korean cinematic period. As a result, the cinema of the SNW has been divided into three distinct categories: national realism, intimate cinema and genre cinema. According to Enrique Garcelán and Gloria Fernández, national realism placed emphasis on ‘the study of character, emphasising the human being and social problems and conflicts the community goes through’ (n.d.). This emphasis is demonstrated by South Korean directors such as Lim Chan-sang with the film *The President's Barber* (Choi, Choi, & Shin, 2004) and Lee Chang-dong with *Oasis*. Intimate cinema is defined by directors who are recognised ‘by their style, obsessions, or by the narrative that makes them break the rules, reinventing them or simply ignoring them’ (Garcelán & Fernández, n.d.). In Korean intimate cinema, the film’s style and narrative is prescribed to the themes and techniques preferred by the filmmaker, resulting in personal works that do not conform to the accepted narratives and film style of the time. This is most notable by the works of Kim Ki-duk with the film *The Isle* (Lee, 2000) and Hong Sang-soo with the film *The Day a Pig Fell Into the Well* (Lee, 1996). Finally, and most common to the SNW, is genre cinema. The genre films of the SNW blend melodrama, spectacle and black humour with other genres, resulting in works that are both highly unique, and counter to many Hollywood conventions such as consistent tone, relatable characters and closed endings (Garcelán & Fernández, n.d.). Filmmakers under the genre cinema category include Ryoo Seung-wan with *Arahan* (Kim & Lee, 2004) that encapsulates both the martial arts and fantasy genres; Bong Joon-ho with *Mother* (Choi e al., 2009) that utilises neo-noir conventions; and Kang Je-kyu with *My Way* that is within the war genre. Inclusive of this three-way division between melodrama, spectacle and black humour, the majority of the films attributed to the SNW also include elements of social commentary, utilising the present socio-cultural context of the film’s production to influence its narrative. For example, the social realties of the North/South division on the average citizen is explored in *Over the Border* (Cha, Kim, & Ahn, 2006), and the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation on South Korean society forms the thematic core of *Green Fish* (Myeong,

Yeo, & Lee, 1997). The concerns and anxieties of this present socio-cultural context is repurposed into either the narrative or thematic backbone for the films of the SNW.

The films of the SNW share four common elements: irony, attachment to the past, spectacle and violence. Irony, according to Moon Jae-cheol, is important in the narratives and thematic meaning of the SNW films. As he posits:

irony, when interpreted on a social or historical level, points to the uncertainty of history by showing that positive truth is not possible. Irony does not directly draw out meaning, but in opening possibilities of meaning through gaps effectively captures the ambiguity and multiplicity of reality. Given that realistic representations in film are losing steam these days, irony can elicit an important political effect. (2006, p. 49)

Irony, as Moon emphasises, is used to subtly elicit complex social commentaries without clouding the film's central narrative. This element is often found in the use of black comedy which is juxtaposed against elements of present societal concerns and anxieties.<sup>65</sup> Using the film *JSA: Joint Security Area* (Lee & Park, 2000) as example, Moon states that irony is found in the humorous banter between the South and North Korean soldiers as it distances the characters away from the reality of national division (2006, p. 50). Furthermore, Moon elaborates that the over-the-top, almost comical violence in a film such as *Sympathy for My Vengeance*, also creates a distance from the real. The comical violence created by a laid-off factory worker cutting himself with a knife commonly used to sharpen pencils creates a darkly humorous image. However, this black comedy in turn distances the scene and its characters from the real social issues simultaneously being presented through the scene's context, namely, the class division and poverty that drove the man to such an act of violence (Moon, 2006, pp. 50-51). Therefore, by separating the film's characters from their oppressive social conditions due to these elements of dark comedy, Moon argues that irony is created via juxtaposition, revealing important social commentaries in the process. Many of these

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<sup>65</sup> In black comedy 'a heavy, controversial, disturbing, or generally off-limits subject matter' is depicted as humorous. This humour concerns taboo subjects, such as torture, sadism, rape, incest, child murder and family annihilation, being portrayed in a light tone or positioned at the centre of a joke. This style of

social commentaries contained in the SNW can be analysed to represent the anger, sorrow and resentment of the Korean working class towards the social constructs imposed onto them by the government, such as the aforementioned issues of national and class division.

The second common element the films of the SNW share is their tendency to make the past ‘its main subject’. The film’s representation of the past is ‘reproduced through the lens of nostalgia, thereby emphasising a sense of loss in the present’ (Moon, 2006, p. 44). Films that have such a narrative include *Spring in My Hometown* (Jung, Kang, & Lee, 1998), *Silmido* (Kang, Kim, Lee, Leong, & Kang, 2003) and *The President’s Last Bang* (Choi, Lee, Shin, Sim, & Im, 2005). Character actions and interactions, specifically the humanist approach to the North Korean characters, become a main focus of these films. For example, in *The Front Line* the comradery between the South and North Korean soldiers emphasises the loss of this personal connection between the nations in the present. These films emphasise elements of history to dictate that the past is superior to the present, often with depictions of social harmony and a clear historical antagonist, such as the Japanese, to juxtapose the social upheaval and ambiguous morals of the present.

Finally, the third and fourth common elements these films share is the usage and depiction of spectacle and violence. These two elements can be grouped together as these moments of spectacle are often punctuated with moments of extreme violence, and often the act of violence is the focus of the spectacle. This development coincides with the emergence of blockbuster filmmaking in South Korea during the late 1990s.<sup>66</sup> Before 1987 blockbuster filmmaking was rare in South Korea, but through the 386 Generation the style became a prominent feature of the post-1987 South Korean historical film. While the narratives of the SNW remained small in scope, a vestige of the FNW’s *minjung* perspective, the visual image grew more detailed and complex than the previous cinematic periods. Through this increased complexity, key elements of

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humour is designed to shock the audience and ‘shed light on controversial or disturbing’ social issues, such as the quality of public education, class division and drug culture (McKittrick, 2017).

<sup>66</sup> The blockbuster style of filmmaking requires an epic narrative and scope, giant sets, elaborate action set pieces, an extravagant budget and monumental manpower and material assets. The Chinese term for blockbuster, ‘*dapian*’, directly translates into ‘big film’ (Teo, 2013, p. 56).

*cinematic han*'s mise en scene established by the Golden Age, and continued in the FNW, became more prominent, specifically in each film's use of colour, costumes and locations. The diegetic world increased in fidelity, colours deepened, locations grew cluttered with people and objects, and the costumes of the characters became more detailed. However, the division between the Korean protagonists and their external, oppressive agent held fast through these elements. For instance, in *Assassination*, the costuming of the film's main characters often include dark colours, such as dark browns, reds and greys, but are also old, worn out and frequently dirty. When compared to the film's antagonists, namely the Japanese and the Japanese-allied Koreans, who wear decadent, brightly coloured, high class clothing, complete with numerous layers, gold accessories, hats and canes, the Korean clothing is visually inferior. Furthermore, in *Assassination*, the locations occupied by the Korean characters are frequently cluttered, worn and hidden, such as in the Korean Provisional Government's headquarters which appeared to be located in a form of boating shed, as opposed to the Japanese locations that are clean, open and accessible, such as the Japanese Consulate. Therefore, while the progression of South Korean cinema into the SNW increased the verisimilitude of the film's depictions of historical periods, the mise en scene's design still embodied the key elements of *cinematic han*.

The increase in visual scope resulted in higher quality props and costumes, and larger, more intricate sets than those pre-1987, which greatly increased the detail of the film's formal elements. As a result of this newfound complexity, the visuals of the SNW are full of motion and speed, complete with 'slow motion, wire action, quick editing and computer graphic', becoming almost a sensory kaleidoscope of high action and intensity (Moon, 2006, p. 52). Coupled with this sense of spectacle the films of the SNW have an increased emphasis on the body and the 'violence, cruelty, and the allure of repulsion' that can be drawn from it (Moon, 2006, p. 53). Bloody acts of vengeance, torture and sadism, such as in the films *Oldboy* and *A Bittersweet Life*, are persistent throughout the narrative. This increase in detail, complexity and violence also extends to the battle sequences of the South Korean historical film. Within the pre-1987 South Korean historical films, most battles scenes were small, had the enemies off screen or were made up of stock footage from the military film archive. However, under the blockbuster

model not only did the scale of these scenes grow, but also became more elaborate. To align itself with the increasing focus on genre filmmaking, the SNW historical film's depiction of geopolitical warfare became aligned with the action genre, increasing the spectacle of the historical conflict in nearly every way. Battle choreography grew elaborate, the quantity of bullets and explosions more plentiful, and battlefield scenes became very large and shot on location, sometimes even taking place in exotic environments, as seen in sequences set in Mongolia and Russia in the South Korean World War II film, *My Way*.

In conjunction with this expansion, the level of blood and dismemberment also increased to match the film's new found sense of spectacle. Blood geysers, severed limbs and close up images of graphic wounds and screaming faces became commonplace. As the depiction of the war grew larger, so did the level of cruelty. Through this graphic violence, the representation of warfare is not sanitised, with each battle containing simultaneous depictions of the horror and fear of the soldiers during battle, as well as the pain and grief of the injured. Furthermore, the SNW's spectacle immerses the cinematic frame with visuals and an audio soundscape that is consumed with images of gunfire, explosions and hand-to-hand combat that each result in horrific violence against the body, and the sounds of the screams and pleas of the scared, wounded or dying soldiers. In addition, these scenes of warfare, which often occur as a result of Korean oppression under their external agent, embodies the previously discussed mise en scene of *cinematic han* that involves colour. The battlefields of the SNW alternate between an oversaturated or desaturated colour scheme, as seen in *My Way* and *The Front Line* respectively. However, regardless of the saturation, the primary colour palette of these battles are brown, black, grey and red, making each sequence appear grimy as if a thick layer of dirt and blood is ever-present on the battlefield. In the aforementioned examples of *My Way* and *The Front Line*, the protagonist's presence in these conflicts are a direct result of the influence of their external agent, either from forced conscription by the Japanese in the former, and the conflict of the Korean War in the latter. As a result, the battlefield itself becomes representative of the oppression of the Korean populace under their external agent through the film's use of colour. Therefore, despite the changes in the South Korean film industry between the Golden Age and SNW cinematic periods, this key

element of the *cinematic han* aesthetic is witnessed to remain consistent. Furthermore, due to the defining formal elements of the SNW, war is not depicted as a ground of heroism and honour, but as a locus of intense pain, sorrow and anger.

Due to the ideological precepts of the SNW cinematic period, warfare increased in scale and as a result, the size of the armies of both North Korea and South Korea, and their respective opponents, grew to reflect this. As a result, in the SNW the oppressive, external agents that are in conflict with the South Korean characters are the armies of Japan and North Korea. These armies are comprised of mostly anonymous, uncharacterised soldiers who commit violent acts against the South Koreans on a mass scale, specifically through the slaughter and abuse of countless civilians and soldiers, as well as the total destruction of cities or towns. This collective oppressive agent also appears to be infinite, with the numbers of soldiers not shown dwindling no matter how many are killed. The actions performed by any single soldier of this external agent are not unique to this individual, but representative of the entire foreign nation. For example, the sexual abuse the Japanese soldiers commit against the South Korean women in *Spirits' Homecoming* are not depicted as the individual actions of a few sadistic men, but as an inherent ideology of the entire Japanese nation (to be discussed in Chapter 5). Furthermore, in line with the previously established narrative elements and mise en scène of *cinematic han*, South Korean soldiers are always seen to be inferior to their enemy in terms of their encampments, uniforms and equipment, and the geopolitical warfare is never shown beginning or ending within the confines of the film's narrative. Therefore, in the SNW cinematic period, the external agent that oppresses the South Korean characters is raised to be a collective physical force that seeks to harm South Koreans on a mass scale. As the SNW films elevate the external agent to be an overwhelming force, the environment the South Korean protagonists occupy is shaded by an atmosphere of oppression, grief and despair in the shadow of this agent. An example of this is visible in the film *Assassination* when dozens of Koreans are forced to stoically bow to a Japanese flag in a train station (figure 10). In this scene, despite the Korean characters outnumbering the Japanese, they nevertheless succumb to their oppressor. Thus, this characterisation of the cinematic period's oppressive, external agent, alongside the period's previously discussed adaptations of the *cinematic han*

aesthetic, creates an environment of sorrow and loss of Korean agency as they face a superior enemy. In turn, as the scale of the SNW films grew, the oppressive, external agent that antagonised these films, and defined their use of *cinematic han*, grew to meet it.



Figure 10: Screenshot from *Assassination* (Dir. Choi Dong-hoon, 2015)

## 2.6 *Cinematic han*

Thus far this chapter has both developed a working definition of the historical film that pertains specifically to South Korean cinema and has discussed how the South Korean film industry has evolved across decades, altering the formal construction of the South Korean historical film as a result. Core to this discussion has been a uniquely Korean cinematic aesthetic that this thesis calls *cinematic han*. As discussed previously, *cinematic han* is inherent to the South Korean historical film and is integral in separating this national cinema from Western scholarship. This aesthetic manifests from certain narrative tropes and elements of mise en scene that have remained consistent in South Korean cinema since its inception. While the various cinematic periods in which the films were produced demanded different narrative and stylistic approaches, *cinematic han* is consistently expressed through the films' narrative structure and elements of mise

en scene, especially colour, costume and location, which remain near identical in the films discussed despite the many changes over time.

*Cinematic han* consists of six key elements: two narrative tropes and four elements of the mise en scene. The two narrative tropes are: firstly, Koreans/South Koreans always begin and end the narrative being oppressed by an external agent (often a foreign nation), yet always conclude with a thematic shift from oppression to hope embodied in the Korean resilience in the face of this oppression, for example, a sole survivor or an implied future rebellion. The second narrative trope concerns the narrative always being centred on a main protagonist who operates within a larger group, such as a resistance movement or military unit. Through this dynamic, the Korean/South Korean experience is seen at both an individual and collective level as the characters face the oppression of the external agent. The four mise en scene elements of *cinematic han* are: first, when the oppressive, external agent (often Japanese or North Koreans) is absent from a scene, the background characters perform energetic actions, such as dancing and laughing; yet, when this agent is present in a scene, the background characters perform passive actions, such as walking or remaining motionless. This style of movement is subtle, not being commented upon in dialogue and not drawn attention to, as this change in movement primarily occurs behind the scene's central point of attention. In turn, this change in movement is only noticeable in the background of shots, on the fringes of the frame or when the background characters are out of focus. However, the change between these two modes of movement occurs quickly, with the background characters shifting between energetic and passive movements the moment the external agent enters or leaves the shot. Second, the film's colour palette alternates between dull colours, such as browns, blacks, whites and greys with a matte finish, and vibrant colours, such as blues, golds, bronzes and greens with a glossy finish. These dull colours are predominant in environments occupied by Koreans, with the vibrant colours being present in environments occupied by the external agent. This distinction has the Korean characters occupying depressing and lifeless locations, while those occupied by the external agent appear joyful and exciting. In the black and white historical films, this is reflected by dark and bright environments, respectively. Third, the locations the Koreans inhabit are primarily small, rundown, cramped and hidden from view. Conversely, the locations the

oppressive, external agent inhabits are primarily large, well maintained, decadent and accessible. Finally, the costumes of the Korean characters, especially those in the background, are always of a visibly inferior quality and style to the costumes of the external agent. For example, the Korean costumes are either dirtier, made of a cheaper material or in a state of ill-repair than those of the external agent. Each of these elements of mise en scene, in turn, establish a clear, visual divide between the oppressed and the oppressor, specifically by visually showing the Korean characters to live in poverty and sorrow, while the oppressive, external agent appears to exist in an environment of wealth and pleasure. Therefore, through the lens of this cinematic aesthetic of *han*, the analysis of the South Korean historical film genre avoids Chung's (2005) concerns, as discussed earlier in this chapter, about dissolving the unique Korean-ness involved in the idea of *han* by solely focusing on the external expression of such affects as anger and sorrow. Instead, the analysis of *cinematic han* places an emphasis on the links between the concept and its context within Korean culture, specifically through its focus upon atmosphere as constructed through narrative structure and visual composition. Avoiding cultural essentialism, the notion of a *cinematic han* helps to identify a filmic aesthetic through which six formal and narrative elements are identifiable within all of the South Korean historical films studied in this thesis, despite the numerous historical changes that have transformed the South Korean film industry.

Furthermore, the narrative and formal elements of this *cinematic han* conveys the oppression of the Korean populace, both through their narrative and thematic experiences as well as the texture and appearance of the environment in which they occupy. As a result, *cinematic han* can be analysed to contain several different modes of oppression, with each being reflected through the specific narrative developments or aspects of the mise en scene that have been discussed throughout the chapter. The narrative tropes of *cinematic han*, that of the thematic shift from oppression to hope at the conclusion of the narrative, along with the occurrence of the individual operating within the collective reflect two distinct modes of oppression: every moment of the Korean life is consumed by oppression, but this oppression is only temporary; and finally, the oppression of the external agent consumes every level of society, regardless of gender, wealth or status. *Cinematic han*'s elements of mise en scene, specifically the

contrast between the energetic and minimal actions of the background characters, the division between dull and vibrant colours, the juxtaposition between the small Korean locations opposed to the large locations of their external agent and, finally, the inferior costumes of the Korean characters, also reveal several distinct modes of oppression: the weight of oppression affects how Koreans move and interact with each other and the world around them; the environments they occupy appear dour and lifeless, as if all of the goodness, love and positivity has been drained from their word; the small locations acts as a metaphor of the Korean oppression, as if it is making the walls close in, eventually crushing their bodies and spirits; and finally, the Koreans wear their oppression externally, as if they wear their social status on their bodies at all times.

These various modes of oppression detail a specific type of Korean experience under their external agent, namely that Korean lives, movements and environments in which they occupy are heavily influenced by the relationship between these two types of character. In short, *cinematic han*'s narrative tropes and elements of mise en scene represent Korea as a form of metaphorical prison. Through the elements of mise en scene the diegetic world appears to be a Korean prison of which the external agents act as their prison guards. In consequence of these elements, the Koreans are restricted to small, lifeless spaces that restrict their movements, of which their inferior costumes are a form of uniform, signifying who is and who is not Korean. Opposed against this, the external agents occupy large, vibrant spaces, whose actions restrict the movements of others. Their superior costumes appear once again as a type of uniform, clearly showcasing who is in charge of the Korean nation. As a result, *cinematic han*'s elements of mise en scene metaphorically transform Korea into a prison cell for Koreans due to how these elements have been structured and organised. The narrative and thematic elements of the film can expand on this metaphor. Through the film's narrative the Korean oppression is all encompassing, reaching all areas of Korean society. However, due to the thematic shift from oppression to hope, it is implied this oppression will not last, as if the prison sentence will eventually be over. Therefore, the South Korean historical films that have the consistent narrative and formal elements of *cinematic han* immerse Koreans and the Korean nation in sorrow and their loss of agency underneath an external agent who acts as the source of their oppression, most often either Japan or

North Korea, or in line with this metaphor, gives Korea the appearance and all-encompassing atmosphere of a prison.

However, despite the six elements of *cinematic han* that place Koreans in a perpetual state of oppression, this aesthetic still contains notable aspects of hope that is characteristic of the cultural concept it is based upon. As previously established, *cinematic han* creates a narrative space where a peaceful future is implied at the conclusion of the narrative. Yet by also representing this oppression both at an individual and collective level the narrative unifies the Korean characters in their efforts to survive under the oppression of the external agent. The mise en scene of *cinematic han* also display this unity, but also demonstrates the resilience of the Korean characters under this oppression. For instance, the background characters display energetic movements when away from their external agent, visually depicting the Korean characters as full of life and joy despite being under oppression. Also, while the Korean clothing outwardly displays their oppression through their inferior quality, the type of clothing they wear, such as suits and *Joseon* dynasty styled robes, connect the Koreans to their culture and displays a sense of pride in how they dress themselves, as will be discussed in later in the thesis. In turn, the inferior quality and style of the Korean clothing is dictated by their oppression, but the type of clothing they wear demonstrates a form of resistance against their external agent by not letting the pride or culture of the Korean people disappear. Furthermore, the small, cramped nature of the Korean locations places them all in close proximity with each other, in turn, unifying them in the struggle against their external agent. Consequently, *cinematic han* presents the predominant atmosphere of a prison-like scene, but simultaneously demonstrates the hope of resilience under this oppression and how the Korean nation is unified socially and culturally due to their experiences. As a result, each element of *cinematic han*, except for the film's colour palette, contains a small aspect of hope characteristic of the cultural concept the aesthetic is based upon.

The identity of the external agent within *cinematic han*, alongside their visible effect on the Korean characters, is informed by the ideological precepts of the film's respective cinematic period, for example, through defiant protests against communism in the

Golden Age or the extended wailing of a Korean soldier prior to the commencement of combat in a film of the SNW. However, the structure and organisation of how this oppression is portrayed in each film is consistent, using *cinematic han*'s modes of oppression to convey the prison metaphor. In turn, this aesthetic becomes inherent to the South Korean historical film and is what distinguishes it from historical films produced by other national cinemas. Therefore, *cinematic han* is a key component of the working definition of the South Korean historical film established earlier, unifying the predominantly Western scholarship of the historical and war film genres under an exclusively Korean lens.

## 2.7 Conclusion

The South Korean historical film is unique when compared to the historical films of other nations for two reasons. First, the historical films of this national cinema simultaneously evoke the historical genre and the war genre. Second, South Korean historical films are given shape by a unique cinematic aesthetic that this thesis deems as *cinematic han*. The history of South Korean cinema before 1987 was filled with government regulation and restrictions upon creative freedom. Due to the regulations of the NSL and the MPL the representation of South Korean history, specifically South Korean historical geopolitical conflict, had to be fantastical, filled with nationalist themes, anti-North Korean and Japanese propaganda and near divine characters. However, once the anti-communist regulations were eased after 1987, South Korean cinema was free to explore historical events in the manner the filmmakers chose. The resulting films often included working class perspectives, grounded narratives, and elaborate sequences of violence and spectacle. Though each cinematic period had significantly different approaches to the historical narrative, such as the anti-communist focus of the Golden and Dark Ages, the *minjung* narratives of the First Korean New Wave and the irony, spectacle and violence of the Second Korean New Wave, six key narrative tropes and elements of the mise en scene remained identical across all the South Korean historical films produced during these cinematic periods that can be condensed into *cinematic han*.

*Cinematic han* expresses a unifying atmosphere of oppression, sorrow and loss of agency in all South Korean historical films produced over the various periods of South Korean cinema. Despite the ongoing changes to the South Korean film industry's structures, policies, standards and practices, *cinematic han* is a permanent aesthetic in the films due to the adaptable yet consistent presence of an oppressive, external agent. In the Golden and Dark Ages of South Korean cinema, this agent is represented by communism and reflects the period's anti-communist agenda. In the First Korean New Wave this agent changes to become a small number of insignificant soldiers or gangsters who stand in for a foreign, invading nation, which reflects the period's *minjung* perspective. Finally, in the Second Korean New Wave this agent evolves to become the armies of a foreign enemy nation, which reflects the period's focus on irony, spectacle and violence. As this oppressive, external agent is adapted to the ideological, narrative and formal demands of each cinematic period, *cinematic han* remains a stable aesthetic throughout all the cinematic periods of South Korean cinema despite the ongoing formal changes that affect the South Korean film industry. While the South Korean historical film is synonymous with the precepts of the historical and war film genres as defined by Western scholarship, *cinematic han* is the core Korean concept that renders the historical films produced by South Korea unique to this nation. Thus, in this thesis *cinematic han* is proposed as inherent to the working definition of the South Korean historical film outlined earlier in this chapter.

The next three chapters will conduct a textual analysis of notable South Korean historical films, respectively, from the Golden Age of Korean cinema in the 1950s, the First Korean New Wave of the early 1990s, and the Second Korean New Wave of the 2000s and 2010s. The chapters' analysis will seek to demonstrate that *cinematic han* enhances the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film by creating symbolic links between the cinematic text and the socio-cultural context of its production. Specifically, the three chapters will analyse the South Korean historical film's representation of geopolitical conflict, namely, the Japanese Occupation of Korea, World War II, and the Korean War.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Japanese Occupation of Korea and the South Korean Historical Film**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Since the sixteenth century, Japan has had a history of attempting to invade and forcefully occupy the Korean Peninsula. However, all of these armed conflicts eventually failed with Korea remaining a free nation (Turnbull, 2008). Yet, in the early twentieth century, Japan did succeed in occupying the Peninsula, not by force, but by intricate political manoeuvring. The Japanese Occupation of Korea occurred due to the signing of three conventions, the first being signed in 1904. The signing of this convention gave Japan the right to install diplomatic and financial advisors within the Korean government, required Korean officials to seek Japan's approval on all important dealings, and allowed Japan to move military units onto the peninsula (Fuqua, 2011, p. 42). The second convention, known as 'the Eulsa Treaty', was signed in 1905. This treaty, also known as the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty, gave Japan 'full administrative control over Korea's foreign affairs [...] placed all trade activity taking place within Korean ports under Japanese control and provided for the establishment of the Office of Resident General, the office responsible for overseeing all Japanese activity on the peninsula' (Fuqua, 2011, p. 42). Through this treaty Korea became a protectorate of Japan, with the nation's interests being controlled and governed by an alien regime (Dudden, 2005). The third convention, signed in 1907, forced the Korean national army to disband, the King to abdicate, and 'extended Japan's administrative powers to now include Korea's domestic affairs' (Fuqua, 2011, p. 43). The three conventions placed Korea under the total governmental control of Japan, and in 1910 under the enforcement of the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty, Japan's full annexation into Korea occurred on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, marking the beginning of the Japanese Occupation of Korea (Fuqua, 2011, p. 43).

The Japanese Occupation lasted from 1910 to 1945 and during these three and a half decades Japan made numerous changes to the Korean culture. These changes began with Korea's youth, as Japan enforced a strict education system that was designed to assimilate Koreans into Japanese society by cultivating 'loyalty among the conquered

people and to produce lower-level workers to support Japanese bureaucrats' (Kim-Rivera, 2002, p. 264). This occurred through the required learning of the Japanese language, with other foreign languages, such as English, being banned from the curriculum. Extending from this change to the educational system, Japan also enforced a total ban of the Korean language from public areas and from publications such as magazines and newspapers. Japanese became the only acceptable language to be used in all areas of life (Kim-Rivera, 2002, p. 236). In 1940, it was declared that every Korean should adopt a Japanese name. If one were to refuse this declaration, they would 'became targets of the police and were denied food supplies, school admissions and attendance, and/or employment', essentially condemning themselves to either imprisonment, poverty or death (Kim-Rivera, 2002, p. 267). Japan also began to impede on the arts as well with the monitoring and censorship of the national cinema. *Byeonsa* performances were routinely attended by Japanese police officers, ensuring they could stop a performance if any pro-Korean, anti-Japanese messages were stated, fearing these messages might inspire the audience to question their Japanese occupiers. If a *Byeonsa* was caught spreading any potentially harmful message, even accidentally, it could result in the imprisonment and torture of the performer (Shim & Yecies, 2011, p. 88).

The Japanese Occupation has been the basis of dozens of films in South Korea since the 1940s with films such as *Hurrah! For Freedom* (Choi & Choi, 1946), *King Gojong and Martyr An Jung-Geun* (Jeon, 1959), *Lee Seung-man and the Independence Movement* (Lim & Shin, 1959), *Patriotic Martyr An Jung-gun* (Ju & Joo, 1972), *The Blazing Sun* (Cho, Kim, & Hah, 1984), *Modern Boy* (Kang & Jung, 2008), *The Tiger: An Old Hunter's Tale* (Park, Han, & Park, 2015), *The Last Princess* (An, Cha, Park, Shin, & Hur, 2016), and *Love, Lies* (Park & Park, 2016) all being based during this time period. As posited by South Korean director Lee Joon-ik, the significant number of South Korean historical films set during this period is due to the fact that South Korean society has still not recovered from the cultural devastation that occurred during this time. As director Lee states:

72 years have passed since the Japanese colonial era and the Korean society still hasn't managed to fully get over the history. This is because the Japan's nationalist stance to justify their wrongdoings in the past and to cloak the truth.

Europe could develop their transnational ideologies through EU based on their regrets for Nazi Germany, from which they could overcome the dreadful history.

Making films about the Japanese colonial era, I hope that Asian audience could feel a sense of historical interconnectivity between Korea, Japan, China and East Asia. A peaceful future can be achieved through a reflection of the past. (J. I. Lee, personal communication, November 12th, 2017)<sup>67</sup>

For director Lee, a cinematic depiction of the Japanese Occupation era can act as stimulus for South Korean society to overcome the atrocities of the past. By directly addressing the events of this conflict through cinema, as director Lee asserts, a consolidation amongst the Asian regions to move forward from this historical conflict may be achieved. However, another significant element of the Japanese Occupation conflict that director Lee identifies is the animosity towards Japan that still lingers within South Korean society. Upon the analysis of South Korean films that depict the Japanese Occupation (henceforth referred to as Occupation films), this hostility, alongside the elevation of this historical event into warfare as discussed in Chapter 2, can be witnessed to drive the primary narrative conflict in nearly all of the films that depict this era, specifically in how the presence of the Japanese can alter the Korean character's relationships with each other. The narratives of the Occupation films have one of two foci: the struggles of the average Korean citizen under the Japanese rule; or the independence movements who actively fought the Japanese for Korean independence. While these narrative archetypes are not definitive, the majority of films based during this era focus on one or both of these narrative strands. Furthermore, in Occupation films, Japanese characters are represented as an alien 'other', a force that is sent to either unite or divide the Korean people. As previously stated, the Japanese presence in these films is defined by the effect they have on the Korean characters, and

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<sup>67</sup> Interview conducted via email from Australia on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November, 2017, with the interviewee in South Korea (see full transcript in Appendix 1).

are often not characters themselves, but act as mere thematic or narrative devices. For example, the Japanese presence causes the Korean characters to either unite to fight the enemy, or divide by becoming collaborators with the Japanese to assist in the oppression of their countrymen. In turn, the Japanese often become an external force that tests the strengths and weaknesses of Korean society. Case in point, the main antagonist in the Occupation film is often not Japanese but a Korean who has collaborated with the Japanese (henceforth referred to as collaborators). Consequently, while the Japanese often form the physical threat of the Occupation film, the central conflict of these films primarily focuses upon the internal conflict of Korean society that emerges in response to this threat.

The films studied in this chapter, *Nameless Stars* (Lee & Kim, 1959), which was produced during the Golden Age of Korean Cinema (Golden Age), *General's Son* (Lee & Im, 1990), which was produced during the First Korean New Wave (FNW), and finally, *Assassination* (Shen & Choi, 2015), which was produced during the Second Korean New Wave (SNW), all follow the second aforementioned narrative strand. In each film, the representation of the Occupation conflict is centred on Korean resistance groups, which are comprised of students, gangsters and guerrilla soldiers respectively. Each group routinely engages in combat sequences against the Japanese or the collaborators. These sequences involve mass riots, one on one brawls or large scale gunfights and car chases. Therefore, due to their setting amongst the Japanese Occupation and their inclusion of combat sequences against a superior enemy, this set of films meet the requirements of the working definition of the South Korean historical film established in Chapter 2 through their merging of the historical and war film genres. However, as further discussed in the previous chapter, the narrative and formal construction of the representation of this geopolitical conflict and these specific resistance groups, are different to each other due to the ideological precepts of the cinematic period in which each film was produced. For example, *Nameless Stars* filters its narrative and formal elements through the anti-communist agenda of the Golden Age, whilst *Assassination* has a heavy focus upon irony, spectacle and violence due to the precepts of the SNW. However, despite these differences, all of these films share the third aspect of the working definition of the South Korean historical film, *cinematic han*.

This aesthetic can be applied to all three of the films studied in this chapter through an analysis of how the representation of Korean resistance groups adhere to the six elements of *cinematic han* established in Chapter 2. Specifically the way in which each film embodies the modes of oppression presented by *cinematic han*'s narrative tropes and elements of mise en scene that, in turn, represents Korea under Japanese Occupation as a metaphorical prison, yet, simultaneously, presents an element of hope in the Korean unity and resilience against this oppression.

Within the working definition of the South Korean historical film that was developed across Chapters 1 and 2, *cinematic han* is the most significant element. As discussed in the previous chapter, the aesthetic conjoins the Western scholarship of the war film and the historical film under a specifically Korean lens. However, *cinematic han* is also notable for its ability to produce historical knowledge, both about the past the film depicts and the socio-cultural context the film was produced. In the Occupation film, the dual factors of the cinematic period and *cinematic han* affects the film's narrative and formal representation of the aforementioned Korean resistance groups during the Japanese Occupation. Conjoined under the modes of oppression created by *cinematic han*, this representation filters the Korean resistance through either an anti-communist lens, a *minjung* perspective or through the elements of spectacle, irony and violence, depending on when the film was produced. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, this representation, informed by the film's cinematic period and allegiance to *cinematic han*, can be analysed for how it creates symbolic links between the cinematic text and the socio-cultural context of its production. For example, the South Korean film *Empire of Lust* (Kim & Ahn, 2015), previously discussed in Chapter 1, is set during the *Joseon* dynasty, yet contains parallels to twentieth century South Korea, such as the Sunshine Policy (to be discussed later in the chapter), through its thematic depictions of corrupt government officials who refuse to accept changing societal values. As a result, through the film's evocation of *cinematic han* the discursive imprint of the film's present can be identified. Therefore, this chapter argues that the analysis of the representation of Korean resistance groups in South Korean Japanese Occupation films makes evident these films' evocation of *cinematic han*, which, in turn, enhances the historical

knowledge of the South Korean historical film's representation of historical geopolitical conflict.

This chapter is divided into three sections: 'South Korean cinematic periods', examines how the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are present in the Golden Age, FNW and SNW films, *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* respectively, despite the evolving ideological precepts of each cinematic period. 'The mise en scene of *cinematic han*', analyses how key Golden Age, FNW and SNW films reflect *cinematic han*'s elements of mise en scene and how these contribute to cinematically portraying Korea as a metaphorical prison. Finally, 'Cinematic representation of the past and socio-cultural context of production', analyses how the representation of the Japanese Occupation in each of the films studied can enhance the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film through their symbolic connections to the socio-cultural climate of the film's construction.

### **3.2 South Korean cinematic periods**

Depending on the period of the film's production, the representation of the Japanese Occupation has been filtered through either an anti-communist framework, a *minjung* perspective, or an ironic viewpoint that focuses heavily on both violence and spectacle. These approaches reflect the characteristics of the Golden Age, the FNW, and the SNW respectively. This section will analyse how the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are present in *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* as a result of the ideological precepts of their respective cinematic period.

#### **The Golden Age of South Korean cinema**

As detailed in the previous chapter, the Golden Age was characterised by the anti-communist agenda of the Rhee Syngman government. As David Scott Diffrient states, 'no country other than South Korea (and possibly Taiwan) went so far as to institutionalise anticomunism as a categorical imperative through the implementation of industry-wide standards and protection policies' (2005, p. 23). Consequently, the process of historying in films of the Golden Age permeate anti-communist rhetoric in

nearly all areas, specifically in its narrative progression and the formulation of its characters (Dening, 2006). Yet while this anti-communist rhetoric was often reserved for cinematic depictions of North Korea, in their absence the Occupation film characterised this stance through its Japanese characters. Within South Korea, according to Kim Chung-kang, ‘Another significant national ideology that proliferated as part of its anti-communism was anti-Japanism, wherein the government propagandised Japan’s relationship with North Korea, which subsequently also branded as an “enemy” with a dangerous “red” ideology’ (2010, p. 18). Therefore, within the Golden Age era, the representation of Japan became intertwined with the South Korean cultural aversion to communism, resulting in films that recontextualised the historical antagonism between Japan and South Korea as a struggle against communism. By repositioning the Japanese characters to be communist, each Golden Age narrative placed the Korean and Japanese characters into a black and white moral standing, where the Japanese are wholly evil due to their allegiance to communism and the Koreans are entirely good for their resistance against this system. Therefore, through the Golden Age’s anti-communist rhetoric, the oppressive, external agent characteristic of *cinematic han* is established to be both communist and Japanese. This anti-communist perspective is evident within *Nameless Stars*’ narrative approach and formal construction.

*Nameless Stars* is a 1959 film that fictionalises the Gwangju Student Independence Movement of 1910. The narrative centres on a Korean student, Sang-hun, as he and his friends attend school with Japanese students and face systematic oppression at the hands of Japanese officials. Sang-hun and numerous other students form an independence movement, the Sungjin Society, in an effort to organise a student rebellion against the Japanese military. In *Nameless Stars* the Golden Age’s anti-communist rhetoric formally repositions the struggle against the Japanese, and subsequently communism, as a nationalist and noble cause. The anti-communist rhetoric begins within the first two minutes of the film. As discussed in Chapter 1 via the process of historying, the first shot of the film fades from studio logos into a wide shot of a memorial dedicated to the Gwangju Student Independence Movement. The introduction of this anti-communist rhetoric, in turn, demonstrates one of the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*, specifically the narrative beginning and ending with the Korean characters under oppression before a

final thematic shift from oppression to hope. The camera zooms in to a mid-shot of a bronze plaque depicting images of what can be presumed to be Korean students marching before fading to a mid-shot of another plaque of Korean hangul characters. During these shots, a non-diegetic score plays a sad, slow tune, comprised of violins and piano. Accompanying this score, a narrator speaks in a loud, echoed voice. This narration establishes the conflict of the Occupation and how the students rose up to defy the Japanese and were subsequently killed. However, the narration does not depict this event as a tragedy but, as it states, a triumph of ‘Korean liberty’. Among the narrator’s statements is the fact that the students chose ‘death over life’ under Japanese rule and also that their actions ‘awakened the spirit of national pride all over the country’. During this opening, the tragedy of the event is conjoined with the nationalist ideal that while many students were killed or injured in the struggle against the Japanese, their actions ignited a movement that eventually led to Korea’s liberation. Therefore, this unity and resilience against Japanese oppression signposts the element of hope contained within this narrative trope of *cinematic han*.

The balance between tragedy and nationalism is further solidified in the narration’s concluding statements:

54,000 students joined in. Many were injured, killed and tortured in prison. But the torch of justice that was lit that day became a raging flame as it shone brightly in the hearts of all Koreans. The blood and tears shed by the young people changed our history forever and will never go dry. Their spirit and legacy will linger among us and light the path for the nation to march.

After these lines, the film fades to black and the non-diegetic score becomes loud and patriotic complete with trumpets and drums. The score here can be likened to a military march. The placement of this sequence at the beginning of the film is highly symbolic. The footage of what is presumed to be an actual memorial dedicated to the students, along with the emotive narration and the transition from a sombre score to a militaristic one, evokes historiophagy by immediately positioning the film’s narrative within a nationalist discursive framework, generating specific historical knowledge of the Occupation via the film’s formal construction and fictional elements. The film stresses

the ideal of self-sacrifice in the name of national interests from the beginning, consequently framing the entirety of the subsequent narrative under this nationalist slant. This narrative approach condones violence against oppressors and makes the death of Korean citizens acceptable as long as it is in the name of the national interest. In the process, this approach narratively justifies the action sequences later in the film by making the violence against the Japanese morally acceptable.<sup>68</sup> By extension of this, each of the film's action sequences are instigated by the Japanese, and, as a result, the Korean participation in these brawls is narratively justified as a desire to protect other Koreans from Japanese oppression. Of the film's three major action sequences, the first, located at a baseball diamond, begins because the Koreans rush to the assistance of a Korean student being beaten by a Japanese teacher. The second, at a train station, occurs because a Korean student came to his sister's defence after she was aggressively handled by a Japanese student. The third, at a lumber yard, occurs because the Koreans are forced to defend themselves after being ambushed by Japanese students. Each of these action sequences is an externalisation of the Japanese Occupation into armed combat, as discussed in Chapter 2, birthed from the anger of the Korean populace against the actions of the Japanese and the nationalist desire to defend themselves against communism. These action sequences also evoke the aforementioned narrative trope of *cinematic han*, as the Korean characters are routinely oppressed and forced to defend themselves against Japanese oppression. However, the hopeful elements of this trope are also reinforced due to the Korean unity and resilience against these forms of violence.

In addition, by beginning the narrative with the knowledge of the deaths of these students, the conflict of the film is established, specifically of a struggle between Korea and Japanese communists that will eventually lead to mass pain and death. Therefore, via film's formal construction under the processes of historying discussed in Chapter 1, the narrative immediately positions Koreans under the oppression of an external agent, defining all of their narrative action under this struggle. Furthermore, the film concludes in a similar fashion. Images of hundreds of Koreans waving South Korean flags, framed

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<sup>68</sup> To differentiate between the military battles contained in the South Korean films that depict World War II and the Korean War, as examined in later chapters, and the smaller altercations of civilians and resistance fighters in the Occupation films, the sequences of Korean and Japanese melee will be referred to as action sequences in this chapter.

from a high-angle, deep-focus wide shot, are accompanied with superimposed text that reads: ‘The Gwangju Student Independence Movement spread nationwide. To Seoul, to Pyeongyang, to Busan, to Dinuiju, to Hamheung, to Jeonju, to Wonsan, to Daegu, all over Korea’. This text concludes with the line: ‘So many nameless stars fell from the sky to light the torch of national spirit against the Japanese imperialist rule’, before the film cuts to a wide shot of the memorial that opened it. The image of these Korean citizens accompanied by the nationalist text, coupled with the repetition of the memorial footage, invokes both a sense of national unity and the positive reinforcement of sacrifice in the name of the national interest. However, due to the implied future rebellions, Korea ends the narrative still underfoot of their external agent, concluding the film under the same oppression they started with. Yet, by opening and closing the film with shots of the Gwangju Student memorial a sense of positive legacy is implied via the film’s formal construction. If one were to die fighting national enemies, the nation would immortalise them through films and monuments. Consequently, the bookending of the film with this nationalist framework contextualises the intervening narrative struggle against communist oppression as a noble cause, shifting the film’s themes from one of oppression to a hope that Korean resilience will lead to liberation. Therefore, the film’s narrative structure under its anti-communist framework reveals a key narrative trope of *cinematic han*.

*Cinematic han*’s second narrative trope, of the individual operating inside a collective is depicted through two of *Nameless Stars*’ narrative elements, the character of Choi Yeong-ae and the Korean resistance group known as the Sungjin Society. This narrative trope is established through a narrative depiction of the paranoia of Korean characters towards those who collaborate with the Japanese. As discussed in Chapter 2, a primary concern of the anti-communist rhetoric, as well as the Rhee Syngman administration in its implementation of the National Security Law, was the infiltration of communists into South Korean society and their coercion of the South Korean populace. This cultural anxiety permeated through the Golden Age films and in the Occupation film, these undercover communists take the form of collaborators. *Nameless Stars* presents the idea of communist paranoia and its effects on Korean society through the use of the characters of Choi Yeong-ae, a Korean student who joins the Sungjin Society, and her

brother, Choi Yeong-sik, a Korean who works for the Japanese police. At the beginning of the film each side of the Occupation, specifically the Korean resistance movement and the collaborators, are paranoid of each other. In an early sequence, a shot concentrates on Sang-hun and his group of friends, where one of the characters, In-ok, states about Choi Yeong-ae: ‘Her older brother is Choi Yeong-sik. He works for the Japanese police’. The film then cuts to Choi Yeong-ae, Choi Yeong-sik and their friend watching Sang-hun’s group, where Choi Yeong-sik states: ‘Stay away from them, they seem dangerous’. In this instance the parallel editing between the Korean resistance members and the collaborators establishes that both sides are equally suspicious of the other, creating a common parallel between them. Both sides are presented as equal, each right to have their suspicions. However, despite this doubt, Yeong-ae is still invited to join the Sungjin Society, establishing the notion that Koreans were not instantly paranoid about the actions of the Japanese-allied Koreans, or in this case communists, but learned to fear them over time.

