

Disrupting Heritage Cinema: The Historical Films of South Korea

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the revival of historical filmmaking in South Korean cinema. While the success of the domestic film industry over the past twenty years has been considered a second renaissance for Korean cinema, there has been little detailed engagement with the full diversity of films that have been made. Particularly, this thesis looks at the way this renaissance has seen a rediscovery of the Korean period drama. Known as *sageuk* in Korean, the genre has seen an unprecedented boom since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In my analysis, I draw out parallels between recent *sageuk* productions and the so-called 'heritage film'. My project aims to disrupt established ideas of heritage cinema, for instance cultural anxieties and the construction of a national identity, by examining recent shifts and hybridisation of the historical genre in South Korean film. I focus on the postmodern representation of a premodern past and explore issues of authenticity and nostalgia in the depiction of the *Joseon* period (1392-1897).

The introduction provides the contextual basis for my research. Here I explore the history of the genre in conjunction within the context of Korean cinema. In the chapters that follow, I explore the recent development of the *sageuk* genre through close analysis of four successful and influential period films released between 2003 and 2014: *Untold Scandal*, *Jeon Woo Chi*, *Masquerade*, and *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*. My analysis looks at the changes to generic conventions and the impact of the Korean blockbuster phenomenon on the nation's historical representation. In so doing, I show how the contemporary form has been shaped by Korea's experience of the twentieth century, the changing use of traditional culture in neoliberal society, and the influence of global cinematic developments.

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A Note on Korean Names and Resources

This thesis is presented using MHRA style for the footnote referencing and the bibliography.

Throughout the thesis, 'Korea' is used to refer to South Korea or The Republic of Korea, unless stated otherwise.

Korean terms are presented according to the Revised Romanisation of Korean (RR), the preferred system of romanisation in South Korea since its adoption in 2000. Due to the number of romanisation systems in common use, aberrations contribute to a wide variety of English spelling available for Korean words. I have transcribed some terms to follow the RR system for consistency, and as such any errors made are my own.

Korean names are written with the family name first and given name second, unhyphenated. Exceptions regarding name order and spacing are made when referring to royalty, as is customary with Korean temple names (eg. King Seonjo), and for people who have been credited with preferred stylisations (eg. Jinhee Choi, instead of Choi Jin Hee). Romanisation of names varies, as despite the official romanisation systems in place, the transcription of personal names is generally down to individual preference (eg. E J Yong, instead of Lee Jae Yong).

All films are referred to by their English titles. Exceptions are made for films that are referred to in English with their original untranslated Korean title (eg. *Swiri* and *Chihwaseon*). Since the translation of titles sometimes varies, I use the Korean Film Archive's Korean Movie Database as my source for preferred titles.

INTRODUCTION

In the late fifteen century, two acrobatic clowns perform farcical skits about their tyrannical king, earning them fame amongst society aristocrats. Soon they perform in front of the king himself, who obsesses over one of the clowns, turning him into an object of fascination in the royal court. In 1616, a controversial king is suddenly taken ill from a suspected poisoning. Instead of letting the court fall into chaos, an identical body double is hired to secretly take his place until he recovers, only to discover the replacement is a better ruler than the real monarch. In 1597, naval attacks between Korean and Japanese forces result in an uneven standoff. Led by a courageous but weary commander, the depleted Korean fleet enters a battle against hundreds of Japanese ships.

These descriptions are taken from three of the most successful Korean films of all time: *King and the Clown* (Lee Joon Ik, 2005), *Masquerade* (Choo Chang Min, 2012), and *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (Kim Han Min, 2014) all three of which are productions set within Korea's *Joseon* era of 1392 to 1897.¹ *King and the Clown* was a domestic and Asia-wide phenomenon, and for two years was the most successful film at the Korean box office. It is remembered as a key film in the resurgence of the domestic film industry in the early 2000s and demonstrates a continuing shift in the cinematic depiction of, and relationship with, Korean tradition. *Masquerade* was the product of several changes in the Korean film industry, achieving commercial success whilst also winning praise for its artistic value. The film has been praised for its ambitious scale, accomplished acting, and its star quality.² *The Admiral's* release in the summer of 2014 broke numerous records, including

¹ In my thesis and arguments, I refer to *Joseon* as the dynasty that lasted from 1392-1879. Governed by the House of Yi, the family continued to rule during the period of the Korean Empire (1894-1910), which some observers include in their discussions of *Joseon*. However, I restrict the term to refer to the Confucian monarchy.

² Darcy Paquet, 'Box Office, September 1-15' (Seoul: Korean Film Biz Zone, 2012)
<<http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/jsp/news/reports.jsp?blbdComCd=601008&seq=235&mode=VIEW>>
[accessed 9 December 2016]

becoming the first film to gross over US\$100 million at the domestic box office, the quickest film to gain ten million admissions, and the highest number of admissions in a single day (1.25 million tickets sold).³ *The Admiral* finished its theatrical run having achieved 17,607,820 admissions, becoming by far the most successful film at the Korean box office.

These three films not only marked a new phase of domestic success for the film industry, they also marked a new phase in the Korean historical genre known as *sageuk*. Derived from the words *yeoksa* (history) and *geuk* (drama), *sageuk* is a generic classification used to refer to works of cinema, television or theatre that are set in the past. As will be discussed later, the period of history that *sageuk* includes is under debate. The recent cinematic boom in the genre, following the success of an earlier historical drama, 2003's *Untold Scandal* (E J Yong), has ushered in the innovative use of *Joseon*'s traditions and heritage. Through the inclusion of previously marginalised areas of history such as the representation of homosexuality and the experiences of the slave class (*nobi*) in society, and by embracing the increasing presence of digital cinema technology, *sageuk* has developed into a genre that promotes both the high-concept blockbuster form and spectacle-driven period pieces. But while the *sageuk* genre is one of the most popular and profitable in commercial Korean cinema and has changed significantly over the past fifteen years, the genre has received very little critical attention from Western scholarship. Kyung Hyun Kim, Hyangjin Lee, and Yun Mi Hwang have written on the emergent success of *sageuk* but take a largely industrial perspective, each analysing how the films were marketed or financed. I engage with *sageuk* films using the same critical scrutiny that other mainstream Korean genre productions are afforded. My objective is to ask what makes these films so popular and why stories based on Korean heritage and tradition are

³ See, Pierce Conran, 'Records Fall in Colossal *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* Debut' (Seoul: Korean Film Biz Zone, 2014) <<http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/jsp/news/news.jsp?mode=VIEW&seq=3121>> [accessed 9 December 2016]

appealing to a modern and increasingly Westernised audience. I particularly want to focus on the contemporary Korean *sageuk* form to investigate the changes to the genre since the turn of the century and ask why these changes have happened now, taking into account the social and industrial developments of twentieth century Korea. Through my textual analysis of the four films released between 2003 and 2014, I explore how the beginning of the twenty-first century enabled a new reinterpretation of *sageuk* tradition in Korean cinema, which progressed to become a record-breaking, blockbuster genre. In this study, I engage with what I refer to as 'new *sageuk*' to consider how it employs cultural heritage, history, and tradition, and how the form can be seen to problematise the Western/Eurocentric concept of the heritage film. In relation to the shift in the conventions of the genre, my research raises questions about the position of *sageuk* film in Korean popular culture. What is significant about the predominant use of the *Joseon* era as a setting for new *sageuk* narratives over other historical eras? What does the popularity of films depicting Korean tradition suggest about modern society's relationship with the past? Why do contemporary *sageuk* films so frequently manipulate and reshape the past? How has Korea's twentieth century experiences of trauma and victimisation affected the representation of its *Joseon* heritage?

Scholarship surrounding South Korean cinema is growing. However, it is still often examined in contrast to other East Asian cinemas, especially those of Japan and China. The films analysed in these discussions are generally festival favourites, such as the work of Park Chan Wook, Lee Chang Dong, Hong Sang Soo, and Kim Ki Duk. The writing surrounding their films is often focused on the Western notion of 'Asian Extreme' cinema and their transgressive appeal. In recent years, publications have begun to emerge that engage with Korean cinema with increasing diversity, taking into consideration more varied areas of production. Following the growing popularity and development of Korea's national cinema, both domestically and internationally, scholarship has begun to consider genres such as the

action blockbuster, melodramas, teen films, comedies, and to an extent, Korea's very small queer cinema. An edited volume of essays, *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, takes a broad look at the state of these genres in Korea's twenty-first century film culture, and Jinhee Choi's *The South Korean Film Renaissance* investigates the effect of globalisation on the Korean film industry, covering a number of popular genres and questioning how the changes in the national economy have created Korean modern commercial cinema.⁴ Studies on the *sageuk* form have brief sections in the essay collection *Korean Horror Cinema*, Kyung Hyun Kim's *Virtual Hallyu*, and Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient's *Movie Migrations*.

In Kim's short discussion on what he dubs the 'renaissance of *sageuk*', he highlights several important aspects that he considers underline contemporary historical blockbusters: 'the themes of forgetting preferred to remembrance, the postmodern fascination with amnesia, and the superficiality of a pure object that flattens every traumatic bit of history'.⁵ These are important aspects that I will consider in my analysis of each text. The notion of the blockbuster in Korean filmmaking is itself an area I discuss in each chapter, specifically exploring how big-budget historical productions have become the prominent form for *sageuk* film releases over the past decade. Kim Soyoung defines the South Korean blockbuster as 'a compromise between foreign forms and local materials, a compromise itself often staged on a grand scale [...] backed by the Korean nation-state and its national culture, the South Korean blockbuster presents itself as the cultural difference opposing the homogenising tendencies of Hollywood'.⁶ Originally speaking in 2003, her

⁴ See, *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema* ed. by Frances Gateward (Albany: University of New York State Press, 2007), Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

⁵ Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 211.

⁶ Kim Soyoung 'The birth of the local feminist sphere in the global era: 'Trans-cinema' and *Yosongjang*', in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* ed. by Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 490-504 (p. 491).

assertions regarding the Korean blockbuster came shortly after the release of the groundbreaking action thriller *Swiri* (Kang Je Gyu, 1999). Visually imitative of American and Hong Kong action cinema of the 1980s, *Swiri* is set apart since it deals with the unique cultural issue of reunification with North Korea. At the time, the film broke attendance records for both domestic and international productions, bringing in nearly six million viewers. Since the millennium, blockbusters have become staple releases. In my thesis, I investigate how an increasing number of *sageuk* films have adopted this blockbuster style, and how traditional culture and heritage is utilised in this specific context.

One of my key propositions in this thesis is that recent *sageuk* films can be treated as commentaries on modern Korea's social, economic, and cultural issues, as much as contemporary-based films can. While this type of commentary is commonplace for Western heritage film, and to an extent for other Korean genres such as horror and the melodrama tradition, *sageuk* has rarely been associated with this kind of analysis. Yun Mi Hwang's 2011 doctoral thesis on Korea's historical film is currently the most prominent English-language investigation into *sageuk*. Her analysis focuses on two main lines of enquiry: mapping the evolution of generic conventions and new subgenres in contemporary *sageuk*, and linking the boom in historical representation to the wider heritage industry and consumer trends.⁷ Though our theses share similar lines of investigation into the rise of *sageuk*'s popularity and its showcasing of Korea's heritage, our discussions should be seen as complementary. The fact that our works share similar research areas proves that we have both recognised a neglected but fruitful area of scholarship. My thesis ultimately extends beyond that of Hwang's, which only goes as far as the 2010 *sageuk* release *The Servant* (Kim Dae Woo). As such, my intervention explores how *sageuk* has developed into the 2010s. In more recent years, two new papers have

⁷ See, Yun Mi Hwang, 'South Korean Historical Drama: History, Heritage and Cultural Industry', Unpublished PhD thesis, (University of St Andrews, 2011).

offered further observations of Korea's contemporary historical representation that I also find to be complementary to my study. Hyunseon Lee's essay introduces her ongoing research into Korean blockbusters that depict the nation's past. While her work focuses on films that depict twentieth-century history, and largely those that re-enact the history of the Korean war (1950-1953), she makes key observations concerning the ways in which the Korean blockbuster historicises national trauma and acts as an archive for collective memories.⁸ Similarly, Saena Dozier offers up an analysis into post-2000s *sageuk* by approaching the form in conjunction with nostalgia and the melodrama tradition. As discussed in my thesis, she also questions why the *Joseon* period has become the mainstay of *sageuk*'s historical representation and explores how nostalgia can be related to the premodern past.⁹

The rise in critical enquiry drawing attention to the same *sageuk* trend that my thesis explores shows that this is an emergent area of study and one that would only benefit from the multiplicity of scholarship. Drawing back to my objectives with this research, I propose that *sageuk*'s historical representation and reconstruction should be analysed in a similar manner to that of other areas of popular Korean cinema. In her essay on Park Chan Wook's ultraviolent *Vengeance Trilogy* (*Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, 2002, *Oldboy*, 2003, *Lady Vengeance*, 2005) Lee Eunah argues that these films have been sensationalised and categorised as a cultish Other in Western/Global spectatorship. In contrast, she maintains that these films are complex products of the otherwise unrepresentable traumas of Korea's modernity process. She writes, '*The Vengeance Trilogy* emerged out of, and transmitted, the anxiety and fear experienced by the South Korean populace in the late nineties, as a result of its encountering another national trauma

⁸ See, HyunSeon Lee, 'The South Korean Blockbuster and a Divided Nation', *International Journal of Korean History* 21.1 (February, 2016) 259-264.

⁹ See, Saena Dozier, 'Coming Home: Finding Our Space of Innocence Through Sagŭk Films', *International Journal of Korean History* 22.2 (August, 2017) 189-198.

brought about by the Asian financial crisis. These circumstances are imbricated, through extreme aesthetics, with the deep-rooted national trauma of having been repressed by the ideologies of modern nation-building'.¹⁰ I argue that the same traumas are played out through new *sageuk*, and I ask how the representation of a premodern past is influenced by postmodern hardships of economic crises and processes of nation-building.

The use of 'heritage cinema' in my thesis refers to the critical term originally used to discuss a trend of British productions in the 1980s and 1990s that depicted a nostalgic and romanticised view of the nation's past. Since its conception, heritage film criticism has expanded from its original British borders and into European productions, causing the debate to be conducted within a Eurocentric framework. Only recently have scholars begun to consider how heritage is being used in non-Western national cinemas. Writings by May Adadol Ingawanji on Thai heritage cinema, and Mai Kato's examination of the Japanese period drama genre, known as *jidaigeki*, as a heritage form, both draw on canonised discourse within heritage film studies and apply it to Asian national cinemas.¹¹ Despite this internationalisation, the majority of the debate still focuses on Western countries, moreover countries with a heritage of colonisation and exploitation. I intend to expand the heritage film debate to South Korean cinema, to consider whether the nation's heritage of victimisation and post-colonial nation-building alters the way tradition and the past is related to and reconstructed on screen.

Heritage film is characterised by a preoccupation with cultural anxieties, for instance the politics surrounding colonialism and national identities, all the while celebrating the past and rarely offering up critique. A nation's heritage and tradition are

¹⁰ See, Lee Eunah, 'Trauma, Excess, and the Aesthetics of Affect: The Extreme Cinemas of Chan-Wook Park', *Post Script – Essays in the Arts and the Humanities* 34.1 (Fall, 2014) 33-49.

¹¹ See, May Adadol Ingawanji, 'Nang Nak: Thai Bourgeois Heritage Cinema', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8.2 (2007) 180-193, Mai Kato, 'Exploring the Japanese Heritage Film', *Cinema Studies* 1 (2006) 21-49.

intensified through a focus on the visual, such as the fetishised presentation of landscapes, costumes, architecture, and food. Kara McKechnie comments on the maligned status of heritage films that some historians and critics argue are shallow and conservative. She explains how 'in allowing the viewer to escape into the past with the help of pleasing, idealised visual evocations, heritage films have been accused of providing not much more than a distraction, [that they] serve as "conservative escapism", and encourage historical "dumbing down" by placing too much emphasis on the visual'.¹² This notion of heritage as 'conservative' reconstruction and spectatorship of the past is an aspect I consider through a contextual reading in my thesis and throughout each chapter, while also interrogating the problematic nature of applying universal ideas across national cinemas. In line with McKechnie's observations, John Urry lists several aspects he sees as key in heritage productions. The following observations are ones I consider most relevant to my research objectives: 'the attractive representation of the past through a heritage-look suitable for visual consumption, the interpretation of the past through an artefactual history which partly obscures the social relations and styles which underlay the past, the belief that the past is to be understood through pastiched images and stereotypes which convert the past into simple narratives and spectacles'.¹³ As per my thesis' title, 'disrupting heritage cinema', I intend to break down not only the content of new *sageuk* productions and the social, historical, and political contextual elements behind them, but also to critique the current view of heritage film theory as sustaining a predominantly imperialistic perspective.