The film takes time establishing the views of both Choi Yeong-sik and Yeong-ae, and how they each suffer due to their ties to the Japanese, and by extension, communism. In an exchange with Sang-hun, Yeong-ae says that she always felt lonely before joining the Sungjin Society. She states: ‘at school I’m surrounded by Japanese students. My brother working for the Japanese doesn’t help either. People have been cold to me. Even my friends from elementary school stopped talking to me. At night I would cry on my pillows for hours’. The association with her brother turned Yeong-ae into an outcast in Korean society through no fault of her own. The film addresses the idea that this prejudice is evident in Korean society, but through Yeong-ae’s acceptance into the Sungjin society, it portrays the idea that not everyone who lives in a Japanese-allied family is automatically deserving of ridicule and hate. This narrative development analysed from an anti-communist perspective can be understood as arguing that the family members of those accused of being a communist are not communist by association. Hence, they should not be treated as guilty due to the choices of those close to them. The film also briefly sympathises with the plight of Choi Yeong-sik, specifically that he is collaborating with the Japanese to protect his family. During an exchange with Yeong-ae, Yeong-sik states: ‘Do you even know what’s happening to our

country? I know, you hate my job. But you must understand that the world is changing. It's no use to try to resist'. Yeong-sik continues by saying: 'Do you think I'm always happy doing what I do? It's all so that I can take care of you'. This dialogue reveals key aspects of this character. Yeong-sik believes it is impossible to fight back against the Japanese, so he joined the police force not for money or position, but to ensure his family would be safe. This also provides a deeper reason for Yeong-sik's intent on dismantling the Sungjin Society. He does not want to bring the Society to justice for the benefit of Japanese interests, but so his sister would not get hurt carrying out operations against the Japanese. A selfless act that is ultimately punished with death in the film's climax, firstly, by being beaten by Sang-hun and, then, accidentally shot by a Japanese policeman, symbolically killed by both nations he sought to protect. Therefore, the characters of Yeong-ae and Yeong-sik demonstrate the black and white moral standings of Koreans and their external agent as discussed in the working definition of the South Korean historical film established in Chapter 2. Despite both characters being associated with the Japanese, and by extension, communism, each are rendered as either noble or innocent regardless. The actions of Yeong-sik, for instance, are not portrayed as his own, but as a result of the influence of the Japanese. Consequently, the binary moral standing of the South Korean historical film is maintained within the film's fictional narrative. Consequently, the film provides some sympathy for communists, specifically in the idea that while the South Korean government viewed all communists as irredeemable and evil, there may be a few that were still good and only chose to follow communism because they believed it would help their families in some form. Thus, in alignment with *cinematic han*, both characters are oppressed by their association with the Japanese, but each silently endures this oppression, simultaneously evoking the element of hope within the aesthetic.

As the film continues and the clashes between the Korean and Japanese students grow more violent, the paranoia presented by the Sungjin Society increases. In the film's second half, members of the Sungjin Society are caught and tortured by the Japanese police. These members are questioned by Yeong-sik, making the hostility towards Yeong-ae grow. After one student is captured, Yeong-ae tries to warn the remaining Sungjin Society members about the actions of the Japanese. However, all of them,

including one of their parents, turns her away due to their belief that she would betray them. At two separate points, Yeong-ae's message is responded to with the lines, 'Are you going to take him too?' and 'Why? Do you want the girls arrested as well?'.

Although Yeong-ae did not perform any actions against the Sungjin Society, due to the actions of her brother and her unavoidable association with him, she is deemed a collaborator. During this sequence the narrative parallels to the anti-communist rhetoric of the Golden Age become overt. Due to Yeong-ae's connection to her brother, who is a representation of the communist infiltrators, she is shunned and ostracised from the rest of society. Despite being innocent, the cultural anxiety towards collaborators, or in this case communists, is reflected negatively on Yeong-ae due to her family ties. Therefore, Korean society is shown divided due to the fear of these perceived dangers to their way of life. This hostility is further reflected within the mise en scene of this sequence.

During Yeong-ae's frantic pursuit to relay the warning, heavy rain pours onto the street. Due to the lighting of the sequence the rain appears to be following her as she runs along the road, leaving the rest of the street dry. This heavy handed symbolism of the rain makes Yeong-ae's mission appear desperate. In fact, the melodrama of her actions during this sequence unambiguously shows loyalty and devotion to the Sungjin Society. Consequently, the betrayal and paranoia of Society members towards Yeong-ae is made increasing poignant.

Due to the rain and the Society member's refusal to let her inside, Yeong-ae catches pneumonia. In her sick haze, she accidentally reveals the location of the Sungjin Society headquarters to her brother, resulting in the location being raided by the Japanese police. If the Society members had not turned her away, Yeong-ae would not have accidentally revealed the location of the headquarters. Through this sequence of events, the Sungjin Society's paranoia of collaborators resulted in the loss of their headquarters and nearly loses them their fight against the Japanese. The final word within this subject, however, is given to Yeong-ae. After she is accidentally shot by her brother while attempting to save Sang-hun, her final words are: 'I didn't betray you or our country' (figure 11). Yeong-ae's significant final words appear to be reflecting *Nameless Stars*' ultimate stance regarding collaborators and their family members, symbolically representing the anti-communist rhetoric of the Golden Age. Specifically that many of those who

participated in these threats against the national interest did so for necessity, not for personal gain. Therefore, these narrative developments, as a consequence of the film's anti-communist perspective, reveals the individual in the collective narrative trope of *cinematic han*. Both Yeong-ae and the Sungjin Society outwardly display their oppression by the Japanese, the former through how she was been ostracised by Korean society due to her ties to communism and the latter through their collective paranoia of an innocent woman due to their belief she is collaborating with the Japanese. Both of these views, of the individual and the collective, stems directly from their relationship with their external agent, specifically their desires to distance themselves from it by any means necessary. Therefore, the film's allegiance to the Golden Age's anti-communist framework results in the emergence of this narrative trope of *cinematic han*, generating historical knowledge of the Occupation via its fictional narrative and formal elements which demonstrate that the Korean oppression from their external agent effects all of Korea, regardless of their position within that society.



Figure 11: Screenshot from *Nameless Stars* (Dir. Kim Kang-yun, 1959)

### The First Korean New Wave in South Korean cinema

The FNW, as discussed in the previous chapter, was defined by its use of a *minjung* perspective, as well as *auteur*-realism. In this thesis, the analysis of the FNW period will

specifically focus upon this *minjung* perspective. As discussed in Chapter 2, the *minjung* perspective of the FNW works to lower the narrative scope to a working class point of view, which finds the place of the average Korean citizen amongst the greater historical context. The film *General's Son* is a fictionalised account of Korean politician and freedom fighter, Kim Doo-han, as he rises through the ranks of the Chongno gang. Starting out homeless, Doo-han eventually rises to the head of the gang, as he and his organisation attempt to defend their businesses and territory from being overthrown by a rival Japanese gang led by the villainous Hayashi. In *General's Son* this *minjung* perspective is often revealed through visual images and dialogue exchanges that act as metaphors for the working class struggle against the ruling class. It is these narrative divisions and structures that allows for the emergence of the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. For instance, the both narrative tropes of the aesthetic are introduced within the opening seconds of the film during a wide shot that pans over several jail cells. These cells are crowded with stoic Korean characters. A few shots later, it is revealed that these cells look outward into a room where Japanese police officers are visible moving freely (figure 12). The opening shots of the film works to establish the divide between the Korean citizens and the Japanese occupiers, or in plainer terms, the working class and their ruling class. From the outset, through this visual metaphor, the Koreans are shown to be oppressed by a higher power, insinuating that the poverty and starvation that the Koreans face later in the film stems directly from this social hierarchy.



Figure 12: Screenshot from *General's Son* (Dir. Im Kwon-tae, 1990)

As discussed in Chapter 1, a film's monumental history can be filtered through its depictions of significant historical figures to contextualise the film's approach to the moral and social climate of its depicted period (Landy, 2001, p. 3). In *General's Son*, this figure is Kim Doo-han, a real life figure within Korea's struggle against Japanese Occupation. The first action of Doo-han, the film's main character, is his release from the aforementioned prison cells, unambiguously positioning Doo-han on the side of the Korean working class. Therefore, via monumental history, the film's subsequent narrative of Doo-han and the Chongno gang's clash with Hayashi's Japanese gang contextualises the Japanese Occupation conflict to be one of the working class rebelling and resisting the ruling class. Furthermore, having Doo-han emerge from this mass of imprisoned Koreans to adopt a pivotal position in the fight against the Japanese is symbolic. This image of the individual emerging from the masses, combined with the subsequent narrative importance of Doo-han, can be interpreted as a metaphor of the weakness of the collective, but the power of the individual. As a group, Koreans are oppressed, but upon the emergence from this crowd, each individual has the power to cause significant change.

Furthermore, during the film's action sequences, the power of the individual is conjoined with the collective to evoke a deep meaning, specifically through the

establishment of a motif of witnessing. The conclusion of four of the film's action sequences cut to a high angle, extreme wide shot for the final blow. Instead of focusing on the blow itself via a close up or mid-shot, the final shot of these fights is positioned far from the action, shown to be surrounded by dozens of onlookers (figure 13). This final shot is usually lengthy, including the final blow, the crowd cheering, and the losing combatant being carried away by their companions. Due to this, the crowd and the fight are tied into the same shot. This choice of camera angle, along with the mise en scene of a large Korean crowd evokes a motif of witnessing. Each fight is witnessed by groups of Koreans, whether it is a gathered crowd, or a small group hiding from the brawls. In each action scene, Koreans uninvolved with the fight witness the conflict. This is furthered due to the occurrence of close ups of these Korean citizens that are interspersed throughout the sequences. After several shots of the combatants fighting, the scene cuts to Koreans watching the fight, often stoically, before cutting back to the action. This alternation between the fight and the crowd reactions occurs throughout many of the film's action sequences, symbolically making the crowd participants in the fight via association.



Figure 13: Screenshot from *General's Son* (Dir. Im Kwon-tae, 1990)

This motif, created through the process of historying via specific editing patterns and cinematography, focusing on the crowd instead of the final blow, feeds into the FNW's *minjung* perspective. All working class Koreans are involved in the struggle against the ruling class regardless of if they participated in the fight itself. During the 1980s, conflicts between the *minjung* and the South Korean government, such as the Gwangju uprising and the 1987 June Struggle discussed in Chapter 2, were witnessed by all Koreans and their aftermath impacted them all whether or not they were directly involved. Therefore, the motif of witnessing, along with the overall formal construction of these action sequences, is emblematic of how the *minjung* struggle against the South Korean government was witnessed by all Koreans, regardless of age or gender. Therefore, this visual motif depicts the collective oppression of the working class but the resilience of the individuals within this societal structure. Consequently, the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* of the individual in the collective, alongside the narrative beginning with the Koreans under oppression of their external are evoked simultaneously primarily due to the narrative structures the film gains from the ideological precepts of the cinematic period in which it was produced.

However, Doo-han and the Korean citizenry are not the only individual/collective structures present in the film. The second primary structure is Doo-han and the Chongno gang. The FNW's ideological precepts recontextualise the film's narrative as a fight between social classes, which, in turn, changes the meaning behind specific character actions and dialogue. In two scenes, an action scene and a dialogue exchange between Doo-han and a Korean gang leader, known as YMCA Um, the depicted fight for dominance between rival gangs is shifted to be a representation of the working class struggling for power against a violent ruling class. During the film's climatic action sequence, drunken Korean gangsters begin a fist fight with Hayashi's gang. This fight escalates in violence however, when the Japanese combatants draw swords and proceed to stab the men. Rather than meeting the drunken flails with appropriate force, the Japanese resort to lethal methods to deal with the situation. The FNW's *minjung* perspective, and the knowledge that many of these gangsters are students, creates an allusion to the violent clashes and massacres the Korean government committed against the *minjung*, specifically during the Gwangju uprising discussed in Chapter 2, to

violently suppress any forms of rebellion and insolence against the ruling class. Consequently, the choreography of this action sequence evokes this comparison to the *minjung* struggle against the South Korean government, and demonstrates the collective oppression of the Chongno gang under an oppressive agent, reflective of this narrative trope of *cinematic han*.

Furthermore, the individual oppression of Doo-han is demonstrated in a later scene of the aforementioned dialogue exchange. YMCA Um, while discussing the conflict between the Korean and Japanese gangs, exclaims: ‘We are fighting for our liberty and the battle is going on. The battle will never end until we get our liberty back!’ This exchange serves as one of the final lines of dialogue in the film. On its surface, the dialogue is discussing the goals of the Korean independence movement against the Japanese Occupation. Under the FNW’s *minjung* perspective this line can be read to be commenting on the ultimate goals of the *minjung* movement, specifically that they will never stop resisting the government until the citizens are treated humanely. Yet, shortly after this scene, Doo-han is arrested, concluding the narrative by returning him to the prison cell in which it started. There are no charges stated or incidents where the police are present, he is only confronted on the street by a collaborator detective, after which the film ends. As a result, characterisations of the oppressive ruling class, both the Japanese gang and detective are shown asserting their power on Koreans both as a collective and individual, demonstrating that nobody in Korean society was safe from the influence of this ruling class, once again revealing this narrative trope of *cinematic han* through the structures the film utilises to reflect the ideological precepts of its respective cinematic period. Furthermore, the opening scenes of Doo-han being released from prison, as well as the concluding scene that has him being arrested, reflects *cinematic han*’s narrative trope of the thematic shift from oppression to hope despite the narrative beginning and ending with Koreans remaining under oppression. In line with this narrative trope, YMCA Um’s dialogue marks this thematic shift. Despite Doo-han being arrested, in turn, beginning and ending the narrative under Japanese oppression, YMCA Um’s lines reflect the Korean resilience in the face of Japanese Occupation. No matter what hardships the Koreans face, they will never stop resisting the Japanese, reminiscent of the *minjung*’s resilience under their ruling class. Therefore, despite the

narrative coming full circle with Doo-han's arrest, the film's themes shift so that a message of hope is present in this conclusion, specifically, that through Korean unity and resilience, liberation will eventually be achieved. Through the ideological precepts of the FNW, both narrative tropes of *cinematic han* emerge simultaneously, bookending the film under its narrative structures.

Yet, there is a third individual/collective *cinematic han* structure occurring within *General's Son*, that of the Korean female. Through both individual female characters, such as a hostess named Hwaja, and other nameless female background characters, this subset, through the FNW's *minjung* perspective, is also showcased to be oppressed by their external agent on an individual and collective level. The lives of the female Korean characters in *General's Son* are generally harder than the Korean males, often defined by their struggles under the Japanese ruling class. While the main male Korean characters are depicted as gangsters operating under a false sense of superiority and power (as it will be discussed later in the chapter), the female Korean characters work demeaning jobs, often sacrificing their dignity, social status and bodies to support themselves and their families during this cultural conflict. As a consequence of being female, these characters are demonstrated to endure a collective, unique oppression under these societal classes than those endured by the males. The female Korean characters are mostly depicted as 'hostesses' at a restaurant Doo-han frequents, whose work entails entertaining their male clients, specifically by eating and drinking with them, giggling at their every word and pushing their bodies against them. This service also includes the women having sex for money. Dialogue stated by these women, such as 'I've got kids to support', reveal that they have only chosen this employment to survive. Furthermore, their jobs frequently have the women face much ridicule and violence. Several examples include one of the women being punched by a man for trying to protect her colleague, Doo-han shoving a woman and calling her a 'bitch' after they entertain Japanese clients, and finally one woman beating up another for sleeping with a Japanese man. The woman responds to her beating by retorting: 'What's the difference as long as you get paid?' As opposed to the male gangster fantasy, the women of *General's Son* closely reflect the FNW's working class perspective. These characters accept the situation they have come to inhabit and do all they can to survive in a society that oppresses the working class.

Despite appearing forlorn at their position within Korean society, these women nevertheless continue working to ensure their families do not succumb to poverty. Therefore, as a collective, the Korean females are shown to endure a demeaning existence due to the societal classes established by the Japanese, yet are also depicted to be on the lower rungs of the working class for no other reason than their gender. The women demonstrate the extremes of the strength and resilience the working class were forced to adopt by their ruling class and, therefore, this narrative trope of *cinematic han* emerges via the film's adherence to the FNW's *minjung* perspective.

Furthermore, a side effect of *General's Son*'s depiction of the female struggle is the consequential emasculation of its male characters.<sup>69</sup> The contrast between the gangster fantasy held by the Korean males (as it will be discussed later in the chapter) and the struggles of the Korean females result in the male characters repeatedly being depicted as inferior, specifically through the film's representation of sex and employment. Shortly after Doo-han is released from prison, he witnesses a man attempting to beat his wife as she has had sex with a foreman of a construction site. It is implied during their fight she only did so to support their family and exclaims that she would stop her actions if the man gets 'a decent job and support the family'. In this moment the male, the expected head of the family unit, is emasculated by his wife due to his inability to provide for his family. His wife's actions also display the emasculation of the construction foreman (who is never seen on screen). Through the use of sexual seduction, the woman is able to manipulate the foreman to obtain the necessary materials needed for her family to survive, materials that she implies could only otherwise be obtained through her husband's employment. This scene occurs only two minutes into the film and assists to establish the divide between the male and female characters. Later in the film, Hwaja, has a confrontation with her husband in the restaurant after he asks her for money. Her husband is depicted as an academic, repeatedly stating that he went to Tokyo University while also using philosophical terms, such as 'Schopenhauer's pessimism' in his dialogue. However, the man, through his worn out clothing, dishevelled appearance and

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<sup>69</sup> Emasculation refers to an occurrence in which males face sexual frustration, are unable to assert their masculinity, or are socioeconomically incompetent due to outside forces, such as class divides, gender differences or familial concerns (Choi, 2010, p. 168).

blood-riddled cough, is represented as unemployed and destitute despite his education and presumed superiority. Hwaja berates him in front of Doo-han and at least a dozen of her colleagues, stating that his education is useless in helping them survive. Hwaja is able to support her family more effectively through her demeaning hostess job than her educated husband is able to do despite years of implied study. The characterisation of Hwaja, in turn, demonstrates the individual oppression of the Korean female, detailing explicitly why and how the females have to resort to extreme position in society to survive, all of which stems from their interactions, and most importantly, their differences, from the Korean males. Furthermore this occurrence, and the subsequent berating of the husband in front of a crowded restaurant, increases the emasculation of the male characters.

The depiction of sex in *General's Son* furthers this emasculation specifically through the two sex scenes involving Doo-han. In the first sex scene between Doo-han and a hostess, after minutes of conversation and build up, the encounter is over in roughly five seconds after which the woman pats Doo-han sympathetically on the back. Despite Doo-han's outward displays of masculinity and power throughout the narrative, these postulations are undermined by his body, revealing him to be less masculine than he perceives himself to be. However, later in the film Doo-han has a more successful encounter with Hwaja. Yet despite his own sexual performance finally matching his perceived masculinity, he in turn emasculates Hwaja's husband by stealing his wife away from him. Therefore, in *General's Son* the depiction of sex either emasculates the male characters due to the removal of their own perceived masculinity or by proving them unworthy of their female partners.<sup>70</sup> Through both the male and female divide, the character of Hwaja and its depiction of sex, *General's Son* demonstrates the FNW's *minjung* perspective by way of the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. The emasculation of the Korean males undermines their gangster behaviour, and, by contrast, the Korean females are made to appear more stable and effective through their working of high risk, low paying jobs. Therefore, this juxtaposition demonstrates the sturdiness and perseverance of Korea's working class during the Japanese Occupation via the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*.

## **The Second Korean New Wave in South Korean cinema**

As detailed in the previous chapter, the SNW is characterised through three categories: national realism, intimate cinema and genre cinema. The analysis contained in this thesis will study the genre cinema category, specifically focusing on the category's predisposition on spectacle, irony and violence. Irony was defined by Moon Jae-cheol as the contrast of black humour against elements of 'the real', specifically juxtaposing darkly humorous events against societal concerns, issues and anxieties (2006, pp. 49-51). Spectacle however has numerous definitions. For instance, Steve Neale defines it as 'a system which is especially concerned ... to display the visibility of the visible (cited in Lewis, 2014, p. 214). Meanwhile, operating from a Feminist perspective, Laura Mulvey states spectacle to be a "visual pleasure," through gender politics and narratology, describing spectacle as "to-be-looked-at-ness"' (cited in Lewis, p. 214). However, in this thesis, the concept of spectacle will be defined under Simon Lewis's theory, specifically the give and take between 'event' spectacle and 'object' spectacle. As stated by Lewis, event spectacle is:

that type of sequence most commonly thought of as spectacle in the accepted sense of the word. In it, things happen to the characters, often putting them at risk of death or serious injury, and it is thus intended to work with the narrative and to increase the emotional impact of the film. It is the car crash, the shoot out, the fight, the large explosion, the natural disaster. Event spectacle is cued strongly within the film's narrative architecture. The impact of an event spectacle may be heightened by the sense of anticipation that the film instills into the spectator through the narrative development. Event spectacle tends to generate excitement, astonishment, awe, possibly fear, arising out of the spectator's identification not only with the characters' predicament but also the event in itself. It operates within the generic confines of the film so that, for example, we would not expect to see the characters break into a spectacular musical number in the middle of a war film. (2014, pp. 217-218)

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<sup>70</sup> This is furthered by the implication that Doo-han was raped by the Japanese while he was in prison.

Complementary to the working definition of the South Korean historical film established in Chapter 2, spectacle is not just the burst of violent action, but it is also how the narrative works around this moment. The scenes between the moments of spectacle are consumed with its anticipation, with characters planning, dreading, and manoeuvring themselves to be present during the moment in which the spectacle occurs. In *Assassination* the event spectacle is the execution of an assassination plot while the narrative moments in between these sequences are consumed with the characters progressing to a narrative space where these attempts are possible. Therefore, the narrative and spectacle ebbs and flows, with each informing the progression and execution of the other. The second element of Lewis's spectacle theory is 'object' spectacle. As stated by Lewis

Object spectacle arises in that moment when the film asks the spectator to look at a particular object as a spectacle in itself. This will be related to the narrative in broad, often thematic terms, such as establishing the status of the hero or the spectacular backdrop to the action, so that the spectator's emotional alignment with certain narrative concerns that the film is advancing is reinforced [...] we may judge the effectiveness of object spectacle by the success with which it conjures up the requisite emotional response. If we feel awe and wonder at the desert landscape in *Lawrence of Arabia* [...] then the spectacle has achieved its desired effect. (2014, pp. 218-220).

Object spectacle concerns the elevation of specific objects to be spectacle in their own right. For instance, an antiquarian WWII rifle lying on a bench can be downplayed or become a spectacle depending on how the elements of film style position this object. The object can be glossed over and ignored if the cinematography does not focus on it. However, if the object is shot in a close up, with the non-diegetic score swelling as it is revealed on screen, the object is elevated to become a spectacle with the scene being designed to elicit a specific response from the audience towards this object. Therefore, through how certain elements are positioned and shot within a scene, any element can become a moment of spectacle.

*Assassination* details the plight of a team of highly skilled guerrilla soldiers, consisting of Ahn Okyun, Duk-sam and Chu Sang-ok, primarily known as Big Gun, who are put together by the Korean Provisional Government to infiltrate Japanese Occupied Seoul in order to eliminate two high ranking officials in the Japanese Government. The group's first target is the Japanese general Kawaguchi with their second being a Japanese allied Korean named Kang In-guk. Teaming up with two Korean mercenaries, Hawaii Pistol and Buddy, the team attempt to eliminate their targets and escape capture. *Assassination* is an SNW film whose narrative and formal construction is laced in irony. The film's ironic values are also where the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are made evident. However, it is an irony that only emerges through the examination of the film's spectacle and violence. *Assassination* revels in excess. The narrative is sprawling, spanning two different countries, Korea and China, whilst placing three different nations, Korea, China and Japan, into armed conflict. The action sequences are bloody and exuberant, with gunfire and explosions that result in the large-scale sets being destroyed. The morality of the characters is simple. The Koreans and Korea-allied Japanese are portrayed as invincible, selfless people, while the Japanese and Japan-allied Koreans are depicted as fragile, selfish and evil. The excessive violence and destruction of the action sequences and the dichotomy between the Korean and Japanese characters establishes a colourful and bombastic historical narrative that is built upon violence and spectacle.

However, it is within two scenes that occur near the end of the film that work to reshape the preceding two hours under an ironic framework and reveal the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. During the film's climax, as Hawaii Pistol and Buddy are parting ways with Ahn Okyun, Buddy turns to Ahn and tells her: 'Don't forget us'. Previously Buddy's dialogue has been littered with frustration, sarcasm and darkly humorous observations. For example, during an exchange with his offsider, Hawaii Pistol, he attempts to talk him out of helping the Korean resistance because, as he states: 'If you keep farting, sooner or later you shit'. For Buddy to suddenly speak a line filled with existential pathos is both out of character and curious. This scene is readdressed six minutes later, after the climax, and after liberation from the Japanese has been achieved. Fictionalised versions of the factual Korean independence leaders Kim Koo and Kim

Won-bong sit morosely and call a toast for the people who gave their lives for Korea's liberation. The toast is as follows:

Kim Won-bong: 'It is liberation. But so many people died. Choi Soo-bong, Na Seok-ju, Duk-sam, Chu Sang-ok... People will forget them, right? I'm sorry.'

Kim Koo: 'No, it's me who's sorry. I'm sorry to them. I am sorry.'

The Koreans whom Kim Won-bong names include many of the film's protagonists, all who died pursuing Korea's liberation. This moment is out of character for both men, who throughout the film have enunciated their lines with volume, power and pride. In this exchange their voices are weaker, to an almost whisper, filled with sorrow and regret. At the time of Korea's liberation, a goal nearly every main character in the film strived for, the same characters are saddened by the loss of those who gave their lives. It is also interesting to note that the film uses the historical figures of Kim Koo and Kim Won-bong, rather than any of the fictional characters, to apologise for all the casualties of the independence movement. In addition, they also voice concerns that, as time moves on from the Occupation, Korean citizens will forget the struggle of those who fought for their freedom. To reinforce this morose tone, the film concludes with a short montage of Ahn's positive memories of her deceased team members, including a repeat of the footage of Buddy telling her 'Don't forget us'. This dialogue from Buddy serves as the last spoken words in the film. Consequently, a film that was energetic, bright and colourful for the majority of its run time ends on a dour note, concluding with a plea for the liberation effort to be remembered. In these two scenes, the film's monumental history develops a theme of remembrance in line with the narrative trope of *cinematic han* of placing the individual inside the collective. The scene of Buddy talking to Ahn places this duty upon the individual, while the scene with the resistance leaders places it upon the collective. In this, the duty of remembering the sacrifice of the Korean resistance is placed up both individuals and Korean society simultaneously.

Thematically the film can be analysed to call for both an individual to remember the sacrifice of the deceased in their own lived experience, and also for Korean society to remember them in a similar fashion to how other countries remember war veterans. Therefore, this thematic development places the individual in the collective, highlighting

the importance for individuals, like Ahn, and the collective, like Korean society to remember the oppression Korea suffered under the Japanese. Consequently, the oppression of Korea under the Japanese is demonstrated to affect all levels of Korean society. This reflective, sad conclusion in turn becomes a representation of ‘the real’ (Moon, 2006, pp. 49-51). In this moment, the human cost of waging the independence movement is revealed.

If the finale of *Assassination* is the element of the real, the spectacle and violence of the prior two and a half hours becomes representative of black humour. This black humour is created through the juxtaposition of the film’s spectacle and violence. Furthermore, it is within these prior scenes where narrative structures reminiscent of the other narrative trope of *cinematic han*, that of the final thematic shift from oppression to hope despite the narrative beginning and ending with Koreans under oppression, can be witnessed to develop. The event spectacle of *Assassination* is evident in the uneven number of combatants on either side of the conflict. The film’s 13 action sequences all contain one to three Korean fighters or Korean-allied Japanese, against dozens of Japanese soldiers. These sequences range from shoot-outs, car chases and hand-to-hand combat, with the Korean characters often always being the victor. This is evident in the film’s opening action sequence, where one of the film’s main characters, Yem Seok-jin, single handedly faces a hotel of Japanese soldiers to assassinate his target. In this sequence Yem kills half a dozen of highly skilled soldiers but is only shot once. The rest of the action scenes have dozens of casualties on the Japanese side, upwards of 33 in the film’s climax, but only a maximum of two deaths occur on the side of the Koreans per scene. Only one of these sequences, where the Japanese assassinate Hawaii Pistol and Buddy, result in all of the Korean characters getting killed. Alongside this, when the Japanese are killed it only takes one to two bullets, yet when the Korean characters are killed it takes upwards of nine. Through these numbers, it is apparent that the Japanese soldiers are only cannon fodder and, as evident within the aforementioned sequence of Yem’s assassination attempt, cannot stop an amateur gunman armed with a pistol.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, the action

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<sup>71</sup> This is further evident through the accuracy of the Japanese and Korean characters. The Japanese rarely hit the Koreans despite being directly in front of them. However, the Koreans, even when shooting a machine gun downhill, on a motorcycle and from over a hundred metres away, still manage to hit their targets.

sequences of *Assassination* are embodiments of event spectacle. However, juxtaposed against this spectacle is the violence contained in each sequence. Each bullet wound is bloody and large, leaving a noticeable hole in the victim. Each gunshot is accompanied with a small, yet powerful blood geyser or leaves a lingering pink mist that hovers in the air for the duration of the shot. The wounds of *Assassination* look painful and agonising. For instance, in the sequence where Hawaii Pistol is killed, his eyes visibly turn from white to red as they fill with blood (figure 14). The juxtaposition between the stylised spectacle and the harsh violence creates an element of dark humour. The graphic nature of *Assassination*'s violence appears grim and, at times, realistic. However, the spectacle of each scene, including the uneven odds, meticulous stunts and the high body count works against these claims to realism, resulting in scenes that are both dark in their violence, yet enjoyable in their spectacle. Therefore, the concurrent existence of the realistic violence and grand spectacle in each action sequence makes these scenes darkly humorous.



Figure 14: Screenshot from *Assassination* (Dir. Choi Dong-hoon, 2015)

Due to the dark humour of the action sequences and the elements of social reality introduced in the film's closing moments, *Assassination* becomes laced with irony.<sup>72</sup> When Korean characters die in battle, their deaths are not dwelled upon in subsequent scenes, with the narrative moving forward to reach its next action sequence. As a result, the casualties of these sequences, and the emotional response the surviving characters have to their deaths, are only contained to the sequence in which the death occurs. Consequently, the character's death and its aftermath becomes another element of the scene's spectacle. It is only during the film's finale with Buddy's plea for remembrance and Kim Koo's and Kim Won-bong's sombre dialogue where the film grants time for these deaths to be mourned. The sudden change in tone from fun to dour during these closing scenes recontextualises all of the action sequences under a darker lens, where character deaths become emphasised over spectacle. Consequently, the element of 'the real' in these final scenes works with the dark humour of the action sequences to create a deeper, ironic meaning (Moon, 2006, pp. 49-51).

Furthermore, the narrative structure of *Assassination* under event spectacle reflects a narrative trope of *cinematic han*. Throughout the film, the Korean protagonists are poised under physical Japanese oppression, leading to the execution of the aforementioned action sequences. Therefore, the narrative during and between these sequences come as a direct consequence of the Korean characters positioning themselves to resist their oppression. However, despite Korea's liberation occurring in the narrative, the aforementioned climatic scenes of Kim Koo and Kim Won-bong change this oppression from physical to psychological. Despite the oppression of the Japanese being removed from the nation, each character is still visibly affected by their experience, prompting either emotive dialogue, such as the dialogue shared between these leaders, or physical action, specifically through Ahn assassinating Yem, who became a collaborator early in the film, decades after liberation. Therefore, these Korean characters are still under oppression, if only through their own memories and trauma of the Occupation. Yet, even though each character is depicted as struggling with the mental fallout of their

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<sup>72</sup> A notable element of this irony is the name of the assassination team's Seoul headquarters. Placed in the heart of occupied territory, the headquarters is a restaurant called *Café Anemone*. When pronounced phonetically Anemone sounds like 'An Enemy'. Consequently, the Korean resistance are pronouncing their location to the Japanese by stating that the café is filled with enemies.

experience, the aforementioned development of the theme of remembrance signals the film's primary thematic shift from oppression to hope. The call for remembrance from Buddy, Kim Koo and Kim Won-bong insinuate that the sacrifice of the Korean resistance in their fight for freedom will never be forgotten. In a fashion, they are immortalised by their martyrdom. Therefore, through the ideological precepts of the SNW period, the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are witnessed to emerge.

### **3.3 The mise en scene of *cinematic han***

As demonstrated thus far, the narrative and formal construction of the representation of the Japanese Occupation is not static, but is swayed by the ideological precepts of the cinematic period in which the film was produced. Yet amongst these evolving representations certain narrative tropes characteristic of the *cinematic han* aesthetic emerge through the ideological precepts of the cinematic period the film was produced. Furthermore, the mise en scene of each film establishes key modes of oppression through the use of costumes, locations, colour and performance. As established in Chapter 2, *cinematic han* create a historical narrative that has the movements of Koreans weighed down by their oppression, wearing their social class externally through their inferior clothing, and creates a visual image of the Korean environment that appears to be crushing their body and soul through their cramped, dour and dull locations and colour palette. Yet, simultaneously, these elements of mise en scene unify the Korean characters under their resilience against oppression, evoking *cinematic han*'s element of hope. In turn, this section will analyse the mise en scene of *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* to demonstrate the ways in which their formal construction evokes *cinematic han* and how they contribute to cinematically portraying Korea as a metaphorical prison.

#### **Background characters**

According to the *cinematic han* aesthetic, as established in Chapter 2, background characters subtly shift between energetic and passive movements depending on the presence or absence of the film's external agent. In turn, this formal element

demonstrates that the weight of oppression under their external agent affects how Koreans move and interact with each other and the world around them, creating an ebb and flow of Korean agency from scene to scene. Firstly, the background characters of *Nameless Stars* often appear directionless, performing only minimal movement with superfluous action behind the scene's main focus. This is due to the presence of Japanese characters in the scene, such as soldiers, police officers and even civilians. When in the presence of this oppressive, external agent, who are primarily witnessed during scenes taking place in public areas such as street corners or train stations, the background characters are seen merely walking or riding rickshaws.<sup>73</sup> These movements are also noticeably rigid, with characters often shown walking in straight lines as individuals or in pairs. The rickshaws follow the same linear pattern. However, in several shots, the rickshaw is shown stopping with a passenger either entering or disembarking the vehicle. As a result, the film's historical narrative appears lifeless, with minimal actions occurring in the backgrounds of scenes. In *Nameless Stars*, this is further apparent in a scene that occurs in a Japanese prison that is filled with Korean people. In this scene, over a dozen background characters are present. As the camera pans slowly right across several cells, these characters are shown sitting or lying down, remaining motionless throughout the duration of the scene. In the presence of the Japanese, this film's oppressive, external agent, the background characters remain near motionless throughout the scene's duration. Conversely, in a scene set in a restaurant, above which the Sungjin Society's headquarters is located, the background characters are shown performing more energetic actions. In this location, in which the Japanese rarely occupy, the Korean background characters, in this instance Korean students, eat and drink in silence, ordering buns, ripping them apart with their hands, and occasionally pour themselves a drink. While their actions are limited, they are noticeably more energetic than their passive actions when in the presence of the Japanese.

Secondly, in *General's Son* the energetic action of the background characters when the external agent is absent is witnessed within the film's opening scene. In this example, Kim Doo-han is seen sitting alone by a river. This scene contains a linear series of deep

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<sup>73</sup> Rickshaws are two-wheeled vehicles with capacity for two passengers, powered by a single person who pulls the rickshaw behind them as they run (Geens, 2011).

focus wide shots in which Doo-han is stationary while characters perform energetic actions in the background. Dozens of background characters work and play in or around the river. The energetic actions carried out in this sequence include: Korean women washing their clothes by dunking them in the water and scrubbing them by hand; Korean women hanging clothes from a line; a Korean man appearing annoyed as three children run and play around a fire he is nursing; and finally, a group of men standing in a circle, playing a game of dice which eventually ends as the men collect their winnings and leave. All of this action occurs within a small number of brief stationary shots, creating up to four focal points simultaneously per shot. In these scenes in which the external agent is absent, the lives of the Korean citizens exist as mini vignettes that occur concurrent to scene's main action. Two further scenes in particular make this apparent. In the first scene, Doo-han sits in a movie theatre. During this scene, one of the shots is a low angle, deep focus mid shot of Doo-han. In this shot, to the top right hand side of the frame, a man and a woman are visible. The man leans forward with a large smile on his face whilst bouncing slightly in his seat. The woman next to him gives him a concerned look and appears less than enthused about his company. In the second scene, that takes place in the hostess restaurant, Doo-han and his gang celebrate their victories over the Japanese gang. During this sequence, a man and a woman are visible in the background of several shots. This couple flirts openly. The man leans forward, while the woman leans back holding a glass of wine. Both appear to be enjoying the other's company but also appear coy and shy, laughing quickly, avoiding each other's glances and generally acting in an awkward manner. The performance of these characters signifies that they are either on a first date or in the early stages of a relationship. In these scenes, the Koreans are witnessed to be full of life, energy and movement, operating interdependent of the foreground action. However, in scenes in which the Japanese are present, specifically during action sequences in which a crowd gathers around a one-on-one fight, or in which bystanders observe the mass brawls, these characters are witnessed to have passive movements. In these sequences, the background characters stand or sit, their faces stoic, with no movement outside of scratching their bodies or shifting their body weight. This passive movement contrasts against the movement of these characters in scenes that do not contain the oppressive, external agent.

Finally, in *Assassination*, when the background characters are present in scenes in which the oppressive, external agent is not present, they also perform energetic actions interdependent of the scene's main action. Like *General's Son*, these movements are also comprised of small vignettes that the background characters perform behind the foreground action. These vignettes are not limited to one or two people, but are often highly populated and bustling with sound and movement, sometimes consuming the scene's main characters. Examples of these vignettes can be as trivial as a Korean man attempting and failing to haggle at a market on a busy street or as large as scenes that take place in the assassination team's headquarters, *Café Anemone*. The café is often filled to capacity with patrons, forcing the main characters to push their way through the crowd. In two separate scenes, small, yet detailed vignettes occur as the main characters occupy this space. In the first scene, a group of young men are seen in the corner of the location. These men are visible across several shots, including a high angle wide shot of the main characters entering the café and subsequent mid shots of the team making their way through the location. The men are dressed in identical black suits, share alcoholic drinks (noted by their amber colour), and occasionally laugh or cheer, implying this group is either celebrating or on a pub crawl. The next event takes place further on in this scene when the patrons of the café begin to dance. While the main characters of Ahn Okyun and Big Gun dance amongst a bustling dance floor, a man dances with a woman to the left of the screen. The man has one hand in his pocket and the other arm raised. He bobs and weaves awkwardly as his female partner dances in front of him laughing and giggling. The actions of this man, in their uncertain and unsteady nature, appear genuine and spontaneous, as if this is the first time the man has danced in front of his partner. Furthermore, the sequence involves a specific dance routine that Big Gun is teaching Ahn. This dance appears to be a pre-established dance, such as a waltz or tango, with choreographed steps. The entire café participates in this dance. Within this dance, each background character has their own reaction to it. Some are out of time, some do not participate, and some appear annoyed while others appear enthusiastic. However, in scenes in which the oppressive, external agent is present, background action is once again witnessed to be reduced to passive action, specifically with the characters only appearing to walk or stand, whilst appearing emotionless and stoic. Two key examples

include scene at a Japanese run train station where the background characters are forced to stand in reverence to a Japanese flag, and a scene where a Japanese lieutenant, named Kawaguchi, shoots a young Korean girl on the street. In both sequences, the background characters stand dejected, shoulders slumped, their faces emotionless, often with these characters staring into the distance. In both sequences, the Japanese presence is overt, with them surrounding the background characters with both their superior numbers and weapons, such as swords and guns. The stoic nature of the background characters in these examples in which the external agent is present stand in contrast to the scenes in the *Café Anemone* in which this agent is absent where the background characters display energetic movements.

Despite all three of the analysed films displaying various degrees of detail in regards to what occurs within its background action, one element remains consistent. When the external agent is absent, the background characters perform energetic actions, and when they are present, these same characters shift to only performing passive actions. As a result, the oppression of the Korean populace by their external agent is witnessed to metaphorically weigh them down, as if their limbs are made heavy by the presence of the Japanese. In this, oppression is portrayed as a physical force, repeatedly being placed and removed from the Koreans from scene to scene, affecting when and how they can perform specific actions. As a result, Korean agency is made to be dependent on their external occupiers, as if the Koreans only have control over their movements when their external agent is absent, turning their energetic actions into individual acts of defiance in the face of this oppression. Therefore, through the ways in which each film has implemented and stylised its background characters, all three films evoke *cinematic han*'s elements of mise en scene.

## **Locations**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the locations of the South Korean historical film under *cinematic han* establish a historical narrative in which the Korean character's bodies and souls are being crushed by an ever encroaching environment by placing them in small, cramped and rundown settings. Furthermore, it is within these locations that another element of *cinematic han*'s mise en scene emerges, that of colour. Under *cinematic han*,

the South Korean historical film has a consistent colour palette, specifically a clear contrast between dull colours in Korean occupied locations and vibrant colours in the locations occupied by their external agent. In the black and white historical films, in this chapter reflected by *Nameless Stars*, this is reflected by dark and bright environments respectively. In turn, the Korean locations have the metaphorical atmosphere and functionality of a prison cell, specifically a cold location that keeps the Koreans in perpetual oppression by their external agent. When analysed, the formal construction of *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* make evident their evocation of cinematic han's elements of mise en scene.

Across the representations of the Japanese Occupation contained in *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* there are a total of 54 unique locations: 16 in *Nameless Stars*; 17 in *General's Son*; and 21 in *Assassination*. The locations shown in these films can be divided into five subcategories: Korean streets; Korean households; Korean controlled buildings; Japanese households; and Japanese controlled buildings. Across these films the Korean street locations are portrayed from many different angles and viewpoints. When the depictions of this specific location is examined it becomes apparent that these streets are dull with limited colour. The Korean streets appear monochromatic, with each building either made of grey brick or brown wood. When shown in conjunction with the roads, which alternate between being either dirt or paved, the visual of a Korean street becomes washed out, plain and almost two dimensional. In fact, despite *Nameless Stars* being filmed in black and white, this monochromatic colour scheme is still apparent due to every road, wall or building being either bright white or tepid grey. In addition, these locations have a notable absence of any vegetation, and by extension the colour green, leaving them drained of colour and giving them an appearance of a lifeless concrete jungle. Furthermore, each building is small, no more than two storeys, and less than ten metres across in length. Each building also appears dilapidated with dirty bricks, splintering wooden beams or broken windows. This state of disrepair also extends to the roads which are almost always wet with large, deep potholes. The roofs of these buildings are shown in one of four varieties: tin; canvas;

grey giwa tiles; or flat with a balcony area.<sup>74</sup> Every building is directly next to the other, with only a small alley between them. With the uniform architecture and the cramped perception of every building, Korean streets appear claustrophobic, almost closing around the people occupying them. This confined nature is exacerbated by the cluttered nature of the streets. Not only are the buildings small and the roads narrow, the exteriors of these buildings are littered with market stalls, rubbish, people and vehicles.

Consequently, the Korean streets appear more cramped than they are by design. All of these elements make the average Korean street look like a slum, almost as if they were shanty towns. The general disrepair of the buildings and the lack of space for people to occupy makes Korea appear poor. The nature of the street's layout give them the appearance of a prison, not allowing the citizens to escape its confines. This is further demonstrated by the electricity poles that litter the street. Wires stretch between the poles in a haphazard pattern, creating a net like design, cementing the notion of the Korean streets being a form of cage.

Amongst the representation of the Korean streets in the films being analysed, several key items are noteworthy. Firstly, there are often Japanese flags hanging outside of several buildings. When this occurs, there are two flags hanging from poles, placed diagonally across each other. These flags are at their most visible over the entrance to the department store location in *Assassination* and the entrance to the schools depicted in *Nameless Stars*. The Japanese flag present is the Japanese national flag which is made of a bright red circle in the middle of a white rectangle. The flags are often visible in the backgrounds of shots, often out of focus behind the main action of the scene. Yet due to the contrast of the white and red of the flag against the brown and grey of the Korean streets, these flags are always visible regardless of where they are placed in the shot, reflecting the omnipresent nature of the Japanese occupiers. The Japanese encroachment is also evident in the appearance of the Japanese alphabet on nearly every sign, poster

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<sup>74</sup> Giwa tiles are traditional Korean roof tiles that are made of clay. This style of roof was made by spreading a layer of dirt over the wooden boards that had been placed over the top of the roof's rafters. The tiles were then interlocked with each other across the entire roof giving it a ribbed design often coming to a point at the summit of the roof. This style of roof was used during the Joseon dynasty of Korean history to designate the building as important and that the occupants were of a high status in society (Jackson & Koehler, 2012).

and banner. Despite the Korean alphabet being present in the Chongno district in *General's Son* and the English alphabet being visible once in *Assassination*, all signage (as notable in the movie posters visible in *General's Son*) is in Japanese. Wooden signs hang in windows, posters are fixed to electricity poles and walls, and banners hang on the sides of buildings, each containing the Japanese alphabet. While not the focus of any shot, this signage subtly adds to the representation of Japan's suppression of the Korean culture. The visuals of the Korean streets, when analysed in conjunction with the Japanese paraphernalia, create links between the location's condition and the events of the Japanese Occupation. As a result, the condition of the Korean street location can be interpreted to be a direct result of the Japanese actions during the Occupation. Furthermore, by making the Japanese flag the most vibrantly coloured object in most scenes, it furthers the Japanese ownership of the Korean nation. Specifically, the locations occupied by the Koreans are not truly theirs but the property of their external agent, keeping them under oppression even when the Japanese are absent.

Korean households are another prominent location in the South Korean films that depict the Japanese Occupation. The poverty of the Korean people becomes more apparent through this location. Each house is designed after traditional Korean hanok architecture, which dates back to the *Joseon* dynasty (1392-1897), connecting the Koreans' houses to their history.<sup>75</sup> The interior of the Korean households reveal basic living conditions with plain furnishings, such as bamboo floors, wooden furniture, white walls and small living space. The houses do not contain evidence of personal expression or overt social status, instead only serving as a space for Koreans to occupy. Routinely, in the Occupation film families sleep together in the house's main room, despite the house visibly containing multiple rooms in exterior shots. The Koreans sleep on the ground level, in traditional Korean bed rolls that comprises two white, thick doonas. The poverty of the Koreans is also depicted in their food, consisting mostly of white rice, kimchi, seaweed and other simple items, eaten with plain wooden chopsticks. All of these elements showcase that the Korean households are locations that only serve two purposes, being a place to sleep

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<sup>75</sup> The hanok style of architecture has the house built in a 'U' or 'L' structure, comprising of multiple buildings and a large central courtyard. The idea of this style of architecture was to place the occupants of the house in one with nature, allowing the structure of the house to be dictated by its natural surroundings, rather than reconfiguring nature itself to build the house (Patel, 2016).

and eat. These locations have little to no luxury visible, and as a result, appear as places for Koreans to occupy briefly, not to live permanently, making their world appear as one without any sentimental attachment to location or objects.

The basic nature of the Korean households extends to other locations controlled by the Koreans, which include the headquarters of: the Sungjin Society in *Nameless Stars*, the Chongno gang in *General's Son*, and the Korean Provisional Government in *Assassination*. These locations are primarily used to plan operations against the Japanese soldiers and yakuza and this is reflected in the location's construction and organisation. These headquarters have two elements in common. Firstly, each has an appearance of luxury as if to reflect their importance for the Independence Movement. However, even this appearance is stripped back. For example, the movie theatre that acts as the Chongno gang's headquarters in *General's Son* has red velvet chairs and doors, and wood panelling on the walls. *Café Anemone*, the base of operations for Ahn's team in *Assassination*, has potted plants, elaborate glassware and stained glass in numerous windows. Yet these luxuries are contained to the public areas of the base, a theatre and a café, respectively. The private areas of the bases where the Koreans plan their operations are once again cramped and narrow, with simple wooden furniture and little room to manoeuvre. Furthermore, the walls are either a smooth, grey colour or contain a two-tone paint scheme, often with white covering the top half of the wall and blue covering the bottom half. The decadence of the public area transitions into the simple, yet practical space that dominates the Korean locations. The second common element of these areas is their usage of space. The locations are small and poorly furnished, but practical, appearing to be used, often with each space being cluttered with items: paper is stacked onto shelves, maps are laid out on tables and there is a general messiness to each room. The clutter of each room serves a practical purpose as each item, consisting of files, maps and plans, are used to plan operations against the Japanese. For example, in *Assassination* the Korean Provisional Government's headquarters has barrels of rolled up paper, a map attached to the walls and a Korean flag hung prominently from the ceiling. While cluttered, the items contained in these locations are depicted to serve a single purpose, to liberate Korea from the Japanese. Furthermore, the dull colouration of these locations, combined with their cramped nature, acts as a visual reminder of the

enormity of the liberation effort. These small, dour and lifeless locations, as reflected through their colour palette and narrow construction, gives them an appearance of the world closing in on the characters, that the vastly superior Japanese threat has backed them into a corner and is about to consume them. Therefore, the actions that occur in these rooms appear trivial, as if the task of liberation is too big for the characters who occupy this space.

Both the Korean households and Korean controlled locations provide a contrast to the locations occupied by the Japanese and Japanese collaborators. To begin, the Japanese households are antithetical to the small nature of the Korean households, with each portraying extreme wealth. The antiquarian details of these houses also position the Japanese citizens and their Korean collaborators as decadent, narcissistic and arrogant. The Japanese homes appear to have longer corridors, higher roofs and wider floor space than the Korean households. Each house is enormous, allowing the antiquarian objects to be widely dispersed, leaving long stretches of empty space. This extra space is evident in the bedrooms of the Japanese and Japan-allied Koreans, specifically that each character has their own room. These rooms contain numerous possessions and their beds mirror a western style: with raised bedframes and thick mattresses covered with several sheets and blankets. The western style architecture is also visible in the house's exterior. Many of the houses are constructed from bricks, are multiple storeys high and have flatter roofs than the Korean houses. Significantly, the residences of the collaborators reflect the same traditional hanok architecture of the Korean households but they are noticeably larger. For example, the house of the collaborator Kang In-guk in *Assassination* is double the size of Sang-hun's home, one of the founders of the Sungjin Society in *Nameless Stars*.

While the houses of the Korean characters demonstrate poverty, the houses of the Japanese demonstrate wealth, establishing a clear class divide between Korea and Japan through architecture. Consequently, these houses artificially position the Japanese and their collaborators at the top of Korea's social hierarchy. This idea is evident in the interiors of the Japanese households, demonstrating a clear taste for impractical luxury and decadence. Nearly every room in the Japanese dwelling is lined with reflective

wallpaper with floral-like curvy and wavy designs. Conversely, the walls of the Korean houses rarely include colour or elaborate designs. This wallpaper is a reoccurring motif within numerous Japanese houses in these films and come in a variety of colours including gold, green, blue and white. The wallpaper of the Japanese households is aggressive in appearance, often overpowering the room's furnishings in design and colour. Consequently, the wallpaper of the Japanese houses assists in establishing the artificial class divide Japan instilled over Korean society. Furthering this class divide is the inclusion of luxurious furnishings in every Japanese house. These furnishings include padded chairs, gramophones, patterned table clothes and most commonly, low-hanging chandeliers. Also, the food the Japanese are seen eating is often roasted meat with potatoes and steamed vegetables. This food is visibly more than required by the house's occupants, injecting a sense of decadence within the Japanese houses. It is interesting to note that each house has strong ties to the Japanese culture, specifically the *Edo* period and the Samurai custom.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the scenes set in these houses traditional Japanese iconography is present. These icons include paper sliding doors, bonsai trees, ornamental samurai swords in wooden display racks and many pieces of Japanese artwork ranging from calligraphy to simple paintings, reflective of the *Edo* period art style of a single image on a beige background. This art is depicted on both canvas and ribbed panels throughout the house. These visible ties to Japanese cultural heritage is an ironic inclusion as the Occupation's main objective was the systematic destruction of Korea's bonds to their culture. Finally, due to the spacious and empty nature of the houses each appears cold and uninviting. The houses do not appear lived in with no dirt or mess visible. The floors are always polished, giving the houses a glossy, bronze hue, and the windows are always uncovered. As a result the Japanese houses appear sterile. This, coupled with the decadent nature of the antiquarian objects, the

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<sup>76</sup> During the *Edo* period (1603-1867) Japanese culture began to emerge into a decadent, thriving culture (Vollmer, 2015). This was achieved through the isolation of Japan from the international community. The English, Spanish and Portuguese were expelled from the nation and trade with Korea and China became heavily regulated (Hendry, 2013). In the *Edo* period cultural items such as theatre, paintings and haiku poems began to thrive with the development of woodblock print, allowing for mass distribution around the country (Vollmer, 2015). It was in this era that the culinary dish of sushi was also created (Yonekawa, 2013). The *Edo* period helped to establish many cultural items and traditions that continue to define Japanese culture in contemporary society. For more information regarding the *Edo* period, see: Matsunosuke, 1997.

houses appear more akin to shrines to wealth or museums of Japanese artefacts, as opposed to a liveable space.

The decadent and sterile nature of the Japanese households also extends into the Japanese controlled buildings. For example, locations such as the Japanese Consulate in *Assassination*, the high school in *Nameless Stars* and the Japanese restaurants in *General's Son* contain much of the same antiquarian elements as the Japanese households. These buildings are made of orange, red and yellow bricks, surrounded by lush green grass and bushes. During exterior shots, the colour palette of each Japanese building creates an obvious contrast to the monochromatic design of the Korean buildings, characteristic of the *cinematic han* aesthetic.<sup>77</sup> Each Japanese building is large and bold, each in a state of immaculate care. In interior shots the wealth of the Japanese nationality is reinforced. Antiquarian items such as chandeliers, stained glass, padded wooden chairs, floral motif wallpaper, venetian blinds, hand crank wine pourers and marble and granite pillars are visible in these locations. None of these items are used during the scenes they are present in, instead, they are conspicuous in the backgrounds of various shots, subtly indicating the wealth of the Japanese.<sup>78</sup> Examples of Japanese artwork is again visible throughout these locations. This artwork is notable in the high school in *Nameless Stars* where painted portraits of what can be presumed to be the Japanese emperor hang in many prominent areas in this location, such as in classrooms and hallways. Japanese flags are also displayed prominently throughout these locations. These flags vary between small, framed flags, noticeable above the blackboard in the classrooms of *Nameless Stars*, or humongous flags that visibly block corridors and access routes in the Japanese consulate of *Assassination*. However, it is important to note that many of the Japanese controlled buildings are accessible by the Korean populace. Consequently, the decadence and cultural artefacts of the Japanese, such as flags and *Edo* artwork, are always perceptible to the Koreans. As the Koreans live in poverty and squalor, the Japanese flaunt their wealth and power by wasting it on useless

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<sup>77</sup> In *Nameless Stars* this is evident in the tone of the black and white imagery, whereby the whites and blacks of the Japanese locations appear brighter than those present in Korean locations.

<sup>78</sup> In *Nameless Stars* these historical icons are only present in scenes set in the office of the Japanese headmaster. In classrooms that contain a mixture of Korean and Japanese students, no such decadence exists, furthering the class divide between the two nationalities.

items, as notable by the food consumed by both nationalities. A have and have not culture is created through the contrast of Korean territories and Japanese territories. As a result, the representation of these locations establishes a clear separation between the Korean and Japanese cultures within the films of the Japanese Occupation. Due to the small, narrow and dour locations and colours of the Korean locations, these appear to be temporary housing, keeping the Koreans in a perpetual state of displacement, as if they have nowhere to belong in their own nation. Conversely, through the warm, vibrant and decadent locations occupied by the Japanese, they appear to be firmly established as the ruling class of this nation, or by extension, the true owners of the land. As a result, the Koreans are kept in poverty and societal disadvantage by the Japanese, their homes as cold and lifeless as prison cells, reflecting their position in society during the Occupation. Therefore, regardless of when each film was produced the formal construction of the locations and colour palettes in *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* all evoke these elements of *cinematic han*'s mise en scene and the modes of oppression that each demonstrate.

### **Costumes**

In Chapter 2 it was established that under *cinematic han* the costumes of the Korean characters are always of a visibly inferior quality and style to the costumes of the external agent, specifically in regards to the background characters. This, in turn, makes the Korean characters wear their oppression externally, as if they were wearing their social status on their bodies. The primary example of this element of mise en scene amongst *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* are the suits worn by the Koreans and their external agent, in this case, the Japanese. The majority of the Korean men wear suits, as clearly seen during scenes set at *Café Anemone* in *Assassination*, and at the Chongno gang's movie theatre in *General's Son*. These suits are often three piece, with white shirts, vests and a jacket, often all in black. When Korean women wear suits the character often represents the extremes of society. These women are either someone of great importance, such as the Korean handler of the assassination team in *Assassination*, or of low social standing, such as the female escorts in *General's Son*. The Korean women's suits consist of a blazer and an undershirt, while wearing either

pants or skirts. However, these suits often contain more colour than the males, alternating between brown, burgundy and white. In accordance with the *cinematic han* aesthetic, regardless of the gender of the individual wearing it, every suit a Korean wears is dirty, torn (often visibly repaired with different colour fabric) and looks as if they are made from cheap material. The image of a suit is traditionally associated with wealth and a high status in society, but how they are worn and presented by the Koreans, regardless of if they are a sex worker or a high ranking independence fighter, reflects a lower class. Consequently, the symbolism of this item of clothing, juxtaposed with how the Koreans wear them, can be interpreted as the Koreans attempting to give themselves a sense of superiority and importance in a culture that oppresses them. In turn, these costumes also evoke the element of hope characteristic of *cinematic han* by becoming a symbol of resilience against their external agents.

Furthermore, the suits the Japanese men wear throughout these films have a similar style to the suits worn by the Korean men, specifically that they are also black, three piece suits complete with white shirts, vests and jackets. Many of the Japanese men also have an accessory to accentuate their clothing. These accessories range from hats - such as trilby hats, bowler hats or large top hats - pocket watches, gold buttons, scarves and more. While small, each accessory is a token of wealth, signifying the high position of the Japanese in the social hierarchy. Unlike the dishevelled appearance of the Korean suits, the Japanese suits are spotless, pressed, made of high grade material and appear to be new. Both Korean and Japanese men wear the same clothing but the way they appear and how they are worn separate the two nationalities. Consequently, it is possible to interpret this occurrence as the Korean men mimicking the fashion of the Japanese, attempting to view themselves as equal or superior to their occupiers. The analysis of the design principles of the costumes worn by the Koreans and their oppressive, external agents show that this element of mise en scene is a consistent visual element in all of the Occupation films analysed, with each evoking *cinematic han* as a result.

### **3.4 Cinematic representation of the past and socio-cultural context of production**

Thus far this chapter has conducted an analysis of South Korean films that represent the Japanese Occupation, revealing that this subset of films are affected by the ideological precepts of their cinematic period through which the narrative tropes and elements of mise en scène of an unifying cinematic aesthetic I have identified as *cinematic han* emerges. As detailed via the working definition of the South Korean historical film established via the discussions held in Chapters 1 and 2, *cinematic han* is a central, decisive aesthetic that differentiates the South Korean historical film from their Western counterparts. Furthermore, *cinematic han* is integral to the historiophoty of the South Korean historical film, as it is through the film's evocation of this aesthetic where the historical knowledge of this subset of films can be identified. This historical knowledge, as established in Chapter 1, is developed through the symbolic links the historical film creates between itself and the socio-cultural context of its production.

In consequence of each film's formal construction, which as previously demonstrated evokes *cinematic han*, the elements of the real world the film's narrative, visual and aural elements allude to are likewise aspects of Korean oppression. The analysis of *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* reveals symbolics links to their production contexts that each detail a figure of Korean oppression, either an external force, such as North Korea, or an internal one, such as the South Korean government. These links then demonstrate either a societal fear or anxiety of the loss of Korean liberty and a cultural return to a form of oppression, or a cultural hope to transform a previous oppressor, such as Japan, into an ally of Korean society. Therefore, as revealed in this section, not only are the narrative and formal elements of the South Korean historical film poised to represent Korean oppression, but the symbolic links to their production contexts are likewise connected to this oppression. In this section, each film will be discussed and analysed in order to demonstrate how the representation of Korean resistance groups in South Korean Occupation films can create these symbolic links between the film and its production context, and how the historiophoty of these films reveal a specific societal fear of a return to Korean oppression.

#### **The socio-cultural context of the 1950s**

The decade of the 1950s was a period of recovery for South Korea. The three years of the Korean War proved devastating to the nation with a reported 940,000 deaths, 660,000 of which were civilian casualties. The destruction of infrastructure was also monumental with an estimated 6.8 Billion USD in damages. Of this destruction, ‘Almost 20 percent of all housing and 44 percent of manufacturing facilities were destroyed. 60 percent of roads and 52 percent of hydro-electric and thermal power plants were destroyed’ (Moon & Park, 2003, p. 79). Due to the widespread death and destruction of the Korean War, the 1950s became defined as a period of reconstruction and recovery not only for the nation, but for families who were either separated by the newly implemented demilitarised zone between the North and the South, or whose members were killed during the conflict. In the period following the war, South Korea became one of the poorest countries in the world, with each person making roughly only \$64 per year (Tran, 2011). Furthermore, food was also scarce during this decade, with people being reported scouring the hills for edible herbs and plants between autumn and spring harvests (Oh, 2010). However, as the decade progressed, South Korea began to recover. With the help of foreign investment, such as the United Nations Korea Reconstruction Agency and the United States bilateral assistance program, as well as the establishment of numerous government ministries and committees, specifically the national Committee for Reconstruction, the South Korean economy grew and stabilized by the end of the decade (Frank, Kwang & Westphal, 1975, p. 12; Moon & Park, 2003, pp. 81-82).

During this period there was a very real fear that the armistice that ended the war could be broken at any time and the conflict would resume. While this fear would prove detrimental to the economic recovery of the nation, it was also reflected in the narratives of many South Korean films produced during this era.<sup>79</sup>

As previously discussed, the historical representation in *Nameless Stars*, whose formal construction evokes the narrative tropes and elements of mise en scène characteristic of *cinematic han*, positions the Japanese Occupation conflict under an anti-communist

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<sup>79</sup> During the 1950s, Seoul depended heavily on foreign aid for both infrastructure and defence. During this time, ‘Foreign aid constituted a third of total budget in 1954, rose to 58.4 percent in 1956, and was approximately 38 percent of the budget in 1960’. Peaking at \$365 million USD in foreign aid in 1956, South Korea maintained an average of \$200 million USD annually until the mid-1960s. However, the need to maintain a large army in case of war erupting on the Peninsula caused a high rate of inflation that did not stabilise until 1958 (The Syngman Rhee Era, 1946-60, n.d.).

perspective due to the ideological precepts of the Golden Age. *Nameless Stars* contextualises the Japanese Occupation under a powerful nationalist stance, the paranoia of the Korean populace of a Japanese/Communist takeover, a black and white morality in which Koreans are always morally in the right despite their allegiances to the Japanese and, finally, the ideal of noble sacrifice, specifically that to die in the pursuit of liberation was honourable. As a result, the film's representation of the Occupation becomes one where despite the oppression and paranoia of the Japanese occupiers, the Korean populace are always ready to die honourably for their ideals. *Nameless Stars* was produced during a socio-cultural context of post-war reconstruction and a cultural anxiety of renewed aggression by North Korea. Therefore, this historical representation is significant when analysing the film in conjunction with this present socio-cultural context. Within the film's representation of the Japanese Occupation there is a substantial emphasis on children and teenagers taking on the struggle against the Japanese Occupation in the absence of their fathers and other adults. The narrative depicts this youth as ready and willing to fight against oppression and uses nationalist overtones to encourage them to fight for South Korean interests in the place of their absent family figures. The choice of the Japanese Occupation as a backdrop to this narrative can be viewed as deliberate. The Japanese Occupation was an era where many Korean citizens, regardless of age or geographical position, united to fight for independence. In the period of post-war reconstruction, with the fear of war breaking out once more, the Occupation period was an ideal backdrop for a message of the youth assuming the fight for South Korean freedom against communism should the North invade once more. Therefore, in *Nameless Stars* the Occupation becomes a stand in for a universal South Korean struggle against oppression and foreign occupiers. With the high civilian casualty rate, coupled with the close proximity of warfare to all Korean citizens, the youth of South Korea had all been in some way been affected by the war, either through the deaths of friends or family members, or by witnessing the conflict firsthand.

Due to the death or forced separation of those who already fought or participated in warfare, the film's representation of the Occupation, can be interpreted as a call for the Korean youth to assume the mantle of the previous generation in their fight to protect their country against foreign invaders, and for this youth to pass it onto their children,

thus passing on the struggle indefinitely. This ideal is evident within *Nameless Stars'* central plot point about the Sungjin Society. The Sungjin Society is an independence movement founded by Korean high school students from schools located across the entire Korean peninsula. The movement is also highly organised with leaders and a clearly defined hierarchical structure. It is stated that the Sungjin society was founded to keep the national spirit 'alive and burning'. In the same scene where this idea is presented the members clearly state the goal of the society as being: 'We are opposed to Japanese Education in Korean schools. Together we will strive to get our nation back and we will fight for freedom against the colonial rule'. *Nameless Stars* proposes that the students are willing to continue the fight for independence, risking imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Japanese if caught, to attempt to regain the country's independence. This continues into the film's climax where the Sungjin Society organises a mass riot with hundreds of Korean students against the Japanese. Leaders of this riot rally the participants with dialogue such as: 'We cannot just sit and wait for the oppression to go away' and 'Yes, we must stand up and fight!' Amid the riot Sang-hun raises the Korean flag high, leading the crowd in a chant of 'Hurray'. During this moment, he is shot in the arm but continues marching and chanting. Through these exchanges the film appears to be appealing to the Korean youth that they can, and should, take the country's future into their own hands in order to free the nation from foreign invaders. As already established, during the Golden Age the South Korean government rebranded the Japanese under a 'red' ideology (Kim, 2010, p. 18). Consequently, the passionate resistance against the Japanese ideology held by the Sungjin Society contains sub-textual allusions to the anti-communism agenda of the South Korean government, furthering the film's connections to the Golden Age cinematic period. Therefore, as the representation of the Sungjin Society can be interpreted to be suggesting that the youth will have to one day take up the fight for the nation's freedom, symbolic links can be drawn between the film and the socio-cultural context of its production due to its connections to the 1950s socio-cultural anxiety of a renewed Korean War.

Furthering the symbolic links between *Nameless Stars'* and the socio-cultural context of its production are notable scenes in which the parents and teachers of the Korean youth

are shown passing on the anti-communist struggle. This is encapsulated in two exchanges from Sang-hun's father and his teacher, Mr Song. At the beginning of the film Sang-hun's father has a conversation with his wife. In this conversation, his father states: 'The day for revenge will surely come. If we can't do it, our children will. If they don't succeed, then their children will. We must get our country back'. Sang-hun's father then hands his wife a taegukgi, a Korean national flag, to give to Sang-hun when the time is right. This flag is the one Sang-hun raises during the aforementioned climatic riot. During this scene Sang-hun's father is shown placing national interests before the lives of himself and his son, burdening Sang-hun with the nationalist struggle from a young age. After this scene Sang-hun's father leaves to fight for independence and is not shown on screen for the remainder of the film. Despite this character abandoning his family to fight for Korean interests, and leaving the family without money or a father figure during the height of the Occupation, the character is always highly regarded by the other characters. When he is referred to characters speak in reverential tones and dialogue. In one scene Sang-hun's teacher Mr Song describes his father as, 'a great father'. As Sang-hun is one of the founding members of the Sungjin Society, not only did he accept his father's call to action, but actively embraced it. Despite the father's actions being objectively selfish, the film positions his ideology as a positive one, which in turn also helped to shape Sang-hun into the selfless and passionate man he is depicted as being. This nationalist, anti-communist ideology is not only embraced by the film, but is also shown to have a positive impact on the lives of those who follow it. As a result, the film further conjoins its representation of this geopolitical conflict, which evokes *cinematic han*, to the socio-cultural context of its production.

The second exchange comes from Sang-hun's teacher, Mr Song. During a class in which Mr Song is referring to the Japanese language, he states: 'This character means, unforgiveable enemies that have ruined the country and killed your family and friends. Even just one ship or just one soldier can fight the enemy if...' When called out by a Japanese teacher, who says that he should not be 'corrupting the minds of the students,' Mr Song simply replies, 'I am just teaching what's true'. In the same scene, when Mr Song quizzes the class about the content of the lesson, a Korean student stands and states, 'It means, if I kill all my enemies, my life will not be wasted. I will die in peace',

to which Mr Song agrees.<sup>80</sup> When viewing the film as a whole, the Japanese teacher is revealed to be right in his concerns as the student's resistance against the Japanese, stemming from the influence of Mr Song, results in many students either receiving grievous injuries or dying as a result of the conflict. Yet due to the nationalist stance of the film, its anti-communist allusions, and the narrative viewpoint of Sang-hun and other Sungjin society members, the conflict against the Japanese is labelled as a desired outcome and the death and injury that comes as a result are acceptable losses. This is particularly evident in the aftermath of the film's three action sequences. In these sequences, many students are beaten with fists, beams of wood and even knives. Despite many shots of students receiving massive blows, or in one case, being stabbed by three knives simultaneously, not only are there no bodies on the ground after the fight but no dialogue is dedicated to addressing the casualties of these conflicts. Despite the actions and ideals of Sang-hun's father and Mr Song visibly getting the students injured or killed, the film positions their nationalist outcries, and their symbolic fight against communism, as the right course of action.

Yet during the climax of one of the film's action sequences, *Nameless Stars* appears to deviate from its single-minded call to action to show how this call actually affects the students. Mr Song, who observes Japanese police and teachers laughing and enjoying the fight, decides to walk into the skirmish to stop the conflict. Mr Song pleads with the students with cries of 'Stop, look at yourselves', but they do not stop, forcing Mr Song to fight alongside them. In the aftermath of the fight, Mr Song wanders dazed and confused, forced to face the grim reality of the rhetoric he was teaching the students in his class. In this instance, Mr Song's ideology is put into practice and he is horrified by what he sees. For a moment, the film, through Mr Song's shaken being, appears to be

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<sup>80</sup> During this lesson, Mr Song also teaches the students Korean history, specifically that of the Korean Admiral Yi Sun-sin. Admiral Yi is a significant historical figure in Korean culture, specifically due to his actions during the battle of Myeongnyang in 1597. This battle was Korea's last defence against a total Japanese incursion, which if lost, would have made Korea a permanent Japanese territory. The battle pitted Yi's fleet of 12 warships against the Japanese fleet of over 300, with Yi emerging victorious (Kenning, n.d.; Kyung, 2017, p. 71). This detail is significant because it creates a parallel between the character's struggles against Japanese Occupation and a seminal Korean military victory, as both were fought with minute Korean forces against a significantly larger Japanese power. As Mr Song creates symbolic allusions between the Japanese Occupation and this historic victory, the film can be interpreted as symbolically alluding to the belief that its present socio-cultural struggle against communism and North Korea will result in a similar decisive victory.

questioning the ideology it is passing onto the Korean youth and shows the dangers of an anti-communist struggle when put into practice. However, this is short lived as once the scene has concluded, this concept is never referred to again, thus returning the film to the call to nationalist action and anti-communist rhetoric it was being shaped into previously. Due to the depictions of the Sungjin Society, the positive narrative reinforcement of Sang-hun's father's and Mr Song's ideology, as well as the Golden Age's anti-communist influence, *Nameless Stars*' historical narrative of the Japanese Occupation, which evokes *cinematic han*, can be interpreted as an attempt to appeal to the Korean youth to take up the fight against South Korea's foreign invaders. In turn, this analysis draws direct parallels between the film and its socio-cultural context of the post-war reconstruction era, consequently enhancing the text's historical knowledge.

### **The socio-cultural context of the 1980s**

The 1980s were a turbulent time for South Korean society. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, the decade leading up to South Korea's democratisation was defined by the significant conflicts between the *minjung* movement and the South Korean government, specifically the Gwangju uprising of 1980 and the June Struggle series of protests which forced Roh Tae-woo to transition South Korea to a democracy in 1987. The significance of the democratisation of the South Korean government to the *minjung* can only be properly understood through the knowledge of what transpired in the 1960s. In April of 1960, a mass uprising by the South Korean populace, known as the April Revolution, was led against the Rhee Syngman government. The preludes to this revolution occurred in March when the citizens of Masan entered city hall to ask for voting slips as their names had been removed from the voting rosters. This crowd eventually grew into thousands, resulting in the police being called to disperse the voters. However, the protest eventually grew violent with protestors storming, and destroying, several government buildings, including police stations, as police officers fired tear gas into the crowds. This battle between the police and citizens resulted in the police firing live ammunition into the crowd, killing and injuring several people (Hayes, 2006, p. 253). According to William Hayes, in the aftermath of this battle, 'The police arrested hundreds, tortured dozens, fabricated evidence, and refused to release the identities of

those in custody or even the number of casualties from the violence' (2006, p. 253). The entire incident was described by police as a communist plot. This protest was followed by another in Seoul on April 18<sup>th</sup>, when 3,000 students marched on the national assembly to demand a new and fair election (Hayes, 2006, p. 254). Another protest the following day, this time with 50,000 students, fought through police lines to demonstrate outside of the central government building in Seoul. Government officials ordered the police to open fire on the crowd, killing 20 and injuring hundreds. In the evening, protests had erupted in a number of South Korean cities including Busan, Daegu, Gwangju, and Daejon. By the day's end over 186 people had died and 1,600 had been injured. The government declared martial law, banned demonstrations, and placed soldiers in control of the affected cities (Hayes, 2006, p. 254).

On April 26<sup>th</sup>, 100 university professors marched in Seoul, rallying hundreds of thousands of students and civilians, in their demands to have Rhee Syngman removed from office (Hayes, 2006, p. 254). The following day Rhee resigned and fled into exile, blaming the government's corruption on his vice president, Lee Ki-pung. On April 27<sup>th</sup>, Lee and his family committed suicide over the allegations (April 19<sup>th</sup> Revolution, 2016). The day after Rhee was removed from power, a caretaker government was formed led by Heo Jeong, who was later succeeded by Yun Po-sun after a general election on July 29<sup>th</sup> (Jung, 2002, pp. 88-89). The purpose of this new government was to reform the government towards the needs and wants of the *minjung* movement, specifically in the removal of government corruption and the punishment of business conglomerates that prospered as a result of the corruption of the Rhee government, with its ultimate goal being to transition South Korea into a democracy (Jung, 2002, pp. 91-92). In fact, the year of 1960-1961 was labelled as a 'year of democracy' (Hayes, 2006, p. 256). Despite being as close to a democratic system as they had ever been, the South Korean populace would ultimately have to wait until the June Struggle of 1987 before this dream could be achieved. The reason being is that on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1961, Park Chung-hee led a coup d'état against the Yun government that ended this period of democracy and returned South Korea to Rhee's anti-communist regime (Jung, 2002, p. 108).<sup>81</sup> However, the *minjung*

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<sup>81</sup> Participated in by only 3,500 soldiers, the May 16<sup>th</sup> coup succeed in part due to the exit of top officials from the Democratic Party and the ambivalence of Yun Po-sun and the United States government. In fact,

continued to fight for South Korea's democratisation, culminating in the 1987 June Struggle. Therefore, after a long history of violence and protest, a major *minjung* victory was finally achieved.

The historical representation of the Occupation in *General's Son*, whose formal construction evokes the narrative tropes and elements of mise en scène characteristic of *cinematic han*, positions this geopolitical conflict under a *minjung* perspective due to the ideological precepts of the FNW. *General's Son* contextualises the Japanese Occupation under a motif of witnessing and the emasculation of Korean men due to the sacrifices of the Korean Women. As a result, the representation of this conflict is one where due to the oppression of the Koreans under their Japanese occupiers all Korean citizens are divided along gender lines into those who endured the conflict and those who were ignorant of it, represented by the Korean women and men, respectively. The analysis of this representation reveals symbolic connections between the film and the socio-cultural context of its production, specifically in regards to the fears and anxieties of Koreans towards this newfound democracy. *General's Son*'s narrative is based on an idea of false victory and ignorance to the status quo. As previously discussed, the film's representation of this geopolitical conflict divides the Korean population along gender lines, specifically in regards to how the Korean females struggle to survive during the Occupation, and the ways in which their experiences contrast against those of the Korean males. It is within the experiences of the Korean males where the film's symbolic links to the socio-cultural context of its production can be drawn.

Throughout the narrative of *General's Son*, the Korean males are characterised to hold a deep-seated belief that they have significant agency and power over their Japanese occupiers, embodied in the film through Hayashi's gang. However, this belief is routinely juxtaposed by depictions of their insignificance and lack of power during this cultural event, which positions them underfoot of the Japanese. Consequently, the Korean male's belief they hold any power during this era is contextualised as foolish. The Korean character's outlooks on their position during the Occupation can be read as

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the United States knew of the coup before it occurred and later recognised the Park Chung-hee military regime due to its anti-communist stance (Jung, 2002, p.108).

a symbolic comparison to the back and forth struggle of the *mingjung* democracy movement during the twentieth century. While the *minjung* believed democracy was imminent in 1960, it was halted due to the 1961 coup. Therefore, through *General's Son*'s depiction of the Korean male's ignorance in the face of their own reality, which is contrasted against the experience of the Korean females, the film's formal construction under the FNW's *minjung* perspective can be interpreted to reflect the societal fears and anxieties of the Korean citizenry towards this democracy during the socio-cultural context the film was produced, specifically that the newfound democracy of the late 1980s may also be short lived. This symbolic connection between the film and its socio-cultural context can be witnessed through the male Korean characters who, through either ignorance, arrogance or hubris, are blinded to realities of the Japanese Occupation.

Through numerous examples of boastful pride, the Korean gangs view themselves as if holding all the power, assuming it is their right to have a clearly defined territory. In addition, several are shown making risky deals with the Japanese gangs through various power plays.<sup>82</sup> These two aspects of male pride are seen in two early exchanges. The first, the Korean male belief that they have the right to hold territory, is exclaimed when a Korean gang member states to the head of the Chongno gang that, 'Japs are trespassing our market. We need some protection'. Prior to this dialogue, there has been no action or dialogue to make an audience believe that the Korean males do not have the right to this territory, and as a result, a power struggle between the Korean and Japanese gangs is established, with each appearing to be on equal ground. Through this exchange, it is clear that the Korean males believe they have a say in where the Japanese operate and that they can easily overthrow any instance of Japanese control, despite the film being set during the height of the Occupation. However, during this dialogue exchange, the mise en scene indicates that this assumed power of the Korean males is false. During the

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<sup>82</sup> Along with the Japanese military, Japanese civilians also moved into Korea after annexation. Amongst these were numerous factions of the Japanese Yakuza. These gangs, some of who had ties to the Japanese Government and Military Police, ran several activities such as smuggling stolen goods and extorting local businesses. The Japanese Gangs would often clash with Korean gangs, with reports of up to 100 members of each faction clashing in empty fields. The Japanese gang's ties to the Japanese Police were so strong that many Korean gangs were disbanded and either sent to prison or forcibly conscripted into the Japanese Army while Yakuza factions remained untouched (Lee, 2002).

scene, as the Korean males discuss how they can protect their territory, a sign hangs above them with large, prominent Japanese characters, acting as a visual reminder of the suppression of the Korean language during the Occupation. This sign provides the first hint that the power of the Korean gang is less than what they themselves assume. The second type of male pride, of their power plays against the Japanese, occurs ten minutes after the previous example and concerns another Korean gang being paid by Hayashi's gang to work for them. The leader of this Korean gang, named Wang-devil, plays coy with the Japanese, pretending to consider their offer before stating: 'Ours is a big family. I need that much money to pay my boys to make them work under Japanese'.

Wang-devil threatens to back out of the deal unless the gang receives more money. The actions of Wang-devil symbolises the arrogance of the Korean males in assuming that they are in any position to bargain with the Japanese during the Occupation. However, this move ultimately pays off as the Japanese gangster gives in to Wang-devil's demands.

Through these two exchanges, the narrative initially contextualises a historical narrative where the Korean males have an equal or greater power than the Japanese, and that the Japanese are perceptive to, and ultimately swayed by, their demands. This representation of the Occupation can be interpreted to be a symbolic reflection of the *minjung* movement's confidence after their victory in 1987. After mass protest, the South Korean government, in which the Japanese gang can act as a metaphor, finally relented to the *minjung*'s demands, granting them a significant victory. Therefore, the arrogant and hubristic nature of the male Korean characters can be interpreted to be a belief that the democratic system the *minjung* fought for would remain in place indefinitely. Just as how the South Korean government submitted to the *minjung* movement's demands, in turn giving them a modicum of power and influence over South Korea's future, the Japanese characters in *General's Son* also grant the Koreans a similar power. However, the power and influence that the male Korean characters believe they hold is eventually positioned to be false, symbolically reflecting a key anxiety of the film's present socio-cultural context, specifically, that the newly formed democratic government may eventually disband.

Shortly after the film's hour mark, subtle hints are shown that the power the Korean males wield is nothing more than a fantasy. At a meeting between various Korean gangsters three lines of dialogue are spoken that reveal the previously established historical narrative to be false. The lines are: 'we got to stick together to protect Chongno, Chongo is the heart of Korea, this is our last fortress against the Japanese;' 'this is the last thing left, Chongno's the heritage of 500 year old Lee dynasty, who's going to stand against Japs if you give up? We got to stick together;' and 'Chongno is the sole place where Koreans can remain undisturbed'. These lines establish that the setting of Chongno is, in fact, the last remaining Korean-held territory, revealing why the Korean males had any power over the actions that occurred within the area. While subtle, this dialogue recontextualises the first hour of the film from displays of Korean pride, which has spread to all Koreans nationwide, to a fantasy that is upheld only by the males who live in the Chongno district. As a result, Chongno becomes a fantasy, a location that shields the Korean males who occupy this area from Japanese oppression, in turn, fuelling their wilful ignorance of the Occupation. Once this narrative element is established, all the petty squabbles and conflicts the Korean gangs displays towards the Japanese gangs to win territory and power appear small scale and petty. As a result, when these Korean males are placed alongside the Korean females, the hubris of the males is made all the more apparent due to the ideological divide between their gangster fantasies and the female's struggles for survival. Furthermore, this hubris, and the diminishing power of the Korean males, can be symbolically linked to the film's socio-cultural context. Specifically, the social anxiety that the democratic system the *minjung* fought for would eventually diminish. Similar to how democracy was taken away from the Korean people in the 1960s, the film's representation of the Occupation can be symbolically linked to an anxiety that the democracy of the 1980s may also be removed. The power of the Korean males, and its subsequent removal, can be linked to the fear that the power granted to the Korean working class due to the newly implemented democratic system may eventually be taken away or granted false. The Korean females, therefore, can be symbolically linked to those in Korean society who persevered under the belief that whether or not the newly implemented democratic system remained, this would not change the actions of the South Korean government to

the citizenry, specifically that the violent clashes between both parties would continue indefinitely. Consequently, *General's Son*'s historical narrative of the Japanese Occupation, established through the evocation of *cinematic han*, can be symbolically linked to the film's present socio-cultural context of the Korean anxiety at another potential loss of their democratic system.

### **The socio-cultural context of the 2000s and 2010s**

During the 2000s and the 2010s the democratic South Korean government made significant efforts to restore peaceful relations with North Korea, with the goal of an eventual reunification of the two nations. After decades of anti-communist rhetoric, this move was a monumental development in Korean history. Beginning in 1998, South Korean president Kim Dae-jung introduced a policy, entitled the Sunshine Policy, which was designed to ease tensions and build reconciliation between the North and the South.<sup>83</sup> In a meeting held between the South Korean and North Korean leaders in Pyongyang in 2000, an agreement was signed that stated both nations were willing to work towards reunification. This agreement included:

substantial South Korean humanitarian aid to address North Korea's chronic food shortages, loosening of restrictions on South Korean investment in North Korea, the opening of North Korea's Kumgang Tourist Region to South Korean visitors, the establishment of a family reunification program, the opening of rail links through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and a worker exchange program permitting South Korean workers to work at North Korea's Kaesang Industrial Park. (Bramhall, 2017)

With these agreed-upon provisions, the Sunshine Policy became fully integrated into the Kim administration, and Korean reunification became viewed as not only possible but

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<sup>83</sup> The Sunshine Policy's name was taken from an ancient Greek fable in which the Sun and the Wind held a competition in order to see who could make a man remove his cloak. In this fable, the Wind loses the competition because no matter how hard it blew, it only made the man pull his cloak tighter. The Sun wins by shining brightly, causing the man take off his cloak due to the heat. As stated by Felix Abt: 'The wind symbolised unsuccessful coercive policies toward North Korea and the sun stood for an approach able to persuade North Korea to take off its anachronistic and uncomfortable cloak, changing at last' (Abt, 2016).

inevitable.<sup>84</sup> The Sunshine Policy was structured around five sets of activities: to restart and expand political dialogue between North and South Korea; to increase the economic intercourse between the two nations; to create opportunities for families separated by the Korean War to reunite; to provide food and humanitarian aid to North Korea; and finally, to encourage international agencies to cooperate with North Korea in order to reduce tensions on the peninsula and transition the Korean War armistice into a ‘permanent peace agreement’ (Levin & Han, 2002, pp. 27-29). During the years in which the Sunshine Policy operated the relations between North and South Korea began to normalise with many South Korean businesses setting up operations in the North, as well as thousands of South Korean citizens making the trip north to reunite with family members and visit numerous tourist attractions. According to Felix Abt:

During the Sunshine years, not only more and more business people from the South came to the North. NGOs, artists, religious groups, and tourists also crossed the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Close to two million South Koreans visited scenic Mount Kumgang. More than 20,000 South Koreans also met there with their Northern family members. An old North Korean told me he was never as happy in his life as when he met his Southern family, torn apart during the Korean War, at Mount Kumgang. Every day, about 400 South Korean vehicles crossed the DMZ, which Bill Clinton called the most dangerous place on earth, to North Korea. About 1,000 people entered the North on a daily basis. In 2008 North Korea even decided to allow South Korean visitors to use their own cars to make the trip (2016).

The relations between North and South Korea during this time also led to the term ‘reunification’ to be dropped from the policy to be replaced with terms such as ‘constructive engagement policies’. The goal of the policy switched from a total reunification, which implied the total absorption of North Korea into South Korea, to a peaceful coexistence (Levin & Han, 2002, p. 23).<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> The successful implementation of the Sunshine Policy into his administration earned Kim Dae-jung the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 (Bramhall, 2017).

<sup>85</sup> The Korea Institute for National Unification further this point by making the following statement: ‘Unlike past governments that pursued the dual goals of reconciliation and cooperation on the surface and

Ultimately, the Sunshine Policy did not lead to either reunification or a peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas. The policy, which cost South Korea \$4.5 Billion during the decade it was in place, was deemed a failure by multiple government agencies, specifically Kim Dae-jung's political rival Lee Myung-bak (Abt, 2016; Salmon, 2010). Lee's opposition to the Sunshine Policy was the platform that resulted in his election in 2008, where one of his first actions was to remove all vestiges of the policy (Abt, 2016). While the expensive nature of the policy was one of the pivotal reasons behind its failure, there was another vital reason why both South Korean politicians and civilians alike turned on it, specifically the Policy did not work. While South Korea made many concessions to the North, such as injecting billions of dollars into its economy, these did nothing to stop North Korea from increasing tensions on the Peninsula. Since the initial meeting in Pyongyang to set the Sunshine Policy's provisions in 2000, the North continued to pursue a nuclear weapons program. This resulted in numerous missile tests, both nuclear and ballistic, the sourcing of uranium for its nuclear program, as well as persistent threats against Seoul regarding nuclear annihilation (Lee, 2010). North Korea also led many attacks against the South Korean military, such as the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel in 2002 that resulted in the deaths of six South Korean sailors (Lee, 2010). The Kumgang tourist destination frequented by South Korean citizens was shut down in 2008 after a North Korean soldier shot a South Korean tourist (Salmon, 2010). Finally, and most significantly, North Korea openly maintained a reunification doctrine intending to align the South under a communist regime for the entirety of the Sunshine Policy's tenure, despite all of the efforts the Policy made to establish a peaceful coexistence (Salmon, 2010). However, despite the Policy being considered an expensive failure, in one sense it succeeded. As stated by Mike Breen, while the Sunshine Policy did not have any concrete results, 'it helped South Koreans overcome the shortcomings of their anti-communist education' by humanising the North Koreans through government policy (cited in Salmon, 2010). Furthermore, Choi Yong Sub argues that the sunshine policy helped to present the ideal of an 'inter-Korean

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a sort of unification by absorption in fact, [he argued,] the current government has expressly ruled out attempts to absorb North Korea in favor of a more positive engagement policy designed to promote peaceful coexistence, reconciliation and cooperation between North and South Korea' (cited in Levin & Han, 2002, p. 23).

reconciliation' to the Korean populace, which, in turn, helped to 'undermine the anti-communism with which the hegemonic group had exercised ideological leadership for decades' (2017, p. 299). Despite the removal of the Sunshine Policy from the Lee administration, and numerous high profile clashes between North and South Korea since its removal, such as the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan<sup>86</sup> and the bombing of Yeonpyeong Island,<sup>87</sup> the overall stance South Korean society had towards North Korea softened from a place of fear into a more humanitarian view due to the goals and actions of the Sunshine Policy.