An important aspect to address before continuing my introductory chapter is the potentially problematic nature of cross-cultural analysis. My aim to reconsider the

¹² Kara McKechnie, 'Mrs Brown's Mourning and Mr King's Madness: Royal Crisis on Screen', in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction* ed. by Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001), pp. 102-119 (p. 110).

¹³ John Urry, 'How Societies Remember the Past', in *Theorising Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World* ed. by Sharon MacDonald and Gordon Fyfe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), pp. 45-65 (p. 52).

established Eurocentric discourse of heritage film by discussing it in conjunction with Korean cinema could be seen to have some ideological implications. Paul Willemen argues that the imposition of Euro-American film theory and scholarship on non-Western film cultures is potentially dangerous to the cultural specificity that is integral to national cinemas. He states:

If we accept that national boundaries have a significant structuring impact on national sociocultural formations, this has to be accounted for in the way we approach and deal with cultural practices from 'elsewhere'. Otherwise, reading a Japanese film from within a British film studies framework may in fact be more like a cultural cross-border raid or, worse, an attempt to annex another culture in a subordinate position by requiring it to conform to the raider's cultural practices.¹⁴

In contrast to his idea that applying a nationally specific theory across cultural borders is a problematic method, I intend to show how it can be regarded as a constructive form of film criticism. In my analysis, I show how the Eurocentric discourse itself can be problematised by seeing what issues arise when applying it to a contrasting national context. Later in this introduction, I discuss aspects of colonialism, compressed modernity, and film industry developments that provide a nationally specific context to my discussion of heritage commodification and 'authentic' representations of the past.

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, in his essay on the position of Japanese film studies, laments that the discipline has become marginalised throughout the development of broader film studies, and exoticised through Western approaches to Japanese national cinema. While he gives clear examples of scholarly work from the 1960s and 1970s that marginalise and orientalise Japanese cinema, Yoshimoto fails to give examples when arguing that this same attitude continues in modern criticism. Nonetheless, he comments that 'the disciplinary structure of Film Studies demands for the concept of national cinemas as part of its

¹⁴ Paul Willemen, 'The National', in *Field of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography* ed. by Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (London: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 21-34 (p. 26).

strategy of containment'.¹⁵ He, like Willemen, believes that studies of national cinemas need to be undertaken carefully, in order not to impose Western theoretical paradigms onto culturally specific practices of non-Western cinemas, which is a perspective I take on board during my analysis. The difference, though, with Korean film studies is that the national cinema has not gained attention from international scholarship until recently. Japanese cinema has been part of film studies since the 1960s, with Yoshimoto citing *The Japanese Film: Art and History* (Joseph L. Anderson, Donald Richie, 1960) as a significant work that confirmed Japanese cinema's position early in Western film scholarship. It was not until the late 1980s that Korean cinema was recognised. *The History of Korean Cinema* (Lee Young Il, Choe Young Chol), published in 1988, is a classic work of Korean film analysis that was translated into English. It was not until the turn of the century that the amount of English language Korean film scholarship increased. Because of this delay, Yoshimoto's argument concerning the imposition of Western academia onto Japanese film criticism cannot be made in the same way for Korean film criticism. The argument instead should be about the lack of variety in this scholarship, for instance, the lack of writings on *sageuk* productions.

Heritage film criticism that originated in British film studies has spread internationally. While the spread across Europe has led the critique to be considered as fundamentally a Eurocentric debate, the use of heritage film scholarship in Asian film studies presents new developments in the heritage film debate. Belén Vidal remarks on the internationalisation of the heritage film paradigm, claiming it 'has become a supple term to refer to the ways in which national cinemas turn to the past at different moments in their

¹⁵ Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, 'Questions of Japanese Cinema: Disciplinary Boundaries and the Invention of the Scholarly Object', in *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* ed. by Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian (London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 368-401 (p. 384).

histories in search of their own foundational myths'.¹⁶ While Vidal highlights reservations about this internationalisation, mindful of the inevitable loss of cultural specificity when circulating national cinemas in other cultures, she admits that the spread of the paradigm within Asian contexts, for example, is an exciting development. She continues to state that 'the heritage film touches on areas of cultural anxiety about issues of identity politics, appropriation and misrepresentation, all the more linked in film nations shaped by heritages of colonial domination and post-colonial self-determination'.¹⁷ As cited earlier, this spread has already begun in Japanese and Thai film studies. Mai Kato, for example, explores Japan's *jidaigeki* genre as a form of heritage film, looking at the similarities and differences between this culturally specific period genre and British films. Similarly, May Adadol Ingawanij's work explores Thailand's emergent heritage cinema that she argues utilises an archetypically nostalgic heritage gaze to depict what she dubs a 'narcissistic pleasure of certainty in Thai uniqueness'.¹⁸ She explains:

The main reason for borrowing the term comes from the following parallels between the British and Thai case. The heritage film emerged within a broader context of the proliferation of the heritage industry and culture industry; deepening economic neo-liberalism leading to drastic inequality within the nation-state; and the intense new right political-ideological re-articulation of national identity. And in different ways, the films conform to the aesthetic field of pastiche.¹⁹

Kato and Ingawanij each draw their arguments from Western debates in heritage film studies, citing, for instance, the work of Andrew Higson and Sheldon Hall. Both suggest how the term 'heritage film' fits into the use of tradition in each specific national context. With my study into how this discourse can be applied to Korean cinema, however, I intend to disrupt the paradigm by considering how Korea's heritage, which I later discuss as being

¹⁶ Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre, and Representation* (London: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ May Adadol Ingawanij, 'Nang Nak: Thai bourgeois heritage cinema', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8.2 (May, 2007) 180-193 (p. 191).

¹⁹ May Adadol Ingawanij, 'Hyperbolic Heritage: Bourgeois Spectatorship and Contemporary Thai Cinema', PhD Thesis, (University of London, 2006), p.77.

reshaped by (post)colonialism and (post)modernism, disrupts the articulation of 'nostalgia' and 'authenticity'. Heritage films from Europe and Japan deal with their colonial pasts from the perspective of the coloniser, and in the case of Thailand, they glorify the nation's proud past of never having being colonised. For Korea, the nation's traumas of the twentieth century have affected the view towards, and usage of, traditional heritage.

Prior to my textual analysis of these films, it is important to provide a contextual background to my study. First, I introduce the history behind Korean cinema and the position of the *sageuk* genre within it. My overview of Korean cinema engages with social, economic, and cultural shifts that have influenced changes in the industry. Secondly, I break down a number of issues, concepts and theoretical approaches that are integral to my analyses. I use this section to expand on some of the key terms that I have used so far in this introduction and will continue to use throughout my analysis. I discuss aspects of heritage and tradition in more detail, paying attention to debates surrounding notions of authenticity and the commodification of heritage in contemporary capitalist culture. I later consider the influence of globalisation on Korean society and specifically its 'hybridisation effect' on Korean cinema. I use the rest of this chapter to work through my research questions and objectives, by introducing aspects that will be elaborated on later during my textual analysis.

A Brief History of Korean Cinema

Following the Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, both in part fights for control of the Korea that had been weakened by 200 years of isolationism and increasing domestic rebellions, Japan eventually colonised the peninsula in 1910. In order to establish Korea as a military base and food supply route to expand the Japanese empire to China, the Japanese government sought to demoralise their colonial

subjects through the suppression of the Korean language and the administration of Japanese naming styles. The Japanese government enforced changes to the Korean economy that increased the agricultural output of the nation, primarily to export to Japan, which triggered a sudden influx of foreign companies. At the same time, the colonial powers used cinema as a propaganda tool to legitimise their position in Korea. This use of cinema as propaganda was part of a larger system enacted by the Japanese to change the structure and identity of Korean society. Following the introduction of imported films in 1903 and the emergence of a domestic industry in the late 1910s, the development of Korean cinema has always been distinctively political, both in terms of film content and the industry behind it.

As part of Japan's cultural imperialism, films were used as means of introducing Western culture to Koreans, who initially regarded cinema as a curiosity rather than an artistic medium. Films were used by the Japanese powers to demonstrate Western prosperity and innovation, in order to impose a process of modernity onto Korea, conceptualised as a form of Westernisation. As Hyangjin Lee writes, 'the film policy of the Japanese colonial government focused primarily on obliterating Korean culture and manipulating the colonial subjects ideologically'.²⁰ Through the promotion of film as a propaganda tool, Korean film, from its outset, has been politically charged. During the colonial era, foreign films pushed out Korean productions. From 1903 until the late 1910s, the films shown were predominantly those imported from America, with some from Europe and Japan. By 1925, shortly after the start of the domestic film production in 1919, only eight of the 2,262 films released were Korean, with 2,130 of the rest being American.²¹ There is a debate over whether the first directed Korean film is either *The Righteous*

²⁰ Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Revenge (Kim Do San) in 1919 or *The Vow Made below the Moon* (Yoon Baek Nam) in 1923. The former is considered the starting point of Korean film production and is essentially a filmed stage play. In contrast, the latter is considered to be the first Korean feature-length film, with an originally-written script not based on a stage play.²² As the industry developed and the audience's tastes shifted from traditional theatre to cinema, film began to be used as a method of expressing and propagating Korean nationalism. The phenomenal success of films such as *Arirang* (Na Woon Kyu, 1926) prompted the Japanese government to ban the release of resistance-themed films and increased censorship in domestic productions starting from the 1930s.

By the end of Japanese colonial rule and the liberation of the Korean peninsula, the cinema audience had grown accustomed to the Hollywood style imported through American films. After the peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel in 1945, South Korea was to be held under the administration of the United States until the peninsula could regain independence. Ultimately, the peninsula became permanently divided in 1948 between the North and South, with North Korea following the Communism of the Soviet Union and South Korea following the democratic model of the United States. Despite its newly regained independence, South Korea would remain under America's economic and cultural influence. Following liberation and continuing during the Korean War that came in its wake, in which North Korea invaded the South, the nation's cinema industry persevered. This time saw the simultaneous Americanisation/Westernisation of audience tastes as dictated by the continued inflow of Hollywood films, and local filmmakers' use of domestic cinema as a means of political and patriotic expression. Two dominant themes from this

²² Hyangjin Lee discusses problems regarding the designation of the first Korean film. She considers factors such as a film's production and distribution, and how much Korean over Japanese involvement went into its making. While *The Righteous Revenge* is thought of as the start of Korean filmmaking, *The Vow made below the Moon* is seen as the first full-scale production. Lee also draws attention to *The National Boarders* (Kim Do San, 1923), that some scholars have argued should be cited as the first feature film, premiering four months before *The Vow*. The dominant view, however, is that the film was never finished and therefore should not be considered. See, *Ibid.*, p. 18-20.

era were the liberation of Korea from the Japanese and the tragedy of national division. *Hurrah! For Freedom* (Choi In Kyu, 1946) is remembered as a milestone film of the era. Regarded as emblematic of the period's 'liberation films', it depicts the efforts of a patriotic resistance fighter in the last few days of occupation. Such films expressed joy at the sense of optimism that came with liberation from colonialism and an expectation that the nation would now be rebuilt. Films such as *My Liberated Country* (Jeon Chang Geun, 1947), *The Night of Independence Day* (Choi In Kyu, 1948) and *Outcry of the Nation* (Ahn Kyung Ho, 1948) were made with the intention of spreading national pride and excitement for the future of Korea. As Lee states, 'explicitly nationalistic and anti-Japanese in tone, [these] films treat the subject of independence and the political changes exclusively in terms of the simple emotional responses of ordinary Koreans'.²³

Only fourteen films were produced during the Korean War and the majority of filmmaking equipment was destroyed so, in an effort to restart the film industry, Syngman Rhee's government introduced policies that exempted the war-stricken industry from taxation. The incentive and restructuring of the industry boosted production substantially. Only five films were made in 1950. This rose to eighteen in 1954, a year after the policies were introduced, and 111 in 1959.²⁴ This rate continued into the 1960s, with over 100 films being made each year, beginning what is referred to as the 'Korean Cinema Golden Age'. Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann describe the era as 'a vibrant film movement spanning the years from 1955 to 1972, that arose in the traumatic historical circumstances brought about by the Korean War'.²⁵ A key time of this Golden Age is recognised to be the

²³ Ibid., p. 48.

²⁴ See, Brian Yecies and Ae Gyung Shim, eds. *Traces of Korean Cinema from 1945-1959* (Seoul: Korean Film Archive, 2003).

²⁵ Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann, 'Introduction: Genre, Genre, and Nation', in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* ed. by Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), pp. 1-15 (p. 2). This edited collection is the first work to prominently use the term 'Golden Age' cinema to refer specifically to the period 1955-1972 as a distinct film movement. This period of filmmaking in Korea has also previously been

period from 1960 to 1961, during the brief interval between Rhee's resignation from office and the election of the third President Park Chung Hee.²⁶ This period of time saw the release of three films that are representative of broader trends in post-war Korean cinema: *The Housemaid* (Kim Ki Young, 1960), *An Aimless Bullet* (Yu Hyun Mok, 1961), and *Mother and a Guest* (Shin Sang Ok, 1961).

Kim, Yu, and Shin began their careers after the ideological pressures of the liberation and war era had died down, and as such they were not compelled to produce propaganda or overtly nationalistic films. Inspired by Italian neorealism, which was being exported to Korea, they were drawn to the stark representations of everyday life in war-torn countries. These three filmmakers all credited films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) as shaping their outlook towards the poverty, oppression and disillusionment in post-war Korea and making them question how to represent and deal with the harsh realities of unprecedented social change.²⁷ Oh Young Sook, for example, considers these three films to portray the complex mood of post-war Korea and the filmmaking landscape of the era. Commenting on the directors, she writes, 'the variety of their approaches diversified Korean cinema and created high aesthetic standards. Taken together, the three directors' representative films [...] deliver a bird's-eye view of Korean filmmaking in the 1950s and early 1960s'.²⁸ These films each deal with the social realities and injustices of the era. *The Housemaid* is a gothic and grotesque domestic horror that presents an allegorical satire of modern anxiety and changing gender roles. Unlike the other two films that depict

referred to as a 'revival period' and a 'boom period'. See, Min Eungjun, Jinsook Joo and Han Ju Kwak, *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination* (Westport: Prager Publishers, 2003).

²⁶ Korea's second president, Yun Bo Seon, only had a short term before resigning. His position was seen as more of a figurehead for the nation's transitory parliamentary system and this period provided a brief era of creative freedom.

²⁷ Kim Mee Hyun, 'Foreign Films and Their Influence', in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance* ed. by Kim Mee Hyun (Seoul: Communication Books, 2007), pp. 150-151 (p. 150).

²⁸ Oh Young Sook, 'Three Representative Films of Post-War Korean Cinema: *The Housemaid*, *An Aimless Bullet*, and *Mother and a Guest*', *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance* ed. by Kim Mee Hyun (Seoul: Communication Books, 2007), pp. 159-160 (p. 160).

harsh social realities, *The Housemaid* places the horror within a middle class household, in which a maid seduces a faithful, hardworking husband. *An Aimless Bullet* is, along with *The Housemaid*, listed among the top three greatest Korean films ever made.²⁹ Credited as inspiring a move towards cinematic realism in Korean filmmaking, the film depicts life in post-war Seoul as chaotic, frustrating, and traumatic, to the point where it was banned following Park Chung Hee's military coup of 1961, for its pessimistic portrayal of society. Lastly, *Mother and a Guest* deals with the conflict between traditional communal values and modern individualistic desires. In its depiction of social disapproval towards the relationship between a widow and her deceased husband's friend, the film ultimately takes no sides. The tensions between traditional virtues and modern desires is represented as open and unresolved, in order to portray a realistic and non-idealistic view of society.