A clear change in posture regarding North Korea is reflected in the South Korean films of the 2000s and the early-2010s as multiple films have focused upon North Korean protagonists as sympathetic leads. The first notable example of this trend was the 1999 film *Shiri* (Byun, Lee, & Kang), with numerous examples since including *Secretly, Greatly* (Cho et al., 2013), *The Suspect* (Bishop et al., 2013), *Commitment* (Lee, Lee, Park, You, & Park, 2013), *The Berlin File* (Han et al., 2013), *Confidential Assignment* (Youn & Kim, 2017) and *V.I.P.* (Yeon & Park, 2017). The Sunshine Policy resulted in a more humanitarian and sympathetic outlook of North Korea in South Korean society. Consequently, the representation of North Korea in South Korean cinema followed suit with North Korean characters no longer depicted as wholly evil, as they were during the 1950s, but as a complex mixture of both good and evil characteristics. A common narrative thread in the 2000s-2010s films involves a morally good North Korean protagonist, who is often a spy, whose actions are motivated by either their desire to escape from the North Korean regime or their journey to save a loved one, such as a wife or sister, from their North Korean colleagues. In these same films, there is often a

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<sup>86</sup> In March, 2010, a North Korean submarine fired upon and sank the South Korean navy vessel, the ROKS Cheonan, resulting in the deaths of forty-six people. The vessel was believed to have been sunk by a heavy torpedo with a 200 kg warhead that detonated close to the ship's hull. The incident was widely believed to be one of the deadliest attacks that occurred between South Korea and North Korea since the end of the Korean War. The North denies any involvement in the attack (North Korean torpedo sank Cheonan, South Korea military source claims, 2010; Sudworth, 2010).

<sup>87</sup> In November, 2010, North Korea fired two dozen shells at the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong that killed two South Korean soldiers and injured fifteen soldiers and three civilians. This attack sparked an exchange of military fire between the two nations. It is believed 175 artillery shells were fired during this exchange. The North claimed the South started the exchange, to which the South confirmed they had fired test shots earlier but claimed none had fallen into North Korean territory. The attack was deemed to be 'one of the most serious clashes between the two sides in decades'. The area in which the bombing occurred was the same area where the Cheonan was sunk earlier that year (McDonald, 2010).

North Korean antagonist who kills indiscriminately and attempts to cause the downfall of South Korean society. At the conclusion of these films, the North Korean protagonist defeats the North Korean antagonist, sometimes sacrificing themselves in the process, in order to save South Korea. In these films, the representation of South Korea is often equally varied, with morally good South Korean characters, who often team up with the North Korean protagonist, and evil South Korean characters, whose sole motivation is the death or capture of the North Korean protagonist. Consequently, the common narrative for these films concerns good South and North Koreans uniting to fight evil South and North Korean villains. The dual morality of this narrative type always ensures that both the protagonists and antagonists contain a mixture of South Korean and North Korean characters.

Framed under the elements of *cinematic han*, the representation of the Japanese Occupation present in *Assassination* positions this geopolitical conflict under the framework of irony, spectacle and violence due to the precepts of the SNW.

*Assassination* contextualises the Japanese Occupation under the intense sorrow of the Korean sacrifice in pursuit of liberation, graphic violence against the body, and the resilience of the Korean resistance movements under a superior, dominating force. As a result, the film's representation of the conflict is one where due to the oppression the Korean populace faced during the Occupation, the Korean resistance would fight tirelessly for independence despite the threat of death or grievous wounds, and if one were to die, their sacrifice would be mourned and immortalised by the survivors.

*Assassination*'s representation of the Japanese Occupation, and its evocation of *cinematic han*, can reveal symbolic connections between the film and the socio-historical context of its production, specifically by reflecting the dual morality brought upon by the Sunshine Policy. How this dual morality manifests in the films of the FNW differs from film to film. For instance, in the 2011 South Korean film *The Front Line*, the influence of the Sunshine Policy positions North Korea as the film's secondary protagonist while the South Korean military high command is contextualised as the film's main antagonist (as discussed further in Chapter 5). In *Assassination* a perceived national enemy is still a threat, but not wholly, with key Japanese key characters working to assist in the liberation of Korea. However, conversely, South

Korea, the usual hero of the Occupation narrative is not wholly good, with collaborators not working out of necessity, like those found in *Nameless Stars*, but for greed, specifically working for money, power and position. In *Assassination*, the Sunshine Policy's moral ambiguity manifests as four character archetypes: the Citizen, the Traitor, the Soldier and the Mercenary. Each archetype is embodied by two main characters, one that is a tragic figure and the other that is not, with both expressing the archetype under either a positive or negative valence.

The first, the Citizen, can be analysed in the film's protagonist, Ahn Okyun, and her twin sister, Mitsuko. Ahn was raised in China under the guidance of the Korean Independence Movement, while Mitsuko was raised in Korea by her father, Kang In-guk, a Japan collaborator, who has dedicated his life to profiting from Japanese activities. Consequently, both characters serve as representations of the two opposite paths in which Korean citizens could potentially find themselves on during the Occupation: either fighting for independence or siding with Japan.<sup>88</sup> However, there are visible drawbacks to both options. For example, due to Ahn being raised in the independence movement, she has not been exposed to positive aspects of life. She does not know how to dance, has never had coffee, and is introverted, unable to create personal connections with other people. Through her lineage, Ahn has become a single minded, shallow individual, her identity intertwined with the liberation effort. Mitsuko, meanwhile, is decidedly familiar with high class living, with her father providing her with a lavish house. Her fiancé, a Japanese lieutenant named Kawaguchi, who is the son of general Kawaguchi, the Korean assassination team's target, provides her with dresses and jewellery. Mitsuko is sheltered, unable to leave the house without the accompaniment of her father, fiancé, butler or driver. As a result, while Mitsuko is represented as bubbly and full of energy, she also comes across as childlike and naïve about the Occupation and the Korean Independence Movement. After being confused with Ahn, Mitsuko is shot and bloodily killed by her own father in a display of wrath against the Korean rebels. The film presents both options to the audience, stating that as a Korean citizen during the Occupation, an individual had to either side with the

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<sup>88</sup> A potential third option, a neutral option with no allegiance to either side, is not identifiable in the film.

resistance or with the Japanese. This duality is displayed in the film by making Ahn and Mitsuko identical twins, symbolically depicting the two sides an average citizen could take during the Occupation (figure 15). The film neither promotes nor condemns either side: one is a hard life that creates socially inept people, while the other is a good life that creates people who are ignorant about the world around them. However, in so far as Ahn lives while Mitsuko dies, the former side is presented as a road to life, while the latter is presented as a path to an early death.



Figure 15: Screenshot from *Assassination* (Dir. Choi Dong-hoon, 2015)

The next archetype the film presents is the Traitor. This archetype is encapsulated by the characters of Yem Seok-jin, a Korean who betrays the independence movement and joins the Japanese secret police, and Kimura, a Japanese man who turns against his government and joins the Korean assassination team. While both these characters represent a betrayal of their native country in order to promote the interests of the national enemy, the reason behind this betrayal varies from greed to ideology. Yem represents the path of greed. Throughout the film it is revealed that he has been a spy for the Japanese government for over 22 years. It is made clear that while his agreement to become a spy was initially made to save his life after he was captured by the Japanese, he continued to act as a spy for monetary gain. Yem is not selling out his country

because he believes in the cause of the Japanese occupiers, but because it provides him with a comfortable livelihood. When asked by Mitsuko's father, Kang In-guk, why he became a Japanese agent, Yem states: 'If you can't bite, you shouldn't bark'. This provides a significant insight into Yem's character. He is afraid to fight the Japanese but the arrogant tone in which this line is delivered implies that he does not want to fight either. Furthermore, his engagement in the film's action sequences demonstrates that he has the skills to fight the Japanese if he so chooses, but he instead uses them to combat his fellow Koreans. Yem is eventually killed in the epilogue, which is set 16 years after the events portrayed in the film, by Ahn and Myung-woo (a Korean who Yem attempted to kill earlier in the film) for his crimes during the Occupation. His betrayal is eventually paid for with death.

While Yem betrayed his countrymen for greed, the Japanese character Kimura betrayed Japan for ideological reasons. Kimura works behind the bar at *Café Anemone*, which serves as the headquarters of the Seoul Bureau of the Korean Provisional Government, and it is implied through dialogue he has worked there for many years. While it is never directly addressed why Kimura works for the Koreans, the omission of any visible payment or stated reasons behind his betrayal makes a strong case for him acting out for moral reasons. This morality is reinforced by two different scenes. When first introduced, the character of Big Gun addresses Kimura as a 'Japanese bastard', to which Kimura agrees with a smile. This interaction implies that Kimura is ashamed of his Japanese heritage. As no definitive reason is given as to why he thinks like this, the Occupation itself becomes the stand in, as if Kimura had rejected his cultural heritage due to the actions of the Japanese during the Occupation. The second scene that reinforces Kimura's morality is during a scene after Big Gun goes missing following a fight with Hawaii Pistol. The assassination team discusses that they will need to find another person to take over Big Gun's position and within seconds Kimura volunteers whilst loading his pistol. The lack of hesitation reinforces his ideological connection to the Koreans, as he shows no doubt that what they are doing is the right course of action. Ultimately, Kimura is killed during the assassination attempt on Kang and Kawaguchi after driving his car into the battle zone to shoot at the Japanese soldiers. As stated above, both Yem and Kimura betray their countries: one for financial gain, the other for

ideological reasons. However, besides the reason, both men end up killed by the compatriots they betrayed.

The next archetype identifiable in *Assassination* is the Soldier. This is encapsulated by the characters Big Gun and Duk-sam, who constitute two thirds of the guerrilla assassination team, and who, along with Ahn, are sent to Seoul to assassinate general Kawaguchi and Kang In-guk. Both Big Gun and Duk-sam are soldiers in the Korean resistance movement, but each joined for different reasons. One motivation is money and the other is the strive for freedom. Big Gun represents the soldiers who joined the movement for financial gain. In two separate scenes, Big Gun coyly asks for compensation for his services. He states: ‘This independence movement against Japan I’ve been riled up about it for three to four years. But not on an empty stomach. They should pay something’ and ‘We can’t fight on an empty stomach, Captain Yem said you would cover our compensation’. In both instances, Big Gun’s statements are met with surprise by some and accusing glances by others. Most notably, the second declaration is directed to Kim Won-bong, a leader of the entire Korean resistance movement, who after sounding hurt and appearing visibly shocked by this request, still tries to give Big Gun something of value, going as far as to gather money from his bodyguards. However, Big Gun disappears and is presumably killed shortly after this dialogue exchange during his aforementioned fight with Hawaii Pistol. However, not knowing of this fight, none of his comrades attempt to find him, assuming that he abandoned the mission as he was only there for money. Significantly, when Big Gun eventually returns, believing that the assassination team is dead, he is given a chance to flee Korea but decides to stay and fight. After his near-death experience, and the sacrifice of those around him, he realises what is at stake and chooses to fight for the national interest, resulting in him infiltrating the wedding hall, the site of the film’s climatic action sequence, to assassinate the team’s targets.

The character of Duk-sam, on the contrary, is the opposite of Big Gun: he follows all of his orders and does not question anything. In this regard, he is the perfect soldier. In one scene, Big Gun does attempt to flee the country, but Duk-sam stops him and convinces him to attend the aforementioned meeting with Kim Won-bong. Both men are eventually

killed fighting the Japanese. Big Gun is shot by Yem during the wedding shootout and Duk-sam is shot in the head by general Kawaguchi and blown up by his own grenades during the petrol station shootout. While Big Gun entered the fight for selfish reasons and Duk-sam entered it under a nationalist stance, both negative and positive valences resulted in both soldiers fighting for the same cause. Consequently, the film positions the Soldier archetype as a heroic, yet tragic figure.

The final archetype discernible in *Assassination* is the Mercenary. This archetype is represented by the characters Hawaii Pistol, a Korean who will kill anybody if he is paid the right price, and lieutenant Kawaguchi, a Japanese military man who has killed over 300 Koreans while stationed in Korea. When stripped of all rank and position, both men kill for money, embodying the mercenary character. However, Hawaii Pistol, despite being in a profession that is perceived as evil, is depicted as a good and decent man. Kawaguchi, meanwhile, is in a profession that is meant to protect the people, but is cold hearted and malicious. Routinely Hawaii Pistol shows that despite killing for money, he does not kill for fun or enjoyment. This is notable during his initial action sequence. Hawaii Pistol and Buddy are tasked with killing a Japanese gang leader. They do so by ambushing the gang's hideout from afar with a silenced pistol. After the gang flees, one of the gang members, scared and out of ammunition, hides. Hawaii Pistol passes the man, grabs his empty gun and leaves, showing that he only kills his targets and only kills others when they shoot back. Along with this, he is also shown as a decent man through his selfless protection of Ahn. During their first meeting, Ahn is questioned by French police for her papers. Seeing that she does not have papers, Hawaii Pistol poses as her husband to save her. When questioned why he helped, he tells her: 'Compatriots should help each other'. Later, after Big Gun goes missing and Duk-sam is killed, Ahn is presumed to be the last living member of the assassination team and is insistent that she will assassinate her targets alone even if it means her death. Hawaii Pistol deflects this insistence and attends the wedding, the sight of the assassination, with her so she can have a fighting chance. Hawaii Pistol is a man who makes a living in death but routinely attempts to defend life. He acknowledges that people have to die, but only when he is paid, and then, only when it is warranted. This is the direct opposite of Lieutenant Kawaguchi who revels in joy regarding the amount of Korean death he has caused. In

one scene Hawaii Pistol and Buddy, who are posing as Japanese officers, find themselves talking to Kawaguchi about how many Koreans he has killed. He thinks for a moment before lifting three fingers. Hawaii Pistol appears saddened by this fact, further portraying his decent nature. However, later Kawaguchi shoots and kills a young Korean girl because she accidentally hit him with a bucket and dirtied his uniform. He shoots her on the street in front of dozens of witnesses, leaving him with a smug smile. After this execution, it is revealed that the three fingers Kawaguchi held up earlier represented 300 Koreans, a figure that makes him immensely proud. Through these actions, Kawaguchi reveals himself to be an irredeemable character. He is a man who is employed to protect, but instead takes joy in the senseless murder of innocent people. Unlike Hawaii Pistol, he does not kill because he has to, but because he wants to, calling into question the perceived moral fibre of their profession.

Each of *Assassination*'s four archetypes contains a dichotomy, a good side and a bad side, and most of the film's main characters embodies one of these sides. Through these four archetypes, and the variations each character places upon it, both nationalities involved in the Japanese Occupation conflict are presented as both good and bad. As a result, the film presents a moral duality to the conflict where neither nation is positioned as either unambiguously good or evil. Both nations are humanised by flawed characters whose motivations do not entirely lie with the pursuit of national interests, but can also be swayed by selfish or selfless ideals. Therefore, the four character archetypes revealed through the film's representation of the Japanese Occupation exposes a complex morality that simultaneously humanises and demonises Korea and Korea's national enemies. Consequently, through *Assassination*'s historical narrative, established through the evocation of *cinematic han*, symbolic links between the complex morality of *Assassination*'s representation of the Occupation and the film's socio-cultural context can be drawn, specifically through revealing how the Sunshine Policy 'helped South Koreans overcome the shortcomings of their anti-communist education' (cited in Salmon, 2010).

### 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three key areas regarding the South Korean historical film and *cinematic han*. Firstly, the ideological precepts of each cinematic period, specifically the Golden Age, the FNW and the SNW, reframe the Japanese Occupation under three different conceptual lenses. *Nameless Stars'* (1959) anti-communist agenda frames the Japanese Occupation under a nationalist perspective that makes death in the pursuit of Korean freedom noble whilst also being sympathetic towards collaborators. *General's Son's* (1990) *minjung* perspective contextualises the Korean characters as a form of underclass beneath the Japanese hegemony, whilst also granting this underclass a specifically female point of view. Finally, *Assassination's* (2015) focus upon irony, spectacle and violence creates a historical narrative of the Occupation where the members of the Korean resistance are mourned for their heroic actions against oppression. Despite these different approaches, each film contains the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* by forming individual/collective structures where the Korean characters are unified by their oppression and by concluding the film on clear elements of hope, despite placing the Korean characters under the oppression of their external agent for the entire narrative. Secondly, through an examination of each film's mise en scene, *cinematic han* is evoked through their background performances, colour palettes, locations and costumes.

Finally, this chapter has demonstrated that *cinematic han* is an integral element in the production of historical knowledge in the South Korean historical film. Via the evocation of this aesthetic by the ideological precepts of the respective cinematic period a film was produced, symbolic links between the South Korean historical film genre and each film's socio-cultural context can be drawn. The evocation of *cinematic han* in *Nameless Stars'* narrative and formal construction of the Occupation creates symbolic links to the post war reconstruction era of the 1950s through its thematic call for the Korean youth to take up the struggle against oppression, embodied through characters such as Sang-hun's father and Mr Song. In *General's Son* the evocation of *cinematic han* creates symbolic links to the film's socio-cultural anxiety of the loss of South Korean democracy through the male Korean character's arrogant and hubristic nature

under Japanese oppression. Finally, *Assassination*'s evocation of *cinematic han* creates symbolic links to South Korea's Sunshine Policy and the growing sympathetic views of South Korean society towards North Korea, through four character archetypes that contain positive and negative valences. Therefore, the representation of Korean resistance groups in the South Korean films *Nameless Stars*, *General's Son* and *Assassination* contain simultaneous allusions to the historical past and present of Korea, enhancing the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film's representation of the Japanese Occupation. The following chapter will argue that the representation of the forced Korean participation in war in South Korean World War II films also enhances these films' historical knowledge.

## Chapter 4

### World War II and the South Korean Historical Film

#### 4.1 Introduction

During World War II the mistreatment of the Korean populace by the Japanese government became extreme. Countless Korean men and women were forced into the war by the Japanese either to fight in combat or engage in a form of sexual slavery. When the war first began the Japanese called for the Korean men to volunteer to fight for the Japanese Imperial Army. However, those who did not volunteer were forcibly conscripted. In 1942 any pretence of choice was removed and many Korean men of war age were forced to become frontline infantry for the Japanese war effort (Kim-Rivera, 2002, p. 267). Korean women were also forced to participate in the war, but not as soldiers. From as early as primary school age, Korean women were both lured away from their homes by the prospect of paid work in Japan or abducted to either work in factories with no pay, or be forced into sexual slavery, becoming what is referred to as a ‘comfort woman’. Koreans who were not forced to engage in combat or sexual abuse often faced beatings, starvation or murder at the hands of the Japanese (Smith, 2013). The conclusion of the Second World War and Korea’s subsequent liberation from Japan by the United States and Soviet Union ultimately led to the division of Korea into the Southern and Northern nations (as detailed later in Chapter 5). Due to this occurrence, World War II (WWII) serves as a significant historical event in the formation of both the social and political climate of North and South Korea that has held for over sixty years.

As established in the General Introduction, the division between the North and the South was one of the true beginnings of the South Korean film industry and this division is the direct result of the events of WWII. As WWII is a pivotal event in the history of the Korean Peninsula the lack of representation in South Korean cinema is curious. Roughly only a dozen of the films made between 1948 and 2016 are set during the WWII period (1939-1945). These films include *Hurrah! For Freedom* (Choi & Choi, 1946), *The Sea Knows* (Kim & Kim, 1961), *Your Ma's Name Was Chosun Whore* (Ji, 1991), *Once Upon a Time in Corea* (Kang & Jeong, 2008), *The Good, The Bad, The Weird* (Choi et al., 2008), *My Way* (Kang et al., 2011), *Dongju: The Portrait of a Poet* (Shin & Lee, 2015),

*The Last Comfort Women* (Kim & Lim, 2015), *Spirits' Homecoming* (Cho, Lee, & Cho, 2016), *The Battleship Island* (Kang & Ryoo, 2017) and *Snowy Road* (Ham & Lee, 2017). Each of these films details a Korean populace that is under oppression by the Japanese and, in some way, has lost agency over their fates, either through the abovementioned forced conscription or sexual slavery, or via their exodus from Korea to escape Japan's reach. Furthermore, the loss of this agency forces the Koreans to unite, regardless of their social statuses or ideologies, in order to endure the oppression of their external agent. As a result, these films not only meet the requirements of the working definition of the South Korean historical film as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, through their combat sequences, black and white moral standings, and fictional narrative that follows soldiers or civilians during a historical conflict, but also embody the hope and sorrow of *cinematic han*. By conjoining the factual oppression of the Korean populace with a fictional, constructed historical narrative, the Korean characters are visually and narratively ensnared in a metaphorical prison. Yet amongst this limited subset, not every film connects its events to the conflicts Korea faced during WWII, such as the trials of the Korean infantry in the Japanese Army and the struggles of the Korean comfort women. Many South Korean films set between 1939 and 1945 focus on the conflicts of the Japanese Occupation, such as the Korean resistance movement and the general struggles of life in occupied Korean cities and villages, and not WWII specifically. In turn, South Korean films that depict the Japanese Occupation, detailed in the last chapter, can also include those set during the WWII period without being classified as WWII films as they do not depict this geopolitical conflict specifically. Therefore, the films set during this period can be divided into two categories: those that depict the Korean experience in WWII and those that depict the Korean oppression under Japanese colonial rule. Consequently, the films that detail the armed conflicts of WWII are relegated into a smaller subset of films.

There are two possible reasons why WWII has not had a prominent focus within South Korean historical cinema. The first is that, historically, Korea as a nation did not have a stake in the international conflict. Under the Eulsa treaty, all of Korea's international affairs were under the control of the Japanese government (Fuqua, 2011, p. 42). As a result, which conflicts Korea responded to were at the discretion of Japan. Consequently,

during WWII Korea was not fighting under a Korean banner but a Japanese flag. By extension of this, WWII could be viewed as another action Japan forced upon Korea during the Occupation. Therefore, WWII can be placed alongside Japan's other attempts to suppress the Korean culture, such as the suppression of the Korean language, the forced adoption of Japanese names and the dilution of Korean education, and not as a separate conflict (Kim-Rivera, 2002). The second reason is that the cultural developments Japan forced upon Korea during WWII, such as forced conscription and sexual slavery, were amongst the worst perpetrated during the Occupation (Chowdhury, 2014; Smith, 2013). While the films of the Japanese Occupation can reposition this era as a time of heroic struggle against the Japanese through its depictions of the Korean resistance, the Korean experience during WWII cannot easily be depicted positively, despite these films emphasising the aspects of hope contained within *cinematic han* that were discussed in Chapter 2. In South Korean films that depict the Japanese Occupation or the Korean War there is always a clear end point or goal to the character actions and narratives, namely, to fight to end the geopolitical conflict. This is done through both the Korean resistance groups and South Korean infantry forces respectively. However, in the South Korean WWII film there is no such goal or clearly defined resistance or infantry forces, as, discussed above, Korea did not have a stake in this conflict. As a result, in these films Koreans do not have the opportunity or the means to resist oppression and end the war. Therefore, in place of these goals and armed factions, the South Korean WWII film becomes a ground to test the Korean resilience and unity under oppression, in turn, emphasising *cinematic han*'s elements of hope. However, in order to narratively and formally depict this unity and resilience, the weaknesses of the Korean populace during this conflict have to be foregrounded. To represent the WWII conflict in South Korean cinema the experiences of the Korean men and women have to be addressed within the main text of the film and cinematically depict the nation's failings during this era. This explanation can be used to justify the absence of South Korean WWII films, specifically during the 1980s and 1990s.

This chapter examines two South Korean WWII films, the Golden Age film *The Sea Knows* (1961) and the Second Korean New Wave (SNW) film *Spirits' Homecoming* (2016) in order to argue that the representation of the forced Korean participation in

geopolitical conflict in South Korean World War II films makes evident these films' evocation of *cinematic han*. In turn, this evocation enhances the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film's representation of historical geopolitical conflict. Unfortunately, the only South Korean WWII film that could be located from the First Korean New Wave cinematic period (FNW) for this dissertation was the 1991 film *Your Ma's Name Was Chosun Whore*. This film had no copies available for access in Australia.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, an FNW film that depicts WWII will be absent from this chapter's analysis. However, the lack of filmic representation of WWII during the FNW period can be speculated upon when the history of the early 1990s is examined. After decades of military dictatorship, creative censorship and numerous fatal clashes between the people and the government, the films of the FNW were about the working class and the struggles they faced in day-to-day life. The films of this period were focused on the people, their triumphs against adversity and their unity as a society. Therefore, the Japanese Occupation could be depicted in the FNW through a focus on the resistance against the Japanese and how the populace's united struggle eventually led to a liberated Korea. In the next chapter, it is demonstrated that the FNW films that depict the Korean War have a similar narrative framework in their emphasis on the union of the common people to eventually regain peace in the region. However, as previously discussed, the WWII period for Korea had no such triumphant goals or unions. The forced participation in armed conflict for the men and the sexual slavery of the women are situations that could not be overcome by Korean unity. While the films of the Golden Age spun this period into an opportunity for anti-communist rhetoric and those of the SNW could focus on the spectacle of violence and cruelty done to the Korean body, in a period of Korean history where personal freedoms were beginning to return and the long fought for democratic system finally being won, the nihilism of the WWII period, emphasised by *cinematic han*'s foregrounding of Korean oppression during this conflict, ran counter to the ideals of the FNW period.<sup>90</sup> While this justification for the lack of

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<sup>89</sup> The only copy of this film that could be located was a single VHS copy held in the Korean Film Archive in Seoul, without English subtitles.

<sup>90</sup> Another reason for the absence of WWII films from this period was due to the comfort women issue being unknown to South Korean society until the early 1990s. This historical occurrence will be detailed later in the chapter.

WWII films from the FNW cannot be confirmed, when examined in relation to both the socio-cultural context of the 1990s and the ideological precepts of the FNW film period, it is possible that this is the reason why there are a dearth of WWII films made during the early 1990s.

This chapter is divided into three sections: ‘South Korean cinematic periods’, examines how the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are present in WWII films made during the Golden Age and SNW despite the evolving ideological precepts of each cinematic period. ‘The mise en scene of *cinematic han*’, analyses how *The Sea Knows and Spirits’ Homecoming* reflects *cinematic han*’s elements of mise en scene and how these contribute to cinematically portraying Korea as a metaphorical prison. Finally, ‘Cinematic representation of the past and socio-cultural context of production’, analyses how the representation of WWII in each of the films studied can enhance the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film through their symbolic connections to the socio-cultural climate of the film’s construction.

## 4.2 South Korean cinematic periods

Depending on the period of the film’s construction, the representation of WWII has been filtered through either an anti-communist framework or one that focuses heavily on spectacle and violence. These approaches reflect the characteristics of the Golden Age and the SNW respectively. This section will analyse how the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are present in each film as a result of the ideological precepts of their respective cinematic period.

### The Golden Age of South Korean cinema

*The Sea Knows* is a 1961 film that follows the Korean student soldier Aro-un after he is conscripted into the Japanese Imperial Army during WWII. Facing exploitation and humiliation under his Japanese superiors, he falls in love with, and eventually marries, a Japanese woman, Hideko. As the war escalates, Aro-un and Hideko face numerous plots by the Japanese to not only destroy their relationship, but their lives. In *The Sea Knows* the anti-communist viewpoint of the Golden Age is evident within the fictional concept

of the '50-year tradition of the Japanese Army', that is employed by the Japanese military command structure to oppress the Korean student soldiers. It is also the introduction of this tradition and its various uses throughout the narrative that evokes the *cinematic han* narrative trope of the film beginning and ending with the Koreans under oppression, before a last minute thematic shift from oppression to hope. Within *The Sea Knows* this tradition is embodied by one specific character, a Japanese Private First Class named Mori. It is in Mori's practice of this tradition, specifically in how it can be used to justify the mistreatment of the Korean conscripts, which encapsulates the film's anti-communist stance. Mori is first introduced seven minutes into the film, immediately positioning the Korean characters under a form of oppression. However, upon its introduction this oppression is not viewed to stem from the oppressed/oppressor relationship between Korea and Japan, but is initially introduced as an inherent oppression placed upon both the Japanese and Korean infantry by their military superiors. As a result, while still beginning the narrative under oppression, the Korean characters are not initially oppressed due to their nationality, but due to their association with the Japanese army. To wit, in his introductory scene Mori asks the Korean student soldiers: 'do you know about the 50-year tradition of the Japanese Army?' before slapping each of the soldiers hard across the face. On its own, the 50-year tradition is innocuous, an unbiased ploy by the Japanese military to discipline their newly recruited soldiers. At first Mori's use of the tradition appears to be a hazing technique used by the Japanese military to make their conscripts behave. This hazing is shown shortly after Mori slaps the Koreans, justifying his actions by stating that: 'getting slapped before bedtime is a 50-year tradition of the Japanese Army. We beat you up so that you stop thinking about girls'. Initially, Mori's conduct was strange and unjustified, yet after this line the slapping is repositioned as a disciplinary action of the military.

However, as the narrative progresses, the oppression of the 50-year tradition shifts away from being a military training tactic and becomes one that is used to maintain the oppression of the Korean soldiers based on their nationality. This progression is introduced due to the formal construction and narrative presence of the film's battle sequences. Each battle is comprised of archival footage interspersed with insert shots of fighter plane pilots, sailors or soldiers reacting to the battle. None of the film's main

characters are seen participating in these sequences, or make mention to their participation during later dialogue scenes. Despite the consistent physical and psychological abuse the Korean conscripts suffer under the 50-year tradition, which is justified by the excuse of turning them into an effective army, no Korean is ever seen participating in battle. Therefore, these battle sequences in turn work to highlight the futile nature of their training, rendering the violence committed against them fruitless. The war is depicted as a distant event. The knowledge of the conflict lingers throughout the film, but it is never engaged with through the character's active participation. Consequently, the 50-year tradition is rendered a façade. As their training is depicted to be functionally useless, the Koreans are contextualised as being abused for their nationality. In turn, the 50-year tradition is revealed not to be a training tool, but a framework for the Korean character's external agents to justify their abuse.

As the film progresses Mori's actions grow more abusive without accompanying dialogue to justify why his actions were necessary. Consequently, Mori's violent behaviour slowly evolves from a form of discipline to become exploitative in nature. This is evident in how he focuses his abuse upon the film's main character, Aro-un. Mori singling out Aro-un specifically is not provided with a verbal explanation. However, when Mori, and the 50-year tradition he exploits, are both viewed under the film's anti-communist perspective, the tradition becomes an example of a system that is exploited by the Japanese to torment Koreans. As a result, the abuse of Aro-un can be argued to be due to his nationality, or in short, a visual metaphor for the communist oppression of Korea. The abuse the Korean conscripts suffer under Mori, in turn, evokes the second narrative trope of *cinematic han*, specifically that of the individual operating within the collective. As a unit, the Koreans are depicted as second class citizens, with their interests routinely placed after those of the Japanese. On numerous occasions, the conscripts are verbally and physically abused, as well as visibly receiving less food and resources than their Japanese counterparts. However, Aro-un is also shown to be oppressed as an individual, routinely exploited by Mori under the 50-year tradition. Examples of this include Mori forcing Aro-un to act like a horse and run into a wall and also forcing Aro-un to lick and swallow faeces off Mori's boot. As the film continues, the actions Mori forces upon Aro-un and the other Korean conscripts become

humiliating and demeaning, yet is continually justified under the 50-year tradition label. Mori and other Japanese soldiers are shown enjoying their position of power over the Korean soldiers, as seen in Mori's blasé, apathetic tone when he tell Aro-un to lick the faeces off his boot. Mori's tone in this scene unambiguously shows the power the 50-year tradition afforded to him as he expects Aro-un to lick his boot without opposition. Therefore, the oppression of the Korean characters is depicted as universal, with every Korean facing discrimination and oppression due to their nationality regards of rank or position in the Japanese military. Yet, through Mori's increased focus upon Aro-un, this oppression is also depicted from the perspective of the individual, making the oppression personal and visibly affecting Aro-un both physically and mentally. Therefore, through Mori's abuse of the 50-year tradition, both narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are evoked. However, this cultural tradition can be analysed to an important element of the film's anti-communist rhetoric. In turn, *cinematic han* is evoked by the narrative and thematic structures placed upon the film by the ideological precepts of its cinematic period.

The 50-year tradition is represented as a cultural practise that allows the Japanese to assert control over others, one which Mori continuously exploits throughout the narrative. The depiction of the 50-year tradition and Mori's progression away from a hazer to abuser is an example of the film's process of historying. Through the narrative and formal depictions of this tradition, a discursive emphasis is placed upon the Japanese and how they justify their abuse of the Korean soldiers. It is through the use of this tradition, and Mori's blatant abuse of this control, the film's anti-communist meaning becomes evident. *The Sea Knows* positions the 50-year tradition as a system that was implemented by the ruling class in order to benefit the Japanese military, specifically to make the infantry a more effective fighting force. However, this tradition is revealed to only benefit a select few who use the tradition as an excuse to abuse and torment those lower in the military hierarchy. Due to this the film's commentary on communism becomes apparent. While the communist system was implemented under the guise of benefitting the entire nation, only those high in society would reap its benefits while the rest of society suffered under their rule. Therefore, the film's anti-communist stance can be interpreted as a warning, specifically that if the system

were to ever be implemented into South Korea, the average citizen would languish. This idea is furthered in a notable line of dialogue that occurs during a conversation early in the film in which several Korean characters state their displeasure towards the 50-year tradition. Occurring only ten minutes into the film, a Korean soldier states: ‘who knows when the 50-year tradition of the Japanese Army will kick into action again? Their ideology is group madness. Their ways of eradicating individuality is a crime, a cruel one at that’. As a result, the film’s criticism of communism is not in its subtext but becomes integral to the narrative and the formation of character dynamics. The occurrence of this dialogue early in the film’s runtime positions the film’s narrative under this critical context. Consequently, every time the concept of Japanese tradition is presented throughout the film it is immediately positioned under this critical depiction of communism, namely that it is ‘madness’.

A key example of the film’s anti-communist stance occurs during the film’s climatic scenes of the bombing of the Japanese city of Nagoya. During this sequence, dozens of Japanese citizens, including Aro-un, are caught inside the burning city, all of who are presumed to die. In the film’s concluding scenes, Japanese soldiers refuse to let the families of the deceased retrieve the bodies stating: ‘Citizens of Japan! The tragic event is to be kept a secret for the good of our Imperial Japan. Hold off your grief until the day of our victory and you are not allowed to see the dead bodies until then’. The soldiers then proceed to burn the corpses in front of the grieving citizens. However, during this inferno, Aro-un rises from the pile, the only survivor, and leaves the scene with his wife, Hideko, as the Japanese citizens rush towards the pile of bodies (figure 16). In the general set up of this scene, specifically the burning of the bodies and the Japanese soldier’s message to the citizens, the disconnect between the Japanese government and their citizens become apparent. The government puts their national image and honour above the wellbeing of their citizens, as evident through the soldiers telling the families to keep the deaths of their friends and loved ones a secret. Despite their citizens being killed, the Japanese government is depicted as apathetic to these deaths. This is another example of the film’s process of historying, as when analysed in conjunction with the film’s anti-communist meaning, the actions of the Japanese soldiers opposed to the desperate struggle of the citizens affirm that under a communist system, civilians will

always be secondary to the national interest. The image of Aro-un therefore, could be argued to be reminiscent of the Korean resilience against communism. While he faces the same ordeals as the Japanese who died, he was the only one to survive, as he was the only one present during the bombing that did not follow a Japanese, and by extension, communist, government. This symbolic rise from the dead also marks the film's thematic shift from oppression to hope, evoking this narrative trope of *cinematic han* via its anti-communist narrative. Throughout the film, Aro-un and his fellow Koreans face perpetual oppression under Mori and the Japanese military's high command. Though Aro-un is still held in Japan and he, and his fellow soldiers, are still under the control of the Japanese military by the narrative's conclusion, the film ends on an image where the Korean survives while Japan burns behind him. In consequence, Aro-un's climatic rise from the dead is symbolic of the strength of Koreans under Japanese oppression. Therefore, the film shifts themes from one of oppression to hope due to Aro-un's resilience against a symbolic communist threat. Conversely, the deaths of hundreds of Japanese citizens is emblematic of how citizens may languish under a communist government. Therefore, it is once again demonstrated how the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are evoked through the ideological precepts of the Golden Age cinematic period.



Figure 16: Screenshot from *The Sea Knows* (Dir. Kim Ki-young, 1961)

## The Second Korean New Wave in South Korean Cinema

*Spirits' Homecoming* follows a 14 year old Korean girl, Jung-min, who is taken from her family in 1943 and forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese. There she befriends another girl, Young-Hee, and they attempt to survive the war together.<sup>91</sup> Running parallel to this narrative, in 1991 an elderly Young-Hee attempts to lead a normal life while being constantly haunted by her experiences in the comfort station. *Spirits' Homecoming* depicts the comfort women issue through fictional methods and heightened portrayals, specifically under the SNW's characteristics of spectacle and violence.<sup>92</sup> Through these portrayals, the film's depiction of this historical crisis becomes an example of Landy's monumental history (2001). It is these narrative, thematic and formal structures placed upon the film by its cinematic period, specifically its adherence to spectacle and violence, that evoke the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. While there are elements of event spectacle in the film, through two battle sequences, the main spectacle throughout is object spectacle, in which elements of the mise en scene are elevated to be moments of spectacle (Lewis, 2014, pp. 218-220).<sup>93</sup> There are two main categories of this object spectacle: the spiritual, as shown through objects such as butterflies and charms known as *Gwe-bul-no-ri-gae* that Jung-min and Young-hee carry; and the body, specifically the bodies of the comfort women and the violence and cruelty committed against them. It is the elevation of these two categories to object spectacle that evoke the *cinematic han* narrative trope of the individual operating inside a collective. The first category, the spiritual, is divided into the charms carried exclusively by Jung-min and Young-hee, and the butterflies that are representative of the spirits of every Korean comfort woman. In turn, the spiritual object spectacle is divided into the objects of the individual and collective respectively. The objects of the individual, the charms Jung-min and Young-hee carry, are routinely focused upon throughout the film, with a minimum of 15 unique times where the charms are detailed

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<sup>91</sup> In the film, the comfort women are identified to be both Korean and Chinese, and only stated to be between the age of fourteen and seventeen.

<sup>92</sup> In order to emphasise how spectacle and violence are used in *Spirits' Homecoming*, the SNW's ironic values will not be discussed in this chapter.

<sup>93</sup> The inclusion of these battle sequences justifies the film's inclusion in the war film genre as discussed in Chapter 2.

in either close ups or positioned in centre frame as the shot lingers for upwards of twenty seconds. The moments in which these charms are focused upon are often instants of either high stress or terror in the 1943 segments or during moments of quiet, calm reflection during the 1991 segments. Moments such as this include a nine second close up of the charm falling to the floor into centre frame following Jung-min's first rape and a 20-second wide shot of the elderly Young-hee making a charm opposite a bench that is filled with them. The objects of the collective, the blue butterflies, are likewise focused upon, being shown in a minimum of five separate scenes throughout the film. Notable examples include a sequence where numerous butterflies emerge from a mass grave of comfort women which then proceed to fly over the Korean country side in several high angle wide shots that pan forward over mountains, rivers, rice fields and forests. The butterflies, through their close positioning to the camera and their consistent inclusion in these shots, are the main focus of this sequence. Another example is a scene where a seven second close up lingers upon a butterfly collection as a Japanese hand puts a pin through the abdomen of a butterfly. Through these lengthy shots and sequences the objects of the charms and butterflies are elevated to spectacle, often becoming the focal point of the scene they are included in. The presence and narrative use of these individual and collective spiritual objects reinforces a key thematic element of the film, specifically that Korea was abandoned by the Gods during WWII.

*Spirits' Homecoming* contains numerous diegetic depictions of spirits and unambiguous miracles done by theological powers. During the narrative that occurs in 1991, the primary setting is a Shaman temple where numerous rituals are performed to assist the spirits of the deceased pass into the afterlife. These spirits are represented as matching blue butterflies. The use of blue butterflies as a representation of the Korean spirit is significant. The calm, gentle blue colouration on a small, vulnerable insect signifies that the Korean spirit is delicate and peaceful. As all of these butterflies are identical, the Korean comfort women are personified under this gentle lens, signifying their innocence as a collective. In the 1991 narrative arc a young woman, named Eun-kyung, comes to the temple after she is raped by a criminal and witnesses the murder of her father. Eun-kyung eventually discovers she is a powerful medium, able to talk to the dead and pass on messages to the living. Eun-kyung's abilities and the presence of these spirits are

presented as genuine in this narrative. This is evident in a key scene where Eun-kyung talks to an elderly man who asks her to pass on a message to his grieving daughter. After Eun-kyung delivers this message, the man's daughter reveals that he is dead. As a result, Korean theology, specifically Korean Shamanism, is portrayed as a real presence within the film's narrative. In the 1943 narrative arc, the *Gwe-bul-no-ri-gae* charms are repeatedly stated to protect those who hold them and that bad luck will fall upon those who give theirs away. Due to the unambiguous nature of Eun-kyung's abilities and the diegetic presence of an afterlife as a result of the physical embodiment of the Korean spirit, the charms are also positioned to be genuine in their effect. However, while the blue butterflies represent the innocent nature of the comfort women's spirits, the presence of the charms routinely depict how Japanese oppression destroys the individual's soul. These charms are only held by either Jung-min or Young-hee. During moments of violence and violation of these individuals, the charms are often lingered upon. Examples of this include a six second close up of Jung-min's hand gripping a charm while her genitals are forcibly inspected by a doctor (figure 17) and also a 14 second high angle close up of Jung-min's dead body gripping a charm that is covered in her own blood. During the 1943 narrative arc, the charms are repeatedly focused upon, working to juxtapose the physical embodiment of Korean spirituality against the cruel environment the women occupy. While the butterflies unify the comfort women as a collective, the object spectacle of the charms only occurs during scenes where the women are alone and being violated by the Japanese. Therefore, as the narrative represents the Korean spirit to be physical and that these charms are embodiments of this spirituality, their presence during these scenes acts to further the oppression of the Korean comfort women under their external agent. Specifically, the ineffectual nature of the charms despite the diegetic presence of the afterlife positions the Japanese as a force more powerful than heaven and that no God can save the comfort women from their torment.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, while the comfort women are unified as a collective in their spirits, their individual bodies are at the mercy of their oppressors.

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<sup>94</sup> Also, due to contextualisation of the butterflies as Korean spirits, the aforementioned lengthy shots of the Japanese butterfly collection implies that the Japanese are not only defacing the bodies of the comfort women, but violating their spirits as well.