The 1960s saw increased creativity and production output, and the development of cinema culture with the introduction of the Grand Bell Awards in 1962. In contrast, the decade also saw the return of increased government intervention in the film industry. Park's administration brought in the first Motion Picture Law of 1962, which was revised five times until its abolition in 1984. This regulation oversaw the censorship of screenplays and completed films, for instance blocking any pro-communist sentiments. There was also strong control over film distribution, especially regarding foreign imports, and a screen quota system dictated the number of films that could be produced. Filming was done fast to stay in line with the swiftly changing regulations, resulting in three Korean productions being made for every foreign feature. While the initial boom to the film industry, in terms of both quantity and quality, had developed a thriving film culture in the recovering and

²⁹ Pierce Conran, 'KOFA Releases Top 100 Korean Films List' (Seoul: KoBiz, 2014) <<http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/jsp/news/news.jsp?mode=VIEW&seq=2879>> [accessed 2 May 2017]

rapidly modernising post-war nation, the increasing political troubles in Korean society continuously influenced the film industry.

Park passed an amendment in 1969 that would allow him to take up an unconstitutional third term in office. Demonstrations and protests against him gained traction, but in 1971 he was voted into office again. Political unrest against his authoritarian rule was boosted by declining support amongst the population. The economic growth he had generated in the 1960s had slowed down and government-enforced censorship hit record levels. The massive support for public demonstrations and increasing numbers of riots led Park to declare martial law in 1972, cementing his autocratic rule and increasing government control. The Golden Age is considered to have ended in 1972 with the third revision of Park's Motion Picture Law that banned any film that criticised the military or Korea's government-regulated capitalism.³⁰ The restriction of any social criticism and creative freedom went against the majority of filmmakers' desires, and many were arrested for continuing to make provocative films that were seen by the military government to threaten national wellbeing and security. Those filmmakers who continued mostly made commercial films simply to fill the government's screen quota. This tightened censorship signalled the downfall of the vibrant film industry that had developed over the previous twenty years.

Korean cinema of the 1970s is widely considered to be of low quality and the decade saw a depression and slump in attendances. The military government encouraged the production of propaganda films that reinforced anti-communist ideologies and eulogised Korea's war heroes, both from the modern and premodern era. Biopics of military leaders and liberation-era independence fighters became commonplace but the cinema audiences, that had become used to the social realist style and quality of 1950s and

³⁰ McHugh and Abelmann, 'Introduction: Genre, Genre, and Nation', p.2.

1960s productions were unimpressed. Attendance figures declined significantly, dropping by 60% over the decade. Annual audience highs of 178 million in the 1960s plummeted to just 70 million by 1976.³¹ Despite the film industry's regression, the wider Korean economy was becoming stronger and the nation's modernity process was increasing rapidly.

In 1979, after eighteen years of autocratic rule, Park was assassinated following mass anti-government demonstrations and student protests calling for democratisation. However, the period following this sudden end to Park's military regime was short-lived as Major General Choi Doo Hwan maintained martial law until officially being elected president in 1980. His administration brought about continued economic growth, successful diplomacy, and many efforts to fund cultural developments such as museums and the bid for the 1988 Summer Olympics. Nonetheless, the nation was essentially still under his military regime. Choi's declaration that he would bring about democratic reform never materialised and public furore was larger than ever. Despite the continually low audience numbers throughout the decade, the 1980s saw the return of the film industry's creative freedom. The government gradually relaxed censorship laws and loosened control over productions. This allowed Korean cinema to return to the social critique of the 1950s and 1960s but with more contemporary aesthetics. Two films of note include *A Fine, Windy Day* (Lee Jang Ho, 1980) and *A Small Ball Shot by a Midget* (Lee Won Se, 1981), each addressing the social issues faced by poor, working-class individuals. Both can be considered as archetypal examples of the resistance culture of the era and inspired a flood of similarly-themed social issue films. The focus on realism in the portrayal of class, poverty, industrialisation, and modernity in these films stood, however, in stark contrast to the surge in erotic films that was also very pronounced in 1980s Korean cinema. *Madame Aema* (Jeong In Yeob, 1982) is the first of such films and was the biggest box office success

³¹ Byun In Shik, 'The Watershed of the 1970s', in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance* ed. by Kim Mee Hyun (Seoul: Communication Books, 2007), pp. 223-229 (p. 223).

of the year, inspiring a number of sequels and similar erotic productions. Many of the decade's most successful films were erotica infused, including *Eo Wu Dong* (Lee Jang Ho, 1985), *Mulberry* (Lee Doo Yong, 1986) and *Prostitute* (Yu Jin Seon, 1988).

While the abolition of the Motion Picture Law in 1984 gave the film industry its long desired freedom of expression, it also opened up the country to an influx of foreign imports. At the same time, Korean cinema also began to find success abroad, earning acclaim at international film festivals and with critics. Im Kwon Taek, who had worked as a commercial director since the 1960s, began in the 1980s to focus on producing art-house cinema. *Mandala* (1981) marked a change in his career and showed that Korean cinema was at a turning point with regard to its creative and artistic recognition. Im's films *The Surrogate Woman* (1986), *Adada* (1987) and *Come Come Come Upward* (1989) won awards at major international festivals, and filmmakers such as Bae Yong Kyun and Chung Ji Young also gained international acclaim. Moving into the 1990s, Korea continued to earn a reputation as having a socially conscious cinema. Having acknowledged the merits of the Chinese Fifth Generation and New Taiwanese Cinema movements in the 1980s, Western observers considered Korea's cinema of the late 80s-early 90s as showing signs that a new generation of filmmakers and creativity was emerging, dubbing the films that were being produced as 'Korean New Wave' and 'New Korean Cinema'.³² Isolde Standish, in one of the works on Korean cinema in Western scholarship, writes that 'the Korean New Wave has come about as a "revolt" against traditional conventions imposed by a stringent system of political censorship'.³³ The young filmmakers viewed cinema as a mass art form that was able to spread social and political commentary to a large audience, taking a more serious

³² There is a flexibility of terms in literature that discusses this era of filmmaking, and as such my thesis also makes use of both 'Korean New Wave' and 'New Korean cinema'. These terms specifically refer to the cinematic movement that ended in the 1990s, and is distinct from the similarly dubbed Korean Wave, or '*Hallyu*', that describes the international surge of popularity in wider Korean popular culture from the late-1990s, which is discussed later in my thesis.

³³ Isolde Standish, 'Korean Cinema and the New Realism: Text and Context', *East-West Film Journal* 7.4 (July 1993) 54-80 (p. 67).

approach to film than previous generations. Throughout the 1990s, a succession of presidential administrations showed that the nation was on route to eliminate all traces of past autocratic governments and increase democratic provisions. While censorship was at a low and freedom of expression at a high point, the economy had slowed down, film attendances and production decreased. New trade agreements with the United States meant that more Hollywood films were being distributed, forcing the domestic film industry to again restructure its methods of production and exhibition. *Marriage Story* (Kim Eui Suk, 1992) marks a significant change in Korean cinema, being the first film to be produced by Samsung. Traditionally, Korean film production was financed through personal production companies and investments from distributors, but the financial difficulties of the early 1990s forced the government to allow filmmakers to reach out for private funding from banks and corporations. Major Korean *chaebols* (Korean business conglomerates) Samsung, Daewoo, and Hyundai all opened film production departments in the early 1990s, radically changing the local film industry.

The rise of Korean cinema in the 1990s is due to this combination of increased democratisation, economic and financial shifts, and the creative legacy of the Korean New Wave. While industrial pressure under the influence of *chaebols* killed the New Wave in the mid-1990s, the local film market was on its way to record success, with commercial cinema attendance gaining momentum. By the end of the decade, Korean audiences had become more enthusiastic and confident about local cinema. This rise in attendance is often discussed in relation to Korea's screen quota system, which dictates how many non-Korean films can be screened in competition with local productions. While this was, and continues to be, seen by international distributors as an unfair practice, it superficially appears as if the use of a screen quota ensured that domestic films steadily became more popular at the box office than Hollywood films. However, Patrick Messerlin and Jimmyn Parc argue that the implementation of a screen quota system is irrelevant to the success of the Korean film

industry since the 1990s.³⁴ Instead, emphasis should be put on the restructuring of the film industry that favoured *chaebols* as investment and distribution companies, leading to an increase of big-budget films being given wider releases. The popularity of big-budget genre films caused venture capital to become the primary financier for the industry. The record success of *Swiri* in 1999 began the ‘Korean blockbuster’ trend, each year bringing bigger films and bigger box office returns. In the years that followed *Swiri*, *JSA* (Park Chan Wook, 2000), *Friend* (Kwak Kyung Taek, 2001), *Marrying the Mafia* (Jeong Heung Sun, 2002) and *Silmido* (Kang Woo Suk, 2003) proved that local cinema could outperform Hollywood imports at the domestic box office.

As Korean cinema entered a new Golden Age that has been dubbed a distinct second ‘renaissance’, the industry soared until 2006, an important year in contemporary Korean film.³⁵ On the one hand, the number of films released reached record levels for the first time in fifteen years, and audience attendance too was on a high, with the highest number of admissions since the 1960s. On the other hand, investment in film was beginning to falter. Despite the success of many films at the box office, the unregulated budgets that these films required meant that few made a profit. 2006 also saw the screen quota law changed again under continued pressure from the US. The previous quota that required local productions be screened for 146 days a year was halved to 73 days, meaning

³⁴ See, Patrick Messerlin and Jimmyn Parc, ‘The Effect of Screen Quotas and Subsidy Regime on Cultural Industry: A Case Study of French and Korean Film Industries’, *Journal of International Business and Economy* 15.2 (2014), 57-73.

³⁵ The term ‘renaissance’ has been used to describe the rise in box office successes and the overall quality of domestic productions starting around the turn of the century and has been progressing since. Hye Seung Chung briefly uses the term in her essay ‘Towards a Strategic Korean Cinephilia: A Transnational Détournement of Hollywood Melodrama’, in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* ed. by Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), pp. 117-150 (p.124), and Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo and Han Ju Kwak discuss the state of contemporary Korean cinema being a renaissance in their work *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination* (Westport: Prager Publishers, 2003). Jinhee Choi uses the term most frequently and suggests that using ‘renaissance’ is ‘a label that can encompass both the resurgence of socially conscious, and/or aesthetically experimental films and the industrial boom’ (See, Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), p. 6.).

Hollywood productions could once again dominate the market. The energy that had spurred on the industry since the millennium had declined and filmmaking entered a creative depression. By 2007 the film industry was considered to be in crisis and it would take years to regain momentum. Paired with the 2008 global recession, the Korean economy at large was hit by the nation's worst financial downturn since the 1997 IMF crisis. The economic reforms put in place by tenth president Lee Myung Bak helped the nation to recover from the recession but cinema had become polarised. From 2010 onwards, it became clear that Korean blockbusters had turned into tent-poles for the industry, requiring big budgets, big stars, and heavy promotion, that in turn support the production of smaller films made to fulfil the screen quota. Writing in 2015, Darcy Paquet commented on the ongoing state of domestic productions, stating that:

The mainstream commercial film industry is no longer as dynamic or creative as it used to be. Not only [is] there a shortage of critically acclaimed films [...] but more generally, the increasingly corporatized system for making films seems to favour familiar stories, styles and casting over bold and innovative creative choices. The independent sector, by contrast, appears to be rich with talent, but challenges exist in this realm as well, particularly in terms of reaching an audience.³⁶

Despite this polarisation of large and small budgeted cinema, especially with regard to domestic distribution, the international presence of Korean film is stronger than ever. Park Chan Wook, Bong Joon Ho, Lee Chang Dong, Kim Ki Duk, and Hong Sang Soo have become regulars at international film festivals, and are viewed as emblematic of the diversity of contemporary Korean cinema. In recent years, Korean commercial genre productions have had a strong presence at the Cannes Film Festival, for instance, premiering films such as *The Target* (Chang, 2014), *Office* (Hong Won Chan, 2015), *The Age of Shadows* (Kim Jee Woon, 2015), and *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang Ho, 2016), which would all become critical and box-office hits.

³⁶ Darcy Paquet, 'Korean Film – 2015', (Seoul: Koreanfilm.org, 2015) <<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm15.html>> [accessed 2 May 2017]

The *Sageuk* Film in Korean Cinema

I now move on to explore the position of the *sageuk* tradition within Korean film history and how the genre has impacted on the development of national cinema. Following the same chronology outlined in the previous section, I demonstrate how the genre has played a prominent role over decades of the nation's cinematic development. The term *sageuk* refers generally to works of fiction wherein the narrative and characters are based in Korea's past. Issues arise when defining this 'past'. In Yun Mi Hwang's study of the genre, she outlines the differing limitations that scholars have used to demarcate the genre. Critics' main concern is when Korean history 'ends', with observers disagreeing on how to limit the scope of genre. As Hwang summarises:

While Yi Gil Seong notes that the term *sageuk* usually does not apply to films depicting the Japanese occupation period (1910-1945), Yi Byeong Hun [...] sets the time from ancient history to the end of the colonial era (circa 1945). What can be easily overlooked in such clear-cut definitions is the fact that 'historical drama', by nature, is always in transition as the notion of the past changes over time.³⁷

She also draws attention to representations of an unspecified past, in which the historical setting and iconography are utilised as backdrops. As discussed in the upcoming section, the matter of history and its representation on screen has been long debated, and is a discussion that can be applied to Korea's localised historical genre. The contention of terms surrounding historical/period/heritage and their application to the *sageuk* form follows on from my contextual overview.

Prior to the 1945 division, *sageuk* played a key part in the emergence of Korea's own productions in the silent cinema of the colonial era. Amongst the first films made was *The Story of Chunhyang* (Goshu Hayakawa, 1923), an adaptation of a classic folk story from

³⁷ Hwang, 'South Korean Historical Drama: History, Heritage and Cultural Industry', p. 4. In this quote, Hwang cites two sources: Yi Gil Seong 'The *Sageuk* and the Issue of Historical Perception', in *The Scenery of Modernity: Korean Film History and Production Design* ed. by Cha Sun Ha (Seoul: Sodo, 2001), and Yi Byeong Hun, 'The Transformation of Television *Sageuk*', Unpublished Master's dissertation (Hanyang University, 1997).

the *Joseon* era, the success of which inspired the production of *The Story of Janghwa and Hongryeon* (Kim Hyeong Hwang, 1924) and *The Story of Shim Cheong* (Lee Gyeong Son, 1925), also based on folktales. The *Chunhyangjeon* folktale tells the story of two young lovers who are separated by social class. Mong Ryong, an educated upper class man destined for government service, and Chun Hyang, a beautiful but low-ranking daughter of a concubine, fall in love at first sight and marry the same day. When Mong Ryong must leave to take his state service exams, the two promise to remain faithful to each other until they can be together again. The narrative celebrates Chun Hyang's virtuous and chaste nature as she is tortured and imprisoned for refusing to submit to a corrupt local official's desires, before she and Mong Ryong are eventually happily reunited. The folktale has been examined as a reflection of the oppressive social structure of *Joseon* society, and of the legacy of patriarchal values and morality. With its origins in the seventeenth century, the story remains significant in contemporary culture. The continued adaptations of *Chunhyangjeon* and other folktales demonstrate not just the way in which traditional values are reinterpreted in contemporary society, but also the methods used to introduce the Western medium of film to the Korean audience.