Figure 17: Screenshot from *Spirits' Homecoming* (Dir. Cho Jung-rae, 2016)

The individual/collective narrative trope of *cinematic han* is also evoked through the film's second element of object spectacle, the body. In these instances, the violence and cruelty of the SNW becomes the film's primary spectacle, offering many lingering shots and scenes that reveal the continuous violence the Japanese committed against the comfort women. Violence and the aftermath of violence often create the focal point of many sequences, with numerous lengthy shots that linger on the bodies of the comfort women revealing graphic injuries, scars and bruises, often in detailed close ups and mid-shots. Therefore, the film's violence is separated into two categories: the act of violence and the aftermath of violence. Each of these categories further displays the individual/collective narrative trope of *cinematic han*. During the film's first half, acts of violence are often relegated to scenes of Jung-min being struck and sexually violated by the Japanese. Consequently, the film's violence is often only depicted through a single, restricted point of view. The scenes of violence committed against Jung-min introduce the idea that she no longer has agency over her own body due to these scenes being formally constructed to focus upon her physique and the violence committed against it. Both of these aspects are introduced sequentially. After arriving at the comfort station Jung-min is forcibly taken away from the other girls and is washed in a large bath. The scene in which she is washed lasts for 27 seconds and consists of a single shot that

begins as a high angle wide shot as it slowly zooms into her back. This lengthy shot of her being washed against her will introduces the idea that she no longer controls her own fate. The violence occurs in the following scene in which Jung-min is raped for the first time. After a lengthy scene of her pleading with her attacker to be freed, she is savagely beaten three times and knocked unconscious. This beating is shown through a mid-shot of Jung-min, with her face visibly getting more bruised and bloody with each hit. After she is knocked unconscious, the camera lingers on her injured face in a close up for nineteen seconds as she is raped. In these scenes, the body and the violence committed against it become the scene's main focus, and through the lingering and intimate camera, is elevated to become a spectacle.

However, after the scenes of Jung-min's abuse, the film's point of view widens to include scenes of violence committed against other Korean women. These scenes include an 11 second wide shot of one of the girls being whipped, a lengthy sequence of a girl being punched in the face, being grabbed mid-fall and punched again before being knocked to the ground and getting her throat stood on, and an 18 second wide shot of the comfort women being executed, resulting in bloody gunshot wounds and each girl falling into a mass grave filled with bloodied and dirty corpses. Through these scenes, and their placement after Jung-min's abuse, her experiences are made universal.

Specifically, the abuse Jung-min experienced as an individual is in fact endured by the comfort women as a collective. Therefore, the repositioning of Jung-min's abuse widens the film from a subjective point of view to an objective one, revealing that the violence and sexual abuse suffered by Jung-min is not an isolated incident, but reflective of the comfort women experience. This objective perspective is reinforced in a nearly 90 second sequence that involves a mass rape by Japanese soldiers. During this sequence, the aspect ratio changes from widescreen to full screen, removing the letterboxing from the frame to fill the entire screen with action and movement.<sup>95</sup> This sequence consists of two lengthy tracking shots of the entire comfort station, the first being 30 seconds in length, the other being 53 seconds in length. In the first shot, Japanese soldiers line up outside of the comfort women's rooms, jumping and pushing each other to be first in

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<sup>95</sup> This is the only sequence in the film where this change in aspect ratio occurs. This change occurs in both the theatrical print and in the film's official DVD release.

line. In the second, the camera tracks in a birds-eye view angle across several rooms, showing multiple beatings and rapes of the comfort women in detail. In this sequence, the acts of violence and rape are elevated to the level of spectacle, with each detail being shown in lengthy and graphic shots. The camera angles used in this sequence represent objective coverage, lingering above the action, capturing the oppression of multiple women simultaneously. As a result of the film's formal construction, oppression of the comfort is depicted as total, affecting both the individual and the collective equally. Therefore, through the film's adherence to the ideological precepts of its cinematic period, this narrative trope of *cinematic han* is evoked.<sup>96</sup>

#### **4.3 The mise en scene of *cinematic han***

As demonstrated thus far, the narrative and formal construction of the representation of WWII is swayed by the ideological precepts of the cinematic period in which the film was produced. Through the structures these precepts provide to each film, the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are evoked. Furthermore, key elements of the mise en scene in each film also evoke *cinematic han* by establishing its key modes of oppression. This is induced through each film's use of costumes, locations, colour palette and performance that makes Korea have the look and atmosphere of a prison, under which their agency is removed by their external agents. However, these elements also unify the Korean characters through their endurance of this oppression, in turn also embodying *cinematic han*'s element of hope. This section will analyse the mise en scene of *The Sea Knows* and *Spirits' Homecoming* to demonstrate how their formal construction evokes *cinematic han* and how they contribute to cinematically portraying Korea as a metaphorical prison.

#### **Background characters**

In films that evoke *cinematic han*, the background characters appear to be metaphorically weighed down by their oppression, their bodies noticeably altered by the presence of their oppressive, external agent. As discussed in Chapter 3, their oppression

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<sup>96</sup> The second narrative trope of *cinematic han*, specifically of the narrative beginning and ending with the

is portrayed as a physical force, repeatedly being placed and removed from the Koreans from scene to scene, affecting when and how they can perform specific actions. The background characters of *The Sea Knows* and *Spirits' Homecoming* evoke this element of the mise en scene. In *The Sea Knows* the background characters are routinely shown performing little to no action. For example, during the scene where Mori slaps a Korean soldier in the name of the 50-year tradition, no one moves, blinks or looks at Mori's actions. This inaction is demonstrated again two minutes later when a Korean soldier is tossed into a wall by the Japanese. While one character is visible climbing down from his bunk bed after this action, he stops halfway down the ladder. During this scene the room is filled with at least a dozen background characters, many of who are Korean, but no one betrays any emotion, nor do they talk or react to this violence. As a result, each scene in which the external agent is present, often personified by Mori or an unnamed Japanese military police officer, the background characters become tableau-like in nature. However, in a later scene set in the infantry common room, in which the external agent is absent, the same men who did not move in earlier scenes are seen talking, blowing smoke rings and playing the harmonica. One man smokes a cigarette and begins sharply gesturing to his fellow soldiers. Upon not receiving a response, the man puts the cigarette down and leans his head on his hands while looking annoyed. Another instance has two soldiers playing a board game in the background, while Aro-un and other soldiers discuss narrative crucial dialogue in the foreground. Many men watch this game, sitting in a tight group. It is important to note that within these scenes, both in the barracks and the common room, Japanese conscripts are also present, identified through dialogue, in turn revealing that low level Japanese soldiers are subject to the same conditions of abuse as the Korean soldiers. In turn, the treatment of these Japanese soldiers reveal that the film's true external agent is not the Japanese as a whole, but figures of Japanese authority. This is demonstrated when Mori, a surrogate for the Japanese high command, enters the common room. As soon as he enters, the background characters once again become quiet and rigid, their movements passive and restricted. Therefore, it is demonstrated that in scenes where figures of Japanese authority are

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Koreans under oppression, is detailed later in this chapter.

absent the soldiers act in an energetic, lively manner. However, these same soldiers become comparable to statues when their oppressive, external agent is present.

In *Spirits' Homecoming* the majority of the background characters are comprised of the oppressive, external agent, namely of the Japanese soldiers who physically and sexually abuse the comfort women. However, there are a few notable scenes in which the comfort women are present as these background characters. In this film, the comfort women are characterised to be young women between the ages of 14 and 17. Reflective of this fact, during scenes in which the women are able to interact without the presence of the external agent, their actions become reminiscent of school girl behaviour, specifically of gossiping, discussing schoolyard crushes and general banter. One of the key examples of this dynamic is during a scene in a quarry in which the women gather to swim and make fart jokes. In this sequence, the girls are seemingly free from their predicament and partake in discussions that involve them laughing and speaking in a bright tone of voice. During these dialogue exchanges, the women who make up the scene's background characters join in with this light hearted banter by also visibly laughing and reacting to the conversation with large smiles and loud voices. In the foreground of this scene, several anonymous women strip down to their underwear to swim in the quarry, most of whom are noticeably shivering in the water and holding themselves for warmth. These women are also shown reacting with the aforementioned laughter and smiles towards the scene's main dialogue. Another example of this type of behaviour comes during a scene in which the women are forced to pick up wood just outside of the comfort station. This sequence occurs shortly after the 90 second sequence of the mass rape of the women. As they carry out the task, Jung-min and Young-hee are approached by another girl. The girls compare wounds in a light tone of voice, brushing off their injuries with comments such as 'this is nothing compared to what you look like'. The girl proceeds to tell Jung-min and Young-hee how one of the Japanese soldiers, who she refers to as 'Mr Godama', has fallen in love with her and wishes to take her back to Japan to be his wife after the war. As she talks, the girl smiles and acts embarrassed, as if she is discussing a schoolyard crush. During this sequence, Jung-min and Young-hee look shocked and try to talk her out of this by calling Godama a gorilla and telling her 'don't trust anyone but us'. The girl looks down dejected, before Jung-min begins to discuss the beginnings of

an escape plan. During this discussion, several of the women in the background of the shots continue their task of moving the wood, yet listen in on the conversation, seemingly in agreement with what Jung-min and Young-hee are telling the girl through their facial expressions and sideways glances in their direction. In this scene and the scene at the quarry the main and background characters are displayed to show a multitude of emotions, such as happiness, embarrassment, shock, anger and determination, portraying them as complex individuals. However, in scenes where the external agents are present, the girl's become passive and emotionless. For example, the scene immediately following the wood stacking scene has the women being led two-by-two back to the comfort station. In this scene, the women become quiet and rigid, walking in silence with their heads down, only occasionally rubbing their arms. During a later sequence, the women are punished for Jung-min's and Young-hee's attempted escape from the comfort station, resulting in them being forced to strip naked. In this scene, the women maintain the same dejected, passive posture. Another example near the beginning of the film has dozens of women sitting in a train car in the presence of a Japanese soldier. Despite these uneven numbers, the women sit in silence on the floor, their knees to their chests, huddled around the circumference of the train car. In a scene in which only one Japanese soldier is present, the women remain quiet, immobile and emotionless.

The performance of the background characters when their oppressive, external agent is either present or absent reveals that both *The Sea Knows* and *Spirits' Homecoming* evoke this element of *cinematic han*'s mise en scene. In both films the Korean background characters exist in a space controlled entirely by their oppressor. In *The Sea Knows* this space is the Japanese military barracks and in *Spirits' Homecoming* it is the comfort station. In addition, these locations are not situated on the Korean peninsula, further taking these characters out of their natural environment. The energetic actions performed by these characters only occur in spaces that are either hidden from view, such as the quarry, or designated by the Japanese as spaces they can relax, such as the common room. At all other times, the background characters occupy spaces that are perpetually monitored or occupied by Japanese soldiers, resulting in the primary movements of the Korean background characters being passive and emotionless. As a

result, the energetic movements of the background characters are minimal, and due to them only occurring in specific locations, rare. Therefore, the primary movements of the background characters in these films are passive, resulting in a historical narrative where the Korean characters are perpetually weighed down by their oppression.

## Locations

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the locations, and associated colour palette of films that evoke *cinematic han* give the locations the Korean characters occupy the appearance and atmosphere of a prison. In *The Sea Knows* and *Spirits' Homecoming* the formal construction of the locations occupied by the Koreans and the Japanese evoke these elements of *cinematic han*'s mise en scene. The prison-like appearance of the Korean locations is reinforced due to them being contextualised in the narrative as being literal holding cells that restrict these characters movements, specifically in the barracks location in *The Sea Knows* and the comfort station in *Spirits' Homecoming*.

In *The Sea Knows* the main area occupied by the Koreans are their barracks. This room is filled with basic fixtures, such as a sink, lockers and tables. The walls are made of brick, light fixtures hang low from the ceiling and there are no interior walls, just wooden frames. The room itself is quite wide and deep, with a clear division between the sleeping area and a common area, with half the room being dedicated to each. The bunks, which are made of wooden frames, each contain a small mattress and thin blankets as well as three small stacked pillows. Each bunk has two, possibly three, beds stacked on top of the other that are connected by a small ladder made of thin wood. In the common area there is a simple wooden table stretching nearly the entire length of the room. The plates are deep and made of metal and the food (plain rice) is delivered in a large wooden bucket and served with a wooden spoon. A poster of a naked woman can be glimpsed on occasion, but it is small and unexceptional, often disappearing amongst the bland nature of the room. In addition to this bland, basic stylisation, these barracks are expected to house dozens of grown men. In scenes when this room is filled with Koreans, the space becomes cramped and too small for energetic movements. Furthermore, this room is only shown to have a single door, which can easily be locked from the outside. This single room is the sole space the Korean characters hold within

the film, and through its rudimentary elements, is given the appearance of a holding cell, a place where the Koreans can eat and sleep, awaiting the orders of their Japanese superiors, with little to no room for luxury or items of personal expression. Furthering this holding cell appearance is the room's monochromatic colour scheme. Despite *The Sea Knows* being filmed in black and white, all of the walls, floors and rooves are visibly a single, mostly darkened colour, giving it the appearance of grey concrete, as if they have not been painted over after their initial construction. Therefore, the small, cramped nature of the room, combined with this grey colouration, makes the space appear gloomy and depressing. In short, the oppression of the Korean characters is baked into the space they are allowed to occupy.

In *Spirits' Homecoming*, the rooms in the comfort station the women are allowed to sleep double as the rooms they are sexually abused in. The belongings of each women rest on a shelf high above their bed that is too tall for many of them to reach. The walls and floors are wooden, but are cut poorly and are unpolished, resulting in many inconsistent gaps between the boards and several splinters can be viewed poking out from between them. The boards are also almost always wet. A small wooden barrel filled with water sits in the corner of each room, however each time it is shown, the water has the appearance of crimson. The colour of this water is never seen to change, meaning the girls are drinking and cleaning with dirty, presumably bloody, water. The room is also small and cramped, being no more than a few metres wide. The doors to these quarters are made of wood, but each has a rectangular steel frame attached to it with rivets. An additional steel beam is attached diagonally across the door. Furthermore, the door is locked from the outside. Therefore, the small size of these lodgings, along with these doors, give each room the appearance, and narrative functionality, of a prison cell. The women are allowed to sleep in these rooms, but due to the locations also being the site of their abuse, they are not allowed to leave. The only time they are outside of these rooms is when the Japanese let them. Additionally, these spaces contain a few amenities, such as curtains, a desk, soap and sponges. However, due to the contextualisation of the rooms as being the sites of sexual abuse, these items can be argued to be placed in these locations for the benefit of the Japanese to clean themselves after they abuse the women. As a result, these items demonstrate the ever

present nature of the women's oppressor. Even when the Japanese are absent, symbols of their abuse remain behind. Furthermore, the colouration of these rooms furthers Japan's omniscience over the Korean characters. These rooms are dark, with the wooden walls and furnishings being either a dark brown, deep red or black, with a perpetual shadow over everything. Therefore, the horrific and depressing nature of this environment is reflected by the dark and gloomy colours of the room. However, there is a notable example of a lightly coloured object in this space, namely of blue curtains. This colour is vibrant, reminiscent of the brightly coloured areas the Japanese occupy. As a result, this blue is representative of the Japanese. Whilst the rooms occupied by the women are uniquely Korean through the use of primarily dark colours, this blue becomes a symbol of their occupiers. Like the amenities objects discussed earlier, this blue colouration, which is located near the top of the room, is a symbol of the women's oppressors. Therefore, even when the women are alone, the Japanese are ever present and they are never free from oppression. Consequently, the colouration of these locations furthers the hopelessness of the comfort women experience.

The spaces occupied by each film's external agent project the opposite of the dour and oppressive locations occupied by the Koreans. Instead, these locations are routinely shown to be large, organised and decadent, establishing the Japanese as not only superior to the Koreans, but more civilised. In *The Sea Knows* the areas solely occupied by the Japanese are both upper class in appearance and more practical than the spaces occupied by the Koreans. In a meeting hall, the Japanese sit at a large, chunky wooden table, adorned by a white table cloth. The walls are smooth, clean brick and the doors have a rectangular pattern carved into them. Windows are adorned with curtains which are made of dark and heavy material, presumably velvet. In the offices of the Japanese soldiers papers are stacked neatly on desks and letters are held within a 5x6 cabinet of pigeon holes. Vertical posters filled with Japanese characters also line the walls, along with a map of Japan itself. Therefore, these locations portray the Japanese as a well-oiled machine, with every person and object in the correct place they need to be for maximum efficiency. Furthermore, the residence of the Japanese citizens, specifically of Aro-un's wife, Hideko, are of a similar organised manner. This house has a small, neat garden on its exterior, complete with trees and flowers. The interior is filled with books,

lamps and tables, each neatly stacked and organised. These rooms, while a smaller size than the Korean barracks, are occupied primarily by Hideko and her mother, making the space appear larger and more than what they need. These Japanese rooms also have multiple doors and exits, giving the appearance of freedom, specifically that the Japanese characters are free to come and go as they please, opposed to the single door and exit that ensnares the Koreans in their barracks. As a result, the spaces occupied by the Japanese are significantly larger, decadent and organised than the Korean locations. Furthermore, the colouration of these locations makes them appear warm and inviting, with many of the walls, floors and rooves being white or a light shade of grey. Therefore, when placed in conjunction with the more open construction of the Japanese locations, the colours make the Japanese space appear big and bright, as if they are being welcomed by their environment. In turn, the formal construction of the Japanese locations is a direct contrast to the Korean locations that appears to be actively rejecting them.

The neat and orderly nature of the Japanese interiors in *Spirits' Homecoming* are also a direct contrast to the dark and gloomy nature of the Korean locations. In the film, only one location is shown to be solely occupied by the Japanese, which is a medical room used to treat the injured comfort women. This room is tidy, with medical instruments either placed in glass jars, porcelain bowls, or lined up neatly on metal trays. A white curtain clearly divides the two areas of the medical room. The first area is an examination area, which consists of a high wooden chair, and a surgical area, that contains two beds covered in white sheets. It is a small, nondescript room, yet significantly larger than the cell-like nature of the rooms of the Korean women. Furthermore, the walls and floors are clean and made from perfectly cut and intact wooden beams. The meticulous placement of every object, along with its cleanliness, gives the room a clinical appearance. When juxtaposed against the almost rotting-like appearance of the Korean rooms, primarily through the badly cut and splintered wooden floors, this medical room appears to be detached from the comfort station, as if they are two completely different locations. As a result, the sexual abuse that occurs in the Korean rooms are distanced from the medical procedures that occur in the medical room, as if the Japanese are detached from the atrocities they are committing elsewhere.

in the building. Furthering this detachment, the medical room contains more bright and vibrant colours than the spaces occupied by the women, mostly provided through the light coming in through windows. These windows remove the shadows from the room, allowing the walls, floorboards and curtains to gleam with bright browns and whites. In addition, vibrant greens are also seen in this location through trees visible outside of the window. Despite the colour pattern of the medical room and the Korean rooms being similar, the addition of this window removes the darkness from the Japanese locations, making the previously dull colours to appear vibrant. Therefore, this colouration adds to the thematic ideal of the Japanese distancing themselves from their actions. Despite being conjoined by similar colours, establishing both rooms to be within the same building, the contrast between the dull and vibrant colour palettes makes the Koreans exist in perpetual darkness while the Japanese exist in the light. As a result, the Japanese appear more civilised and superior to the comfort women, stylistically separating them from their actions.

The formal construction of the locations and colour palettes of *The Sea Knows and Spirits' Homecoming* evoke cinematic han. Through the contrast between the Korean locations and the Japanese locations, each nationality is stylistically positioned to either be a low social class or the ruling social class, or by extension, the oppressed or the oppressor. Through the appearance of each location, along with their respective colour palettes, the Koreans are kept in a form of captivity, with each room having the appearance, functionality and atmosphere of a prison cell. Conversely, the Japanese locations and colour palettes depict them as the superior nation, with each character existing in a decadent environment in which they are given free rein to enter or leave. Therefore, the oppression of the Korean populace is reflected through the formal construction of the locations they are shown to occupy.

## Costumes

As discussed in Chapter 2, the costumes the Korean characters wear show their oppression externally, their clothes becoming symbols of their low societal position. In *The Sea Knows*, the primary costumes worn by the Korean characters are Japanese military uniforms that are worn by both Japanese soldiers and the Korean conscripts.

These uniforms alternate in colour during the films, being seen in both a light and dark colouration. The long sleeved shirts, pants and hats of the Japanese uniform are all the same colour, either entirely dark or light. The hats worn by the Japanese soldiers often have a star in the middle of the forehead, with a leather strap around its circumference. The shirt has a rectangular patch on each shoulder, along with a similarly shaped patch on both sides of the collar. The majority of the soldiers also have a white arm band filled with Japanese writing. Each soldier also wears knee high leather boots along with a leather belt around their waist. However, despite being similar in style, the Korean conscripts are visibly inferior to the Japanese soldiers for two reasons: rank and the absence of weapons. These uniforms contain different items which help to denote the rank of the character. While the basic uniform of the Japanese military is the same regardless of rank or nationality, colonels and generals are visually separate from the infantry due to the presence of dozens of rectangular medals attached to their chest, hats that have a wider brim than the infantry soldiers, and a rope that hangs from their shoulder, runs across their chest and ends at their belt. Therefore, through the film's mise en scene, a clear divide is established between the Korean conscripts and their oppressive agents, specifically, figures of Japanese authority. Furthermore, many Japanese soldiers are shown carrying weapons on their shoulders with a dark leather strap. This weapon is usually seen to be a bolt action rifle but can also include knives or swords. The Korean conscripts conversely do not usually carry weapons. The lack of weaponry immediately positions the Korean soldiers as inferior to their Japanese counterparts, as if they are not trusted to hold them. This could be analysed to be a measure of the Japanese army to crush potential rebellion and halt escape attempts. As the Koreans do not have weapons, they cannot fight back against the Japanese. By extension, if they attempt to escape, any Japanese soldier could immediately kill the escapees. Therefore, the absence of these weapons further ensnares the Koreans into Japanese oppression. Additionally, this lack of weaponry implies that the Korean conscripts would be sent into battle with no or minimal equipment, positioning them as an expendable arm of the Japanese army, acting as nothing more than canon-fodder. Due to these visual differences, the Koreans are depicted to be under equipped, missing weaponry, and lack representation in the Japanese military high command. As a result,

these differences depict the costumes of the Korean characters to be of an inferior quality to their external agents, and by extension, visually position them at the bottom of the Japanese military hierarchy.

In *Spirits' Homecoming* the inferior costumes of the Korean women to their oppressive, external agent is demonstrated through their primary costume: Japanese robes. These robes are constructed from a long sleeve shirt, a dress and a sash around the woman's waist. The shirt and dress are often different colours and are seen in pink, yellow, blue and other varieties. The women are also seen in a second style of clothing which consists of a plainer, yet still formal, style of casual dress, complete with shirts, skirts or cardigans, seen in white, brown and black colours. Each of the Korean women are shown wearing these styles of clothing while at the comfort station. However, the women do not just wear the same clothing, but are also shown with the same hair colour and style. Their hair is black, straight, combed and chin length. It is always parted in the middle. As a result, these costumes display the forced conformity of the women.

Through their near identical costumes, each are depersonalised, not given opportunity for personal expression through their dress or appearance. Therefore, through their indistinguishable look, the women become defined as a homogenous collective, not as separate individuals. However, despite the majority of the Japanese characters depicted in this film wearing military uniforms, one character dresses in a similar style to the Korean women. It is in the contrast between these costumes that make the inferior nature of the Korean robes become evident. This character is a Japanese women, identified only as 'Mother', who manages the Korean women at the comfort station. She is routinely shown wearing Japanese style robes, similar to a kimono, that are of a visually superior material and style to the robes the Korean women are forced to wear. The primary robe Mother wears is a black robe, with a large red sash around her middle. This robe has a white collar and is covered in red splotches, which has the appearance of small pools of blood. The robe is made of a reflective material, like silk, that is of a superior material to the matte, cotton robes the comfort women wear. Mother's robes have a unique pattern and express the personality of the character, specifically she is an evil, violent women who is complicit in the sexual slavery of the Korean women. Therefore, her robes, through their unique design and noticeably higher quality material, are an expression of

her personality, as opposed to being forced upon her like those worn by the comfort women. In turn, the clothing of the comfort women becomes likened to a uniform, a low quality standard of dress that identifies their position at the comfort station. Mother's clothing however, despite being of a similar style, is clothing of personal expression, consequently, singling her out from the rest of the women as a figure of authority. Therefore, through these differences in both the appearance and usage of these items of clothing, the Korean characters' robes become a symbol of their oppression due to their inferior quality and design when compared to Mother.

In *The Sea Knows* and *Spirits' Homecoming*, the analysis of the costumes of the Korean characters in relation to their external agent reveals a clear division between them. The Korean costumes are of a noticeably inferior quality and design to their external agent, in this case the Japanese, and how they are utilised within the film reveals specific societal structures that furthers their oppression. In *The Sea Knows*, the absence of rank and weapons positions the Koreans underfoot of their Japanese superiors, while in *Spirits' Homecoming* the identical design and material of the Korean robes in contrast to the robes of Mother removes the identity of the individual and visually identifies them as comfort women. As a result, the costumes of the Korean characters evoke *cinematic han* as their inferior quality positions these objects as symbols of Korean oppression.

#### **4.4 Cinematic representation of the past and socio-cultural context of production**

Thus far this chapter has conducted an analysis of South Korean films that represent WWII, revealing that this limited subset of films are affected by the ideological precepts of their cinematic period. Through these precepts, the six elements of *cinematic han* are evoked through various narrative tropes and elements of mise en scene, which formally construct the representation of Korean characters to be oppressed, by giving the locations they occupy the appearance and atmosphere of a prison. As established in the last chapter, *cinematic han* is integral to the historiophoty of the South Korean historical film as it is through the film's evocation of this aesthetic where the historical knowledge of the South Korean WWII film can be analysed. As discussed in previous chapters, this historical knowledge is developed through the symbolic links that are drawn between the

cinematic text and the socio-cultural context of its production. As the representation of WWII places Koreans under continuous oppression, the connections to the real world that these films allude to are also concerned with Korean oppression. These symbolic links take two forms: a societal fear or anxiety regarding Korean oppression that was occurring during the period of the film's production; or a form of cultural hope to overcome a historical oppression that was still affecting Korea in the film's socio-cultural context. In this section, each film will be discussed and analysed in order to demonstrate how the representation of forced Korean participation in geopolitical conflict in the South Korean WWII film can create symbolic links between the film and its production context.

### **The socio-cultural context of the 1950s**

Like *Nameless Stars*, as detailed in the previous chapter, *The Sea Knows'* narrative is heavily influenced by South Korea's era of post-war reconstruction. However, while *Nameless Stars* used this context to propagandise Korea's youth into assuming the mantle of resistance against foreign invaders should the Korean War eventually resume, *The Sea Knows* takes the opposite approach. Namely, by calling for unity between warring nations. As previously discussed, under the anti-communist perspective of the Golden Age and the evocation of *cinematic han*, *The Sea Knows* contextualises WWII to be an environment where Japanese traditions are warped to justify the near constant abuse and humiliation of the Korean soldiers by those in the Japanese military who hold positions of power. However, enduring this oppression alongside the Korean conscripts are low level Japanese soldiers who train beside them. Despite the narrative and formal construction of the film placing the Korean characters under permanent oppression, they are repeatedly shown being resilient of this environment due the personal bonds and comradeship they share with the Japanese conscripts. The Korean characters exist in an environment where the Japanese abuse and oppression is total, yet, the comradeship of the Korean and Japanese soldiers, as witnessed in the aforementioned scenes in the common room, and the blossoming romance between Aro-un and Hideko, demonstrate a developing bond between the citizens of both nations despite the sadistic behaviour of the Japanese high command. Produced during a time that was anxious of a renewed

Korean War, the film's Japanese characters can be interpreted as symbols of North Korea in that both are historical national enemies of South Korea during a period of cultural unrest, specifically WWII and the post-war reconstruction era. Through the film's depictions of the interactions and relationships between the Japanese and Korean soldiers and civilians links are drawn between both sides, demonstrating that the opposing countries are near identical culturally and ideologically. This unity can be interpreted as the removal of responsibility from the North Korean soldiers and civilians for their actions during the Korean War. Despite both nations engaging in combat, the average Korean, from either North or South, was not responsible for the war and were only acting under the orders of an oppressive ruling class. At a time of high tension and fears that renewed aggression from both Koreas was inevitable, the film's depiction of unity between opposite sides of a conflict, specifically through its depiction of Japan's and Korea's complex dynamic during WWII, can be argued to be an effort to demonstrate that reunification was not impossible. In turn, the oppression the Korean and Japanese soldiers are witnessed to endure, specifically through the film's narrative and formal construction that evokes *cinematic han*, gives rise to the unity of both sides. Therefore, the analysis of the film's representation of this geopolitical conflict reveals that beneath the façade of the North Korean communist threat was a citizenry that were near identical to the South Korean populace.

When *The Sea Knows* details the interactions between the Korean and Japanese soldiers and civilians, specifically those low in the Japanese military and social hierarchy, the nationalities of the characters become irrelevant. The symbolic unification of Korea and Japan occurs in Aro-un's interactions with three Japanese characters: Nakamura, Suzuki and Hideko. The interactions between these characters demonstrate that Japanese citizens are not always defined by nationalist ideologies. The characters of Nakamura and Suzuki repeatedly put Aro-un's wellbeing before their own lives and careers. Nakamura is knowledgeable about the mistreatment of the Korean conscripts under Mori and teaches them a trick to survive his beatings. This trick involves picturing a beautiful woman in their heads and removing a piece of her clothing every time they are struck. The trick Nakamura teaches the Koreans leads to each being able to withstand the beatings, resulting in Mori becoming humiliated in front of his peers. In order to help the

Koreans Nakamura ridiculed a fellow Japanese soldier, negating the expected protagonist/antagonist relationship of the Korean and Japanese characters set up by the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. In this instance, Nakamura treated the Koreans as peers and not by nationality, symbolically unifying both sides in order to survive the brutal training regime of the Japanese Army.

The next character, Suzuki, performs a similar feat. In the middle of the film's second act, Aro-un reveals to Hideko that Mori tried to force him to beat a Japanese private. Aro-un refused and was beaten himself. This private is later revealed to be Suzuki. Later in the film, Aro-un is coerced into nearly releasing American prisoners in order to give the Japanese an excuse to execute him. Suzuki, realising this plot, purposely gets himself arrested so he can be sent to the prison where Aro-un is stationed in order to warn him of the Japanese plans. Aro-un's mercy and Suzuki's sacrifice creates a mutual ground between the Japanese and Korean conscripts where each is judged by their actions, not by their nationality. The unification of the Japanese and Korean soldiers is also noted visually during the aforementioned scenes in the common room. In these scenes Aro-un, Nakamura, Suzuki and other Japanese and Korean soldiers laugh, joke, play games and display bonds of friendship, uniting them through their individual relationships and ideological union. Additionally, each soldier wears an identical army uniform to each other. Consequently, the unity of the Korean and Japanese soldiers is furthered, as without the character verbally announcing their nationality, there is no way to tell the Japanese characters apart from the Koreans. Therefore, an object that is outwardly a symbol of the Korean oppression under the Japanese, as discussed earlier, can also be argued to be one of unity. This visual element helps to demonstrate that when not forced into an armed conflict by their superiors, the average soldier on either side of a war are indistinguishable.

The most significant character in the unification of the Japanese and Korean characters is Hideko. It is the relationship between Aro-un and Hideko that forms the narrative backbone of the film. Introduced by Nakamura, Aro-un and Hideko are initially wary of each other due to their nationalities. This is noted during their first exchange where Hideko, upon revealing the house next door was recently robbed, declares, 'I'm so

scared that I'm at a loss for words'. Not realising Aro-un's nationality she continues by stating that she believed the robbery was conducted by Koreans as, 'the Koreans have no jobs. What else could they do besides rob people?' As she speaks, Aro-un appears shocked and embarrassed. Mortified, Nakamura declares loudly that, 'This man here is Korean, we went to the same school' (figure 18). After this is revealed, out of either embarrassment or fear, Hideko excuses herself and leaves the room. Initially, Aro-un and Hideko are opposed due to their nationalities and the stigmas attached to them. However, as the narrative progresses the two grow romantically close and eventually marry. The progression from opposition to unity is signalled in a pivotal dialogue exchange between the characters. In this exchange, Hideko attempts to convince Aro-un that their relationship can occur despite his insistence that society would condemn them. The exchange is as follows:

Aro-un: 'We speak different languages.'

Hideko: 'Japanese and Korean all originated from the Mongol language.'

Aro-un: 'What about social custom?'

Hideko: 'Customs are being globalized.'

Aro-un: 'What about ideology?'

Hideko: 'Ideology changes with time.'

Aro-un: 'What about ancestry?'

Hideko: 'We come from monkeys. And who's ever seen them?'

After this exchange, Aro-un relents to Hideko's approaches, rises above his hatred of Japan, and engages in a relationship with the woman he eventually marries. As Aro-un and Hideko progressively overcome their fears of each other's nationalities they grow to realise their commonalities as individuals. This realisation moves their relationship away from a position of animosity to one of love and compassion.



Figure 18: Screenshot from *The Sea Knows* (Dir. Kim Ki-young, 1961)

However, from the start of their romance, Aro-un's and Hideko's interactions align with a doomed romance archetype, comparable to *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 2005), of two lovers torn apart by their position in society, or in this example, by their nationality.<sup>97</sup> This is notable in a scene where a pregnant Hideko states that she would kill herself if Aro-un is killed by Japan. In this relationship Aro-un plays the role of the sceptic, whilst Hideko is optimistic their relationship will be accepted. The roles these characters play are significant as they can be interpreted as embodying the societal concerns and anxieties of South Korea post-Korean War. Aro-un is cautious about his relationship with Hideko as it unifies him with the Japanese, a nation under which he has faced immense physical and psychological abuse. Aro-un's stance can be analysed as a stand in for those in South Korean society who were sceptical about a possible future reunification with North Korea due to the actions they performed against the South during the war. Meanwhile, Hideko wants to be with Aro-un despite the clear and obvious societal objection to their union. Hideko's optimism could be analysed as a

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<sup>97</sup> William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a narrative of two lovers, Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet who fall in love and are subsequently married despite each being a part of separate factions of two feuding families. Their relationship is tested by a variety of betrayals and backstabs perpetrated by their families who wish the young couple to halt their romance. Despite enduring these oppositions the

representation of those in South Korean society who wanted a Korean reunification despite knowing that the pursuit of this union already resulted in three years of war and would inevitably bring further difficulties and conflict to the Peninsula. *The Sea Knows* ultimately sides with Hideko's viewpoint as she and Aro-un eventually marry, symbolically unifying Korea and Japan. Therefore, the film demonstrates that peace is possible between two opposing nations through the personal connections of their people, specifically through romantic love, as represented by Aro-un's and Hideko's marriage, or platonic love, as demonstrated by the relationships between Aro-un, Nakamura and Suzuki. As Aro-un states: 'War is about manipulating the present world. Love is about creating future generations'. In turn, the oppression placed upon the Koreans by the Japanese allowed these interpersonal relationships to develop and flourish. Therefore, it is from the film's narrative and formal elements that evoked *cinematic han* that provides a grounds for symbolic connections to the cinematic text's socio-cultural context to emerge, specifically through the film's emblematic call for unity and the end of aggression between South and North Korea after the Korean War.

### **The socio-cultural context of the 2010s**

In 1942 a Japanese Naval Lieutenant, named Yasuhiro Nakasone, discovered that gambling, fighting and sexual misconduct had stalled the construction of an airfield in Borneo. As a way of solving these work issues, Nakasone organised a brothel, known as a 'comfort station' in order to improve the mood of the Japanese soldiers and increase their quality of work. Nakasone's idea worked and was, in turn, installed into the Japanese Military's policy, being replicated by thousands of Army and Naval officers both prior to and during WWII (Kotler, 2014).<sup>98</sup> The consequence of this doctrine saw the kidnap or coercion of over 400,000 females from Korea, China, and the Philippines into these comfort stations in order to reward the soldiers for their actions in battle (Murphy, 2014).<sup>99</sup> The treatment of these women, some as young as 14 or 15, was barbaric. Not only were the women forced to participate in the sexual release of the

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narrative ultimately ends with Romeo and Juliet's suicide after their attempts to be together are repeatedly thwarted.

<sup>98</sup> Nakasone would eventually serve as Japan's Prime Minister between 1982 and 1987 (Ryall, 2011).

<sup>99</sup> Many of the women, such as survivor Park Rae-sun, were told they were being taken away from their homes in order to assist the Japanese in cooking, laundry and nursing positions (Qiu, 2017).

Japanese soldiers, the women were also routinely beaten, tortured, starved, and murdered by their captors.<sup>100</sup> At the conclusion of WWII, the Japanese military destroyed all evidence of the comfort women and the crimes they committed against them. For decades the Japanese government maintained that the incident never occurred and that the United States fabricated evidence, leaving the comfort women largely forgotten to history until 1991 (Murphy, 2014; Rodriguez, 1997). In 1991 a Korean comfort women survivor, Kim Hak-sun, became the first Korean to make a public statement about her experiences during the war. Kim not only gave several appearances at conferences, both domestically and internationally, to discuss the comfort women issue, but in December 1991 filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government due to her ordeal (Rodriguez, 1997, pp. 390-391). Around this time, many survivors began to come forward and share their stories, forcing the Japanese government to launch an investigation into the claims made by the survivors.

In 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono gave a statement, known as 'the Kono Statement', on behalf of the Japanese government revealing their findings about the comfort women issue. This statement confirmed the existence of the comfort stations and that the Japanese military was involved in the recruitment, imprisonment and abuse of the comfort women (Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the result of the study on the issue of "comfort women", 1993). The Kono Statement became a controversial issue in Japan, with many politicians since its declaration distancing themselves, and Japan, from the claims it made. Most significantly, in 2007 the administration of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made two declarations in regards to the statement: 'that there was no documentary evidence of coercion in the acquisition of women for the military's comfort stations', and that the Kono statement was not

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<sup>100</sup> Comfort women survivors have shared many stories of their mistreatment under the Japanese. One survivor recalls that a teenage girl was buried alive by a Japanese soldier, who laughed while watching her die. Another, Lei Guiying, recalls how girls were sexually tortured and left to die. When Guiying personally started menstruating at the age of 13, soldiers said to her, 'Congratulations, you're a grown-up now' and sent her to be 'violently raped' (Murphy, 2014). According to survivor Park Rae-sun, the women who refused to engage in sex with the Japanese soldiers were beaten until their bodies were covered in bruises, then raped anyway. Parks states that the comfort stations were, 'filled by chaotic sounds: crying, cursing, struggling, tearing clothes, and lecherous laughing' (Qiu, 2017).

‘binding government policy’ (Kotler, 2014).<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, the Japanese government maintained that the comfort women were licensed prostitutes and not sexual slaves (Kotler, 2014).

Despite the Japanese government’s adamant refusal to acknowledge their role in the comfort women issue, the Korean comfort women survivors have taken measures to ensure the incident is never out of public consciousness. Beginning on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1992, protestors, including comfort women survivors and their families, have gathered every Wednesday outside of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to demand a full investigation into the comfort women issue and to receive a formal apology from the Japanese government which acknowledges their responsibility in the abuse of the women (Global Action Day Justice for Comfort Women! Join the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration!, 2011; Wednesday Demonstration, n.d.). Known as the ‘Wednesday Demonstration’, the protests have had thousands of participants from countries such as ‘Japan, USA, England, Germany, France, Australia, Canada, Poland, South Africa, Thailand, and Burma’ (Wednesday Demonstration, n.d.). In 2011, the comfort women issue again became relevant in the Korean, and international, consciousness after the Wednesday Demonstration participants erected a statue in front of the Japanese Embassy to commemorate its 1000<sup>th</sup> gathering. Known as the ‘Pyeonghwa-bi, Peace Monument’, the statue is of a barefoot, teenage Korean girl sitting in a chair, with her hands resting in her lap as a bird sits on her shoulder (Limon, 2014).<sup>102</sup> In response to the erection of this statue, dozens of similar statues began to be constructed in the United States, Canada, Australia, China and Taiwan in the years that followed (Shin, 2017). Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko told South Korean President Lee Myung-bak that the statue was ‘regrettable’ and asked him to ‘remove the statue immediately’ (Panda, 2011). Instead, the South Korean government refused and reopened its requests to Japan to resolve the comfort issue while the remaining survivors were still alive, stating, ‘if Japan resolves the issue while the former ‘comfort women’ are still alive, the

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<sup>101</sup> Upon review of the Kono Statement in 2014, the Japanese government discredited the statement, positing that it had found that, ‘Korean diplomats were involved in drafting the statement, that it relied on the unverified testimonies of 16 Korean former comfort women, and that no documents then available showed that abductions had been committed by Japanese officials’ (Kotler, 2014).

<sup>102</sup> The statue of the girl is said to represent all of the Korean comfort women, while the bird is said to represent freedom and peace (Limon, 2014).

resolution will be extremely useful for the two countries to establish future-oriented relations' (Panda, 2011). After receiving no response from Japan regarding the closure of the issue, on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 South Korea raised the issue to the UN General Assembly, directly criticising Japan's adamant refusal of the issue (Panda, 2011). As a result of this, the comfort women issue was raised from a dispute between Japan and South Korea to an issue that was brought to the attention of the international community. Therefore, through the continued presence of the Wednesday Demonstrations, alongside the controversy of the Pyeonghwa-bi, Peace Monuments, the comfort women issue has remained in the South Korean zeitgeist since the early 1990s.

It is the abovementioned historical contention of the comfort women issue that formulates the socio-cultural context of *Spirits' Homecoming*. As a result, the film's evocation of *cinematic han* through its narrative and formal construction under the ideological precepts of the SNW contains symbolic connections to this historical context. As a result of this construction, specifically regarding the cinematic period's predilection for spectacle and violence, the bodies and spirits of the Korean comfort women are positioned to be violently oppressed by the Japanese. The narrative and formal representation of this oppression, as discussed earlier, also depict the women's environment as a metaphorical prison. As a result, the film's representation of this oppression can be analysed to create symbolic links between this cinematic text and the socio-cultural environment of its construction. These connections are made evident via the film's narrative structure, of the parallel narratives of Jung-min and Young-hee in 1943 and an elderly Young-hee in 1991. This structure evokes one of the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*, of the narrative beginning and ending with the Korean characters under oppression, before a final thematic shift from oppression to hope. Yet it is the film's elicitation of this narrative trope that allows these symbolic links to occur.

*Spirits' Homecoming*'s representation of the comfort women experience contain two foci: To depict the harsh experiences of the comfort women in order for the claims of the survivors to be understood in the present; and to explore how this issue has, and continues to, impact the lives of the survivors. The film's first focus, the depiction of the

comfort women experience, is witnessed through the transformation of the young girls from vibrant individuals into little more than objects for the Japanese to abuse. The first ten minutes of the film are spent establishing Jung-min as a carefree rogue. She makes bets with other children, takes their belongings without remorse, and laughs at their devastated reactions. The hierarchy of her household is also established, with her having a strained relationship with her mother, depicted through a beating her mother gives her after taking the possessions of other children, and a relaxed relationship with her father, witnessed by her and her father dancing and singing across the Korean countryside. Consequently, Jung-min's family life is complex and also full of life, love, and energy. The establishment of Jung-min's personality and her family dynamic early in the film is important for the remainder of the narrative. When the Japanese eventually strip Jung-min of her individuality later in the film, her mistreatment and eventual transformation into a sexual object is immediate and obvious, as Jung-min is no longer bright and energetic, but dour and lifeless, whose existence depends entirely on her servitude to the Japanese soldiers. The notion of the comfort women being treated as objects is evident in Jung-min's first interaction with the Japanese, when they invade her home to take her away from her parents. A small group of Japanese soldiers arrive and tell her parents they want to take Jung-min away. Their demeanour in this scene is relaxed and expectant. The soldiers do not have their weapons drawn, implying that they do not expect a struggle in acquiring Jung-min. This demeanour from the Japanese indicate they believe that since they want Jung-min, they will receive her without question. The soldiers arrive without warning and constantly repeat they are running out of time. Despite this, they know of Jung-min by name. This implies that her abduction was both a spur of the moment occurrence, but also calculated, as if they picked her from a list of other women. In this scene the Japanese are not acting as if they are condemning a young girl to rape and possible death, but as if they are shopping from a catalogue. Furthermore, the scene in which the Japanese arrive to forcibly remove Jung-min from her parents occurs only 11 minutes into the film. After this point, Jung-min's family and home are not seen until the final seconds of the film. As a result, the narrative evokes this narrative trope of *cinematic han* by immediately placing Jung-min under Japanese oppression, leaving her there for the remainder of the film.