In a similar way to that in which Western silent cinema started, by using works of classical literature and theatre as a source for cinematic productions, Korea began by looking to its *Joseon* heritage for inspiration. These early films were crucial in shaping the Korean audience's perception of the new art form, and using indigenous source materials such as *Joseon* folktales helped audiences understand the medium. The *Chunhyangjeon* folktale has been retold and reinterpreted throughout Korean cinema and reappears at several landmark moments. The nation's first sound film, *The Tale of Chunhyang* (Lee Myeong Woo, 1935), was another adaptation of the story and a great success. The film provided an outlet for the colonised Koreans who related to the oppression of the lead characters and the villainy of those in power. As Hyangjin Lee comments, 'the past world

unfolded in *The Tale of Chunhyang* reminded them of their lost images and their longing for a peaceful life free from foreign interference and exploitation'.³⁸ As this was the first sound film, the filmmakers were self-conscious about the involvement of the Japanese in domestic productions. The first adaptation had been made by a Japanese director and Korean filmmakers were insistent that domestic films be made *by* Koreans and *for* Koreans. The inclusion of the Korean language in the first sound film had a significant impact on the industry. While the audience was happy to hear their own language on screen, the Japanese powers saw this as an act of colonial resistance and in 1938 banned the use of Korean language across the nation; by 1942, films were no longer being made in Korean.

Use of the *Joseon* folktales once again proved impactful in the post-war era. *Chunhyang Story* (Lee Gyu Hwan, 1955) was a record-breaking success, with box office receipts totalling 28 times its budget.³⁹ Despite the nation being in a state of poverty and reconstruction, the commercial reaction to the film was staggering. The film's success triggered a stampede of similarly historically-themed productions. While in the colonial and liberation eras *sageuk* was a genre that was used intermittently, with focus instead being on films depicting the contemporary state of the nation, by the late 1950s *sageuk* productions were booming, accounting for as much as fifty per cent of films released.⁴⁰ The financial success of these productions enabled the quick recovery of the post-war film industry and ushered in the Golden Age of cinema. Oh Young Sook notes that there were three main *sageuk* film subtypes during this era. Firstly, there were films like *Chunhyang Story*, which were based on works of classical Korean literature and folk stories. These presented familiar stories from Korea's heritage that comforted audiences in a tense era of

³⁸ Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, p. 72.

³⁹ Oh Young Sook, '*Chung-hyang Story* Pioneers the Korean Cinema Revival', in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance* ed. by Kim Mee Hyun (Seoul: Communication Books, 2007), pp. 138-141 (p. 139).

⁴⁰ Oh Young Sook, 'The Period Films Boom', in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance* ed. by Kim Mee Hyun (Seoul: Communication Books, 2007), pp. 141-143 (p. 141).

instability. Secondly, films such as *The Tragic Prince* (Ahn Jong Hwa, 1956) focused on true historical events, especially those based on dynastic power struggles and vengeful tragedies. Oh writes that themes of revenge in this type of *sageuk* represent 'the mass unconscious of 1950s society', stating that 'the message of 1950s films that personal causes lay behind historic events and individual desires were the driving force behind public order reflected the dominant thinking of the 1950s, when society began to focus on individualism and the growing pursuit of individual maturity'.⁴¹ Thirdly, films like *Hwang Jin I* (Jo Keung Ha, 1957) depicted the lives of lauded historical figures and national heroes. The focus was not just on the figures and their associated history, but on the ideologies that they represented, such as self-motivation and determination, and a forward-thinking outlook, hinting at Korean society's move towards modernity that was, at this time, well underway. These *sageuk* subgenres demonstrate the ways in which Koreans of the modernising age were beginning to re-evaluate their relationship with the past and retell stories in ways that reflected contemporary sensibilities.

Into the 1960s, *sageuk* flourished, proving to be the dominant genre of the decade. However, the trend in quick and similar productions meant that the form was always also maligned. Critics complained that the history being presented on screen was inaccurate and insignificant, arguing that the *Joseon* setting was merely used as a lavish backdrop to tell repetitive stories.⁴² As cited previously, Oh comments on the ideology of the characters in these films being influenced by the reconfiguration of traditional and Western values in society. In spite of the criticisms, *sageuk* had its heyday in the 1960s, especially those made by the director Shin Sang Ok, including, *Seong Chun Hyang* (1961), *Prince Yeonsan* (1961), and *Eunuch* (1968). Films like these took advantage of recent cinematic developments in widescreen and colour technology to reproduce period details

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 142.

⁴² See, Ibid.

on an epic scale, with lavish costumes and sets. They commanded high budgets and were often box-office hits, being considered a type of early 'event cinema'.

Seong Chun Hyang, for instance, marks an important turning point in Korean cinema, being the first film to be made using colour CinemaScope technology. Though CinemaScope had been present in Korea since the premiere of *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953) in 1955, the first film to be produced with the technology in Korea was not for several more years. The first attempt at a black-and-white CinemaScope film, *Life* (Lee Kang Chun, 1958), failed to impress due to its poor quality. Nonetheless, the enthusiasm for filmgoing in the era meant public demand for cinematic innovation remained high, in the hope of keeping up with the wider social changes during Korea's race towards modernity. The popularity of other colour and wide screen formats in Korea such as Panavision and Vistavision proved the audience's acceptance of the new generation of cinema technology. Much like the release of *Chunhyang Story* in 1955, Shin's full colour adaptation of the folk story became a ground-breaking event in Korean cinema history acting as a catalyst for further industrialisation of the local film industry. The highest budgets of the decade were reserved for *sageuk* productions, showing an intent to display both Korean history and the nation's technical achievements. *Prince Yeonsan* is another such film that made full use of the new format. The film depicts the life of the titular Yeonsangun, Korea's famed tyrannical, fifteenth-century king who is remembered for his bloody purges, kidnappings and the suppression of speech. He has gone on to become one of *Joseon's* most portrayed monarchs on screen. *Prince Yeonsan* is emblematic of the type of hit *sageuk* films that dominated the era. Making use of the colour-wide screen format, *Prince Yeonsan* is filmed largely in medium shots that are often filled with a line of characters in elaborate royal court dress. Similarly, *Eunuch*, one of the last successful *sageuk* films of the 1960s, displays how the genre had adapted to the widespread use of the new production formats. Throughout *Eunuch* there is a vibrant use of colour and exaggerated camera



Figure 1 The *Chunhyangjeon* adaptation marks the advent of CinemaScope.

Seong Chun Hyang (Shin Sang Ok, 1961)



Figure 2 1960s *sageuk* made full use of new colour technology to showcase exuberant costumes...

Prince Yeonsan (Shin Sang Ok, 1961)



Figure 3 ... and widescreen formats to display panoramic shots of the Korean landscape.
Eunuch (Shin Sang Ok, 1968)

angles, especially when establishing settings. Based largely within the confines of the royal palace, the few scenes in the surrounding landscape are given panoramic framing.

Aside from the visual developments of the decade, the film also reflects the changes in tone and topic that had become the trend for *sageuk* as the 1960s progressed. While audiences had previously found comfort and familiarity in the relatively joyful adaptations of folk stories, escapism was increasingly sought in the depiction of decadence and violence. Films such as *Seong Chun Hyang* and *Prince Yeonsan* are not free from stories of violence, on the contrary, they do depict torture, executions and imprisonment, and their characters are regarded with more sympathy. As *sageuk* films progressed throughout the decade, the subject matter of the genre's biggest hits became increasingly eroticised and vicious. A new sensibility emerged that veered towards cruelty. As Lee Gil Sung explains:

The royal court period films of the 1960s showed sympathy for the sufferings of the man of power, needed to rebuild the nation but simultaneously tormented by human desires. However, in the late 1960s, only degrading cruelty was portrayed, because the genre films emphasised the inhuman side of power [...] As well as just being a rebellion by the victim or approval of resistance, compared to the early

1960s [the] unconventional and unprecedented endings can be interpreted as political signs of the times.⁴³

Whereas *Seong Chun Hyang* ends with the happy reunion of the two lovers, *Eunuch* ends with multiple murders, including regicide. As Lee states, the conclusions to these types of narrative demonstrate how the *sageuk* of this era, like the 1950s that preceded it, used a premodern setting to depict the politics and sensibility of the contemporary era.

The 1970s saw a dramatic decline in the genre. Along with the rest of the cinema industry, *sageuk* films were losing out to the rise in television ownership. *Sageuk* found a new home in television drama, and the historical films that were released were so infused with government sponsored propaganda that audiences were left unimpressed. As mentioned in the previous section, this decade saw the continued dictatorship of Park Chung Hee, and his militarised culture was promoted through government policies that encouraged the production of nationalistic films. An Jae Seok remarks that ‘they had to be films that “inspire patriotism” and “build national identity”, which was understood as loyalty and filial piety, defence of one’s country, and sacrificing one’s personal interest for the public good’.⁴⁴ *Sageuk* films that reinforced this ideology focused on portraying the lives of figures who contributed to the future of the nation. For example, *A War Diary* (Jang Il Ho, 1977) depicts Yi Sun Shin, the famed naval commander, as a self-sacrificing war hero (representation of Yi is discussed in detail in a later chapter), and *King Sejong the Great* (Jang Il Ho, 1978) tells the story of *Joseon*’s fourth king who oversaw major advances in the nation’s science and literature.

While *sageuk* had been toying with provocative themes since the late 1960s, it was not until the 1980s when *sageuk* collided with the erotica boom that the genre

⁴³ Lee Gil Sung, ‘Exuberant Sets and Costumes in Period Films’, *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance* ed. by Kim Mee Hyun (Seoul: Communication Books, 2007), pp. 185-187 (p. 187).

⁴⁴ An Jae Seok, ‘National Policy Films under the Shadow of Control’, in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance* ed. by Kim Mee Hyun (Seoul: Communication Books, 2007), pp. 245-247 (p. 246).

changed dramatically. In order to generate new interest in the *sageuk* film form, filmmakers took on the trend of cinematic erotica, offering what television *sageuk* could not. *Eo Wu Dong*, *Byeon Gang Soe* (Um Jong Son, 1986), and *Sa Bang Ji* (Song Kyeong Shik, 1988) mix soft-porn spectacles with lavish period details. Simultaneously, another branch of *sageuk* was emerging in Korea's art-house cinema. Productions aimed at the international festival circuit were commonly narratives that critiqued Korea's Confucian heritage. Despite being set in the *Joseon* dynasty, they could be easily read as commentaries on the state of modern Korea. Lee Doo Yong's *Spinning the Tales of Cruelty towards Women* (1984) and Im Kwon Taek's *The Surrogate Woman* gained international acclaim and contributed to the recognition of Korean film as a significant national cinema. *Sageuk*, however, had almost disappeared from cinema by the time the Korean New Wave was under-way in the 1990s.

The emergence of Korean blockbusters towards the end of the decade was taken by filmmakers as an opportunity to give the genre a new lease of life. Shortly after the global success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000) and *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), Korea similarly embraced the historical grand-scale epic, the like of which had never been seen before in domestic productions. Three films were released in quick succession that took their historical settings from ancient and medieval Korea: *The Legend of Ginko* (Park Jae Hyun, 2000), *Binchunmoo* (Kim Young Jun, 2000), and *Musa* (Kim Sung Soo, 2001). The latter is remembered for being, at the time, the most expensive Korean film ever made, with a high level of accuracy in its depiction of the *Goryeo* dynasty (918-1392). In October 2003, two vastly different *sageuk* films were released: *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield* (Lee Joon Ik), an epic war comedy set in the seventh century, and *Untold Scandal*, an erotica-infused drama based in eighteenth century *Joseon*. Much like *Chunhyang Story* in 1955, *Untold Scandal* reawakened interest in the *sageuk* form and inspired a surprise boom in the genre.

My thesis aims to question why this reinvigoration happened with this film and how the social context caused the *sageuk* boom to happen in the early 2000s. In my textual analysis sections I continue to highlight *sageuk*'s development over the years through close readings of four landmark films. I also consider how the legacy of *sageuk* within Korean cinema has helped to shape the look of recent historical films. Kim Soyoung remarks, 'when I examine the current discourse of Korean cinema, all I see is the rhetoric of the "new" and the "unfamiliar". There really is little discussion on how recent films succeed or challenge the heritage of Korean cinema'.⁴⁵ In my analysis of four select films, I do as she suggests and consider the influence of the whole of the *sageuk* tradition, as I have set it out in this section on these films. I view *Untold Scandal* as homage to both historical erotica and the festival-oriented critical films of the 1980s. With *Jeon Woo Chi* (Choi Dong Hoon, 2009) I study the film's use of traditional folklore, considering it similar to early *sageuk*'s exploration of the nation's past as a means of (re)establishing generic conventions. I consider *Masquerade* as a return to the conflict-driven personal narratives of the 1950s and 1960s, in which contemporary sensibilities are intertwined with the period aesthetics. Finally I explore how *The Admiral* can be viewed as evocative of the propaganda-laden and militaristic biopics of the 1970s.

Defining Heritage, Defining History

So far, this introductory chapter has addressed several key issues integral to my thesis. Predominantly, I have highlighted the historical development that has contributed to the current state of contemporary Korean cinema, and specifically the *sageuk* genre. My thesis on the *sageuk* form and its growth over the past decade explores the genre's resurgence

⁴⁵ Kim Soyoung, quoted in Yun Mi Hwang, 'Heritage of Horrors: Reclaiming the Female Ghost in "Shadows in the Palace"', in *Korean Horror Cinema* ed. by Alison Peirse and Daniel Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 73-86 (p. 74).

that emerged in the twenty-first century. I also consider what factors could have had an influence in the Korean audience and filmmakers' renewed interest in the premodern past. The remainder of this chapter works through a number of key ideas that are investigated in each of my subsequent chapters. My aim is for this discussion to provide further context to my study into contemporary *sageuk* and how the form disrupts the established heritage film critique. I argue that as a postcolonial society, Korea's relationship with, and representation of, its premodern, precolonial past is depicted on screen with a culturally specific complexity, different to that of other national heritage cinemas. Through my analysis of four successful and influential *sageuk* films released between 2003 and 2014, I show how the contemporary form has been shaped by the nation's experience of the twentieth century, the changing use of traditional culture in neoliberal society, and the influence of global cinematic developments. To begin the rest of this chapter, I start by expanding on my approach to the heritage film and how my study intends to problematise and deconstruct its Eurocentric focus by relating it to the *sageuk* film.

As touched on at the beginning of this chapter, the term 'heritage film' has been used to discuss the international phenomenon of films that suggest a complex relationship between history, authenticity, and representation. Like much heritage film scholarship, my writing fluctuates between the generic terms 'historical drama', 'costume drama', and 'period drama', alongside the more theoretical critique of heritage film. The inconsistency and discussion that surrounds the use of terms is also present in *sageuk* scholarship. Jinsoo An, for instance, draws attention to the different connotations of the terms *yeoksageuk* (historical drama) and *sidaegeuk* (period drama), with the former referring to the depiction of real historical events and people, and the latter to narratives that portray fictional and folkloric stories in a historical setting.⁴⁶ The prevalence of (*yeok*)*sageuk* as the primary term

⁴⁶ See, Jinsoo An, 'Popular Reasoning of South Korean Melodrama Films (1953-1972)', Unpublished PhD thesis, (University of California, 2005).

for historical representation is seen by Hwang as down to its mainstream use as a counterpart to the term *hyeondaegeuk*, or contemporary drama.⁴⁷

In European heritage film scholarship, Belén Vidal and Andrew Higson each discuss the categorisation of ‘history’ versus the ‘historical’ as denoting whether a film is a depiction of real figures or fictional characters. Vidal states that regardless of the term, each conveys ‘a type of film that places its characters in a recognisable moment of the past, enhanced by the mise-en-scène of historical reconstruction’.⁴⁸ She encourages the view that while characters may differ, the key aspect behind historical, period and heritage films is the common spectacle of the past. Higson further suggests that in contemporary filmmaking trends, the distinction between the historical drama and the period drama has loosened, causing him to reject the term ‘historical’ in relation to the genre.⁴⁹ Concerns over accuracy in the interpretation of the past have long been raised when discussing historical and heritage films, and a key aspect of my research is the notion of authenticity in the presentation, reconstruction, and consumption of the heritage and tradition. The playful and subversive approach to representing the past that has been observed in various national cinemas from the 1990s onwards leads to questions of whether authenticity is defined as factual accuracy or more as a certain attitude when viewing the past. Marcia Landy, for example, argues that ‘the concern with history is not to reproduce factual “truth” but to explore how and for whom truth is constituted and the destructive consequences of relying on such knowledge. [Such] films do not offer a unified version of the past, instead they present the past in an allegorical fashion to offer a striated rendition of history and memory’.⁵⁰ She suggests that in focusing too much on fact and a positivist

⁴⁷ Hwang, *South Korean Sageuk*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Vidal, *Heritage Film*, p. 1.

⁴⁹ See, Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁰ Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). p. 66.

view of history reduces how much the past can, and should, be used as a way of engaging with the present. For heritage films, this manifests itself in narratives that take on the look of a historical moment but in which the characterisations may be rooted more in fiction. As Kara McKechnie remarks, ‘the expectation is always that [the heritage film] will represent history “as it really happened”, but the key to convincing audiences that historical truth is being represented appears to lie in the film’s ability to reproduce accurately the look of the period [...] this obligatory accuracy of appearance can provide the necessary level of authenticity, so that greater narrative freedom can be taken’.⁵¹ The focus on the spectacle of the surface and fetishised gaze at period details have been some key areas of focus in heritage film criticism. As noted earlier by McKechnie, the preoccupation with depicting a nation’s traditional culture, such as architecture, food, and costumes, has led to heritage film being viewed by some as fundamentally inauthentic due to its shallow obsession with superficial, pastiche images and ‘dumbed down’ escapism.

In contrast to this criticism, some scholars have observed that knowingly presenting an ‘inauthentic’ or ‘spectacular’ depiction of history allows heritage films to construct a more ‘illustrative’ or ‘enlightening’ view of the past. Deborah Cartmell and I. Q. Hunter, for instance, propose that films which maintain a blatantly interpretive reading of history do so to construct counter-myths to the past. As they suggest, this alternative perspective to ‘factually’ reading the past creates a gaze into history and heritage, ‘sometimes with horror at its violence and oppression [...] and sometimes with nostalgia for lost innocence and style’.⁵² This aspect of nostalgia in relation to viewing the past, again, has its supporters and detractors. While the derision aimed at nostalgia in heritage films is

⁵¹ Kara McKechnie, ‘Taking Liberties with the Monarch: The Royal Biopics of the 1990s’, in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film* ed. by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 217-236 (p. 218-219).

⁵² Deborah Cartmell and I. Q. Hunter, ‘Introduction: Retrovisions: Historical Makeovers in Film and Literature’, in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction* ed. by Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001), pp. 1-7 (p. 2).

regarded as a mainstay of early criticism, in recent years it has been viewed more favourably. Anthony Enns adopts the term 'reflective nostalgia' in his essay on post-Soviet nostalgia in German cinema, suggesting that it is used to create a space for a critique and re-examination of the nation's contemporary issues.⁵³ Similarly, Pam Cook discusses nostalgia as a method of working through social and historical traumas, and in the context of cinema, nostalgia gives an audience a chance for engagement with history that can challenge how the past is viewed. She comments that 'rather than being seen as a reactionary, regressive condition imbued with sentimentality, it can be perceived as a way of coming to terms with the past, enabling it to be exorcised in order that society, and individuals, can move on. In other words, while not necessarily progressive itself, nostalgia can form part of a transition to progress and modernity'.⁵⁴ While Enns and Cook talk about nostalgia in relation to history within living memory, their ideas are problematised when one considers how audiences engage with depictions of premodern history, and how this past is reconstructed on screen. Their suggestions that nostalgia can be utilised in the process of modernity and for engaging with historical traumas are aspects that I address later in this chapter. As Saena Dozier suggests:

In Korean *sageuk*, nostalgia is not a yearning to return to a home that had actually existed historically, but rather a psychological longing to escape, that is, to project one's prospective hopes and desires into an imagined past. Nostalgia involves a continual search for a time where we can imagine that desirable humanness once existed. As member of the postmodern mankind, spectators find these ideal human qualities and relationships in historical fiction, specifically in the premodern past.⁵⁵

Similarly, I focus on how the concepts of authenticity, nostalgia, and a historical gaze can be regarded in the context of new *sageuk* films and Korean cultural heritage.

⁵³ See, Anthony Enns, 'The Politics of Ostalgie: Post-Soviet Nostalgia in Recent German Film', *Screen* 48.4 (Winter, 2007), 475-491.

⁵⁴ Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 4.

⁵⁵ Dozier, 'Finding Our Space of Innocence Through *Sagŭk* Films', p. 196.

In line with Enns' and Cook's ideas, Jerome de Groot states that historical fictions 'allow a culture to think in new ways about what historical engagement, and the writing of the past, might actually be, and to rethink the terms of historical understanding. They contribute to the historical imaginary, both in their diegetic content and also in the modes of narrativization, knowing, and articulation that they deploy'.⁵⁶ The notion of heritage film's construction of a historical gaze is not unique to Korean cinema. The creation of what Eckart Voigts-Virchow calls 'heritage spaces' is an undercurrent to all films that reconstruct a period setting.⁵⁷ It is when this notion is applied to a national, in this case Korean context that this historical imaginary takes on specific cultural concerns. In Kyung Hyun Kim's brief examination of the current state of the *sageuk* form, he proposes that recent cinematic imagery of Korea's premodern past is constructed to give viewers a chance to re-examine the present. This method, he argues, is inspired by the successes of other East Asian national cinemas using 'Orinary Worlds' to depict fantasised stories against a traditional backdrop. Pointing to the international successes of *wuxia* and *jidaigeki* films around the millennium, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000) and *Zatoichi* (Takeshi Kitano, 2003), Kim asks:

What could Korean cinema offer to counter the callisthenic bodies that somersault through the bamboo groves, or the samurai swords that criss-cross alongside rice paddies – traditional features of Hong Kong and Japanese cinema? Korean cinema around 2005 proposed its own 'Orinary World' that allows viewers to diagnose the frail conditions of civility and the cruelty of the present: using the Gyeongbok Palace and its association with *Joseon*-era history as the main setting for premodern period pieces that probe Koreans' own brand of love stories and action dramas, which cut across the regional, ideological, and class barriers that have plagued Korea for the past hundred years.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Jerome de Groot, *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Films* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

⁵⁷ Eckart Voigts-Virchow, "'Corset Wars': An Introduction to Syncretic Heritage Film Culture since the Mid-1990s", in *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions since the Mid-1990s* ed. by Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 2004), pp. 9-32 (p. 11).

⁵⁸ Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, p. 207.

His observation, however, is brief and he does not go into further detail explaining how the fictional use of *Joseon* traditions and iconography changes how history itself is viewed. My thesis aims to further this discussion regarding the construction of a historical imaginary that is being used as a resource in Korea's contemporary cinema culture. I want to expand on Kim's *Originary World* by drawing a comparison with how Carol Gluck views the use of tradition with regard to Japan's Edo period of 1603 to 1868, which she argues has become a desired and commodified Other for a modern industrialised Japanese society. Through a comparison, I suggest that Korea's *Joseon* era has undergone a similar appropriation but that this has ultimately played out differently due to the nation's particular experience of the twentieth century.

As Gluck summarises:

Modernity, by definition, foresaw the future by setting itself off from the past. Newness was all, but it could only be grasped by juxtaposition to what was old. In France the ancien régime came to represent the whole of the old order, the very antithesis of the new revolutionary age. And in Europe the medieval past became the anterior Otherness against which the modern historical imagination [...] defined itself as *modern*, whether by asserting utter difference or by evoking seductively selective affinities. In Japan the Edo period became this sort of historical imaginary.⁵⁹

She maintains that as Japan entered the process of modernity, the Edo period became a marker of Japanese tradition. As she continues, 'accounts of modern Japan began by situating Edo, as roadblock or detour, straightaway or shortcut, on the historical highway leading to modern times'.⁶⁰ However, through this process the Edo period became commodified not just as a historical era to distinguish from modernising Japan, but also as a cultural resource that Gluck dubs 'a repository of traditions associated with Japanese distinctiveness'.⁶¹ She argues that this (re)invention of Edo heritage and traditions is

⁵⁹ Carol Gluck, 'The Invention of Edo', in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* ed. by Stephen Vlastos (London: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 262-284 (p. 262). [Emphasis in original]

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 263.

presented in three differing forms. Firstly, national Edo utilises this era of Japan's history in order to formulate a linear narrative of the national past, seeing Edo as a functional and essential aspect of Japan's national development. Secondly, oppositional Edo views tradition and heritage in relation to modern society's struggles and political protests. Here, both conservatives and progressives view Edo with particular ideologies, identifying the era, for instance, as either a harmonious and communal tradition, or as demonstrating a history of protests and peasant uprisings. Finally, commodified Edo is the most industrial form, which sees Edo heritage as a visual stockpile exploited as an inspiration for popular fictions, commercial media, and state-sponsored memorialisation. Gluck summarises these processes of reinvention as the 'Edo-as-storehouse of national identity'.⁶² I argue that Korea has undergone a similar process of commodification with its *Joseon* era, creating an archive of traditions, ideologies, and iconographies that are used in various forms when representing the past. Korea's historical imaginary and marker of historical transition has in many ways been used similarly to Japan's Edo period. Both cultures use influential historical periods that are imagined as comparisons to, and desired objects of, the present. However, unlike Japan's modernity that began internally with the Meiji restoration of 1868 to 1912, Korea's modernity was, to a degree, imposed upon the nation during the Japanese colonial era of 1910 to 1945.

In ways that I discuss later in this chapter, Korea's *Joseon* historical imaginary is rooted in the nation's formulation and transformation into a postcolonial and postmodern society. Before this, I first return to how the discussion of historical imaginaries and heritage commodities works into my ideas surrounding how these aspects play into the *sageuk* form. Returning to Kim's *Originary World*, his terminology and argument is drawn from Deleuzian theories regarding the tensions between fantasy and reality in the creation

⁶² Ibid.

of a cinematic temporality. He proposes that the contemporary representation of Korea's past has entered an era that demonstrates a postmodern desire to create a space for historical interpretation and revisionism:

We have come full circle: the virtuality rendered in this new *sageuk* is a Korea that insists on blurring the boundary between the way things really were and the way things are remembered, or the way things now appear in our consciousness. The Deleuzian 'powers of the false' [...] suggest finding a third path beyond the true and the false [...] In this [Originary] world, neither the opposition between true and false nor the one between reality and fantasy can be resolved. Instead, both turn into what Henri Bergson calls the 'creative evolution' that allows that very tension to be a joyous *nolabose* (let us play) site.⁶³

In Kim's idea of the Originary World, he points towards what he regards as 'the deconstruction and demise of historical authenticity', suggesting that instead of presenting any form of historical analysis, contemporary *sageuk* is focused instead on forging a historical imaginary based around revisionist representations and special effect-driven imagery.⁶⁴ To use Voigts-Virchow's expression 'heritage space', quoted earlier, this drive towards a postmodern fantastic view of history and tradition can be seen as a way of creating a new space to explore how the past relates to present-day concerns. While Kim views this form negatively, believing it to flatten and asphyxiate history, Kyu Hyun Kim disagrees as to the reason why. In his reading of Kim's *sageuk* analysis, Kyu Hyun Kim states that his issue with the historical authenticity in these films is not the lack of allegorical usage but down to its effect on historical integrity and temporality. He comments: 'the problem with [these] historical dramas is not their indifference to "representation" or "historical analysis"; it is rather their analytic excess and relentless "presentism" – that is, their desire [...] to collapse the distance between the past and the present, and thereby to effect an erasure of the disparate and irreducible moments that constitute the totality of

⁶³ Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, p. 211-212. In this quotation, Kim cites two sources: Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), and Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson, Michael Kolkman and Michael Vaughan, trans. Arthur Mitchel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

Korean history'.⁶⁵ The aim of my analysis is not to draw a conclusion as to whether the 'inauthenticity' and 'inaccuracy' of *sageuk* films is a positive or negative aspect of cinematic representation. Instead, I approach the historical imaginary in an exploratory manner, questioning the use of heritage and identifying the social factors that have led to a subversive use of traditional culture, characters, and iconography.

Post/Heritage, Post/Modernism, and Post/Colonialism

I use the term 'post-heritage' to discuss my ideas regarding this emergence of a new *sageuk* historical imaginary. While Claire Monk originally used post-heritage to discuss gender politics and representation that arose in a wave of heritage films from the 1990s, the term has since become used to debate all aspects of recent productions that go against the typical fetishisation seen in former styles. Vidal summarises that 'the emergence of a post-heritage paradigm suggests a celebratory turn to postmodern cultural recycling and aesthetic possibilities offered by pastiche in relation to the contemporary period film'.⁶⁶ She goes on to highlight how this post-heritage approach includes social critique, eroticism, self-reflexivity, and depictions of class struggles, all in ways not typically addressed in archetypal heritage films. For my investigation into new *sageuk*'s example of this emergent paradigm, I use the term to relate to discussions of postmodernism and postcolonialism in the context of Korean heritage. Linking the prefix 'post' with heritage, in this context, alludes to the way Korean heritage is used, manipulated, and commodified in contemporary culture, which is entrenched in two key aspects of the nation's twentieth

⁶⁵ Kyu Hyun Kim, 'Virtually Alive or Questionably Dead? The Ambivalence of Modern Korean Identity in Literature and Film', *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 3 (June, 2012), 80-89 (p. 82).

⁶⁶ Vidal, *Heritage Film*, p. 100.

century experience: modernity and victimisation. While these two are intrinsically linked, I first want to consider them separately.

First, modernity is understood as a catch-all term to broadly refer to the shift from agricultural 'traditional' society to an industrial 'modern' society. However, it is often understood in essence to also mean the process of Westernisation. Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo, and Han Ji Kwak argue in their discussion of Korean cinema's reaction to democratisation and modernity that, for non-Westerners, 'modernisation as an economic process, combined with its social and cultural implications, is nothing other than the implication of Western discourse whose essence is the instrumental rationality generated by the logic of capital'.⁶⁷ They imply that the dominant Western powers that impose industrialisation and the corresponding social values onto non-Western cultures disrupt indigenous cultures and identities. The experience of modernity and Westernisation fractures a culture's link with tradition, causing it to be 'mourned' and, in an attempt to reconnect to the past, is reconstructed. Here, the nature of authenticity is questioned. Laurel Kendall remarks that Korean society's transition into an economic and cultural powerhouse has caused the nation's traditional culture to be realigned with the emergence of a capitalist social structure. She writes:

South Korea in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first centuries is a fundamentally different place, a strong nation-state and techno-giant that has mastered all manner of modern forms from one of the world's largest megamalls to the hugely successful production to pop culture for a global market. At the same time, and in a manner everywhere conducive to nostalgia, South Koreans express anxiety over the corrupting influence of new wealth. On such ground, traditional things become desirable commodities, and a nostalgic embrace of tradition – in modern commodity form – constitutes one South Korean response to the flux and contradiction associated with a postmodern condition.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo and Han Ji Kwak, *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p. 117.

⁶⁸ Laurel Kendall, 'Introduction: Material Modernity, Consumable Tradition', in *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity: Commodification, Tourism, and Performance* ed. by Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), pp. 1-17 (p. 3-4).

As discussed earlier, the nostalgia that is often associated with tradition is considered a factor in the commodification of cultural heritage. For Korea, this is expressed as a reaction to the rapid shift in society from modernism to postmodernity. Kendall draws attention to commodified traditions such as the touristic and ticketed performances of palace ceremonies and the institutional veneration of *hanbok* (traditional dress) and *hangeul* (the Korean writing system) through commemorative holidays, questioning the nature of authenticity and nostalgia in their (re)invention. She asks if the consumable quality of heritage as replicable resources means that tradition becomes artificial, or if it could be considered a cultural production significant in and of itself.⁶⁹

Min, Joo, and Kwak, on the same issue of the contemporary reaction to modernity, hold the opinion that 'given the unprecedented extent and intensity of modernisation are widely considered to represent the unique accomplishment of modern Korean history and culture, modernisation can be seen as the major constituent core of Korean collective experience during the twentieth century'.⁷⁰ They go on to suggest, through their investigation into how Korean modernity has been represented in cinema since 1988 (from the time of the first democratically elected president), that the emergence of a stronger middle class created a new critical consciousness.⁷¹ Chang Kyung Sup's theory of 'compressed modernity', which could be considered a kind of Korean exceptionalism, proposes that the condensed and complex social shifts that shaped twentieth century Korea set an unprecedented model of development, which has been regarded as an example of successful transition from post-war poverty to advanced global economy within four decades. Chang defines his idea as follows:

⁶⁹ See, *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Min, Joo and Kwak, *Korean Film*, p. 115.