The narrative and formal construction of the comfort station location, and the actions that occur there, have been discussed earlier in the chapter. However, the violence and spectacle of the women's abuse, along with the film's elements of mise en scene that evoke *cinematic han*, work to further the film's harsh depiction of the experiences of the comfort women. Upon their arrival at the comfort station, Jung-min and the other Korean comfort women begin to become dehumanised. The girls are stripped of their possessions, forced to speak Japanese and are given Japanese names. This is furthered during the scene of Jung-min's first rape. Her abuser speaks at her, not to her, stating: 'She certainly has the spirit worthy of being offered to The Great Imperial Army'. Jung-min's virginity is offered as a reward to this Japanese soldier for reasons never made clear. Jung-min and the other women are reduced to objects that are passed around between the soldiers to help them gain sexual release presumably after battle, a difficult day or as a reward. The women are also violently assaulted before and during sex, forced to play out the fantasies of their abuser. For example, one woman is forced to wear the dress of a dead woman while the Japanese man strips to his underwear and assaults her with his sword. Of the dozens of Japanese soldiers who are shown participating in this sexual abuse, only one does not violently strike or beat the women. Evidentially, the sex becomes a form of catharsis, a way for the soldiers to release their tension and anger towards an enemy that may have bested them on the battlefield as implied by the numerous brutal beatings the women are subject to. Furthermore, the sex could also be a form of domination, a way for the soldiers to further assert their violent aggression and fantasies against war time civilians, furthered through the aforementioned example of the woman being made to dress as a dead civilian.

The dehumanisation of the women is heightened when it is revealed that each soldier has a coupon that can be exchanged for ten minutes of sex. The women are depicted as a commodity and the system designed to abuse them, as implied by the coupons, is well organised and smoothly operated. This mindset is evident when one of the Japanese soldiers states: 'You guys are not even human beings. But only bitches for the Imperial soldiers'. Significantly, late in the film when Jung-min is asked her true, non-Japanese name, she cannot remember it nor can she remember her parents or where she used to live. Due to this, the connection between Jung-min and her home is severed, removing

her individuality, forcing her to accept the comfort station, and her Japanese identity, as her only reality. Finally, when the women become sick, injured or worn out, the Japanese take them to a pit and shoot them. Instead of releasing the women or giving them medical attention, the Japanese soldiers treat them like a broken toy; they throw it out and get a new one. The women are used, abused and disposed of as if they are a sex doll, designed to bring the Japanese momentary pleasure but are then ignored until the next time they are needed. Therefore, the film's first foci, complimented by the perpetual oppression of the women under the film's narrative and formal construction that evokes *cinematic han*, discussed earlier in the chapter, connects the film's representation of the comfort women to a present audience. In turn, the violent, dehumanised depiction of the women provides context to the comfort women survivors, specifically as to why the Wednesday Demonstrations are so passionately held.

*Spirits' Homecoming*'s second focus, to explore how the comfort woman issue has, and continues to, impact the lives of the survivors, is depicted through the film's secondary narrative that follows an elderly Young-hee in 1991. At the conclusion of the war Jung-min is killed by the Japanese, leaving Young-hee as the sole survivor of their comfort station. Numerous psychological scars, such as survivor's guilt, that were formed by the abuse the comfort women suffered under the Japanese are evident in the portrayal of the elderly Young-hee. The scenes in 1991 display the ways in which the comfort women survivors were physically and psychologically affected by the events of WWII and depicts how hard it was for these women to adjust to modern society. The 1991 segments imply that the comfort women issue was originally a hard, almost taboo, subject to discuss in Korean society. The first lines of dialogue in the film is from archival footage of a television interview between Kim Hak-sun and a journalist. The dialogue starts over a black screen, before fading into images of the interview. The exchange is as follows:

Female Reporter: 'Yes, so after your confession, what was the reaction from people around you?'

Kim Hak-sun: ‘They all said...that I am brave. Well I don’t think they think all that much of it. I feel ashamed myself but there is not much of anything. Not much of any reaction at all.’

Female Reporter: ‘Do you still feel embarrassed?’

Kim Hak-sun: ‘No I don’t feel embarrassed at all.’

Female Reporter: ‘Then, how long did you suffer under the brutalities of the Japanese Military?’

Kim Hak-sun: ‘Taken when I was 17 years old, I cannot talk about all of it. Just...can’t...Not in such short period of time. Taken and all the suffering caused by the soldiers...How can I list everything? I cannot express in words...Women are menstruating but they continue to abuse us irregardless. They didn’t care at all. They drag you like a piece of luggage, use you as they would like and when we are broken - sick so to speak, they trash you or kill you. So that was the situation...what can I say?’

Female Reporter: ‘So how were the rations? Like food or...’

Acting as an example of historying, the film’s opening seconds places a distance between the comfort women survivors and South Korean society. Specifically, that while the comfort women had the sympathy of the Korean public, the topic was uncomfortable to discuss at length. Through the reporter abruptly changing the subject at the mention of the beatings and murders of the women, it is depicted that Korean society preferred not to know the truth about what happened to these women despite the survivors having to live with this knowledge every day. This notion is reinforced during a scene where Young-hee attempts to register to a government registry for comfort women survivors, but cannot bring herself to do it. As she leaves a young man tells his co-workers that the people who sign up for the registry must be, ‘an insane lunatic or something’. For Young-hee she is both uncomfortable and embarrassed at the prospect of signing up for the registry, to make the horrors of her past public knowledge. In this scene she is visibly torn about dredging up her past, her face sullen and uncertain. However, despite this contention, the young man is shown being dismissive and abrasive

about the topic, in short, he does not care or know how hard it would be for these women to resurrect their past. As a result, the film positions the comfort women survivors to be isolated from Korean society due to their experiences.

The hardships of the comfort women survivors are shown to not just be external, societal factors, but also internal, psychological issues. The internal hardship Young-hee displays during the film's 1991 segments revolve around her attitudes towards family and illness. It is revealed halfway through the film that Young-hee has a son. It is stated that her son is adopted, yet there is no mention of a husband, father or partner for the entirety of the film's run time. This has two possible implications for both the character and for the comfort women survivors: the first is that Young-hee is forever repulsed or traumatised by the thought of sex; the second is that her mistreatment by the Japanese at such an early age left her infertile.<sup>103</sup> Either possibility is tragic and demonstrates that the mistreatment the women endured had a profound and damaging impact on their physical and psychological condition later in life.<sup>104</sup> Young-hee's attitude towards illness is revealed late in the film when she is diagnosed with terminal cancer. This occurrence is tragic due to the fact Young-hee survived such terror and hardship only to die from cancer, yet despite this tragedy, the scene is hopeful as she was able to survive to die from this illness when other comfort women could not. The latter sentiment appears to be the primary focus of this narrative development as, in a later scene, Young-hee tells Eun-kyung, 'I'm only telling you this but this illness is actually just made up. It's

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<sup>103</sup> According to Michael Solis, the rape of the comfort women made many contract sexually transmitted diseases and infections, as well as to become pregnant. As a way to abort these pregnancies, the Japanese would administer arsenic-based drugs to the women as a way to destroy the foetus. This process left many of the women infertile (2011).

<sup>104</sup> The psychological damage of the comfort women is further evident during the film's end credits, during which paintings and drawings completed by actual comfort women survivors are included. According to the film's subtitles, each drawing was completed as an act of psychotherapy. These images display numerous topics such as the women's early family life, reflections of their time under the Japanese, and depictions of their lives after the war. These images are presented alongside the film's end credits, being displayed at the top of the screen, fading between each image. Accompanying these images are the names of the women who drew them and the name of the painting itself. The names of these paintings include 'Innocence Stolen', which depicts a girl lying under a tree that is losing its leaves, while a Japanese soldier appears to be emerging from its trunk, and 'Punish the Guilty', which depicts a blindfolded girl tied to a tree against a red background as doves fly overhead. In the lower half of this image several handguns are pointed directly at the woman. The contextualisation of each painting as a form of therapy indicates that each of these women continue to struggle with the immense psychological toll their experiences have over them decades after the war ended. Therefore, this archival material reinforces how the comfort women survivors continue to struggle in a modern world.

nothing compared to what happened to me before'. Regardless of the horror and pain the cancer will cause Young-hee, including the inevitability of her death through the disease, it is still preferable to her experiences under the Japanese. Therefore, a dichotomy of tragedy and hope is formed in the depiction of the comfort women survivors. The survivors may confront their lives acknowledging that the worst event of their life is behind them. However, in order to achieve this outlook the women first had to withstand unspeakable tragedies that would haunt them for life.

In the film's 1991 segments, Young-hee is also depicted to have survivor's guilt, namely, that she survived where others did not. Despite 48 years separating the elderly Young-hee from her younger counterpart, she has been unable to move on from the fact that she lived while Jung-min died. Due to this, her life has been forever intertwined with this guilt as every experience she lived was to make Jung-min's death meaningful. This guilt is evident during the film's climax when Eun-kyung begins to channel Jung-min's spirit. As Young-hee and the spirit talk, she breaks down crying, distraught at seeing her friend again. Their exchange is as follows:

Young-hee: 'Jung-min!! I...I returned alone. I am so sorry...so very sorry...Jung-min.'

Jung-min's Spirit: 'It's okay. I am here now.'

Young-hee: 'Since the day I left you there and till now. I...I was there too. My body may have returned. But my heart never did, Jung-min.'

Jung-min's Spirit: 'It will all be over soon, right? I am just thankful that you called me here...to come home.'

Young-hee: 'I got so old, didn't I?'

Jung-min's Spirit: 'You look just the same...As you were.'

Young-hee: 'Thanks to the Gwe-bul-no-ri-gae you gave me. I was able to hide without being seen by anyone.'

Jung-min's Spirit: 'Sis, you can come out now.'

Young-hee: ‘Can I really?’

Jung-min’s Spirit: ‘I can’t find you...wherever you are. Just wait.’

Young-hee: ‘I will finish my picnic here and I will come to you soon.’

Jung-min’s Spirit: ‘No...Don’t rush. Eat plenty of wonderful food, do fun things, then come.’

Young-hee : ‘Are you going to sleep?’

Jung-min’s Spirit: ‘Why am I so sleepy? Lying here makes me so drowsy.’

Young-hee: ‘Are you asleep?’

Jung-min’s Spirit: ‘Yeah...’

This dialogue, coupled with the performance of Young-hee suggests the emergence of a long buried trauma. As Jung-min’s spirit speaks, Young-hee breaks down, tears flowing heavily from her eyes, her face contorted in pain and most of her dialogue is screamed or sobbed, juxtaposed against Jung-min’s calm, peaceful voice and demeanour (figure 19 & 20). This suggests that for Young-hee, the experience of the comfort station has left a deep psychological scar, through which, her experiences as a child are as painful to her decades later as they were when they first occurred. The dialogue and the performance suggest that Young-hee still shares a kinship with Jung-min and that her guilt and pain over Jung-min’s death has never faded. Consequently, this suggests two elements, the bonds each comfort woman formed with each other are unbreakable and also that the physical and psychological scars that were formed through their sexual abuse, bodily torment and in watching their friends be killed, can neither fade nor be forgotten.



Figure 19: Screenshot from *Spirits' Homecoming* (Dir. Cho Jung-rae, 2016)

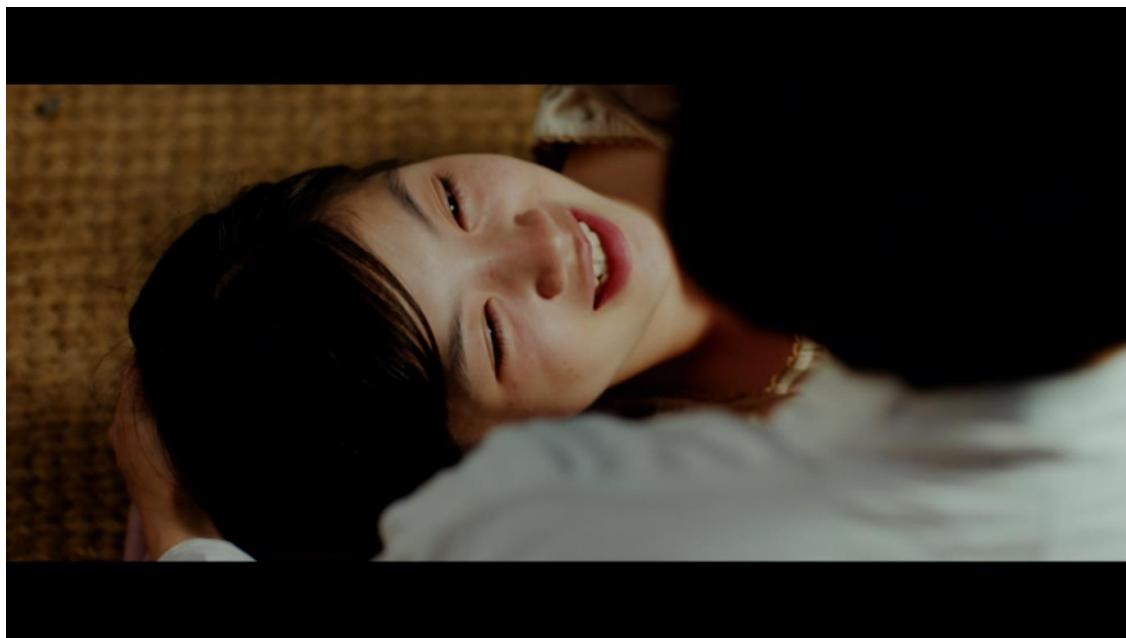


Figure 20: Screenshot from *Spirits' Homecoming* (Dir. Cho Jung-rae, 2016)

This emotional display from Young-hee evokes the narrative trope of *cinematic han* through the depiction of this character concluding the narrative under the oppression of her external agent. While the narrative oppression of the Korean's began with Jung-min, it ends with Young-hee, in turn depicting the oppression of the comfort women as universal and not restricted to the individual. Despite the war being over for decades,

Young-hee is depicted to still be under the oppression of her external agent, not physically but psychologically. This is furthered by her statement of her heart never returning from the war, indicating that psychologically she is still held in the comfort station unable to overcome this oppression.<sup>105</sup> However, a thematic shift from oppression to hope occurs shortly after Young-hee's breakdown. After channelling Jung-min's spirit Eun-kyung performs the 'spirits' homecoming' ritual, through which, Jung-min's spirit is shown returning to her home to share a meal with her parents. Despite Young-hee's mind remaining under Japanese oppression, the direct confrontation with her guilt and the horrors of her past allows Jung-min's spirit to rest in peace. Therefore, it can be argued that this is the film's central thesis. Only through a direct confrontation with the horrors of the past will the comfort women survivors, and Korean society, be allowed to move on from this historical occurrence. Therefore, the final scene of Jung-min returning home marks the film's thematic shift towards hope, in that the comfort women crisis can still have a positive resolution. As result, the film's symbolic connections to the socio-cultural context of its present occurs through the film's evocation of *cinematic han*. This connection brings the comfort women issue into a present context, one where the Japanese government continues to deny the existence of the comfort women and where the comfort women survivors continue to demonstrate through the Wednesday Demonstrations despite their rapidly declining numbers.<sup>106</sup> In consequence, the film's representation of these women provides context to these denials and demonstrations, and through its confronting images, keeps the issue and its repercussions, within the zeitgeist of its socio-cultural context.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three key areas regarding the South Korean historical film and *cinematic han*. Firstly, the ideological precepts of the Golden Age and the SNW reframe WWII under two different conceptual lenses. *The Sea Knows'* (1961)

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<sup>105</sup> During the scene, this mental state is represented by Young-hee changing from the actress that plays the character in the 1991 segments to the actress who portrays the character during the 1943 segments, visually indicating that Young-hee never mentally overcame her experiences in the comfort station.

<sup>106</sup> Comfort women survivors were numbered at only 59 in 2013 (Williamson, 2013).

anti-communist agenda uses the narrative device of the ‘50-year tradition of the Japanese Army’ to mask its criticisms of communism and how the citizens of a communist nation languish under its rule. Finally, *Spirits’ Homecoming*’s (2016) focus upon spectacle and violence transforms the Korean body and spirituality into elements of spectacle to demonise the Japanese treatment of Korean women during the war. Despite these different approaches, each film still evokes the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. Secondly, through an examination of each film’s mise en scène, *cinematic han* is evoked through their background performances, colour palettes, locations and costumes.

Finally, this chapter has demonstrated that via the evocation of *cinematic han* by the ideological precepts of the respective cinematic period a film was produced, symbolic links between the South Korean historical film genre and each film’s socio-cultural context can be drawn. The evocation of *cinematic han* in *The Sea Knows* creates symbolic links to the post-war reconstruction era of the 1950s through the moral and ideological union of the Korean and Japanese infantry, specifically through Aro-un’s relationship with Nakamura, Suzuki and Hideko. Finally, *Spirits’ Homecoming*’s evocation of *cinematic han* creates symbolic links to the Wednesday Demonstrations and Korean women survivors via its depiction of their dehumanisation as they are forced to become ‘comfort women’ by the Japanese and its portrayal of the psychological scars of the survivors. Consequently, the representation of the forced Korean participation in geopolitical conflict in the South Korean films *The Sea Knows* and *Spirits’ Homecoming* contain simultaneous allusions to the historical past and present of Korea, therefore, enhancing the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film’s representation of WWII. The following chapter will argue that the representation of the Korean Infantry in the Korean War films of South Korea also enhances these films’ historical knowledge.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Korean War and the South Korean Historical Film**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943, the allied forces held a conference in Cairo, Egypt to discuss the war against Japan. The conference, known as the Cairo Conference, consisted of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Chinese President Chiang Kai-shek and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. It was during this conference that the Cairo Declaration was signed. The declaration's main function was to remove Japanese influence from its conquered territories, including several Chinese states, the Pacific Islands, the Philippines and Korea (The Cairo Conference, 1943, n.d.). In 1945, after Japan's defeat in WWII, the allied nations enforced the declaration, stripping Japan of all of its acquired territories. In August of the same year, Korea was divided along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel of latitude separating the Peninsula between the South and the North. The United States occupied the South and the Soviet Union occupied the North.<sup>107</sup> In 1948 a Korean national election was devised by the US and USSR with the intention to unify the North and the South under one central government. However, arguments between US President Harry Truman and Soviet Leader Joseph Stalin stalled the election. Truman believed that Korea should become a democracy and implement a capitalist system, while Stalin argued that Korea should align under a Communist regime. Stalin believed that as 'only Korean communists and leftists' would support a Soviet candidate the chance of Koreans freely electing a Communist government were slim (Matray, 1998). After the elections stalled, both the US and USSR installed their preferred leaders into power in the Southern and Northern nations. The South was put under the leadership of the capitalist president Rhee Syngman, with the North placed under the rule of communist dictator Kim Il-sung (Szczepanski, 2018a). On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950, North Korean forces crossed the border into South Korea with the intention to reunify the two nations under the North's communist system and Kim Il-sung's leadership, beginning

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<sup>107</sup> The border between the two nations were created by US officials Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel, who, without knowledge from the USSR or Korea, split the nation along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel of latitude, to ensure that Korea's capital, Seoul, would remain in US control and not the Soviet Union's (Johnson, 2008, p. 101).

the armed conflict known as the Korean War. The North, with the aid of the USSR and China, and the South, with the aid of the United States, fought a bloody war with both sides aiming to reunify the peninsula under their respective regime. (Kim, 1989). On July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1953, after hundreds of thousands of deaths on both sides and two years of negotiation, an armistice was declared that ended all hostilities on the Korean Peninsula and made the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel a permanent border between North and South Korea. While the war did not officially end, the armistice continues to hold for over half a century after it was signed (Malkasian, 2001).

The Korean War has served as the basis for numerous films since the ceasefire, including *Piagol* (Kim & Lee, 1955), *Five Marines* (Cha & Kim, 1961), *The Marines Who Never Returned* (Mart, Won, & Lee, 1963), *Nambugun* (Jeong & Jeong, 1990), *Spring in My Hometown* (Jung, Kang, & Lee, 1998), *Taegukgi* (Lee, Lee, & Kang, 2004), *A Little Pond* (Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2009), *The Front Line* (Jeong et al., 2011), *The Long Way Home* (Cha, Kang, Yim, & Cheon, 2015) and *Operation Chromite* (Chung, Lee, & Lee, 2016). The South Korean films that depict the Korean War embody the working definition of the South Korean historical film established in Chapter 2, not only due to the inherent depictions of physical combat, but also in how the historical conflict of the North and South Korean division plays a central role in their narrative. This divide is not only depicted through sequences of warfare, but also the way in which the Southern and Northern characters are separated morally, ethically and ideologically. In these films, North Koreans often serve as a form of ‘dark mirror’, specifically an alternative or malicious reflection of South Korea. This reflection can be unambiguously evil, in which the North are hell-bent on destroying every facet of South Korean society, or an alternate version of the self, in which the Northern characters are near identical to the Southern characters in terms of characterisation. Which form the North Korean characters take depends on the ideological precepts of the cinematic period it was produced, with Golden Age films emphasising the former, while the First Korean New Wave (FNW) and Second Korean New Wave (SNW) films emphasise the latter. This chapter will analyse the Golden Age film *Five Marines* (1961), the FNW film *Nambugun* (1990) and the SNW film *The Front Line* (2011) respectively. As established in the previous chapters, the narrative and formal construction of each of these films

under the ideological precepts of their cinematic period evokes *cinematic han*. However, in the Korean War film the external agent of the aesthetic is not fixed, shifting between its representation as North Korea, South Korea or the military high commands of both nations. The nationality of the film's primary protagonist along with who their external agent is depends on the cinematic period in which the film was produced. For example, in the Golden Age, this dynamic is often South Korea being oppressed by North Korea due to this period's anti-communist focus. However, in the SNW, this dynamic evolves to one where the South and North Korean infantry are both oppressed equally by their military superiors due to the period's focus upon irony. As a result, the film's evocation of *cinematic han* can be analysed to draw symbolic links between the cinematic text and its socio-cultural context. Therefore, this chapter argues that the analysis of the Korean infantry in the Korean War films of South Korea makes evident these films' evocation of *cinematic han*, which, in turn, enhances the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film's representation of historical geopolitical conflict.

This chapter is divided into three sections: 'South Korean cinematic periods', examines how the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are present in Golden Age, FNW and SNW films despite the evolving ideological precepts of each cinematic period. 'The mise en scene of *cinematic han*', analyses how *Five Marines*, *Nambugun* and *The Front Line* reflect *cinematic han*'s elements of mise en scene and how these contribute to cinematically portraying Korea as a metaphorical prison. Finally, 'Cinematic representation of the past and socio-cultural context of production', analyses how the representation of the Korean War in each of the films studied can enhance the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film through their symbolic connections to the socio-cultural climate of the film's construction.

## 5.2 South Korean cinematic periods

The films *Five Marines*, *Nambugun* and *The Front Line* embody the Golden Age, the FNW and the SNW respectively. As a result of their respective cinematic periods each film is formally constructed to contain either an anti-communist perspective, a *minjung* perspective, or an ironic perspective that has a heavy focus on both violence and

spectacle. This section will analyse how the narrative tropes of *cinematic han* are present in each film as a result of the ideological precepts of their respective cinematic period.

### **The Golden Age of South Korean cinema**

*Five Marines* explores the lives of five marines enlisted in the South Korean military during the Korean War. The marines, named Oh Deok-su, Woo Jeong-guk, Jang Yeong-seon, Kim Hong-gu, and Ma Ju-han, spend their time digging trenches, performing sentry duty and longing for the loved ones they left behind. However, once vital information is received regarding the location of a strategically important North Korean ammo dump, the five marines embark on a mission to destroy it in order to ensure a crucial advance for the South Korean army.<sup>108</sup> The anti-communist agenda of the Golden Age had a major influence on the narrative approach and formal construction of *Five Marines*, specifically in its representation of death. Due to the film's staunch anti-communist perspective, every South Korean soldier's death is tragic, anti-war sentiments are turned into pro-war rhetoric, and the entire Korean War conflict is recontextualised to be a holy crusade bestowed upon South Korea by theological entities. Furthermore, this representation of death due to the Golden Age's ideological precepts evokes the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. Specifically, that through death, every individual soldier is unified as a collective, revered force, and through their demise in the pursuit of South Korean freedom, they become a form of martyr, immortalised within the Korean War narrative of South Korea.

Whilst the deaths of the soldiers are constructed to be heartrending, these developments also visibly change the character's anti-war rhetoric into pro-war sentiments. The first death scene occurs at 47 minutes into the film after a South Korean Private, Ha Yeong-gyu, is killed. This character was not given a name, a backstory or a personality prior to the scene in which he is called for the sentry duty where he is slain. Up to this point none of the characters have shown any concern for the young man and, as a result,

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<sup>108</sup> It is significant to note that North Korea is never mentioned by name during the film. The only enemy identified is China or 'the enemy'. However, through the appearance of iconography such as infantry uniforms, the enemy the marines fight during the film are North Korean. As a result, each enemy soldier becomes anonymous, stripping all identity from the North Korean and Chinese soldiers, leaving them as hollow representations of communist forces.

the narrative has provided no emotional connection to this character. Despite this however, after Yeong-gyu's death, a funeral is held for him that lasts for over two minutes of screen time. During this sequence soft, reverential harmonica music plays over the scene as the marines cry, hug and remove their helmets in respect. A personal letter to Yeong-gyu's lover is read by one of the marines, accompanied by a flashback sequence of the Private saying goodbye to her. Prior to Yeong-gyu's death, one of the South Korean marines, Jeong-guk, explicitly states anti-war sentiments in his dialogue. At 24 minutes into the film, a voice over narration recounts a letter he sent to his lover, Suni. The dialogue is as follows:

‘My love, Suni. It’s so quiet it’s almost scary. This makes me think of you even more. In this crazy thing called war, a madness created by men, it seems countless lives have disappeared today as well. Writing to you, Suni, is the only thing that lets me know I’m still alive. Who knows which bunks will be empty tomorrow night. Suni, why do I have to live in this madness? Why do I have to continue to live as a part of this madness? Suni...’

However, after Yeong-gyu's death, Jeong-guk's anti-war perspective is demonstratively changed due to his reverence for the dead Private. In a later scene Jeong-guk states: ‘I considered war a meaningless charade, created by men. But... after the death of young Yeong-gyu I've become embarrassed at how I had been living so selfishly’. In another scene he states: ‘I thought the memories from the war zone had no meaning or worth. But the memory of Yeong-gyu now has a grip on my memory. I don't know why, but I feel like I now have the courage to lead on the battlefield. That way, I can live in somebody's heart forever.’ These pieces of dialogue from Jeong-guk demonstrates that his anti-war rhetoric has been transformed into a pro-war stance as a result of Yeong-gyu's death. The first piece of dialogue reflects how he is now willing giving up his individuality, and his life, to fight for a nationalist cause, the retention of which he now considers ‘selfish’. The second piece of dialogue reveals how he now has the courage to ‘lead on the battlefield’ in order to cement his name and legacy within the Korean War narrative of South Korea. Both sentiments recontextualise the Korean War from a place of violence and oppression, into one of hope and glory, where participation

on the battlefield is both an event that ideologically unifies the soldiers and one where death grants a form of immortality in the ‘hearts’ of the Korean population. Furthermore, Yeong-gyu’s death also acts as the film’s inciting incident as it prompts a South Korean Squad Commander, Yang, to infiltrate the North Korean base to recover the location of the ammo dump, which leads to his death. Yang’s death scene is over four minutes long. During this scene, a sad and reverential non-diegetic score, similar to the one in Yeong-gyu’s death scene, is heard as Yang dies slowly, having enough time to deliver a lengthy speech to his comrades before he expires. These extended death scenes are also included in the film’s climactic mission. Both Ju-han and Hong-gu are killed in long, drawn out scenes where each are shot repeatedly, fall and continue fighting before they are killed. Both death scenes are lengthy, taking up minutes of screen time, and linger on the suffering and death of well-established characters. When Jeong-seong and Deok-su are killed both die in the arms of their fellow marines and, like Yang, give protracted speeches to be passed on to their loved ones.

The stylistically elongated death sequences evokes the narrative trope of *cinematic han* of the individual being placed inside a collective. Due to the length of the film’s death scenes, each is made tragic and as a result, the deeds of the dead soldiers are made heroic as each gave their lives to further South Korea’s war effort. As the deaths of the film’s main and minor characters, like Yeong-gyu, are given near identical screen time and dramatic emphasis, *Five Marines*’ process of historying celebrates and mourns the lives and deaths of all of the South Korean infantry in an equal manner. All of the soldiers in the film, not just the titular five marines, are depicted as average citizens going above and beyond the call of duty to fight for South Korean interests. In this regard, the normal, unexceptional soldier, like Yeong-gyu, is held in the same reverence as any of the five marines. Not every soldier carries out heroics or makes a significant impact in the outcome of the war but through *Five Marines*’ elevation of their deaths the sacrifice each soldier makes to be present in the conflict is acknowledged. This narrative approach dictates that all soldiers deserve to be mourned and remembered regardless of their actions in the war. Each risks their lives by participating in armed conflict and through this reverence, the film becomes sentimental towards the plights of the infantry soldier. Due to this narrative repositioning, when the actions and sacrifices of the

individual five marines are shown, they are contextualised within the greater losses of the infantry forces. Therefore, the experiences of the five marines are not unique to them, but universal to the entire South Korean war effort, firmly representing the South Korean oppression from their external agent, in this case North Korea, on both an individual and collective level. As a result, the film's representation of death evokes *cinematic han*.

*Five Marines'* anti-communist approach is furthered through its recontextualisation of the Korean War as a sacred mission given to the South Koreans by a theological entity. It is through this narrative repositioning of the war where *cinematic han*'s narrative trope of a thematic shift from oppression to hope is evoked, specifically through the elevation of the South Korean soldier to the level of martyr. This notion is first introduced an hour into the film shortly after the death of Squad Commander Yang. After Yang dies Jeong-guk leaves the body and begins to pray via a voice-over (figure 21). During the prayer Jeong-guk states the following: 'Dear Heavenly Father, your son has done your will and fought against the unrighteous ones that have denied you. Now he has received your calling and is on his way to the holy land. Amen.' This prayer has many notions attached to it regarding the Korean War and South Korea's position within the conflict. The first notion is that every soldier who dies in service of the South Korean military is now a martyr who died in the service of a God. Therefore, the South Korean infantry will be rewarded in the afterlife should they die in battle. The second is that the Gods are on the side of South Korea while the communists are heathens who have denied heaven. As a result, the actions and violence the South Koreans display towards the enemy soldiers is repositioned to be in the service of a theological power. As the communists are the 'unrighteous ones', the South Korean infantry, and by extension the audience, do not need to feel guilt over their deaths. Finally, Jeong-guk's words reposition the Korean War as South Korea's equivalent of the crusades.<sup>109</sup> Through this notion *Five Marines*

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<sup>109</sup> The crusades were a series of wars that occurred between 1099 and 1291. These wars were fought by armies of Christians, under the authority of their church, to claim various cities and territories from Muslims in the Middle East. The crusaders, operating under the orders of Pope Urban II, fought the Muslims to claim the city of Jerusalem, which the Christians deemed their 'Holy Land' and rightful property under God. Upon defeating the Muslim army and claiming Jerusalem, the Christian Army tried and failed to claim the Syrian stronghold of Damascus as well as the nation of Egypt. After this defeat, the Christians lost Jerusalem to their enemies. The crusaders went on to sack Constantinople in 1204 and

can be interpreted as presenting the idea that a South Korean led reunification is owed to South Korea under the will of the Gods and by opposing this ideal North Korea, and by extension all communists, are actively fighting against heaven. As Jeong-guk recites this prayer a heavenly and uplifting non-diegetic score plays loudly in the background. The combination of this non-diegetic voice-over, the score, and a shot length that lingers on Jeong-guk for tens of seconds as he delivers his prayer, demonstrates that the film's ideology regarding the Korean War is aligned with Jeong-guk's perspective.



Figure 21: Screenshot from *Five Marines* (Dir. Kim Ki-duk, 1961)

The narrative of *Five Marine's* begins with the war already in motion and ends before the war can conclude. As result, the South Korean characters begin and end the narrative under the oppression of their external agents. However, the film's evocation of *cinematic han* is different from the conventional aesthetic precepts as the film's thematic shift from oppression to hope does not occur at its conclusion, but at the time of Jeong-guk's prayer which occurs an hour into the film's runtime. The presence of this prayer and its positive affirmation reframes the film's narrative under this crusade-like agenda. Suddenly, the meaning behind the film's historying process becomes evident;

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spent years attempting to destroy enemies of Christianity in France and Transylvania. By the end of the crusades Jerusalem exchanged hands between the Christians and Muslims several more times before eventually ending up under Muslim rule in 1291 (Crusades, 2010).

the call to arms for every soldier is a sacred duty. The film begins with several lengthy stationary shots of South Korean infantry marching while a loud, militaristic non-diegetic score plays. The soldiers walk confidentially, fully equipped with uniforms, helmets, rifles, and grenades as the boisterous and patriotic score plays over the scene. Under this new context, the army appears as the crusaders, marching under the will of the Gods.

By extension, the reasoning several of the marines used to join the South Korean army, that previously appeared to be selfish, are repositioned to be selfless. Early in the film, Deok-su volunteers to join the front line in order to spite his father and finally become a marine. Later in the film it is revealed Jeong-guk left his true love Suni to join the army. Both of these actions that were prompted by the North Korean incursion, initially seen to be foolhardy, are now portrayed as acts of divine intervention. Both men move from the relative safety of their old lives to follow a higher power into a holy war. The devotion to this divine source is made selfless due to the lives each marine left behind in order to fight. For instance, Suni and Yeong-seon's wife are both pregnant and Deok-su's father desires to reconcile with him after years of estrangement, but each leaves their loved ones behind to fight in the war in order to free the nation from the oppression of the North Koreans. In the final battle four of the five marines are killed, leaving only Jeong-guk alive at its conclusion. As stated previously, each of their deaths are presented as grand tragedies through elongated death sequences. These events taken alone affirm that the film's protagonists begin and end the narrative under the oppression of North Korea. Their oppression under this agent prompted them to fight, and this action eventually led to their deaths. Additionally, South Korea remains under the oppression of North Korea despite their best efforts. However, owing to the film's earlier thematic shift, this conclusion becomes hopeful, lessening the tragedy of the event due to the marine's perceived religious martyrdom. This thematic shift reframes the Korean War from a tragic, violent conflict to a noble pursuit that serves a theological entity. As a result, the film suggests a hopefulness in the deaths of each soldier. In their sacrifice, they served their theological power and pushed the conflict towards a South Korean victory. Alternatively, the recontextualisation of the conflict is decidedly anti-communist as it is portraying communists as godless and fighting against heaven. Consequently, the

canonisation of the South Korean infantry and the demonisation of communists portrays the Korean War as a literal struggle between heaven and hell. While each of the soldiers' deaths are filled with sorrow, due to the film's evocation of this *cinematic han* narrative trope through the Golden Age's anti-communist perspective, each death is positioned to be in the service of the heavens and that each soldier died for a noble cause, namely the will of the Gods. As a result, this thematic shift from oppression to hope provides a near elation to the soldiers' deaths due to the implication that their sacrifice will eventually lead to the defeat of North Korea and that they will be rewarded in the afterlife due to their selflessness.

### **The First Korean New Wave in South Korean cinema**

*Nambugun* is a 1990 film that follows Lee Tae, a war correspondent turned partisan during the Korean War. Operating in the mountains of South Korea, Lee Tae moves between several North Korean guerrilla factions, eventually joining the elite Nambugun unit in order to carry out a variety of raids and operations against the South Korean army. As stated in Chapter 2, the films of the FNW were characterised by their *minjung* perspective. This perspective, primarily established through the film's depiction of the partisan forces as being average citizens uniting to fight a ruling class, heavily influences *Nambugun*'s formal construction. Additionally, it is the film's allegiances to the ideological precepts of its cinematic period that evokes the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. To begin with, the narrative trope of the individual operating inside of a collective is introduced through the contextualisation of the partisans as civilians who joined the conflict willingly and not as conscripted, trained soldiers. The normality of the partisans is established within the film's first ten minutes after Lee Tae arrives at the partisan base camp. Littered throughout this camp are men, women and children of various ages. As they wait to be assigned to their platoon each wears distinctly civilian clothing such as robes and school uniforms. The inexperience of the civilian volunteers is revealed shortly after Lee Tae's arrival at the base camp, during a scene where he is assigned to a partisan unit. In this scene the following exchange occurs:

Hwang: 'You, what extra work did you do in school?'

Lee Tae: 'I waged the struggle against National College system of the US military rule and against the Syngman Rhee clique's (sic) separate election manoeuvres in South Korea.'

Hwang: 'Do you have any military experience?'

Lee Tae: 'A little in the Japanese army...like basic rifle firing.'

Hwang: 'You mean, you participated in the war against our nation's liberation.'

Partisan second-in-command: 'Well anyway, you should take advantage of your military experience. So, I appoint you as the second platoon leader.'

This exchange highlights how little experience the other civilians have in regards to armed combat. Lee Tae is a reporter by trade and has minimal military knowledge. As an individual, he is an unexceptional soldier. However, despite being underqualified the partisan command assigns Lee Tae to be a leader of a combat unit, as he is deemed a superior soldier to the rest. Therefore, when Lee Tae is placed in the context of the collective, he is held in high regard for his military experience. The elevation of Lee Tae, in turn, works to highlight the lack of combat experience of the entire partisan unit. As an individual, Lee Tae's soldiering abilities are poor, but in the collective, they are unique. As a result, by placing the individual inside this collective, the inexperience of the North Koreans are demonstrated, with each facing the oppression of the South Koreans regardless of their position within this unit.

The inexperience of the partisans is demonstrated numerous times, as many appear to not know how to handle their weapons while also panicking under heavy fire. During several early combat scenarios, partisans hold their rifles incorrectly, either holding them out to the side or not aiming down the sights. When they are shot at, some are witnessed abandoning their weapons in order to retreat. The partisan command appears to be aware of their army's deficiencies as after a soldier loses his rifle in battle, the platoon leader, Hwang, wants the soldier executed. After Lee Tae tries to reason with him, stating: 'the life of man is more valuable than a piece of rifle', Hwang responds by saying: 'You'd better discard the nepotist sentimentalism! I just don't agree...How can you lead the people's liberation struggle to victory with such a weak ideological armament?' Through

this exchange it is clear that Hwang desires a well-organised, well-disciplined army, but is lamenting that all he could acquire was a group of scared, inexperienced civilians. Once again, the inexperience of the partisans evokes a narrative trope of *cinematic han*, namely of the narrative beginning and ending with the Korean characters under oppression. The early contextualisation of the partisan units contextualises the North Korean fight against South Korea as a struggle of a small, oppressed nation against a much larger, overwhelming force. Lee Tae is a South Korean fighting the South Korean army for North Korean interests. Consequently, it can be ascertained that many of these civilians are also South Korean. The reason behind this collective of civilians joining the partisan forces is never made clear. As a result, the film's historical setting, the Korean War, becomes the stand in for their actions. As Lee Tae and his fellow volunteers are depicted as average people without military training, it is logical to conclude that each joined the fight not only due to their oppression under South Korea, but due to their ideological alignment with the North Korean goal. Consequently, this ideology, which is not stated within the film, is the main factor behind the partisan's will to fight.

Therefore, the Korean War becomes a conflict of defence, namely that the partisans are attempting to defend their beliefs from the much larger South Korean force that is attempting to destroy it. This idea is furthered by the place the narrative begins. One of the film's opening scenes conveys Lee Tae and his fellow reporters being forced to retreat from their office to the partisan base camp due to the approaching South Korean forces. This indicates that Lee Tae's activities prior to the film commencing made him a target for the South Korean military, presumably due to his occupation. This occurrence, along with the presence of the men, women and children volunteers that are already present at the camp, implies that each of these characters has faced similar oppression from the South Korean military prior to the narrative. Consequently, the narrative begins with these Korean characters under the oppression of their external agent which potentially influenced their ideologies to align with North Korea and prompted them to join the partisans. Due to this contextualisation the FNW's *minjung* influence becomes apparent. The partisans become a representation of an underpowered, inexperienced working class that align not only due to their collective oppression under South Korea, but also due to their ideologies and beliefs for the future of the nation. The South Korean

infantry in turn, becomes a representation of a strong, well-equipped force that is actively attempting to suppress this belief through sheer, violent strength. Consequently, the FNW's *minjung* perspective repurposed the Korean War conflict to be a conflict between a working class and a ruling class, evoking the narrative trope of *cinematic han* as a result.<sup>110</sup>

The character of Lee Tae is based upon a real life war correspondent under the same name, who operated during the Korean War (Hometown of Films: North Korean Partisan in South Korea, n.d.). As a result, due to his position as the film's central protagonist, the film's depiction of the Korean War becomes monumental. Due to this, Lee Tae's experiences embody the moral and social climate of the partisan forces during the Korean War. This is evident through Lee Tae's loss of humanity throughout the narrative. This character arc also reflects the film's *minjung* perspective and furthers the narrative trope of *cinematic han* of the narrative beginning and ending with Koreans under oppression. As *Nambugun* progresses the civilians participate in numerous raids and armed combat scenarios, resulting in the unit becoming more efficient and disciplined in military doctrine. Lee Tae's progression from civilian to soldier is therefore earned as he and his fellow partisans are seen to grow from their experiences on the battlefield. However, the journey towards becoming an efficient soldier is shaded with the partisan's losing their kindness and morality. On several occasions the subject of love is broached in the narrative and is repeatedly positioned to be detrimental to the war effort. Lee Tae engages in a romantic interlude with a nurse named Park Min-ja. However, their romance is short lived as each are assigned to different guerrilla units. In order to remember their time together, Min-ja gives Lee Tae a fountain pen and he writes her a poem. In a later scene, the second-in-command of Lee Tae's unit reveals that the poem was confiscated from Min-ja as love affairs are prohibited. As the second-in-command states: 'Under present circumstances and at this time, it is serious to indulge in love affairs. It is an erroneous act against the nation and the people.' Love is viewed as an enemy to the North Korean war effort and is immediately halted lest it hamper the fighting ability of the partisans. This notion is reinforced as the

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<sup>110</sup> The knowledge that Lee Tae also resisted the Rhee Syngman administration furthers this idea of the citizenry resisting the ruling class.

second-in-command states further: ‘you have weak-hearted sentimentalist nature. You’d better to discard it promptly, then you’ll be an excellent warrior in every aspect.’ The notion that love hampers a soldier’s ability is revisited several times throughout the narrative. In three separate scenes the fountain pen is the central focus. In the first scene, Lee Tae accidentally drops the pen as dozens of injured partisans march past him. After he drops the pen, he dives to the floor, crawling through the mud and between the legs of crippled and injured partisans to retrieve it. In this image, Lee Tae places love above the war effort. In the second scene, during which dozens of partisans are dying of sickness on top of a mountain, Lee Tae reveals that the pen has long since run out of ink, but he refuses to throw it away. Despite the hardship he continues to face, love is helping Lee Tae through the ordeals of war. However, in the third scene, in which Lee Tae is alone, starving and near death, he drops the pen in the snow but continues to move, either unaware or uncaring about the loss of this item. After the pen is abandoned, the idea of love is discarded from the narrative, leaving Lee Tae as a shell of survival instincts and devotion to the North Korean cause. The progression from a naïve civilian into an effective soldier forces love, and in turn all emotions such as happiness, joy and excitement, to be symbolically abandoned. Therefore, through Lee Tae, the partisan soldiers are witnessed to become emotionless, hollow shells as they fight North Korea.