⁷¹ While Roh Tae Woo was elected as the sixth president of South Korea in December 1987, he was not inaugurated until February 1988. The Sixth Republic is cited to have started in 1987 but Min, Joo, and Kwak focus on films from 1988 onwards as this was when censorship laws and industry practices were loosened, resulting in the emergence of New Korean cinema in the late 80s and 90s.

Compressed modernity is a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system. Compressed modernity [...] can be manifested at various levels of human existence – i.e., personhood, family, secondary organisations, urban spaces, societal units (including civil society, nation, etc.), and, not least importantly, the global society. At each of these levels, people's lives need to be managed intensely, intricately, and flexibly in order to remain normally integrated with the rest of society.⁷²

Much like Min, Joo, and Kwak who describe Korean modernity as a 'unique accomplishment', Chang argues that his theory allows for a better understanding of Korean society and culture, as classical Western-derived theories of modernity do not apply to the nation's compressed transformation. Much like other nationalist exceptionalist philosophies such as Germany's *Sonderweg* and Japan's *Nihonjinron*, which propose the uniqueness of these national cultures and their historical trajectories, Chang's compressed modernity emphasises the uniqueness of the Korean experience in order to also discuss the problems that arose for the nation. For instance, he uses his theory to highlight how the rapid economic changes and development that exploded over the past few decades has too hastily altered family social structures, thereby explaining the country's plummeting birth rate and rising divorce rate. In relation to these observations surrounding Korean modernism, an objective of my textual analysis is to consider how this process has affected the gaze towards the past and how this cultural disruption can be read in *sageuk* films.

The second of my viewpoints regarding Korean heritage refers to victimisation. Dai Jinhua notes, in relation to the changes to Chinese national identity in the face of globalisation, that China's transformation following the First and Second Sino-Japanese Wars (1894-1895 and 1937-1945) changed the nation's cultural and ideological outlook. She writes:

⁷² Chang Kyung Sup, 'Compressed Modernity in Perspective: South Korean Instances and Beyond', *5th World Congress of Korean Studies*, Taipei, Chinese Culture University (25-28 October, 2010) 1-36 (p. 6).

The experience of victimisation in historical and practical terms was another origin for the strengthening of nationalistic identification [...] The Chinese dwelling on cosmopolitanism, Eurocentrism, the complex cultural psychology of idolizing the West while searching for an indigenous identity, and the display of conscious national resistance and extreme nationalistic fanaticism have always been inextricably entangled.⁷³

Dai highlights the role of an external influence in the construction of national identity. Similar statements could be made about Korean nationalism in the modern era and its influence on modern culture's relationship with a premodern past. Korea's twentieth century experiences of colonialism, independence, war, and post-war nation building demonstrate how Korean national identity has been forged through repeated oppression and resolve. One could relate this to the concept of *han*, an ambiguous and difficult-to-define term that is broadly used to refer to Korea's national sentiment and character, encompassing a range of feelings including despair, lament, resentment, and repressed rage. Though much too wide a term to discuss in detail here, *han* is considered to play a unique and vital role in Korean culture and identity, and has developed over centuries of injustices from internal and external oppressions.⁷⁴ This very attitude towards *han* as a unique, culturally-specific concept has its detractors. Hye Seung Chung, for instance, criticises an apparent overdependence on the term, especially when attaching it to the depiction of Korean history and nationhood. She argues that 'the critical overemphasis on such an ambiguous concept as a definite marker of Korean-ness contributes to the erection of "imagined emotional communities" of the nation and its culture'.⁷⁵ To Chung, *han* has become privileged as a unique Korean sentiment despite similar concepts existing across

⁷³ Dai Jinhua, 'Behind Global Spectacle and National Image Making', *positions: east asia cultures critique* 9.1 (Spring, 2001) 161-186 (p. 171).

⁷⁴ For detailed discussions on *han*, see, Boyé Lafayette De Mente, *The Korean Mind: Understanding Contemporary Korean Culture* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), David Bannon, 'Unique Korean Cultural Concepts in Interpersonal Relations', *Translation Journal* 12.1 (January, 2008), Jae Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds – Han* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

⁷⁵ Hye Seung Chung, 'Towards a Strategic Korean Cinephilia: A Transnational Détournement of Hollywood Melodrama', in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* ed. by Kathleen McHugh, Nancy Abelmann (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), pp. 117-150 (p. 121).

other cultures. The persistent link in Korean culture between victimisation and nationalism has created a form of national identity dependent on an emotional connection to the past. Through a sense of belonging to a collective feeling of grief and injustice, the perspective of the past is burdened with a contemporary bias that continually positions Korea as the oppressed. In a similar vein, several scholars have debated Korea's position as a postcolonial nation and a Third World culture, suggesting that such terminology encourages a stagnant view of Korean modernity and enforces a Cold War ideology.

Chungmoo Choi, for example, debates whether Korea is indeed *postcolonial*. Choi believes that postcolonial is an ambivalent term and it is more appropriate to think of Korea as under the colonisation of consciousness. Here, she states that American mass culture's global dominance is a form of continuous colonisation, writing, 'American mass culture towered over Korea's desolate cultural landscape as South Korea becomes one of the most heavily armed fortresses of the vast American empire. To live in this state of internal displacement and external dependency is to live in a state of colonialism'.⁷⁶ Min, Joo and Kwak disagree with Choi's argument, suggesting that Korea's clear economic, political and social development since the nation's liberation is a sign that Korea is able to enact its own changes without the influence of a coloniser. Viewing heritage while also considering a (post)colonial perspective, it can be argued that Korea's traditional agrarian past was not lost through modernity but usurped by colonial powers. Since Korea's early modernity was experienced as a colonial enforcement, the nature of discussing nostalgia in relation to Korean heritage is problematised, and furthermore when also considering the concept of *han*. The past becomes politicised as a nationalistic and patriotic remembrance

⁷⁶ Chungmoo Choi, 'The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea', in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia* ed. by Tani E. Barlow (London: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 349-372 (p. 353).

of a premodern and precolonial heritage, in which unique Korean traditions and heritage objects have become fetishised and commodified.

An example of this nostalgic/nationalistic remembrance has been observed since the late 1980s. Okpyo Moon's study of the development of Korean heritage tourism in the 1990s suggests that the impulse to return to premodern traditions as a source of nationalistic pride and distinction is an act of postmodern remembrance. While in the colonial era, the Confucian ideals of *Joseon* tradition were seen negatively and blamed as the reason behind the collapse of the dynasty and the nation's colonisation. As Korean society became democratised and the economy strengthened in the late 1980s, this attitude changed. Moon explains that as Korea gained prominence as a global power, the nation began looking inward at the issue of national identity and cultural distinctiveness. She writes:

Social commentators described a sense of loss or an identity crisis, which they attributed to Korean experiences of colonisation, war, economic development, modernisation, and above all the pervasiveness of Western cultural influences, which were believed to have fundamentally changed Korean ways of thinking, lifestyles, and patterns of social relationships. In the search for Korean national-cultural identity, many came to appreciate that Confucianism had once helped define what it meant to be Korean [...] The revival of interest in Confucianism in the 1990s can thus be characterised as a postmodern search for roots in an increasingly globalising world and as part of a collective nostalgia for things past as a counter-weight to Westernisation.⁷⁷

In her study, Moon specifically examines this postmodern nostalgia in relation to the rise in the touristic appropriation of Confucian heritage, such as Buddhist temple stays, *yangban* lineage house experiences, and the mimicry of ancestral rites as a performance. I demonstrate that this revival of *Joseon* era Confucian heritage and tradition has also occurred with the contemporary resurgence of the *sageuk* genre.

⁷⁷ Okpyo Moon, 'Guests of Lineage Houses: Tourist Commoditization of Confucian Cultural Heritage in Korea', *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity: Commodification, Tourism, and Performance* ed. by Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), pp. 88-104 (p. 91).

Jini Kim Watson's work on Japanese imperial mimicry and its implications for Korea as a postcolonial state argues that the ambiguity when viewing Japan as a former colonising power has had an impact on Korea's transitory modernity process, and as such, its view of traditional culture and heritage. She explains that 'Korea's tutelary modernity is [...] more the result of the internalisation of, and not the repudiation of, Japanese colonial hierarchies. The complexity of viewing Korea as a postcolonial nation comes not only from these contradictions, but also from the apparent lack of depth (and therefore obvious aberrance) of Japanese colonialism'.⁷⁸ This lack of depth, Watson highlights, is attributed to Japan's imperial mimicry based on a colonial hierarchy that positions Japan under Western powers such as Europe and America, but above its neighbouring states that it sought to colonise.⁷⁹ This act of colonisation is described to be not just a form of possession and an attempt to gain political global power, but also, according to Watson, Japan's justification for colonisation to unify Asia in the process of modernity (Westernisation). She continues that:

[While] under the Japanese, the process of colonisation is transformed into the process of civilisation, [...] the ambiguity over *whose* civilisation this might be – Japanese? European? American? – is telling. These otherwise attentive postcolonial analyses neglect to account for the way Japan's *translation* of the West has influenced the Korean understanding of modernity, nation and culture.⁸⁰

Watson highlights how Japan's imperialistic modernity was more of an impersonation of Eurocentric enlightenment and civilising ideals. She argues that this logic has been forced upon Korea's modernity process, and as such caused what she dubs 'the failure of Korean postcoloniality'.⁸¹ The repetition of a colonial hierarchy strengthens the view that the

⁷⁸ Jini Kim Watson, 'Imperial mimicry, modernisation theory and the contradictions of postcolonial South Korea' *Postcolonial Studies* 10.2 (May, 2007) 171-190 (p. 187).

⁷⁹ Watson derives her term imperial mimicry from Homi K. Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry. He defines colonial mimicry as 'the [coloniser's] desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*'. See, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 122. [Emphasis in original]

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182. [Emphasis in original]

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

nation is in a position of inferiority, reinforcing the victimisation at the core of Korea's national identity. From this perspective I aim to readdress and problematise the established framework of heritage film scholarship. My intention to refer to contemporary *sageuk* as a post-heritage form is drawn from these discussions of the postcolonial and postmodern conditions unique to Korea's recent social and cultural shifts. As such, in my usage of the term post-heritage I refer to the way in which Korea's link with its past and traditions has been fractured and manipulated by external and internalised forces.

While much writing about Korea's postcolonial filmmaking concerns the representation of the trauma surrounding the nation's twentieth century experiences of colonisation and war, I am more interested in exploring how a postcolonial historiography is manifested in the depiction of a premodern past. Relating to Kim Seong Nae's phrase, 'mourning Korean modernity', I argue that the depiction and revisionism of *Joseon* heritage in contemporary *sageuk* is a reflection of the trauma of the modernity process which has fractured the cultural link to the pre-colonial past.⁸² In her essay, Kim discusses issues surrounding the representation and repression of local and national memory regarding the violent insurgency that occurred between 1948 and 1949. The Jeju uprising between civilians and anti-colonial, anti-imperial rebels, and the transitional US Military South Korean government, resulted in the death of at least 14,000 people.⁸³ For many decades discussion of the incident was suppressed by the government, with those who spoke about the uprising being subjected to beatings and prison sentences. Upon the establishment of democracy in the late 1980s the government apologised for the suppression, and analysis of the uprising began through various forms, including public memorials and ceremonies,

⁸² See, Kim Seong Nae, 'Mourning Korean Modernity in the Memory of the Cheju Third Incident', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1.3 (2000) 461-476.

⁸³ Estimations about the death rate are varied, which is attributed to the suppression of analysis of the incident. Kim cites between 14,000 and 80,000 deaths from differing sources. While around 14,000 is the official statistic, many, such as Kim, argue that around 30,000 is more likely, taking into consideration unreported deaths and disappearances.

victim and survivor testimonies, and art exhibitions. Kim's analysis of these representations argues that the remembrance and memory of this history is not a retrieval but 'a reconfiguration of the past, for memory selects from the flux of images of the past those that best fit its present needs'.⁸⁴ She suggests that the postcolonial, postmodern reaction to the trauma of Korean modernity, fraught with violence, oppression, and conflict, is to depict the past in a manner that aids contemporary society and culture, not necessarily depicting the past for the sake of repossession. I propose that these political dynamics of remembrance and historical consciousness towards modern society can be seen to have an impact on the way a *premodern* past is also viewed.

In Kim Soyoung's essay on the presentation of postcolonial historiographies in the cinemas of Taiwan and Korea, she illustrates how period films such as *The Puppetmaster* (Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 1993) and *Chihwaseon* (Im Kwon Taek, 2002) create a form of 'visual archive'. Using this term, she refers to the way in which these films 'create the elaborate sets which offer a glimpse of the *mise-en-scène* of the past out of the postcolonial ruins'.⁸⁵ Her analysis of *Chihwaseon* is particularly interesting as she applies notions of nostalgia and memory to a film set in the nineteenth century. The film depicts the life and work of Jang Seung Up (known by the pen name, Owon), the celebrated painter of the late *Joseon* era. He is portrayed both as an inspiring and talented painter, earning respect in the royal court and influencing change in Korean art, and also as a drunkard and a vagabond. Early in the film he is accused of simply being a talented imitator of other artists, which sets him on a journey to discover his own personal style. Set against the backdrop of reform in *Joseon* in the 1880s, wherein Japan and China were competing for control of the peninsula, the film

⁸⁴ Kim, 'Mourning Korean Modernity', p. 462.

⁸⁵ Kim Soyoung, 'Postcolonial film historiography in Taiwan and South Korea: *The Puppetmaster* and *Chihwaseon*', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9.2 (June 2008) 195-210 (p. 208).

critiques Korea's heritage of *Joseon* painting by stating it was a mere imitation of neighbouring cultures (i.e., the powerful colonisers). Kim writes:

There is no spotting of *Joseon* people, only the Japanese influence but it shows a political ambience of besiegement. In the midst of this, *Chihwaseon* criticizes the existing *Joseon* painting style, which basically consisted of imitating Chinese ones, and uses the painter Jang Seung Up to describe the immediate prehistory of film culture [...] In order to create his unique paintings, Jang must overcome the limitations of Chinese paintings. However, Jang does not have many resources that he can call upon to create works that are inherently different from his predecessors [...] As an outcast, Jang is well-situated to observe the new world that is to arise after the collapse of the old one.⁸⁶

Kim supposes that the critique of Jang's painting style is also a statement regarding the future of Korean film, and his character is formulated as a commentary on Korea's position within the East Asian political and cultural sphere. She means this to indicate Korea's subordinate status in the region, as frequently victimised and targeted for colonisation. Overall, she engages with this *Joseon*-based *sageuk* film as more than just a period spectacle but as an interpretation of premodern history using a postmodern, postcolonial perspective. This form of critique has its detractors, with some seeing a presentism form of historical representation as a distortion of the past that imposes present-day perspectives and ideologies. As quoted earlier, Kyu Hyun Kim criticises contemporary *sageuk* for its presentist form. He observes, 'it is not so much the "postmodern" or "inauthentic" reconstruction of the past as [the] capitulation to the disciplining impulse of the presentist epistemic regime, enforcing an interpretation of history that has a bearing *only* on the (political) "realities" of contemporary Korea'.⁸⁷ While his criticism is valid, I go beyond this observation and consider what Kim Soyoung describes as 'the postcolonial geopolitics at work in contemporary popular cultural production and dissemination in East Asia'.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 204.

⁸⁷ Kim, 'The Ambivalence of Modern Korean Identity in Literature and Film', p. 83. [Emphasis in original]

⁸⁸ Kim, 'Postcolonial film historiography in Taiwan and South Korea', p. 207.

The result of these discussed postmodern and postcolonial conditions is the on-going debate surrounding the hybridisation of local cinemas in reaction to globalisation. For my investigation into the renaissance of the *sageuk* genre, I highlight here Dal Yong Jin's argument on Korean cinema's creation of a 'third space'. His work discusses the role of hybridisation in Korea's popular culture and genre filmmaking and asks whether it is possible for Korea to have successfully undergone a process of blending local and global cultures. Drawing from hybridity theorists such as Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, and Arjun Appadurai, Jin interprets the rhetoric of hybridity as a process of cultural shift.⁸⁹ He explains:

Hybridisation is not merely the mixing, blending and synthesising of different elements that ultimately forms a culturally faceless whole. In the course of hybridisation, cultures often generate new forms and make new connections with one another. As Bhabha points out, hybridity opens up 'a third space' within which elements encounter and transform each other as signifying the 'in-between', incommensurable location where minority discourses intervene to preserve their strengths and particularity.⁹⁰

Jin's approach to hybridity maintains that hybrid culture is the creation of a new means to deal with cultural and national identity. Using Bhabha's term, 'third space', he argues that hybridity allows for a localised culture to become more resistant and enriched against a dominant globalised culture, by enabling localised specificity and interpretations. Given that hybridity is rooted in theories of postcolonial mimicry and aims to critique cultural imperialism, Jin draws attention to the relationship between Korean cinema and popular culture, and that of Hollywood and the West. He summarises that the act of hybridisation is an attempt to find a form of culture between a globalised local and a localised global. Jin claims that 'hybridity theory in Korean cinema distorts the inequality and imbalance of

⁸⁹ See, Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power', in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* ed. by Stuart Hall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), pp. 184-228, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁹⁰ Dal Yong Jin, 'Critical Interpretations of Hybridisation in Korean Cinema', *Javnost – The Public* 17.1 (November, 2010) 55-71 (p. 57).

power relations between Hollywood and national cinema, while optimistically chanting or empowering the cultural capacity of the local in the processes of hybridisation'.⁹¹ In relation to cinema, the drive to create a third space, Jin argues, is reflected in the hybridisation of domestic film genres. This genre blending results in the mixture of Hollywood-style conventions with localised/Korean mentalities and cultural representations. He ultimately believes, however, that this attempt for a third space has so far failed to take hold. Returning to his discussion in 2016, he concludes that hybridisation in Korean cinema is an unresolved and potentially open-ended issue. As he surmises, 'if hybridity simply means the mixture of two different cultures, Korean cinema would be one good case to prove this trend. However, as long as hybridity is about the creation of a third space beyond the simple fusion of two cultures, the local film industry has not successfully hybridised'.⁹² A successfully hybridised Korean cinema, in his perspective, is one that would stand equal to Hollywood as a global cinema. Jin concludes in saying 'the issue is that the majority of films have by and large failed in creating a third space, because the display of the cultural factors of hybrid Korean films is Western-centric and neglects Korean sociocultural values to fit Western tastes'.⁹³

Sun Jung, in contrast, believes that the hybridisation of Korean cinema is a successful phenomenon and contemporary Korean filmmaking represents what she calls an 'indigenized Global form'.⁹⁴ By concentrating on the dominant presence of the global over the critical and interpretive power of the local, Jung finds that this view of hybridisation detracts and diminishes the achievement of Korea's postcolonial cinema. As she remarks, 'the cultural imperialist view only highlights South Korean cinema's mimetic tendencies and

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 67.

⁹² Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 89.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), p. 11.

its neo-colonial desire of the dominant culture that is Hollywood while failing to acknowledge local power dynamics such as the ability to discriminate and re-examine the dominant culture'.⁹⁵ She suggests that the phenomenon of hybridity in Korean film is best viewed by drawing attention to the articulation of differences, not criticising the imitative similarities between forms. Similarly, Hye Seung Chung maintains that Korean cinema already had a prolific era of hybridisation during the Golden Age, mixing classical Hollywood narrative and aesthetic conventions with the post-war specificity of the era. Writing on the 1950s melodrama, she argues that:

Korean audiences' infatuation and identification with Hollywood cinema should be historicized in the post-war cultural context rather than being simply frowned upon as a symptom of U.S. cultural imperialism. The post-Korean War generation's intense nostalgia for sentimental Hollywood melodrama is a significant indicator of the cultural displacement that occurs when spectatorial desire for the 'other' operates within a postcolonial setting.⁹⁶

She claims, like Jung, that an imperialist perspective when viewing hybridisation is an inadequate method for explaining the complexities of the phenomenon. In her analysis of *An Aimless Bullet*, she remarks that the film successfully hybridises Korean and Euro-American conventions and signifiers, and creates a blend of Hollywood melodramatic tropes and post-Korean War realism. In doing so, hybridisation in this context is not merely postcolonial mimicry but a more purposeful indigenous recontextualization and rearticulation of an imposing Other culture.

As I utilise the term hybridisation in subsequent chapters, I address how acts of genre blending and localising sensibilities are enacted within the renaissance of *sageuk*. I explore hybridisation through the larger influence of blockbuster-scale productions and the adaption and appropriation of Hollywood culture in contemporary Korean filmmaking. I also consider more specifically the influence of Euro-American heritage and historical

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁹⁶ Chung, 'Towards a Strategic Korean Cinephilia', p. 120.

productions on new *sageuk*. In doing so, I question the various aspects that I have addressed throughout this chapter. How does the Korean appropriation of heritage film conventions problematise the genre's inherent Eurocentrism? How does the rearticulation of Hollywood blockbuster aesthetics in a localised Korean cinema in turn create an indigenized global form? What are the implications that arise from the depiction of Korean heritage in a Westernised blockbuster form, for instance in relation to nostalgia and authenticity? When considering *sageuk* productions, how did the late twentieth century enable the rebirth of the genre, and what influence did the hybridisation present in Korean New Wave have on new *sageuk*?

Conclusion

I have chosen to concentrate my film analyses on works that represent the *Joseon* era to explore how the visual nature of cinema romanticises and mythologises the visual iconography of the era, but not necessarily the ideology. The Korean *sageuk* genre also has films that use other premodern eras for their setting, for instance, the fourteenth century *Goryeo* era in *A Frozen Flower* (Yoo Ha, 2008), and the battle between the *Baekje* and *Silla* Kingdoms of the seventh century, shown in *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield*. However, the *Joseon* era is by far the most popular with filmmakers and audiences alike. Through a consideration of *Joseon* as the predominant era of historical representation, I analyse how the specificities of the culture are reinvigorated or manipulated in contemporary *sageuk*. I have divided my chosen films into four chapters that illustrate the changes that have occurred within the *sageuk* form ranging from 2003 to 2014. In each of these chapters I engage with how the films can be considered to have taken on postmodern sensibilities, and what implications this has on my research questions.

In my first chapter, I consider how the film *Untold Scandal* constructs a distinct version of the past through a transcultural adaptation of the eighteenth century French novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, 1782). My analysis acknowledges that the film was made not just for a domestic audience but also for international spectators. In this aspect, I ask what effect an intercultural adaptation that moves between European and Asian spheres has on the spectator's understanding of a culturally specific past. As Jerome De Groot asks, 'is the historical engagement that is going on in [in this case, *sageuk*] films important to a non-national viewer, or does that past really become a foreign country?'⁹⁷ This chapter views *Untold Scandal* as a catalyst of generic change, which reinvigorated both the industry and the public's interest in *sageuk* storytelling. Throughout the subsequent chapters, I then explore how the form has evolved during the twenty-first century and how the questions that I have explored in this introduction impact on *sageuk*'s visual engagement with the past and historical representation.

In the second chapter, I progress to the end of the 2000s and analyse the hybrid genre film *Jeon Woo Chi* to consider how *sageuk* has adapted to the encroaching digitisation of Korean cinema. I highlight in my analysis that *Jeon Woo Chi*, like *Untold Scandal*, can be seen as a sign of change for the *sageuk* form, one which represents the wider state of Korean cinema at the end of the 2000s. My analysis also considers the film's use of traditional folklore and literature as the source of its narrative. By exploring the film's narrative and character origins in *Joseon* literature, I propose that *Jeon Woo Chi*, and similar *sageuk* productions, are continuing traditional folkloric storytelling through modern popular culture.

⁹⁷ Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 210.

For the third chapter, I examine *Masquerade*, a production that I argue democratises history by rewriting personal histories and cultural heritage. The film uses dual central characters to represent Gwanghaegun, the fifteenth king of the *Joseon* Dynasty, one, the real king, who is mysteriously taken ill, and a look-a-like, a commoner secretly hired to assume his role in court. The playful historicity at work in the text is a prime example of 'faction' in new *sageuk*. *Masquerade* takes advantage of the gaps in historical records to invent a sensationalised story of impersonators and court conspirators, all inspired by the legacy of the figure it portrays. With this chapter, I draw attention to the increasing critical and commercial attention being given to the *sageuk* form in the 2010s, which coincides with the simultaneous rise in the sense of spectacle and scale that has come to exemplify the form in recent years.

Finally, the last chapter explores the emergent trend in contemporary Korean cinema in producing epic-scale historical action films. I focus on *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, an epic war drama that is the most successful Korean film of all time. The film depicts the naval Battle of Myeongnyang in 1597, in which Korea successfully defended its coastline from the Japanese navy in a vastly outnumbered attack. In my analysis, I take into consideration the depiction of the naval commander Yi Sun Sin, who is revered in Korean society as an icon of courage and self-sacrifice, and has been immortalised as a venerated national hero. I argue that his character is used to represent the traditional 'martial manhood' figure, evoking the nationalistic traditions used throughout the twentieth century. I engage with *The Admiral* to examine the popular trend in Korean blockbusters in combining traditional heroic icons and history with an imitation of Hollywood-style generic conventions.

Overall, this thesis investigates how the recycling and reinventing of tradition and heritage deals with issues surrounding cultural and national identity. I question how

historical films attempt to re-establish a connection to a premodern past through a postmodern perspective, in a culture that is simultaneously localised and globalised. *Sageuk* films are an important area to consider within Korean cinema, not just because they take a distinct approach to cultural heritage but because they are popular. In the top ten most attended domestic Korean productions, three are historical films set within the *Joseon* era.⁹⁸ As discussed at the beginning of this introduction, the majority of Western scholarship dealing with contemporary Korean cinema focuses on festival favourites and arthouse films. With this thesis I intend to increase the scope of such scholarship by drawing attention to films that demonstrate a rising interest in Korean heritage, both domestically and internationally.

⁹⁸ It is interesting to note that also within the top ten are two period films based on twentieth century history, namely *Assassination* (Choi Dong Hoon, 2015) set during the Japanese occupation era, and *Ode to my Father* (Yoon Je Kyoon, 2014) which explores Korea in the decades following the Korean War. [As of September 2018]

CHAPTER ONE

Reviving a Forgotten Genre for a New Era

In Sarah Neely's analysis of *Cruel Intentions* (Roger Kumble, 1999), she discusses what she considers to be the film's revisionist narrative by describing reinterpretation as 'an act of possessing the ability to read the past, in the way that one would possess a prophetic vision [...] it involves casting a backward glance from the vantage point of the present, from the privileged perspective that allows one to look back'.⁹⁹ Her essay explores the surge in modernised adaptations of canonical texts that emerged from the mid to late 1990s, for instance, *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999), and *Romeo + Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1999). Neely's main interest is the film *Cruel Intentions*, a modernised reinterpretation of the 1782 French novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. She concentrates on how the film recreates the subversive sexuality of the source material by shifting the context from eighteenth century French aristocrats to twentieth century American high-school students. Since Neely's 2001 essay, there have been two more film adaptations of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* that transpose the story of the book to different eras and countries. The 2003 South Korean adaptation, *Untold Scandal* by E J Yong situates the events and characters in eighteenth century Korea, whereas the 2012 Chinese adaptation, *Dangerous Liaisons* by Hur Jin Ho, is based in 1930s Shanghai. This chapter concentrates on the first example, *Untold Scandal*, and how it can be regarded as a catalyst for change within *sageuk* filmmaking in South Korean cinema. Following *Untold Scandal*, the genre has experienced a resurgence of popularity with the domestic audience and also has begun gaining interest internationally. The typical content and presentation of the past in *sageuk* films has also altered since the success of *Untold Scandal*. This chapter

⁹⁹ Sarah Neely, 'Cool Intentions: The Literary Classic, the Teenpic and the 'Chick Flick'', in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction* ed. by Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001), pp. 74-86 (p. 74).

aims to ask which aspects of the film influenced such changes to the form. To do so, I engage with issues of cultural tradition and heritage, how these are represented and 'reinvented' through hybridity and Western generic influences, and the importance of gender in the adaptation. I also consider *sageuk's* influence and position within the larger influx of Korean popular culture production in the early twentieth century and its popularity both domestically and abroad, especially engaging with *Untold Scandal* as a key film in the nation's cinematic renaissance. Before moving on to this analysis, I will first introduce the filmmaker E J Yong, the film's plot, and the sociohistorical context behind the text.

E J Yong (his self-styled romanisation of the more standardised Lee Jae Yong) was born in 1965 in Daejeon. Following his graduation from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, E went on a backpacking trip around the world. It was this journey that spurred his love of cinema. In a 2005 interview he recalls the many and varied films he discovered at this time: 'I saw *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* in Germany, *Au revoir les enfants* in London, and *Pelle the Conqueror* in Australia. After I came home, I had to choose a job and movies were the only thing I was interested in. I couldn't imagine wearing a suit and working in a bank'.¹⁰⁰ Having made his decision, E enrolled at the Korean Academy of Film Arts in 1990 and released his first feature length film in 1998. His debut film, *An Affair*, tells the story of a bored housewife in her late thirties with a comfortable lifestyle, successful husband, and a young son, who has a passionate affair with her younger sister's fiancé. The film was a critical and commercial success, becoming one of the most attended domestic productions of the year and showing E J Yong as a director to watch. His second film, however, was less successful. *Asako in Ruby Shoes* (2000) is a co-production between South Korea and Japan

¹⁰⁰ E J Yong, quoted in, Sheila Johnson, *Film-makers on Film: E J Yong* (London: The Telegraph, 2005) < <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmmakersonfilm/3641039/Film-makers-on-film-E-J-Yong.html> > [accessed 20 February 2015]

that deals with voyeurism, loneliness, and global identity. The film presents various communities trying to find a home and what 'home' means to them, as the narrative jumps between Japan and Korea. Despite being praised critically, the film was not a commercial success.

E's next film, *Untold Scandal* was his biggest success to date, as the fourth bestselling Korean film of 2003 with 3,345,268 admissions, and sixth if one includes international releases.¹⁰¹ 2003 was an impressive year for Korean cinema, seeing the release of some of the most acclaimed productions in recent years, and showing that domestic films were not only well made but bankable. The same year that brought *Untold Scandal's* success also saw *Silmido*, *Oldboy*, *Memories of Murder* (Bong Joon Ho), and *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim Jee Won) enjoy both domestic box office success and international acclaim. *Untold Scandal's* reception is the most interesting however, as it was the most unexpected, given that this was a *sageuk* production. As established in the introduction, by the 1990s *sageuk* films had become an almost non-existent genre, with only a few examples to be found throughout the decade. Following the decline of the form during the politicised 1970s and 1980s, *Eternal Empire* (Park Jong Won, 1994) stands out as being a pre-Korean blockbuster-era attempt at making a Western-style historical epic, portraying the royal court power struggles of the late eighteenth century. However, despite being a critical success and winning several prominent awards, the film was not popular with audiences and has been largely neglected in discussions of *sageuk*. The release of *Untold Scandal* in 2003 brought quick success and surprised the local industry. Several big-budget attempts to revive the genre in the years prior had failed to re-establish *sageuk* as an epic form, a form which had become internationally popular for the historical film in other

¹⁰¹ See the following website for more information on the film's box office takings: <<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm03.html>> [accessed 20 February 2015]

national cinemas. For a mid-budget film based on an eighteenth-century French epistolary novel to become one of the year's most celebrated releases, there were signs that change was finally happening for *sageuk*.