The dichotomy between how the partisans act at the beginning of the film and how they act at the end is viewed as tragic, but noble. The devotion to the North Korean cause is so strong that each member is willing to sacrifice parts of themselves to fight for their nation. *Nambugun* therefore implies that since civilians were willing to do this to themselves for their nation, the North Korean war effort was the more devout, and more tragic, side to the Korean War. Consequently, through the film’s *minjung* parallels Lee Tae’s character arc represents the notion that in order for the working class to elicit change in the nation, sentimentality had to be abandoned and violence had to be condoned. However, in the film’s final scene the nobility of this transformation is repositioned into a form of condemnation. This scene reveals that the entire partisan force has been killed, leaving Lee Tae freezing, broken and despondent amongst their bodies (figure 22). Therefore, while *Nambugun*’s formal construction of the partisan’s transformation is largely noble, their climatic deaths reposition this notion into the

negative. As the Korean War has not concluded by the time the film's narrative concludes, the partisan war effort, and their sacrifices to become an effective fighting force, are shown to be ineffectual. By concluding on a note where all of the partisans are dead and the war is still raging, no visible change has occurred in Korean society due to their actions, making their efforts a failure and leaving Lee Tae and North Korea under the oppression of the South. As a result, this narrative occurrence reflects an anxiety of the *minjung* movement's opposition against their government, namely that this emotional abandonment may not cause any societal change. However, in the film's final shot a thematic shift from oppression to hope can be analysed. Seconds before the credits begin text is superimposed on the screen stating that Lee Tae survived and was arrested shortly after the events of the film. As Lee Tae survived, the Korean resilience under oppression is reinforced. The partisan cause lives on due to his survival, ensuring that the film concludes on a hopeful note. Specifically, that despite the North remaining under the oppression of the South, the Korean populace will be able to one day overcome their oppression due to the continuation of the partisan ideology. This thematic shift, in turn, furthers the film's *minjung* perspective, namely that despite the victory of the oppressor, in this case the South Korean government, the resilience of the South Korean working class will ensure that the *minjung* ideology would never disappear. Therefore, in this final scene, the film opposes the violence of the *minjung*. While their ideology may survive despite their numerous causalities fighting the South Korean government, the sacrifices the working class needed to make in order to retain this ideology and continue to resist the ruling class may not be worth losing their lives and their humanity. As a result, *Nambugun*'s narrative and formal construction under the ideological precepts of the FNW evokes the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*.



Figure 22: Screenshot from *Nambugun* (Dir. Jeong Ji-yeong, 1990)

### The Second Korean New Wave in South Korean cinema

*The Front Line* presents the narrative of Kang Eun-pyo who is sent by his superiors to the front line of the Korean War, located at the base of Aerok Hill, to investigate a possible treasonous act by the members of a South Korean unit named Alligator Company. Joining the Company, Kang attempts to uncover the traitor in their ranks as he fights alongside his old friend, Kim Soo-hyeok, to determine the borders of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. *The Front Line* is a film that was produced during the SNW cinematic period. As established in the previous chapters, the SNW is characterised by the way in which it uses irony, spectacle and violence to frame its representation of geopolitical conflict. It is through these precepts that the film also evokes the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. The narrative of *The Front Line* is built off of irony, which as defined by Moon Jae-cheol as the juxtaposition of black humour against elements of ‘the real’ (2006, pp.49–51). In this film, irony is used to contextualise the pointless and redundant nature of the Korean War conflict. Furthermore, it is within this irony where *cinematic han*’s narrative trope of beginning and ending the film under oppression is evoked. The ironic elements of black humour and ‘the real’ are separated into two key sections, the scenes set before Kang’s arrival at Aerok Hill and the scenes set after his arrival. The dark humour of the scenes set before Kang’s arrival at Aerok Hill are contained in one

specific sequence. This sequence, which is the film's first major dialogue sequence, contains a darkly humorous depiction of the armistice negotiations between the North Korean forces and the American military. During this scene, the representatives of each side, a North Korean and American general respectively, bicker over the location of the military demarcation line that will determine the border of North and South Korea. The American general, assuming the American and South Korean forces are currently holding Aerok Hill, draws a line in pen on a map, inclusive of the hill, stating that this line will mark the new border. However, the North Korean general redraws the line in pencil, snapping the lead as he does so. The only change being that the line now puts Aerok Hill within the Northern territory. The American general contests this, reaffirming his force's possession of the hill, yelling, 'If you want to keep arguing about it, why don't we just go out into the field and check it out for ourselves?' However, after he states this he is sheepishly told that the North Korean forces retook the hill the day before. After this exchange, the scene cuts to a South Korean general who says to himself, 'Here we go again'.

The dialogue between the generals is smug and petty, and the amount of territory they squabble over is negligible. The differences between each line they draw on the map is no more than a few centimetres. However, this verbal conflict is overtly comedic in its depiction of two highly trained military men fighting over a map and how their egos clash, and are ultimately undermined, by their misunderstanding of the situation in the field. The final statement of 'here we go again' reaffirms that this petty conflict is not a new occurrence and has been endlessly repeated. Yet this comedic situation becomes dark due to the fact that this squabble is presented as the only point of contention between all-out war and the signing of the armistice agreement. As a result, the scene's humour becomes an example of dark humour. Furthermore, the scene's dark humour also stems from the implied repetitive nature of this argument. As this meeting is contextualised to not be the first armistice talk, due to the South Korean general's dialogue, the Korean War conflict is established to have been ongoing before the events of the film. As such, the oppression of the South Korean infantry under their external agent, North Korea, is established to have begun long before the film's opening. Furthermore, via the process of historying, the placement of this scene is deliberate. All

of the film's conflicts, and subsequent oppression of its main characters, are contextualised to be a direct result of this disagreement, in turn, casting the rest of the film under an ironic light, specifically that the film's base conflict, the possession of Aerok Hill, is ultimately superfluous.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, this scene creates a narrative space where the South Korean infantry begin and remain under the oppression of their external agent for the entirety of the narrative. As a result, this narrative trope of *cinematic han* is introduced to the narrative due to the ideological precepts of the film's cinematic period. However, it is important to note that in this scene, the American general, a surrogate of South Korea, is portrayed in as a negative light as the North Korean general. This fact becomes important later in the narrative, when the film's primary external agent is repositioned from North Korea to become the military command structures of both nations.

Contrasted against the earlier scene's black humour, the scenes that take place after Kang arrives at Aerok Hill embody the elements of 'the real'. Upon his arrival the desolation of the area is apparent. Aerok is depicted to be very steep and rocky, containing little to no soil or vegetation. As such, the land cannot be utilised for either construction or farming. Therefore, nothing can be placed on the hill after the war that would be beneficial to either side. The pointlessness of this conflict is furthered through the depiction of Aerok Hill's ineffectiveness as a strategic position. The hill is constantly taken and retaken by both the South and North Korean forces. In fact, after Kang's arrival the number of times the hill changes hands, as revealed through either dialogue or visual depictions of battle, is up to 12 times. In short, the object that halts the armistice is a worthless piece of land. Furthermore, Alligator Company live in squalid conditions and their camp is in a constant state of mess. In the summer months the soldiers sweat profusely from the heat and in the winter months the soldiers have to wear North Korean

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<sup>111</sup> The inanity of these talks is furthered by the presence of an earlier scene in which a street protest is witnessed in Seoul that has citizens crying 'We want reunification! No 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel!' while carrying a banner that reads 'Unify with the North'. The positioning of this scene before the negotiations furthers the redundancy of the battles at Aerok Hill. The citizens of South Korea are shown to not want an armistice, but reunification, but the talks occur regardless. Not only were these talks lengthy and petty, resulting in the later battle sequences upon Aerok Hill, they are shown to not be wanted by the very people who they were claiming to help. In turn these talks, and the film's entire central conflict, is rendered further pointless due these scenes of protest.

army uniforms on top of their own to abstain from freezing to death. Furthermore, after the film's first battle sequence on Aerok Hill. Kang reinforces a trench and accidentally uncovers the bodies of dead soldiers. Kim grimly tells him that the hill is 'built on those bodies'. The revelation of this body, along with Kim's bleak dialogue, reveals both the length of the struggle over Aerok Hill and the human cost of those who entered the conflict before Kang. The imagery of the foundation of the hill being the dead bodies of Koreans furthers their oppression under their external agents and contextualises Alligator Company as only a fraction of the South Korean War effort. In turn, coupled with the grey complexion of the body buried in dully coloured dirt, this exchange evokes numerous elements of *cinematic han*, both in colour and each of its narrative tropes. The hill is continually won and lost and those who fall in battle become a part of the terrain itself, literally becoming one with the battlefield. The soldiers fight, die and are ultimately forgotten, revealing the human element of the war. As a result, the scenes that occur after Kang's arrival at Aerok Hill introduce elements of 'the real' through depictions of life at the South Korean base camp and the cost of waging a war on such difficult terrain. When the dark humour of the scenes prior to Kang's arrival at Aerok Hill are juxtaposed against 'the real' of the scenes after his arrival, the entire narrative is shaded under an ironic lens. After the armistice meeting, every action that is performed in the taking of Aerok Hill, specifically every death, injury and tragedy that befalls the infantry soldiers, both of the North and the South, becomes meaningless. Every death echoes the futility of the conflict due to the contextualisation of the entire Aerok struggle as a battle of egos between two generals, therefore placing a sense of irony onto the film's depiction of the Korean War.

The most significant element of this irony comes in the form of the film's resolution. After the armistice is signed, the South and North Korean infantry are instructed to fight for a final twelve hours to determine who wins the hill. Yet, after the battle is over, Kang is the last person alive amongst a hilltop covered in dead bodies. The film fades to black on this image and it is left ambiguous who claimed the hill. The squabble that began the conflict, and all of the death and suffering that it resulted in, is left without a victor. Consequently, the narrative begins and ends with scenes and images that depict the battle as worthless. Due to the ambiguity of this finale, the Korean nation is left under

oppression. Not the oppression of the infantry soldiers, but the oppression of their military high commands. Early in the film, a South Korean soldier, named Shin Il-young, states: ‘our enemy wasn’t the commies, but the war itself.’ This is symbolic as it introduces the idea of the film’s external agent not being the men and women the South Koreans fight, but the indecisive and petty command structure who force them to participate in a pointless battle.

*The Front Line*’s narrative and formal construction, and aforementioned historying, positions the fate of the hill as inconsequential as the conflict was never about the hill, but only a battle of egos between two generals who were attempting to sate their own pride in front of their foreign counterpart. While the Korean War concludes at the end of the film, every main character has died and Kang walks off to an uncertain fate.

However, the generals who forced the Aerok Hill conflict, who can be argued to be the film’s true oppressive, external agents, are never seen after their initial scene at the film’s opening, and do not face any consequences for their actions. Therefore, despite the war ending, Korea is still under the control of these generals, who on a whim, could potentially break the armistice and resume the war. Therefore, the film’s narrative concludes with Korea remaining under the oppression of their true external agent. Yet, the film’s final shot of Kang leaving the hill marks the narrative’s thematic shift from oppression to hope. Kang represents the resilience of the Korean populace under the oppression of their respective governments. Specifically, Korea will survive no matter what hardships they endure. Consequently, due to the ideological precepts of the SNW, in this case, irony, *The Front Line* evokes this narrative trope of *cinematic han*.

Additionally, the battle of Aerok Hill serves as a metaphor for the entire Korean War. The war was less about reunifying the nation and more about the implementation of the ideologies of the Rhee Syngman and Kim Il-sung administrations, specifically the removal or application of communism or capitalism. As *The Front Line* contextualises the battles upon Aerok Hill as meaningless, the entire Korean War is repositioned under this viewpoint. Furthermore, the lack of resolution increases the film’s ironic sensibilities as it reaffirms the conflict’s trivial nature. The diegesis of *The Front Line* underwent no change between the first and third act. As the hill did not receive a victor, no goal was accomplished. As all but one of the characters died, no character arcs were

upheld. The world of the film is identical at its conclusion as it was at its beginning. The only difference is that the Korean War ended, an occurrence that was not influenced by the film's narrative progression. As such, *The Front Line*'s ironic qualities make the narrative inconsequential.

*The Front Line* also embodies spectacle in both its event and object forms. It is through this precept of the SNW where the *cinematic han* narrative trope of the individual operating within a collective is evoked. The event spectacle takes the form of numerous battles throughout the film that pit the South Korean infantry against the North Korean infantry as they fight to control Aerok Hill. However, the most significant use of spectacle is the film's use of object spectacle, specifically in its gradual reveal of blood and gore. For most of the first half of *The Front Line* the film is essentially bloodless. The film's initial battle upon Aerok Hill involves the South Korean infantry pushing up steep terrain, encountering machine gun nests and rifle fire as they climb. However, the bullet wounds in this battle are brief and not lingered upon. In fact, the majority of the deaths in this sequence involves a soldier being shot, with a small puff of white smoke erupting from the wound, as their body drops instantly. They are shot, they fall down and the impact is so understated and quick these deaths can be easily missed. In fact, a moment in the battle where Kim blows up a machine gun nest has no blood present, despite the explosive detonating in close proximity to two North Korean soldiers.

Another moment where a South Korean soldier's hand is blown off by gunfire is bloody, but is only witnessed for less than a second before the scene cuts away. In this sequence, blood and gore are almost entirely absent from the battle, though it is lingered upon in its aftermath. After the battle, there are depictions of bloodied faces and injuries, including a graphic shot of a severed leg, which contains much blood and strings of muscle hanging from the wound. This wound is lingered upon in close up for a few seconds. In this, the film's depiction of violence focuses upon the aftermath of battle, not the violence within the battle. In fact, the battles themselves appear blood free, with the soldier deaths being depicted as clean and painless. Consequently, the body, and the effects battle has on it, appears to be the film's primary concern, not the act of violence itself. Crucially though, this lack of violence occurs during the first quarter of the film. During this section, the narrative is placed behind the point of view of Kang. At the

beginning of the film, Kang is sent to Aerok Hill and it is through him where the aforementioned squalid conditions of Alligator Company's base camp are revealed. In this section, information about the hill, most crucially the circumstances of battle, are filtered through his perspective. In the film's initial battle upon Aerok, the combat is shown through Kang's limited perspective, with other characters, such as Kim, only being shown when Kang is present. Therefore, the lack of blood can be argued to be representative of this limited perspective. Specifically, the violence is too quick and distant for Kang to witness. In these early scenes Kang is an outsider, not yet integrated into Alligator Company. Therefore, he is immediately positioned as an individual operating outside of the collective.

As the film progresses, the level of violence in battle gradually increases. Significantly, the violence rises after a pivotal scene where it is revealed that the South and North Korean soldiers are communicating via a box of items left in a bunker at the top of Aerok Hill. In this scene it is revealed that the members of Alligator Company buried their possessions in a small box during a retreat with the intent to recover them once they had retaken the hill. After the South has recaptured Aerok, the soldiers recover the box to find that the North Koreans had taken their items and filled the box with human excrement. The soldiers, annoyed at the loss of their possessions, leave an angry letter cursing the North Korean infantry. After the hill is once again taken by the North and later retaken by the South, the soldiers open the box to discover the North has buried a bottle of wine, along with a stack of letters from Northern soldiers addressed to their family in the South, with a request for Alligator Company to post them. Kim posts the letters, resulting in the aforementioned treasonous act that Kang is sent to investigate, and from that moment the Southern and Northern infantry interact by leaving gifts and letters for each other each time the hill changes hands. It is after this revelation where the film's violence grows, and most notably, primarily occurs between the soldiers who participated in the box exchange. For instance, the film's second battle sequence follows the same pattern as the first, with a noticeable lack of blood and gore despite its depictions of violent action. Yet, later in the film, Kang's and Kim's platoon is ambushed by a sniper nicknamed Two Seconds, a North Korean soldier involved with the box exchange. During this encounter a South Korean Private, Nam Seong-shik, who

also participated, is shot four times. Each bullet creates a large blood cloud and tears violently through Nam's clothing. Nam's wounds are graphic, with each shown in vivid, lengthy close ups or positioned in the foreground of mid shots. These wounds trickle blood, staining his uniform and creating lengthy lines on his skin. The wounds appear deep and meaty, with flaps of skin sticking up at odd angles, or at times folding underneath itself to create an appearance of a wet, red rose. Nam is the first main character to die on screen and his death marks the first overt use of violence in the film. Kim's death scene is similar to Nam's with Two Seconds shooting him repeatedly from a distance, resulting in similar blood trails and rose-like wounds (figure 23). During this scene, Kim is shot in slow motion, resulting in numerous small blood balls erupting from his back as he spasms. Another bullet wound causes his internal organs to spill out in a quick, second long close up. While the previous deaths in the film are quick and painless, Nam's and Kim's deaths are lingered on through lengthy shots of their wounds and body spasms. Along with their pained cries and screams throughout these sequences, accompanied by a loud and emotional non-diegetic score, the deaths of these characters become moments of object spectacle. At these moments, the film's blood and gore becomes noticeably graphic, elevated to become the focal point of the scenes they are contained in, making this violence a main contributor to the film's spectacle.



Figure 23: Screenshot from *The Front Line* (Dir. Hun Jang, 2011)

In the film's climactic battle event spectacle and object spectacle fuse. During the battle, blood sprays and meaty bullet wounds are visible on nearly every soldier that is hit with gunfire. Soldiers visibly clutch wounds in pain as blood seeps from behind their hands. At one point in the battle a severed torso, still clutching its rifle, is flung down the hill towards the charging South Korean soldiers. However, the most significant moments of violence are reserved for the South and North Korean soldiers who participated in the box exchange, most notably in the violence they commit to each other. This violence is often positioned close to the camera and lingered upon for seconds at a time. Examples of this include one of the South Korean box participants killing a North Korean contributor with a helmet. He cracks the man's skull open and the camera lingers in close up on a divot in the man's head and a large chunk of flesh that has been taken out of his cheek. A grenade from this North Korean character then detonates, killing the South Korean. Two Seconds is killed when Kang pushes a knife slowly into her chest. Blood pumps out of the wound in a gory fashion as a diegetic squelching sound effect is heard. This entire action is also shown in close up. Finally, the South Korean soldier Shin Il-young is caught in an explosion that severs his arm at the elbow, with meaty strands hanging out of the wound that jiggle as he walks. He is then caught in a second explosion, severing his leg in the same gory visual, before being gunned down by a North Korean Captain who was also involved in the box exchange. While Shin's wounds are not explicitly shown in close up, the entire sequence of him stumbling across the battleground with these wounds prior to his death lasts for roughly a minute of screen time. Therefore, Shin and his graphic wounds become one of the central foci of this sequence. Unlike the previous bloodless battles, the finale contains much blood and gore that elevates the war from a neutered conflict to an almost horror-esque display of terror and carnage.

The elevation of the film's depiction of violence can be directly connected to the narrative's transition away from Kang's individual perspective to a wider scope that includes not only Alligator Company, but the North Korean soldiers who were involved in the box exchange. As the narrative progresses Kang is accepted into Alligator Company, symbolically integrating the individual into the collective. However, Alligator Company is then positioned alongside the North Korean infantry in terms of their

battlefield experiences and ideological alignment. As a result, the collective that Kang is integrated into is not restricted to the South Korean infantry, but the infantry of both nations. During the film's earlier battles, the formal construction of the Korean War conflict was one sided as the North Korean soldiers had no names, faces or personalities. They were anonymous, and as such, the film's violence was also anonymous. For example, in the film's second battle sequence upon Aerok Hill, the North Koreans are only shown in the background of each shot, indistinguishable from one another (figure 24). However, as soon as the North Koreans were characterised, specifically through Two Seconds and the other North Korean soldiers who participated in the box exchange, the violence was no longer perpetrated against faceless victims, but characters with unique personalities. As such, the violence increased from Kang's subjectivity to a near objective perspective that depicted graphic violence being inflicted on both infantry forces, in a sense, reflecting that the actions in war are not victimless.



Figure 24: Screenshot from *The Front Line* (Dir. Hun Jang, 2011)

The cleanliness of the initial battles detached the South Korean infantry from their actions, reflecting not only Kang's restricted view, but also the South Korean belief that the enemy they were fighting was anonymous and unambiguously evil. As a result, the battle is clean, painless and sanitised. However, as soon as Kang, the individual, is

integrated into the collective forces of the Korean nation, it becomes clear that both sides are moral, ethical and ideological equals, specifically in their resentment of the war (as discussed later in the chapter). Consequently, the violence increases and becomes equally dirty and graphic on both sides. As the morals of war becomes increasingly blurry the battles progress away from being fought at a distance towards a more close-quarters, intimate style of killing. As the South and North Koreans become unified, the physical distance between them closes and the violence is elevated. Not to only raise the tragedy of warfare, but to display that both opponents equally suffer in the fighting of the war. After the box exchange, Alligator Company and the North Korean infantry become equals, and in turn, the violence, and closing of physical distance, reflects this. Therefore, the Korean oppression underneath their external agent, in this case the military high commands of both nations, is depicted from the perspective of both the individual and the collective, namely Kang and the Korean infantry. Therefore, the tragedy of war, as revealed through the film's irony, spectacle and violence, removes the differences between both of the infantry forces and aligns the South and North Korean soldiers as equals, not only through their morals and ethics, but through their common experiences as well. In turn, the ideological precepts of the SNW cinematic period, in this case its predilection towards spectacle and violence, evoke this narrative trope of *cinematic han*.

### **5.3 The mise en scene of *cinematic han***

As demonstrated thus far, the narrative and formal construction of the representation of the Korean War is swayed by the ideological precepts of the cinematic period in which the film was produced, evoking *cinematic han* as a result. Additionally, each film's use of costumes, locations, colour palette and performance reflect the modes of oppression characteristic of *cinematic han*'s elements of mise en scene. As discussed in previous chapters, these elements of mise scene grant the representation of Korea the appearance and atmosphere of a prison whilst also unifying the Korean citizens under their resilience of oppression. This section will analyse the mise en scene of *Five Marines*, *Nambugun* and *The Front Line* to demonstrate how their formal construction evokes

*cinematic han*'s elements of mise en scene and the way in which they contribute to cinematically portraying Korea as a metaphorical prison.

### **Background characters**

As discussed in the previous chapters, in films that evoke *cinematic han* the performance of the background characters shift between being energetic and passive depending on the presence or absence of their external agent. Despite the nationality and structures of the external agent changing between the cinematic periods, this style of performance can still be analysed within the background characters of *Nambugun* and *The Front Line*. However, in *Five Marines* scenes in which South Korea's oppressive, external agent is present are very few, of which, only the film's main characters are involved. Therefore, in regards to this element of *cinematic han*'s mise en scene, *Five Marines* does not evoke it through its formal construction.

The background characters of *Nambugun* are characterised by their energetic movements and actions which, in turn, form small vignettes when their external agent is absent. These vignettes help to display two narrative elements, namely the humanity and evolving military discipline of the partisan forces. Despite the partisans being average civilians, military discipline is shown to be instilled in them. In the background of a shot at six and a half minutes into the film a senior partisan waves his arm at a large group of people. At this gesture, all of the people sit. As the partisan begins to move backwards, the group stands and follows. He gestures again and the group stops. This movement occurs far behind the main action of the shot and displays the partisan high command teaching military signals and discipline to the new recruits. The recruits are witnessed being taught how to take orders, starting with when and how they move. Another example of this discipline occurs in a scene when the partisans march across the Korean countryside. As they walk, most move their heads, scanning the distance in search for the enemy. Others only move their eyes, looking at their environment in a non-committal way. Some of the partisans do not move their eyes at all, only staring forward. These actions reinforce the notion that the partisans are gradually learning military tactics and discipline as they participate in military operations. Like all processes of learning, some of the recruits learn quicker than others. These small

vignettes, and others like it, contain small, yet detailed actions that the background characters perform behind the scene's main action when the external agent is absent, which also further the idea of the partisans learning how to act as a military unit. When this agent is absent, the background characters are afforded a narrative space to learn and practice military tactics and signals. Furthering this idea, these actions often occur behind the foreground action of dialogue, usually involving Lee Tae, and, as such, the backgrounds of many shots are integrated into the character progression of the partisan soldiers. Therefore, via this aspect of *cinematic han*, the energetic movements of the background characters when their external agent is absent compliments the narrative progression of the partisan unit from civilians to a capable fighting force. Therefore, when partisan's engage in battle with their external agent, the South Korean infantry, the evocation of *cinematic han* has foreshadowed and contextualised the background characters' experience in battle due to this background action.

Furthermore, the energetic actions of *Nambugun*'s background characters in the absence of their external agents furthers the film's *minjung* perspective, namely through the humanisation of the partisan forces. At key points during the narrative, the background characters take joy in the simple act of washing themselves and their clothes. At twenty minutes into the film, characters wash their clothes in a stream and lay them out on rocks. As this occurs the character's converse in small groups as a gathering of women sing and clap their hands. A lone sentry stands in the distance with his rifle, watching for danger. All of this information is conveyed during a single deep focus wide shot, creating multiple focal points away from the film's main characters. Through these focal points the simple act of washing clothes is shown to be an enjoyable experience for the partisans. This is conveyed again at an hour and a half into the film where the partisans find a river to wash themselves in. Roughly a hundred partisans strip naked and wash themselves in the water. Some sunbake on rocks, either naked or fully clothed. Other partisans use their clothes as blankets to sit comfortably on the rocks. Through the use of wide angles, multiple focal points into each shot are created, allowing for numerous vignettes of background action to occur simultaneously. In this moment the partisans are shown a sliver of luxury where they can momentarily forget the war. Through their naked state, they do not care for modesty and are instead focused on enjoying

themselves. These two moments of joy act as a counterpoint to the rest of their experiences in the war. The elevation of mundane, everyday activities into experiences of bliss displays how harsh and deprived the partisan conditions were during war time and reveals how far removed these average citizens were from their homes and creature comforts due to their devotion to their cause. Due to the parallels between the partisans and *minjung* movement outlined earlier, these depictions of the enjoyment of the ordinary further demonstrates the film's adherence to the ideological precepts of the FNW, as the partisans are symbolic of the average, working class Korean.

The oppressive, external agent of *Nambugun* is characterised as the South Korean infantry forces. The only time this external agent is present are in sequences that contain armed combat or the retreat of the partisans from their bases. During these sequences, such as an ambush on the partisan headquarters, the actions of the background characters are visibly altered from energetic to passive. In these sequences these characters are witnessed to perform only one of two actions: retreating or shooting their weapons. As the chaos erupts around them, many of the background characters run in straight lines, starting at one side of the frame and running across to the other side. They flinch at explosions and gunfire, but often do not stop running, single-mindedly rushing to exit the frame. Many background characters run past each other, but often do not change direction, only moving when confronted with an obstacle like a tree or a rock. When retreating, the background characters either pick up or abandon their rifles, and resume the aforementioned style of running in a straight line. The second type of movement, shooting their weapons, is similarly passive. In shots of the backgrounds characters fighting their external agent, these characters are primarily stationary. When the shot begins, the characters shoot their weapon in one direction, only occasionally ducking behind cover before sitting up and firing back. This is opposed to the scene's main characters, such as Lee Tae or platoon leader Kim Hui-suk, who duck, weave, flinch and talk under fire. The background characters' ability in battle does improve as the film progresses. For instance, as discussed previously, a battle early in the film depicts these characters to routinely hold their weapons wrong or flinch when they shoot, both of which do not occur in the film's later battle sequences. However, despite this improvement, when the external agent is present, their movements do not deviate from

either of these two actions: fighting or retreating. As discussed in previous chapters, the presence of the external agent acts as a force that is shown to physically weigh down the Koreans, forcing them into passive action. When this agent is absent, as demonstrated through the background characters of *Nambugun*, this force is lifted. When free from the weight of their oppression, these characters are depicted as being able to learn complex military strategy as well as outwardly expressing their humanity through their joy at the mundane. Yet when the external agent is present this force returns, weighing down the characters, seemingly making them forget their combat training. When present, the background characters either run in a single direction or remain stationary, as if their oppression is physically weighing them down. Therefore, the presence or absence of the external agent can be argued to be directly affecting how these characters act and react in certain scenarios. As a result, the background characters of *Nambugun* evoke this element of *cinematic han*'s mise en scene.

When the external agent of *The Front Line* is viewed as being North Korea, the background characters of the South Korean Alligator Company follow the pattern of behaviour associated with *cinematic han*. When the North Korean infantry is absent from scenes, the South Korean background characters are shown performing energetic actions that detail a busy world inhabited with people and life. For example, upon hearing of the cease-fire during a scene in which the North Koreans are absent, the South Korean soldiers perform energetic actions that exhibit their joy. Groups of three and four men are seen hugging while jumping on the spot. One man instantly throws down what he was carrying and spreads his arms and legs into an X-like pose, convulsing his body and yelling. The joy the soldiers display upon hearing the news of the armistice demonstrate their energetic movements when their perceived external agent is absent, furthered by the knowledge that, in this moment, North Korea is no longer a figure of oppression. As a result, their movements are free to express their emotions, unrestricted by the weight of their oppression. Furthermore, in a following scene when the South Korean infantry are told they have to fight for another twelve hours to determine the fate of Aerok Hill, these energetic movements continue to reflect their emotions, but now visibly shifted to be display their anguish. As Shin tells Alligator Company they have to fight a final battle most of the soldiers stand stoically,

but shake slightly. They try to compose themselves as professionals, but the shock of this news is visibly affecting each man. A number of men slink to the ground, either crouching, bending over, or holding their heads in their hands. Many soldiers also visibly hold back tears. In these sequences, the energetic actions of the background characters display vivid emotions, such as joy and fear, in turn, humanising these characters during scenes in which their external agent is absent. The scenes in which the South Korean background characters are in the presence of their external agents is during scenes of armed combat. In these sequences, the background characters run, climb and shoot as they struggle up the hill. In these scenes, each background soldier performs near identical actions, namely to run, climb and shoot, without any deviation from these passive movements. As a result, in sequences of armed combat, where their external agent is present, the weight of their oppression visibly alters the behaviour of the South Korean soldiers. In these scenes, the energetic movements that displayed emotions are reduced to passive movements that characterise the South Koreans as instruments of war, who fight their enemy without personal expressions such as hope, fear or aggression. Therefore, contrasting the scenes at Alligator Company's base camp and the scenes of armed combat upon Aerok Hill, the performance of the South Korean background characters visibly change when their external agent is either present or absent. Due to this, their oppression once again becomes a force that physically weighs them down, in turn, evoking *cinematic han*.

However, as discussed earlier, the external agent of *The Front Line* can be argued to not be North Korea, but the military command structures of both nations. When viewed under this lens, the background characters of both nations being to reflect their oppression under the other. Notably, when the North Koreans are elevated to the film's secondary protagonist late in the narrative, they display similar patterns of movement under their own external agent, South Korea. One of the first examples of this style of movement occurs early in the narrative, shortly before the first battle sequence upon Aerok Hill. In this scene, Kim infiltrates a North Korean position by wearing one of their uniforms. Upon being discovered as a South Korean, the North Korean soldiers grab their rifles and point them at Kim. However, one soldier does not grab a gun, instead grabbing a small trench shovel. He holds the shovel in both hands and points it at

Kim as if it were a sword. In this moment of confusion the North Koreans grabbed whatever weapon they had available in order to separate themselves from danger. The shovel is held aggressively by the soldier, but it is also noticeably shaking in his hands. This implies that the soldier did not realise he grabbed the shovel but had no choice but to use it as a weapon in this situation. While this action humanises the North Korean soldiers, the actions the soldiers perform after Kim is revealed is passive. The soldiers hold their weapons, shaking and not moving, until Kim orders a volley of rifle fire that kills them all. In this moment, the North Korean soldiers are also shown to perform passive movements in the presence of their external agent, despite this agent only being one person. Additionally, this pattern of movement in this early scene foreshadows the North Korean elevation to secondary protagonist further on in the film. In a later scene, after Two Seconds has killed private Nam Seong-shik, she returns to the North Korean base in a cave. In this sequence, occurring after this narrative elevation of the North Koreans, their base is shown for the first time. As she walks through the cave, background characters are shown eating or interacting with each other through inaudible dialogue, with some also shown caring for the wounded. This sequence reveals that when the North Korean infantry's external agents are absent, they, like the South Korean infantry, perform energetic actions.

A notable scene regarding this element of mise en scene occurs shortly after a battle in which the North Koreans capture Kang and Kim's unit. At the word of their Captain the North Koreans go from standing still to rushing at the prisoners with their guns raised in a matter of seconds, ready and willing to pull the trigger, yet do not perform any actions or display any emotions outside of this movement. The South Korean characters respond in kind, daring not to move while the guns are pointed their way (figure 25). In this scene, the background characters of both the South and North Korean infantry meet, both in the presence of their external agents, and, consequently, each performing passive actions as a result. However, in the film's climatic battle sequence, which occurs after the armistice is signed, the film's true oppressive, external agent can be argued to be their respective military command structures as each are forcing the infantry to fight a pointless battle. As a result, during this battle, the external agent of both infantries can be viewed as absent, resulting in energetic actions from both sides. During this

sequence, each side engages in hand-to-hand combat. Both North and South Korean soldiers grab whatever weapons they can find, such as bayonets, rifle stocks, helmets and fists, to kill their enemy. In this sequence, the aggression of the background characters is evident, with each attacking the other until only one remains alive. As a result, the frustration of each infantrys at being forced to fight despite the armistice being signed is displayed through the background characters of both the South and North Korean infantry. Therefore, as the film's external, oppressive agent can be argued to shift between being the North Korean infantry, to be both the South and North Korean infantry, before finally becoming the military high commands of both nations, the actions of the background characters respond in kind, alternating between passive and energetic actions depending on who the external agent is viewed to be. As a result, due to their performance noticeably changing when their external agent is either present or absent, the background characters of both the South and North Korean infantries evoke this element of *cinematic han*'s mise en scene.



Figure 25: Screenshot from *The Front Line* (Dir. Hun Jang, 2011)

## Locations

The colour palettes and formal construction of the locations in *Five Marines*, and *The Front Line* evoke *cinematic han*'s elements of mise en scene discussed in Chapter 2.

However, in *Nambugun* the locations of the oppressive, external agent is never shown, meaning that the contrast between the North Korean and South Korean locations cannot be demonstrated. Yet, this film still follows the design principles of *cinematic han* in regards to the locations and colour palette its protagonists occupy. Therefore, while the entirety of this element cannot be demonstrated, the North Korean locations still reflect the dour, encroaching appearance characteristic of this aesthetic.

In *Five Marines*, *Nambugun*, and *The Front Line* the primary locations occupied by the infantry and partisan forces of South and North Korea are their military bases. Each of the bases in these films share similar design principles and therefore, will be analysed together in regards to how they evoke *cinematic han*. Each military base is a camp that is constructed in the Korean countryside. The structure and layout of these bases are designed around environmental obstacles, reminiscent of Korean hanok architecture previously discussed in Chapter 3. A design principle of hanok is that each house is built around nature, instead of removing nature to accommodate the building. As a result, the shape of the house is dictated by nature, allowing both the building and the environment to exist concurrently without one affecting the other (Patel, 2016). True to this principle, the military bases of the South and North Korean military have shaped their camps around the landscape. The bases are constructed on the side of hills and mountains, but are also surrounded by, and littered with, vegetation such as thin spindly trees or small shrubbery-like bushes. The ground is also covered with loose stones and thick dirt. The base camps of the infantry and partisan forces in *Five Marines*, *Nambugun* and *The Front Line* are constructed upon inclines, either against a mountain or a hill, granting them a sense of verticality.

The South Korean infantry camps and the North Korean partisan camps each contain four or more tents which are held up with poles or rope. These tents are constructed from both canvas and wood, with the rooves and walls being made of canvas, with a wooden door and door frame on one side. The tents are often not constructed properly, with each sagging in many areas. This implies that due to the environment around them, the soldiers do not have enough space to stretch the tent to its full size. The tents also appear to be old and broken. The majority of the tents in these films have numerous large

square patches on the canvas of the interior wall. These patches imply that a variety of holes and other tears have been torn into the tent and instead of replacing the canvas, they have been repaired with patches of similarly coloured fabric. These haphazard repairs imply a lack of resources in the respective Korean armies. Furthermore, despite the environmental obstacles, each camp is widely spread with significant distances between each tent. These spaces are filled with crates, ammo boxes, straw bundles, vehicles, or environmental elements such as rocks and grass. However, despite the scattered nature of the camps, the insides of the tents are cramped and unappealing. These interior locations are filled with both soldiers and antiquarian items such as military field phones, stacks of books and papers organised into neat piles, low hanging light fixtures, and ropes hung across the roof of the tents with clothing and other items hanging from it. Amongst these items, dozens of infantry soldiers are required to sleep, mere centimetres apart. In these tents, items are unorganised and littered haphazardly throughout the location. Therefore, the Korean characters live in unideal conditions, with all of their living quarters appearing dishevelled, cramped and unorganised despite the tent's position within the environment. Additionally, the tents and other various objects in these bases are coloured grey, white or black, and when green is shown, specifically through the canvas, it is faded to a form of dull, almost grey colouration. The environments around the base are also drearily coloured, with trees, rocks and mountains appearing to be a dull yellow, dark brown or grey. In *Five Marines*, which was filmed in black and white, this environment appears consistently dark, as if in perpetual shadow. Therefore, the base camps, as well as the environment they exist in appear dully coloured, almost desaturated, giving these locations a depressing, gloomy appearance. As a result, each camp has the look of a tent city, acting as a small settlement of people living as hermits instead of an organised, cohesive military group. The layout of the camp alongside the broken, worn out appearance of the tents and the dull, matte colours of these locations make the Korean soldiers and partisans appear as refugees in their own country, forced to live in close proximity with each other, unable to return to their homes.

Conversely, the bases of the Korean's oppressive, external agent, specifically in the cave bases of *Five Marines* and *The Front Line*, while smaller in size, appear more

comfortable, organised and maintained than the South Korean bases. While North Korea can be analysed not to be the external agent in *The Front Line*, their locations nevertheless reflect the design principles of one. As these agents are Korean, their locations likewise implement hanok architecture. In *The Front Line*, the North Korean encampment is built into a natural cave system, providing them with a strong, fortified position. In *Five Marines*, the North Korean command centre is also built into a similar cave network. As a result, the bases once again reflect a harmony with their environment. Yet, despite being built into a cave, with barely enough space for two people to pass each other, whenever these caves are shown, they are not overpopulated, granting the soldiers enough space to manoeuvre, whilst also having places to put their personal effects, such as books, maps, cots and lanterns. In this cave, which has rough walls and dirty or muddy floors, wooden cabinets, safes and radio equipment fill this space comfortably. Additionally, in *Five Marines*, various tables and safes are littered around the room, while in *The Front Line* pictures of Kim Ill-sung are able to be hung on the wall. Therefore, the cave bases of the external agents are more organised, complex and pleasant than the tent city styled bases of the main Korean characters.

Furthermore, the colour palettes of these cave locations reflect an inviting, vibrant colouration. In *The Front Line*, lanterns hanging from the wall provide the space with a golden bronze hue, which deepens when contrasted against the North Korean's brown uniforms. This hue gives the location a sense of warmth. Additionally, the natural light from the cave's exterior also provides this area with a cool blue. Therefore, this location is perpetually bathed in soft, inviting colours, giving the space a gentle quality. In *Five Marines*, this cave, despite being an interior location, has a lighter colouration to the South Korean tents, containing more greys and white than blacks. As a result, the locations and colour palettes of *Five Marines* and *The Front Line* position each film's respective external agent to occupy spaces that appear more attractive and comfortable than those occupied by the film's main Korean characters. Consequently, a divide between each side is established, one where the film's main Korean characters are trapped and weighed down by their oppression despite the more open construction of their bases, while their external agents occupy alluring locations despite their closed nature. Therefore, due to the formal construction of their locations, the primary Korean

characters exist in a depressing, enclosed environment, one where they are surrounded by their oppression which traps them immutably underfoot of their external agent. As a result, the locations and colour palettes of *Five Marines* and *The Front Line*, and in part *Nambugun*, evoke these elements of *cinematic han's* mise en scene.

## Costumes

The primary costumes worn by the main and background characters throughout *Five Marines*, *Nambugun* and *The Front Line* are the military uniforms of the South and North Korean infantry. The way in which these costumes are designed and worn evoke the respective element of *cinematic han's* mise en scene as discussed in Chapter 2. In *The Front Line* and *Nambugun* the uniforms of the South Korean infantry are always a shade of green, usually a dark, swampy colour. However, a lighter shade of green is also visible in numerous scenes. In *Five Marines*, these shades are seen to alternate between a light and dark shade of grey. In these films, there is no consistency between when the lighter or darker shades are used, seemingly being interchangeable. The uniform itself is made up of long pants, black combat boots with rubber soles, and either long or short sleeve button up shirts. The soldier's uniforms are routinely drenched with large, dark sweat stains. During scenes set in winter the soldiers wear a green, thick coat that has a diamond pattern on the stitching. Each soldier owns a hat that is a square, box-like shape with a short brim. The colour of this hat matches the colour of the rest of their uniform. Leather straps are pulled tight across each soldier's chest where items such as grenades and radios hang. Each South Korean soldier has between one and five leather pouches on a belt around their waist. This belt holds spare magazines of ammunition and explosives. When combat scenarios occur the soldiers wear metal helmets that either have camouflage patterns that consist of blobs of green and black, or in the case of *Five Marines* grey and black, or small ropes tied around the circumference of the helmet in obtuse patterns. The presence of these ropes appear to be camouflage as the ropes break up the smooth, round design of the helmet, allowing it to blend in against the natural flora of the battlefield. To further demonstrate this camouflage, leaves and sticks are sometimes put underneath these ropes to further assist the soldier to blend in with the natural vegetation. The soldiers also carry rifles that are slung across their backs with a

strap. Each soldier is individually characterised by the antiquarian accessories that hang from their belts. Some have large knives in sheaths, others have pistols in a holster, and some omit weapons altogether, instead carrying a radio to call in airstrikes and reinforcements. In *Five Marines* rank is determined through patches on the soldier's arms. These patches are positioned on the bicep of both arms and consist of a number of downward facing arrows, coloured black with a white outline around it. It is established that a private's patch has one of these arrows, while a lieutenant has three arrows. Other infantry soldiers, whose ranks are not established, have a similar patch to the lieutenant, but the arrow is halved, with only three diagonal lines on the patch. In *The Front Line* these arrows are absent, with rank seemingly determined by a vertical metal rectangle attached to the lapel of the soldier's shirt. This rectangle is also seen on the forehead of the soldier's cap. This rectangle has a number of ridges in the metal, with three to four ridges for high ranking officers. Despite the differences in design, each film has a clearly defined method of denoting the ranks of the soldiers. As a result, the South Korean army uniforms displayed in *Five Marines*, *Nambugun* and *The Front Line* all have similar styles and appearances.

However, in *Five Marine* and *The Front Line*, the abovementioned uniforms of the South Korean characters are visibly inferior to their oppressive, external agents, namely, the North Korean infantry. The North Korean infantry uniform has a similar design to the South Koreans but their uniform appears to be more formal and decadent than the Southern version. Each soldier wears a light brown, long sleeved shirt that has gold buttons running vertically down the chest, along with brown pants. In *Five Marines* this difference in colour is noted by the North Korean infantry uniforms being a significantly darker shade of grey, almost black. Like the South Koreans, the North Koreans also have belts that contain pouches of ammo or explosives, but this belt is made of brown fabric instead of leather. The soldiers wear square, box-like hats with a small brim. However, each hat has a broach in the middle of the forehead that consists of a small star inside a circle. In *The Front Line* this broach consists of a yellow or red star inside of a yellow circle. Like the South Koreans, the North Koreans also have metal helmets with ropes strung across it for camouflage. Also like the South Korean helmets, the North Koreans attach foliage onto their headgear for camouflage. At other times, North Koreans are

seen wearing their caps into battle instead of helmets. The weaponry of the North Koreans also differ from the South Koreans. The North Korean rifles appear to have a longer barrel than the South Korean rifle. While the South Koreans are rarely seen with automatic weapons, numerous North Korean soldiers carry machine guns with a rounded magazine. The way in which rank is visibly determined is also different, noted by two visual elements. The first is a flap of fabric on the soldier's shoulders. This flap is the same colour as the rest of the uniform but has a vertical strip of a lighter colour, possibly gold, running across it. Not every soldier has this strip, denoting it to be a way of determining rank. The other, more overt, visual element that determines rank is the differences in the soldier's uniform and weapons. While the South Korean infantry determined rank by patches or rectangular metal pins, the North Korean infantry defines rank by changes to the uniform's appearance. North Korean officers wear close to knee high boots with polished black leather. Their hat has a red stripe running along the base of the hat's circumference. The officers also do not carry rifles, but pistols, as if only expecting to fight if the battle evolves into close quarters. Due to these design differences, namely the use of weapons and the presence of gold on the uniform, the uniforms of the South Korean characters appear inferior to their oppressive, external agents as the North Korean uniform always appears to be more decadent than the South. Furthermore, through the clear visual separation between the low ranking infantry soldiers and their superior officers, the North Korean infantry appears to have a more clearly defined hierarchical structure. In comparison, the South Korean infantry, through the near identical uniforms, appears leaderless and disorganised by contrast. As a result, the North Korean uniforms make them appear to be a clear, military presence as opposed to South Korea's scrappy, guerrilla-like appearance.

However, keeping in line with the evolving external agent in *The Front Line*, in this film, the North Korean uniform also has notable inferior elements when compared to the Southern uniform, specifically in their lack of helmets. This deficit has two possible implications, that it is either a personal choice of the North Korean soldier to wear a helmet into battle, or there were not enough helmets for every soldier. This second option is the more likely option due to the decadence of the North Korean uniform. From the excess materials such as leather and gold it can be argued that the North

Korean uniform wastes the resources that could have been assigned to helmet production. Furthermore, the visual differentiation of the North Korean officers is a poor tactical decision as their uniforms single them out on the battlefield. Due to these changes, the North Korean officers are easier to spot from a distance, making them a clear target for enemy fire. The way the South Korean army determines rank is more tactically viable than the North Koreans as they are more reserved and do not overtly signpost the force's command structure. Therefore, due to this, in *The Front Line*, the uniforms of both armies are simultaneously superior and inferior to the other, and as a result, foreshadows the evolution of North Korea from the external agent to secondary protagonist.

In *Nambugun* there is only one type of military uniform present, that of South Korea. As a result, the uniforms worn by both sides are South Korean due to the guerrilla tactics employed by the partisan forces. During an early scene at the partisan base camp each partisan volunteer is shown wearing civilian clothing. Lee Tae wears a brown jacket, scarf and grey pants respectively. While the volunteers are shown in civilian clothing, the partisans who recruit them wear military uniforms. These uniforms are near identical to the design of the South Korean military uniforms described above, but appear either worn out or, most likely, scavenged from the dead. In this scene the soldiers' uniforms are blood stained and contain small circular holes, most likely bullet holes. Most of these stains and holes are on the chest area (figure 26). During early combat engagements, the partisan volunteers are witnessed in the same clothing they wore at the base camp, despite the scenes taking place days apart. However, after the first South Korean soldier is killed in battle, the dead body is swarmed by partisans who strip the body of its weapons, ammunition and clothing. After this action occurs, in subsequent scenes Lee Tae and other partisans wear increasingly militaristic garb. The partisans' clothing changes throughout the film with numerous combinations of shirts, jackets and pants shown being worn by each. Through this initial instance of scavenging items from the dead, each partisan is implied to be wearing the clothing of those they kill, furthered by their torn, ripped and, at times, bloody appearance. Therefore, the costumes worn by the partisans are entirely obtained through the aftermath of battle and violence. Consequently, the partisans are forced to wear the uniforms of their oppressor.



Figure 26: Screenshot from *Nambugun* (Dir. Jeong Ji-yeong, 1990)

In *Five Marines*, *Nambugun* and *The Front Line* the uniforms of the primary Korean protagonists are depicted as being inferior to their external agents, firmly placing these characters underfoot of their oppressor through these visual items. These costumes also foreshadow the shift in external agent from North Korea to the military command structures in *The Front Line*. Through these items depicting the Korean infantry and partisan forces as either disorganised, under-equipped or as scavengers in comparison to their external agents, the uniforms they wear become symbols of their oppression. In this, the Korean War conflict is firmly positioned as a smaller force attempting to fight back against a superior one, recontextualising the conflict as the oppressed fighting the rule of an oppressor. As a result, this element of the mise en scene establishes a clear societal structure in which one of the Koreas is always oppressed by the other. Therefore, the costumes worn by the primary Korean protagonists in these three films evoke this element of *cinematic han*'s mise en scene.

#### **5.4 Cinematic representation of the past and socio-cultural context of production**

This chapter has so far conducted an analysis of South Korean films that represent the Korean War and the way in which they are constructed under the ideological precepts of

their cinematic period. It is witnessed that these precepts evoke *cinematic han*. As a result of this evocation, the oppression of the film's primary Korean characters appears eternal, with the narrative and formal construction of each film giving Korea the appearance and atmosphere of a prison. Yet simultaneously, elements of hope are evoked by the unification of the Korean characters in their resilience of the oppression of their external agent. As established in the previous chapters, *cinematic han* is integral to the historiophony of the South Korean historical film as it is through the film's evocation of this aesthetic where each film's historical knowledge of the Korean War can be analysed. This historical knowledge is developed through the symbolic links that are drawn between the cinematic text and the socio-cultural context of its production. In Chapters 3 and 4, these symbolic links were discussed to take one of two forms: a societal fear or anxiety regarding Korean oppression that was occurring during the period of the film's production; or a form of cultural hope to overcome a historical oppression that was still affecting Korea in the film's socio-cultural context. In this section, each film will be discussed and analysed in order to demonstrate how the representation of the Korean Infantry in the Korean War films of South Korea can create symbolic links between the film and its production context.

### **The socio-cultural context of the 1960s**

The 1950s and early 1960s were a turbulent time for South Korea. Amongst the post-war reconstruction and the occupation of the South by the United States following the Korean War, relations between the Korean citizenry and the South Korean government was reaching a breaking point. This tension culminated in the previously discussed 1960 April Revolution that removed Rhee Syngman from power and eventually led to the Park Chung-hee military regime after the coup in 1961 (Hayes, 2006; Jung, 2002). Shortly after the April Revolution groups of South Korean citizens began to revolt against the South Korean military, demanding recognition and recompense for atrocities it had committed against the South Korean people since liberation from Japan in 1945. It was the death of Bak Yeong-bo at the hands of the residents of Geochanggun County on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1960, which made the military's actions emerge into public knowledge. Bak was the head of Sinwon-myeon Town of Gochanggun County when soldiers from the

South Korean Army stormed the village in 1951. Bak accused many of the town's residents as being communist sympathisers, leading to the unjust deaths of 719 people at the hands of the Korean military. After the families of those killed had their revenge against Bak, many cases of civilian deaths by the South Korean army since liberation started to become known to the wider South Korean public (Jung, 2002, p. 99). The massacres committed against the South Korean citizens between 1945 and 1953 were so numerous that South Korean Army Chief of Staff General Jeong Il-gwon issued a directive on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1951 to his subordinate units, 'urging them to exercise restraint in their discretionary executions' (Jung, 2002, p. 103).<sup>112</sup> However, despite these massacres emerging into the public sphere, few of the officials implicated in them were formally charged. Those who were only received light sentences which were later dismissed.<sup>113</sup> After the April Revolution family members of the victims and survivors of these massacres organised the National Bereaved Family Association of the Massacred based in Seoul in October of 1960. According to Jung Byung-joon, the Association demanded that, 'the family registry records of the slaughtered be rectified to read "innocent citizens" instead of "communist collaborators," that those responsible for the massacres be punished, that bereaved families be protected by the state and compensated for their loss, that the victims' remains be exhumed, and that memorials be built in their honor' (2002, p. 105). However, neither the Heo Jeong nor Yun Po-sun governments could meet these demands as numerous officials implicated in the massacres still held office. Any hope for the Association's demands being met were removed after the Park Chung-hee coup of 1961. The Park Chung-hee government responded to the Association harshly, labelling their actions as 'special acts of sedition' (Jung, 2002, pp. 109-110).

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<sup>112</sup> Most of the massacres were either 'genocides or political massacres' carried out on the orders of the Rhee Syngman government. Between 1949 and 1952 the Rhee government, according to Jung Byung-joon, 'preemptively executed large numbers of people it considered a political danger to prevent possible security problems and for other political reasons without following legal procedures' in response to a number of riots and uprising the citizenry held against the regime, along with several 'Communist offences' that had challenged Rhee's power (2002, p. 99). Furthermore, after the Korean War begin, the South Korean government began to execute a large number of political prisoners and 'rehabilitated leftists'. In the first week of July, 1950 approximately 1,800 prisoners were executed, with a further 200-300 on August 10<sup>th</sup>, under the guise of these people being 'North Korean prisoners of war' (Jung, 2002, pp. 102-103).

<sup>113</sup> According to Jung, 'Two junior army officers were given life sentences and Kim Jong-won, the commander of the civil affairs division of martial law, a three-year term in prison. All three were freed after serving only one year' (2002, pp. 103-104).

Consequently, the regime's response to the Association was sudden and violent, as according to Jung:

The military regime destroyed the graves of the massacred and the gravestones their relatives had erected with public donations. Activists in the bereaved family associations were detained as communist sympathizers, with some targeted with trumped-up espionage charges. Also arrested were some journalists who had covered incidents of genocide. The Minjok Ilbo (National Daily), a progressive newspaper, was shut down and its president Jo Yong-su was executed [....] The military regime, advocating anticomunism as its paramount national policy, denounced citizens who lodged complaints of state-perpetrated crimes as pro-North Korean elements or leftists. The activities of the bereaved family associations came to an end, and the victims went back to being labelled as "reds." (2002, pp. 109-110).

As a result of this upheaval the South Korean military's image amongst the South Korean people became contentious.

Released on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1961, *Five Marines* was produced during this period of social turmoil. As discussed earlier, the ideological precepts of the Golden Age cinematic period, alongside its narrative and formal elements that evokes *cinematic han*, establishes a historical narrative where the Korean War becomes a form of holy crusade, in which the South Korean infantry are elevated to near reverence and martyrdom. At a period of time where the popular perception of the South Korean military was unfavourable, the release of a film with such a positive representation of the military is curious. Therefore, the representation of the Korean War, with its tragic and hopeful depictions of the soldiers' deaths and humanisation, can be interpreted to be a response to this turbulent period in South Korean history in an attempt to soften their public image. The soldiers fighting in the war are depicted as selfless, caring men, acting in the interests of their families, loved ones and the South Korean people, morally incapable of committing mass genocide against their countrymen. Alongside the favourable characterisation of the South Korean soldiers, discussed earlier in the chapter, the narrative crux of *Five Marines* is the transformation of five flawed men into heroes due

to their participation in battle. The first two thirds of the film comprises of the titular five marines performing menial tasks around their front line position. This includes digging trenches, performing sentry duty, and retrieving water for the other soldiers. It is during these scenes where the dynamic between the main characters displays much comradery, with the soldiers swapping stories of their loved ones (such as Yeong-seon's sex-filled tale of his wedding night), exchanging cigarettes, lamenting the lack of women at the frontline and responding to enemy fire with good humour, such as in a scene where Han-gu is knocked over during an enemy bombing run and shrugs it off by claiming he was just 'trying to get some rest'. The soldiers appear good natured, as if the war they are fighting is just an excuse for them to spend time with each other. Furthermore, the majority of the marines respond to the mechanics of warfare with light hearted complaints. In one scene Squad Commander Yang forces the marines to dig a trench around their base to ensure a fortified position should the North Koreans attack. Instead of acknowledging the tactically viable strategy the trench employs, the men instead complain, calling themselves 'slaves' and saying 'I hate that little prick' when Yang is not around. Through these displays, the film's main characters are portrayed sympathetically. The film's representation of the Korean War does not depict the soldiers as monsters, nor as individuals dedicated to the war or the love of killing, but as men doing their part to help their country.

This humanistic approach is furthered through pivotal flashback sequences that depict why several of the marines entered the war. These scenes reveal that these characters have a key personality flaw or point of view which, in turn, leads, or forces, them to join the front line. Ju-han, lacking excitement due to the running of pointless exercises in his drill platoon, joins the infantry as he craves action. Deok-su is shown to be alienated from his family due to his perception that his father does not love him as much as his brother, leading him to leave home. Hong-gu is portrayed as a destitute drunkard who joins the army at the behest of his mother in order to make a better life for himself. Jeong-guk joins the army out of a sense of national pride and the urge to participate in the war, leaving the woman he loves, Suni, pregnant and alone at home despite her objections. Therefore many of the film's main characters are shown joining the front line out of either recklessness, alienation, a search for redemption, or the call of duty. As a

result, each main character is unique and varied in their presence in warfare, colouring the South Korean army as a force made up of individuals with their own goals, hopes, and dreams, and not as an unfeeling mass of like-minded killers. Therefore, when the film's third act begins and Deok-su, Jeong-guk, Yeong-seon, Hong-gu, and Ju-han depart on their mission to destroy the North Korean ammo dump and are shown to work together as a professional, cohesive military unit, the transition from civilian to soldier occurs solely through their engagement in combat. The instant the mission commences the flaws and humanity that defined each character is replaced with a level of bravery, ability and focus shared amongst the marines, similar to how Martin Baker argues that the average soldier can be absolved through combat in the infantry subgenre as discussed in Chapter 2 (2011).<sup>114</sup> These traits are prominently displayed during a lengthy sequence where the marines silently crawl across enemy lines, effectively disarming landmines and cutting through barbed wire fences. This action occurs without dialogue or a non-diegetic score, emphasising the tension and silence of their situation, allowing the skill and teamwork of the unit to be the sequence's central focus.

The switch from individual soldier to cohesive fighting force is further displayed during the climactic battle sequence that pits the five marines against dozens of North Korean soldiers. During this sequence each character is given a heroic moment to display their tenacity in battle. At separate points in the encounter Yeong-seon, Hong-gu and Jeong-guk each individually shoot numerous North Koreans (figure 27), Ju-han kills several enemy soldiers with two hand grenades and Deok-su single-handily destroys the North Korean command centre. Each soldier is given a moment that reveals their evolution from flawed civilian to model soldier, capable of carrying out complex military actions autonomously. At the conclusion of this battle only Jeong-guk remains alive, yet through their participation in this final mission, each character overcame their defined character flaws and, subsequently, found redemption in battle. Therefore due to the character trajectory of each of the marines, it is possible to interpret that the film's representation of the Korean War not only positions the members of the South Korean infantry as sympathetic individuals, but through their participation in warfare they

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<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, each character individually volunteered for the mission and is described by their Lieutenant Colonel as having 'true marine spirit'.

become stronger, nobler and better people (Baker, 2011). Consequently, this narrative occurrence, alongside the previously discussed elevation of the Korean War to a form of holy crusade, create symbolic links between the film and the socio-cultural context it was produced. Whilst the military were subject to much scrutiny during the 1950s and early 1960s, *Five Marines*' representation of this geopolitical conflict positions the film to be a form of propaganda due to its opposition to the South Korean citizen's popular stance towards their military at this time. Therefore, the film's narrative and formal content can be interpreted as an attempt to sway popular opinion back to some form of positivity. Consequently, the links that can be drawn between the film's socio cultural context and its narrative and formal evocation of *cinematic han* reveals a substantial divide between the film's content and the audience it was made for.



Figure 27: Screenshot from *Five Marines* (Dir. Kim Ki-duk, 1961)

### The socio-cultural context of the 1980s

As detailed in Chapters 2 and 3, the 1980s, through cultural events such as the Gwangju uprising and the 1987 June Struggle, were characterised as an internal civil war between the South Korean government and the South Korean citizens. Former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who served as president between 1998 and 2003 (Gittings, 2009), reveals the mindset of the *minjung* movement during this era, by stating they

were ready to ‘die in the name of democracy and for the sake of the Korean people’ (Kim, 2000, p. XIV). However, the South Korean government were as equally invested in maintaining the status quo, resulting in the aforementioned cultural conflicts. The divide between the South Korean government and the South Korean populace is best described by Kim Dae-jung, who states:

back in 1980 the Kwangju Movement was portrayed by the martial-law authorities as “rioting.” The citizens were condemned as rioters, rebels, and pro-communists. They deserved capital punishment by massacre, the generals in Seoul decided. The people of Kwangju were depicted by the press, under army censorship, as “hooligans.” Nothing was said of the actual motivation - to resist injustice. The truth was distorted by manipulation and censorship (2000, p. XV).<sup>115</sup>

Despite fighting for democracy, and the perceived betterment of Korean society, the South Korean government used their anti-communist rhetoric to label the *minjung* movement as a public enemy. Therefore, the political and cultural context of this time can only be described as an immovable object coming up against an unstoppable force, as neither side were willing to back down or submit to the will and desires of their opposition.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the ideological precepts of the FNW framed the depiction of the North Korean partisans in *Nambugun* as average, inexperienced citizens who rallied behind a strong core ideology which they believed would better Korean society. Additionally, through the evocation of *cinematic han*, the partisans were represented as an oppressed working class fighting back against a superior ruling class. As a result of this representation, the film contextualises the partisan struggle under a valiant lens. This depiction of the partisans creates symbolic links between the film and its socio-cultural context by aligning the partisans with the *minjung* movement. Aligned with the martyr-like devotion of the *minjung* revealed by Kim Dae-jung, the partisans also become a martyr-like group, fighting together to combat the much larger force denying them their desired future, often dying in its pursuit. In an echo to the film’s

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<sup>115</sup> Kwangju is the alternative spelling of Gwangju.

socio-cultural context, as previously established, this larger force is the South Korean military. As revealed through the film's representation of this geopolitical conflict the partisan force is shown to be comprised of normal people, unprepared for the conflict they have joined. Additionally, the partisans are witnessed to be ill-equipped (with broken and worn out equipment and uniforms), without shelter and, most significantly, lacking stable nutrition.<sup>116</sup> In one sequence Lee Tae is forced to eat flowers and tree bark for sustenance. Medical equipment is also sparse within the partisan units, with Park Min-ja being established to be the only medical officer in Lee Tae's platoon. The medical equipment Min-ja has to work with is limited to bandages and scalpels, with surgery often occurring in dirty houses on straw beds. In fact, Lee Tae leaves a wound unattended, presumably to preserve the platoon's dwindling medical supplies. Once injured, the wounded soldiers are still expected to perform chores. In one scene a soldier who has his arm in a sling carries a stack of wood up a hill as the rest of the partisans carry out their own work. Due to the lack of supplies and low numbers, every partisan has to push past severe injuries to keep the unit functioning. The partisans are shown to become irate at this lack of supplies, specifically in a scene where liquor is required to be used as anti-freeze. A partisan moans that he would rather drink the liquor, but is stopped by Lee Tae who states, 'liquor is poison to partisans'. However, in a later scene the desire for liquor becomes too much for the partisan, sharing the liquor amongst his comrades. This action leads the men to miss enemy movements, resulting in heavy casualties. Furthermore, the contextualisation of the partisans as volunteers furthers the links between the film's formal construction and its socio-cultural context. The partisans willingly leave their homes to endure injury, hunger and sickness for a cause they believe in. Likewise, during the 1980s, countless South Korean citizens left their homes to oppose their government, facing imprisonment, torture, and death to further their democratic agenda. Therefore, through the depiction of the partisan hardships a direct link can be drawn between the *minjung* movement and the partisan forces, specifically in their collective resolve in resisting the South Korean military and government.

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<sup>116</sup> One of the first operations the partisans partake in is an invasion of a village to find food. The partisans break into houses, taking food off of plates and out of pots, as confused villagers watch.

The symbolic connections between the partisans and the *minjung* deepens when analysing the narrative depiction of the humane treatment the North Koreans afforded Korean citizens during the conflict. In a battle sequence late in the film, the North Koreans are unable to breach a South Korean position. Their initial solution is to mortar the South Korean position located in a small town. However, before the bombing commences, the partisan leaders send a small group to evacuate the town to ensure only South Korean soldiers are killed in the bombing. The platoon leader, Kim Hui-suk, explicitly states to her team: ‘Be Careful! Don’t hurt civilians when you evacuate them’. Later when Hui-suk finds civilians hiding from the battle she kneels next to them and calmly says: ‘Hey, you guys, don’t be surprised. Hide yourself when shells fly overhead.’ Hui-suk is later rewarded with a medal for her actions during this battle. However, this humane treatment of the Korean civilians also results in violence amongst the partisan ranks. An hour into the film the partisan platoon commander, Hwang, rapes a South Korean civilian. Shortly after this act the woman bites off her tongue, killing herself. In response to this, Hwang is forced by his second-in-command to shoot himself in the head in front of the entire platoon as an act of contrition (figure 28). These two examples demonstrate the strong stance the partisans have towards the protection and treatment of the Korean civilians. As the partisan struggle is implied to be for the betterment of the Korean people, the lives of the civilians are placed above their own. This in turn further aligns the partisans with the *minjung*. The partisans fight for a cause they believe will benefit the lives of all Koreans, and through the visible protection of civilians and the punishment of those who harm them, the partisans cause is positioned to be morally good. Therefore, the narrative and formal construction of the partisans is reflective of how the *minjung* also believed they were fighting for the Korean people. Similar to how the *minjung* fought the South Korean government in order to install a democratic system on behalf of the South Korean citizens, in *Nambugun* the partisans fight the South Korean military in an effort to install what can be interpreted to be a communist system on behalf of all Koreans. Despite the system of government they were fighting for changing, both the partisans and *minjung* are symbolically linked through their common goals and motivations. Therefore, through the analysis of *Nambugun*’s representation of the Korean War, and how the ideological precepts of the

FNW that evoke *cinematic han* formally constructs their struggles, symbolic links can be drawn between the film and the socio-cultural context of its production.



Figure 28: Screenshot from *Nambugun* (Dir. Jeong Ji-yeong, 1990)

### The socio-cultural context of the 2000s and 2010s

As explored in Chapter 3, due to the implementation and subsequent removal of the Sunshine Policy during the 2000s and 2010s South Korea's anti-communist rhetoric began to dissolve (Choi, 2017, p. 299; Salmon, 2010). Instead, South Korea's popular perception of North Korea shifted to be one of sympathy, lamenting the suffering of the North Korean people under the nation's totalitarian rule.<sup>117</sup> As discussed earlier, the evocation of *cinematic han* in *The Front Line*'s formal construction under the ideological precepts of the SNW reflects this sympathetic stance. Under these precepts and aesthetic, the South and North Korean soldiers are aligned morally and ethically through the narrative elevation of their external agents to be each nation's respective military command structures. As a result, the representation of the Korean War is one where the South and North Korean infantry become unified under their shared disdain for combat, where the violence of the Korean War conflict did not come from the soldier's hatred for each other, but from the orders they were forced to follow.

<sup>117</sup> For texts that reflects this sympathetic perspective, see: Sweeney, 2013; Harden, 2015; Tudor, 2017.

Initially, the sympathetic representation of the North Korean infantry is framed through the perspective of the South Korean characters. For the first forty-five minutes, North Koreans are not given prominent screen time. As previously discussed, when the North Koreans are present during this time they are only shown in battle sequences as silhouettes with minimal dialogue. Consequently, this sympathetic stance is first introduced during one of Kang Eun-pyo's first dialogue exchanges that has him defending the North Korean soldiers to his superior officer. This officer affirms that the Northerners should be purged, admitting that the deaths of North Korean civilians are 'just collateral damage'. In response, Kang states: 'Most of those North Koreans are civilians who signed up for the food and water and were given guns. And you call them commies'. Immediately, there is an evident disconnect between the soldiers fighting the war and the superiors who dictate how the war is fought. However, through Kang's positioning as the primary protagonist, it is his assertions that are depicted as being correct, with his superior's notions coming across as cruel and short tempered. The film's formal construction reinforces Kang's humanitarian stance on the North Korean soldiers in the scene that follows, where he is given a letter by his superior that was posted in the South Korean military's postal service. The letter is from a young North Korean soldier to his mother, lamenting the battles he has fought in and how he has lost both friends and comrades to the war. The placement of these elements, namely the young soldier's letter and Kang's defence of the North Korean soldiers to his superior, in quick succession foreshadows the ideological unity of the North and South Korean characters. Before any North Korean is present on screen, *The Front Line* characterises them as poor, innocent, and most importantly, sympathetic.

This sympathetic characterisation is furthered when the character of master sergeant Yang Hyo-sam is introduced amongst the South Korean infantry. Hyo-sam is a warm and gentle man who is also North Korean. He laughs away this fact by stating he left the North twenty years prior to the war. Hyo-sam is a calming figure for Alligator Company and repeatedly recounts a story about his participation in the Korean independence movement during the Japanese Occupation. It is revealed that Hyo-sam has told this

story so many times his fellow soldiers can mime along with him as he talks.<sup>118</sup> Before the film's initial battle on Aerok Hill, he recounts this story again in order to break the tension. Through the repetition of this story, Hyo-sam keeps the unit's mood jovial despite the horrendous circumstances they find themselves in. Therefore through Kang's defence of the North Koreans, the soldier's letter and the character of Yang Hyo-sam, the North Korean infantry is contextualised not to be an unambiguous villain, but an opposing force made up of complex individuals that are as sympathetic as the South Koreans. Furthermore, the filtering of these elements through the perspective of Kang, whose humanitarian views towards the North are inherent to his character, implies that this perspective is likewise embedded within South Korean society.

After the film's initial forty-five minutes, shortly after the first battle sequence upon Aerok Hill, the sympathetic portrayal of the North Korean infantry evolves. Though still not present on screen, the North Korean characters begin to be characterised by the items they leave behind within the box they share with the South Koreans. The idea is raised several times that either side could have booby-trapped the box, but neither does. In fact, it was the North Korean soldiers who first extended a peace offering with a bottle of wine. Therefore, despite still not being seen on screen, *The Front Line* portrays the North Korean soldiers through a non-confrontational lens. This elicits the idea that at a human level, both sides of the conflict were averse to fighting each other. This notion is reinforced through the gradual reveal of the North Korean characters into the narrative after the box exchange has been introduced. North Korean soldiers begin to gain faces, personalities, and dialogue which act to further their connection with the South Korean soldiers. For example, late in the film when Two Seconds shoots the South Korean private Nam Seong-shik, Nam was holding a pair of goggles the North Koreans gifted specifically to him through the box exchange. Two Seconds sees the goggles and recognises Nam, causing her to momentarily hesitate. The scene where Nam is killed is the first time Two Seconds' face is seen. Prior to this scene, Two Seconds had only ever been referred to by name in hushed and fearful tones by the South Korean infantry.

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<sup>118</sup> Hyo-sam's character is defined by his pride of his actions during the Japanese Occupation, a time where Koreans across the Peninsula united in order to fight for liberation. The placement of a North Korean character amongst the South Korean infantry, whose main characteristic concerns the union of Koreans, is significant in the film's sympathetic portrayal of North Korea.

However, she was seen on screen once prior to her reveal, being confused by Kang as a civilian who lived near the hill. This occurrence is significant to the film's sympathetic stance towards the North Koreans. When not wearing her uniform, Kang does not know Two Seconds is fighting in the war and believes her to be a non-combatant. Therefore this implies that the only element that signals who either side is meant to fight, is not an ideology, but the literal uniform they wear. After Two Seconds' face is revealed, the civilian's identity is discovered to be of this revered sniper. Prior to her reveal, she was only ever referred to by the nickname the South Koreans gave her. However, after her face is revealed, her real name Cha Tae-kyeong, is also revealed via a photo she left in the box exchange. The act of Two Seconds' killing Nam marks the first time the film gave a North Korean character a name, a face and a personality. After this revelation, she returns to the North Korean base where numerous soldiers are visible, including two other soldiers who participated in the box exchange. In this instant, these soldiers are also given faces and dialogue, finally giving prominent screen time to the North Koreans over an hour into the film. Consequently, the plot device of the box exchange was used to humanise the North Koreans prior to their reveal on screen, allowing a sympathetic connection to be established between them and the South Koreans. As a result, due to the film's formal construction, by the time the North Koreans are granted prominence on screen the position they embody in the narrative has shifted away from being the film's oppressive, external agent to being a form of secondary protagonist.

Later in the film, the perspective shifts back to the North Korean soldiers after they have retaken the hill. In these scenes Two Seconds and her comrades open the gifts left to them by the Southern soldiers. During this scene, the North Koreans reflect the humanistic attitudes built for them throughout the first hour of the film. They get excited for the alcohol left to them by the South and read aloud letters from the Southern soldiers. In turn, the only discernible difference between the scenes of each infantry force's opening the box is the nationality of those present. During this scene, the Northern soldiers converse, during which the following statement is made:

North Korean Captain: 'I bet they're sick of this war.'

North Korean soldier: 'So are we. Why are we fighting, then?'

This exchange acknowledges that the Southern and Northern infantry harbor no hate towards each other and are equally averse to the war. This lamentation is evident in a later scene where the South Korean and North Korean infantry accidentally cross paths after the war ending armistice has been signed. Both sides reach for their weapons instinctively, but instead of shooting, the Southern soldiers begin waving and yelling ‘Goodbye, you fought well’. The Northern Captain smiles and says ‘I guess it’s really over’, before instructing his men to leave. In this moment the North and South Koreans are harmonised. Instead of fighting, they light heartedly complement each other’s prowess in battle. As the war is thought to be over in this moment, there is no reason for either side to antagonise the other. However, after this scene the South Korean and North Korean military high commands complete their evolution into the film’s oppressive, external agents by forcing both infantries to fight a final battle to determine the ownership of Aerok Hill. Before the battle commences, the entirety of the North Korean infantry begin to sing a song they learnt from lyrics Nam Seong-shik left in the box. Upon hearing this, the South Korean infantry joins in. The lyrics to this song are:

Into the night at the front line. Falling down silently, dew is so cold. Not able to sleep. Tossing and turning, I heard my mum’s voice telling me the ways of a man. Don’t I miss her voice. Heard from a distance. A loud gunshot, like a lullaby. Takes me home in my dream. My home. My sweet home. Before a bowl of water Mum prays for my safety. Her shining grey hair brings tears to my eyes.

The song’s lyrics, as well as the simultaneous singing of it by the South and North Korean infantry, reveals that the soldiers of both sides long for home and have loved ones wishing for their safe return. Due to these lyrics, and the unity displayed by the North and South Korean infantry during this scene, both sides become intertwined, demonstrating that there is no overt difference between either sides; both are as human, and as deep and complex as each other. Through this song, the infantry forces of both nations are unified in their resilience of their external agent, specifically their strength under the oppression of their military high command. As a result, *cinematic han*’s element of hope is evoked. Therefore, through the sympathetic and humanistic stance established via *The Front Line*’s formal construction under the ideological precepts of

the SNW that evoke *cinematic han*, symbolic links can be drawn between the film and the socio-cultural context of its production. Specifically, due to the occurrence of the Sunshine Policy, the North Korean people were no longer deemed as communist threats, but complex individuals that shared the same ethical and moral ideology as the South Koreans.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three key areas regarding the South Korean historical film and *cinematic han*. Firstly, the ideological precepts of the Golden Age, the FNW and the SNW reframe the Korean War under three different conceptual lens. *Five Marines'* (1961) anti-communist agenda recontextualises the Korean War into a holy crusade through which every South Korean soldier is canonised and martyred through their participation in battle. *Nambugun's* (1990) *minjung* perspective portrays the North Korean partisans as an inferior force in comparison to the superior South Korean military and demonstrates how the partisans lose their humanity in their struggle against oppression. Finally, *The Front Line's* (2011) focus upon irony, spectacle and violence renders the Korean War as inconsequential and unifies the South Korean and North Korean infantries through its depictions of blood and gore. Despite these differing approaches, each film still evokes the narrative tropes of *cinematic han*. Secondly, through an examination of each film's mise en scene, *cinematic han* is evoked through their background performances, colour palettes, locations and costumes.

Finally, this chapter has demonstrated that via the evocation of *cinematic han* by the ideological precepts of the respective cinematic period a film was produced, symbolic links between the South Korean historical film genre and each film's socio-cultural context can be drawn. The evocation of *cinematic han* in *Five Marines* creates symbolic links to the dispute between the South Korean public and their military during the 1960s, specifically in the conflict between the National Bereaved Family Association of the Massacred and the Park Chung-hee government. These links are drawn through the narrative and formal depiction of the titular five marines as flawed individuals who are redeemed by their participation, and sacrifice, in battle. *Nambugun's* evocation of

*cinematic han* creates symbolic links between the contention of the *minjung* movement and the South Korean government in the 1980s via its portrayal of the sacrifices the partisans' make to fight oppression, as well as their humane treatment of the Korean citizenry. Finally, *The Front Line*'s evocation of *cinematic han* creates symbolic links to the South Korean government's Sunshine Policy through its humanistic and sympathetic depiction of North Korea, as well as the ethical, moral and ideological unification of the South Korean and North Korean infantries. Therefore, the representation of the Korean infantry in the Korean War in the South Korean films *Five Marines*, *Nambugun* and *The Front Line* contain simultaneous allusions to the historical past and present of Korea, enhancing the historical knowledge of the South Korean historical film's representation of this geopolitical conflict.

## General Conclusion

The historical discourse will always be affected by the understandings and biases of the historian. More significantly, it will always be influenced by the fictional, dramatic and narrative devices that are used to tell stories of the past. The historical film is one such medium where fictional elements and historical information become intertwined and at times indistinguishable from one another. Yet while the fictional elements of the historical film discourse can appear as antithetical to an idealist understanding of history as an unbiased account of the actions of people, fiction, in fact, makes the narration of the past emotive and experiential. Fiction, far from invalidating the historical knowledge contained in a historical film, enhances it. The historical films of South Korea are a key example where this enhancement of the historical knowledge via fictional strategies and dramatic narratives takes place, proving to be a complex and highly structured, considered, and political representation of the past. The symbolic links these films make to the socio-cultural context of their production, transforms their historical representations from static visions of long dead civilisations to become emotional and affective films. Therefore, reminiscent of the mythical figure of Janus, the South Korean historical film considers both the past and the present through its fictional, dramatic and narrative devices.

As a result of the theory and analysis of South Korean cinema presented within this thesis, the South Korean historical film is proven to be an intricate, multi-faceted genre, which combines elements of the historical film genre and the war film genre to develop narrative and formal representations of the past that are unique to this nation. However, this is not due to the representation of specific historical geopolitical conflict, such as the Japanese Occupation of Korea and the Korean War, but through the South Korean historical film genre's unique aesthetic that this thesis has identified as *cinematic han*. This thesis analysed eight South Korean historical films: *Nameless Stars* (Lee & Kim, 1959), *The Sea Knows* (Kim & Kim, 1961), *Five Marines* (Cha & Kim, 1961), *General's Son* (Lee & Im, 1990), *Nambugun* (Jeong & Jeong, 1990), *The Front Line* (Jeong et al., 2011), *Assassination* (Shen & Choi, 2015) and *Spirits' Homecoming* (Cho, Lee & Cho, 2016), with each demonstrating a uniquely Korean approach to historical

representation that permeated throughout all of South Korean cinema after the formal division of Korea into the northern and southern sovereign nations in 1948. Through two narrative tropes and four elements of mise en scène, *cinematic han* is demonstrated to create a consistent historical narrative where the Korean characters are held in a metaphorical prison by an oppressive, external agent. Who these agents are and how their oppression manifests is dictated by the ideological precepts of the cinematic period in which the film was created, which in this thesis were named as the Golden Age of Korean cinema, the First Korean New Wave and the Second Korean New Wave. The ideological precepts for these cinematic periods have been reiterated throughout the chapters to be respectively an anti-communist agenda, a *minjung* perspective, or an increased focus on spectacle, irony and violence. Through the analysis of the evocation of *cinematic han* in each film's narrative and formal construction under the ideological precepts of its respective cinematic period, the thesis has shown that *cinematic han* enables the production of historical knowledge of this nation's geopolitical conflict in the twentieth century by identifying symbolic links between the cinematic text and the socio-cultural context of its production. *Cinematic han* is a diverse aesthetic that adapts to both the cinematic period in which the film was produced and the geopolitical conflict the film depicts.

While this thesis has demonstrated *cinematic han*'s various manifestations in South Korean films produced after 1950 that depict twentieth century geopolitical conflict, the analysis of a wider filmographic corpus, for example, South Korean films produced prior to 1948 and those that depict geopolitical conflict prior to the twentieth century, would be a unique opportunity to further interrogate *cinematic han*.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview with Lee Joon-ik (English translation)**

The following interview with South Korean film director Lee Joon-ik was conducted in the form of a written questionnaire via email on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

#### *1. Why was it important to you to set this story in the Japanese Colonial period?*

72 years have passed since the Japanese colonial era and the Korean society still hasn't managed to fully get over the history. This is because the Japan's nationalist stance to justify their wrongdoings in the past and to cloak the truth.

Europe could develop their transnational ideologies through EU based on their regrets for Nazi Germany, from which they could overcome the dreadful history.

Making films about the Japanese colonial era, I hope that Asian audience could feel a sense of historical interconnectivity between Korea, Japan, China and East Asia. A peaceful future can be achieved through a reflection of the past.

#### *2. What was it more important for you as the director of Dongju: The Portrait of A Poet: the story you wanted to tell or how historically accurate your film was?*

Based on the historical research, I wanted to show the perspectives of *Dongju* and *Mongyu*. Through the character of *Dongju*, I portrayed a young man who confronts the violence of Japanese imperialism in a peaceful way, as well as the courage that never submit to unjust authority through the character of *Mongyu*.

#### *3. Would it possible to tell the same story set in a different historical period?*

People's life is not much different even in a different era. Especially the nature of human society is replicated over time. That's why we see an existence of same kind of stories in difference eras.

*4. How much historical research did you do before starting the design and scripting of your film?*

It depends on films but I mostly rely on related books when it comes to the research, and I normally read about ten historical books for reference. The research itself is to maintain a factual part of historical characters and events and then creativity comes into the daily lives and emotions of the characters.

*5. Were you influenced by other films that depicted the same historical event?*

I rarely get influenced by other films.

*6. How did you direct your extras, for example, those playing soldiers in encampments and civilians on the street?*

Most of the times, an assistant director and designated director for the cast take the responsibility.

*7. Were there any obstacles in gaining funding for *Dongju: The Portrait of A Poet*?*

It wasn't hard to attract investment. The investors were ok with a bigger production budget, but I refused. *Dongju* wasn't a commercial film so my aim was just not to make it a total failure.

*8. What was the highest budgeted scene amongst all of your historical films?*

I can't recall a particular scene, but *Sunny* (2008) was the most expensive one.

*9. Why do you believe the story of Yoon Dongju is important to be told?*

People love the poems of *Yoon Dongju*, but hardly know of his lives and death. That's why I had to make his story into a film. Without knowing about the time when the poet went through, the affection of his works only means that you love yourself being in love with the poems.

*10. Is there a reason that you shot the film in black and white?*

A portrait of *Dongju* that we see from a textbook is all black and white. If I had made it with colours, it would mean that I bring him into the present, but the black and white allows a feeling of us being transported back in the time when he lived.

*11. As a historical film director, what does the historical film mean to you?*

A modern society witnesses a bigger gap and difference between the generations as people live a longer life. Having the different generations living in the same era watch a historical film together, I believe that it can help promote intergenerational understanding and communication.

*12. Do you wish to work on another piece about the era under Japanese Occupation? If so, do you have any particular area of interest?*

There are a lot of things that I want to work on but situations don't allow.

I want to make a film about a figure of the *Joseon* dynasty who worked for the Chinese communist party as well as in Moscow during the Japanese ruling era.

*13. How do you communicate with your main actors/actresses and what do you, as a director, think is the most important part when it comes to communicating with them?*

I give all actors/actresses as much freedom as possible.

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## Appendix 2

### Interview with Lee Joon-ik (Korean original)

#### 1. 실제 강점기 시대의 이야기가 감독에게 중요한 이유?

일제강점기가 지난지 72년이 됐는데 아직 한국사회에서는 그 시기를 역사적으로 정리해 내지 못하고 있다. 이는 가해국인 일본이 사실을 은폐하고 자신들의 행위를 정당화하려는 일본 국수주의 태도 때문이다.

유럽이 EU를 통해 탈 국가적인 이념을 키워나가는 힘은 나치독일의 반성을 기반으로 역사적 정리가 되었기 때문에 가능했다고 본다.

일제 강점기를 다루는 영화를 통해서 아시아의 관객들이 한국과 일본, 중국과 동남아시아가 역사공동체로 서로 묶여있다는 공감을 가져야 한다.

미래의 평화는 과거의 반성을 통해서 만들어지는 것이다.

#### 2. 영화 동주에서 중점을 두었던 부분이 어떤 이야기를 하고자였나? 아니면 역사적 고증을 맞추는 부분이었나?

고증을 바탕으로 윤동주와 송몽규의 가치관을 보여주는 것이다. 동주라는 시인을 통해서 일본제국주의 폭력 앞에 평화적인 방식으로 시대와 맞서는 젊은이를 그린 것이고

동규를 통해서 부당한 권력에 굴복하지 않는 젊은이의 용기를 그린 것이다.

### 3. 같은 이야기를 다른 시대에서 할 수 있나?

시대는 달라도 인간의 삶은 다르지 않다.

특히 인간집단의 속성은 시대를 막론하고 복제 되는 것이다.

그래서 어느 시대에나 같은 이야기가 존재하는 것이다.

### 4. 시대극을 연출함에 있어 역사적 고증이 감독에게 중요한 이유와 고증으로 인한 창작력의 침해를 어떻게 극복하는가?

영화마다 다르지만 대부분 관련 서적에 의존하므로 해당 이야기의 역사관련 서적 10여권 정도 참고한다.

고증의 영역은 실존 인물의 등장과 사건의 사실성을 지키는 것이고

창작의 영역은 인물의 일상과 감정들이다.

### 5. 혹시 본인의 연출한 작품 중 동일한 시대를 그린 다른 영화로부터 영향을 받았나? 받았으면 어떤 영화인가?

영향을 안 받는 편이다.

6. 시대극을 연출 할에 있어 감독으로써 가장 중요한 것은 무엇인가?

그리고 왜 중요하다고 생각하는가?

대부분 조감독과 엑스트라 전문 디렉터가 연출 진행한다.

7. 동주는 저예산 영화로 알고 있다. 동주를 저예산 영화로 만든 이유는

무엇인가?

투자받는데 어렵지 않았다. 오히려 투자사에서 예산을 더 키워도

된다 했지만

내가 반대했다. 동주는 상업영화가 아니기 때문에 망하지 않는게

목표였다.

8. 연출한 작품 중 (시대극 중) 가장 비싸게 찍은 장면은?

장면은 기억이 안 난다.

'님은 먼곳에'가 가장 비싸게 찍은 작품이다.

9. 감독으로써 동주가 이 시대에 어떤 영화로 기억되기를 바란다?

한국 사람들은 윤동주의 시를 사랑하지만 윤동주의 삶과 죽음에 대해서는 잘

알지 못한다. 그래서 영화로 찍었다.

시인이 살았던 시대를 모르고 시인의 시를 사랑한다는 것은 그 시를

사랑하는 자신의 마음을 사랑하는 것에 불과하기 때문이다.

10. 동주를 흑백으로 찍은 이유는?

교과서에 실려 있는 동주의 사진은 흑백이다.

컬러로 찍으면 동주를 현재로 불러오는 것이지만

흑백으로 찍으면 우리가 동주에게 다가가는 느낌이 들 것이기 때

문이다.

11. 시대극을 연출 하는 감독으로써 시대극은 감독에게 어떤 의미가  
있나?

현대사회는 인간의 수명이 늘어나면서 세대간의 격차나 갈등이 더욱  
커져간다.

동시대에 다른 세대들이 같은 시대극을 같이 봄으로서 세대간의 이해와  
소통에 도움이 된다고 생각한다.

12. 있다면 어떤 작품에 대한 흥미를 가지고 있는가?  
하고 싶은 건 많지만 여건이 어렵다.

일제 강점기에 중국공산당과 러시아 모스크바에서 활동했던 조선 인을  
영화로 만들고 싶다.

13. 주연배우와 어떤식의 소통을 하고 주연배우와 소통함에 감독으로써  
가장중요하게 생각하는 부분은 무엇인가?

나는 모든 배우에게 무한한 자유를 준다.

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## Filmography

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