The plot of *Untold Scandal* does not stray too far from the source material. All the narrative and character changes that have been made are those necessary to make the plot fit the context of Joseon era Korea. E had actually seen the film *Dangerous Liaisons* (Stephen Frears, 1988) before reading the book. He states in an interview, 'I first saw the movie in 1988, when I was travelling in Australia. At the time I didn't speak much English, so I couldn't understand all of it, but it was impressive, the scenes and the acting'.¹⁰² E describes how he had originally thought of doing an adaptation of the folk story *Chunhyangjeon* as his second film but knew he would never get the funding as a second-time director. The idea of making a period film came back to his mind after seeing Im Kwon Taek's 2000 version of the folk story *Chunhyang*, the costumes and acting reminding him of seeing *Dangerous Liaisons*. He then finally read the book and decided to adapt that instead. The layers of intertextuality and cultural hybridity this adds to his adaptation will be analysed later in this chapter.

E's *Untold Scandal* sets the events of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in the aristocratic lives of the Joseon dynasty, specifically within the later years of the eighteenth century. This was a time of increasing Western/European influence in the region, especially with regard to science and religion, aspects E utilises in the film's mise-en-scène and narrative. Madame Cho (portrayed by Lee Mi Sook) and Cho Won (Bae Yong Joon) are the two scheming and immoral aristocratic cousins depicting Laclos's Marquise Isabelle de Merteuil and Victome Sébastien de Valmont. Cho Won is an artist and scholar but also a dangerous

¹⁰² E J Yong, quoted in, Darcy Paquet, *An Interview with E J Yong* (Seoul: Koreanfilm.org, 2003) <<http://koreanfilm.org/ejyong.html>> [accessed 20 February 2015]

seducer, in love with Madame Cho, his cousin. She herself is a manipulative and ruthless power player, who maintains an outward appearance of being a respectable and pious noble woman. Upon discovering her husband's intentions to take So Ok (Lee So Yeon), a virginal 16 year old (the Cécile de Volanges character), as his new concubine, she sets out to get revenge. Madame Cho strikes a deal with Cho Won, whereby he will seduce and impregnate So Ok before her husband can sleep with her. Cho Won, however, wants more of a challenge. He bets his cousin that he can bed the famous and celebrated 27 year old virgin, Lady Jung (Jeon Do Yeon; the Madame Marie de Tourvel character), who was widowed before consummating her marriage and has remained chaste ever since. Their deal states that if Cho Won is successful in seducing Lady Jung, Madame Cho will let him spend one night with her, something he has long wanted. However, if he fails, then he must vow to take up a life of chastity and become a monk.

By situating the corruption and decadence of eighteenth century France in the equally corrupt landscape of *Joseon* Korea, E is able to address social and cultural aspects specific to the era. The contrast between the puritanical and patriarchal dominance of Confucian society, and the immoral, pleasure-driven hidden lives of the elite *yangban* class, presents an interesting critique of the hypocrisy of Korea's *Joseon* heritage. The *yangban* were the ruling gentry of *Joseon*, expected to oversee the social order using their Confucian education, yet they are frequently depicted as the leisured class, flouting the social mores that they instigated.¹⁰³ Moreover, E's depiction of the conflicts between traditional Confucianism and foreign Catholicism adds an extra dimension to the canonical source material. Regarding the continued interest in Laclos's novel, Richard Frohock maintains that the 'continual adaptations do not result from an abiding interest in dramatizing the

¹⁰³ Though they could be landed or unlanded, their elite status was not hereditary like European gentry, but dependent on passing a government sanctioned exam based on Confucian scholarly ideals. If a *yangban* family failed to pass the exam for three generations, they would lose their status and become commoners (*sangmin*).

decadent aristocratic culture of pre-Revolutionary France; rather, filmmakers are drawn to this eighteenth-century narrative because of its usefulness as a basis for examining and critiquing contemporary culture'.¹⁰⁴ Aside from representing and critiquing Korea's heritage, *Untold Scandal* can be seen as a commentary on contradictory values in present day Korean society. Contemporary Korea society and culture is a blend of conservative and liberal ideals, of Confucian and Christian values. The film is able to criticise traditional and modern society through the characters of Madame Cho and Cho Won, as their liberal and decadent lifestyles become a mockery of the Confucian social order. On the other hand Lady Jung lives her life as a devout Catholic, despite the ban on the religion in Korea at the time. She is celebrated as a highly moral and faithful woman, yet her Catholic values go against those of the Confucian state. This representation of heritage in conflict could be one reason why the film became so popular. On the appeal of *Untold Scandal* and its success with audiences, E has stated that 'the story is an all-time favourite, of love and revenge. The audience may have been attracted by the clash of Western and Korean imagery. The title is *Scandal*, but the story is of traditional Korea, so that may have caught people's attention. Finally, the actors are very popular. So there was an interesting story, good actors, and good promotion'.¹⁰⁵ This quotation introduces the aspects of the film that I wish to discuss in the rest of this chapter. I explore how *Untold Scandal* can be seen as an example of a post-heritage *sageuk* film through its intercultural representation of a European narrative in an Asian context, and how this hybridised representation of heritage can be seen as establishing cultural capital.

The first section of this chapter concentrates on cultural hybridity and intertextuality with regard to heritage film conventions and the film's production values. I

¹⁰⁴ Richard Frohock, 'Adaptation and Cultural Criticism: *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* 1960 and *Dangerous Liaisons*', in *Eighteenth Century Fiction on Screen* ed. by Robert Mayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 157-174 (p. 157).

¹⁰⁵ E J Yong, quoted in, Paquet *An Interview with E J Yong* (2003)

consider the influence of Western heritage films on E J Yong, specifically the 1988 production *Dangerous Liaisons*, and what generic changes he made with *Untold Scandal* in an effort to make the *sageuk* genre appeal to modern audiences. I focus on the audio-visual aspect of the production, in order to explore how E de-westernises a European classic, and Westernises Korean tradition, through the insertion of Western historical objects and music. I also explore how *Untold Scandal* can be considered a post-heritage film because it presents a critique of Korea's past, instead of simply recreating it. This is communicated through its representation of women. Drawing on Sheila Miyoshi Jager's study on the formation of the nation's collective consciousness and how this has been constructed from the utilisation of narratives, I consider how gendered tropes have been used to shape collective ideas of Korean nationalism and modernity. Early in his career, as demonstrated in Jager's book, independence activist and writer Yi Kwang Su focused on the notion of women as a colonial metaphor. He utilised the female body as a symbol of political and colonial suppression, thus creating an analogy between women's oppressed position in patriarchal Confucian Korea and colonial Korea's situation under Japanese rule. Through his writing, Yi portrayed Korea as virtuous but victimised womanhood in an argument for the Westernisation of the nation. I consider this type of discourse and representation from a contemporary standpoint. From the virginal and exploited Lady Jung, to the manipulative and vengeful Madame Cho, I examine how these characterisations critique Korea's Confucian and *Joseon* heritage and provide a social commentary on the position of women in postmodern Korean society. Jager's study into Yi's writings will come up again with my chapter on *The Admiral*, where I will make similar arguments for the way the film portrays militaristic heroic masculinity as a statement of nationhood.

In the second section I consider the impact of stardom and soft power in relation to the film, and how these aspects contribute to *Untold Scandal* becoming a catalyst for *sageuk*'s contemporary shift. I examine how *Untold Scandal* was received differently by

different cultural groups, focusing in particular on the stardom of Lee Mi Sook and Bae Yong Joon. I argue that these two actors evoke a sense of nostalgia in certain audiences, for instance with Lee Mi Sook being compared to her celebrated roles in the 1980s. With regards to Bae Yong Joon, his popularity in Japan was so phenomenal that he is credited with being one of the key elements that increased the popularity of Korean popular culture abroad. I analyse the characterisation of Cho Won as a seductive and sexually aggressive *yangban* figure and how this plays against Bae's type as a sensitive and pure persona, which he became celebrated for. Utilising Sun Jung's study of the role of gender in cultural exchange, I argue that *Untold Scandal's* presentation of gender as a postmodern hybrid of traditional and contemporary masculinity had an impact on how the film was received by audiences, especially international audiences in Japan.

Intercultural Heritage and *Untold Scandal*

Untold Scandal's introduction establishes how the film is recontextualised from eighteenth century France to eighteenth century Korea. The opening sequence demonstrates elements of hybridisation and intertextuality that links the film with its source material. It is important to address these two aspects in an analysis of *Untold Scandal* due to the intercultural nature of the adaptation. The film is a cross-cultural production with intertextual relationships between Western and Korean period films, European and Korean heritage, and the previous adaptations of the text *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Julia Kristeva establishes intertextuality as the notion that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another'.¹⁰⁶ This can be seen in the film's opening sequence, which mimics the fake publisher's note of the source novel

¹⁰⁶ Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. by Toril Moi (New York: Colombia University Press, 1986), pp. 34-61 (pg. 37).

both in terms of content and structure. The beginning of *Untold Scandal* frames the film's narrative within an illustrated *chunhwa* book (a genre of painting that focuses on erotic and sexually explicit scenes), entitled *Record of Cho's Scandalous Affair*. As the book is opened and the pages turned to reveal Madame Cho and Cho Won's sexual exploits, a narrator warns the viewer of the immorality and promiscuity of the characters in the book. As the narrator states:

Most of the characters in these illustrations are promiscuous and immoral. So much so that one is led to doubt whether they indeed existed. It is widely known that *Joseon was founded on Confucianism, whereby men must be virtuous gentlemen, and women must be modest ladies*. So these characters are more unlikely to be found in *Joseon*. Even though the contents here have been proven to be based on a true story, the names of the characters may be pseudonyms. So be advised not to raise the issue with anyone or within the family. If you have weak self-control, or feel nervous about this book, do close it and erase it from your mind. Written in the year 1792 and published in 1803.¹⁰⁷

This opening narration expresses the same apologetic and satirical tone of Laclos' fake publisher's note in the original novel:

We believe it is our duty to warn the public that despite the title of this work and what the editor says about it in his preface, we do not guarantee its authenticity as a collection of letters, and in fact have compelling reasons to believe it is simply a novel. Moreover, it seems to us that the author, despite his attempts at verisimilitude, has himself most clumsily destroyed every semblance of truth by setting the events he is describing in the present day. In fact, several characters he puts on his stage have such vicious habits that it is impossible to imagine they can live *in our age, in this age of philosophy*, in which the light of reason has spread everywhere and made us all, as we know, into *honourable men, and modest and retiring women*.¹⁰⁸

The italicised sections show how the cinematic narration emulates the phrasing of the novel, drawing attention to the intertextual nature of the production. The parallels in the narration stress the universality of the story, and the similar hypocrisy of aristocratic cultures. Furthermore, it is worth reiterating that E had seen the 1988 Frears adaptation before reading the book, which adds an extra layer of intertextuality to his reworking of the

¹⁰⁷ *Untold Scandal*, dir. by E J-Yong (Soda Pictures, 2005). [Emphasis added]

¹⁰⁸ Choderlos de Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons* trans. Helen Constantine (London: Penguin, 2007), pg. 4. [Emphasis added]

narrative. As Frears' film is itself an indirect adaptation taken from Christopher Hampton's 1985 stage production, any work relating to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* can be said to be, as the earlier Kristeva quotation surmises, a 'mosaic' of texts. This 'mosaic' emphasises the duality of a text and the notion that each work is under the influence of a greater sphere of texts that is imposed upon it. *Untold Scandal* engages with such intertextual context by emphasising, not hiding, the clashes of cultures and Western influence.

My argument for *Untold Scandal* being seen as a shift into post-heritage *sageuk* filmmaking is dependent on how the film utilises the generic conventions of Western costume dramas, and, more specifically, the conventions associated with heritage films. Early costume dramas and *sageuk* films, such as the British Gainsborough melodramas of the 1940s and the Korean folk erotica of the 1980s, used the past merely as a backdrop for a generic narrative, with little concern for an 'authentic' representation of history. Conversely, heritage films emphasise the role of the past in a production. Ginette Vincendeau argues that 'heritage films are concerned with the minute reconstruction of the past: grand houses, landscapes, rituals, costumes and objects. They echo museum aesthetics and the rise of heritage tourism. Generally, they celebrate rather than critique the past'.¹⁰⁹ In my analysis of *Untold Scandal*, I propose that the film instead ignites a trend in post-heritage representation in Korean *sageuk* films, in which a more challenging and critical eye is turned to the past. As I demonstrate in the final section of this chapter, *Untold Scandal* can be read as using Korea's Confucian traditional culture to criticise and explore postmodern Westernised society. In this section, however, I concentrate on examples that show how the film's mise-en-scène emulates that of 1980s and 1990s heritage films.

¹⁰⁹ Ginette Vincendeau, 'Heritage Cinema', in *The Cinema Book 3rd edn.*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: British Film Institute, 2007), pp. 292-294 (p. 293).

To begin with, *Untold Scandal* demonstrates a fetishisation and appropriation of traditional Korea. The visual style and cinematography orientalises and exoticises Korea's own culture. From the food and costumes, to the buildings and landscape, the film presents old Korea as a lavish and alluring 'artefact' to be gazed upon. The museum aesthetics are emphasised through the repeated use of static observational close-ups and long, drawn-out tracking shots. In one scene, for instance, Cho Won is brought a breakfast tray while he entertains a guest. As they begin their conversation, the camera shot lingers on an over-head view of the food before finally cutting to reveal the two men. By introducing the food before the characters in this way, the period feature is idealised and fetishised, an object to be regarded with awe. In a similar scene with Madame Cho, she is depicted with maids helping her get dressed and applying her makeup. Taking place in her dressing room, the natural light through the window gives the scene a graceful and dream-like atmosphere. Shots cut between static views of a tray of cosmetics and ornaments to visuals of Madame Cho's adorned hair and face. The scene mirrors the opening of Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons*. In this, shots of Merteuil (portrayed by Glenn Close) and Valmont (John Malkovich) are crosscut, depicting the elaborate dressing rituals in an effort to show off their immaculate presentation and aristocratic lifestyle. Both of these sequences fetishise the rituals and props as luxurious, and accentuate the physicality of heritage. The intertextual 'mosaic' is emphasised by mimicking the exoticising aesthetics of Western heritage film. E's emulation of Frears' treatment of the period features changes not just the way they are seen on screen but how they are related to.

E's attitude towards the authenticity of his film shows that it was his intention to create a heightened visual style. In an interview, he states: 'My original idea was to make a historically accurate film, but I found that the colours in traditional clothing and objects were too limited. There is a concept in traditional Confucian culture centred around five basic colours: blue, black, red, white, and yellow [...] I wanted to use vibrant colours, and so



Figure 4 Merteuil's elaborate dressing ritual.
(*Dangerous Liaisons*, Stephen Frears, 1988)



Figure 5 Madame Cho's similarly fetishised dressing sequence.
(*Untold Scandal*, E J Yong, 2003)

although the shape and form of the costumes and props are historically accurate, the colours are not'.¹¹⁰ As the costumes in the film show, E plays towards modern styles to create an aesthetic that has a contemporary resonance with the younger audience. His 'inauthenticity' engages with the trend in Korean consumerism for 'fusion' commodities. Staying with the *hanbok* example, the rising trend in Korean traditional clothing is the addition of Western elements such as adding elaborate designs to the fabric or altering the cut of the skirt. The opulence of *Untold Scandal's* costume design draws on real world heritage consumption in contemporary fashion trends.

Further emphasising the Western element of the narrative, E's decision to include historical Western objects and music defamiliarises the orientalist gaze of the film. He uses each of these aspects in specific ways that were unfamiliar to *sageuk* films prior to *Untold Scandal*. The soundscape of the film is composed of a mixture of Western classical orchestration and traditional Korean music, but the latter is kept to diegetic sound. The Korean music heard in the film comes from instruments played on the screen, whereas European Baroque music plays throughout most of the film, stressing the link to the story's origin in eighteenth-century France. While the soundscape pushes the Western influence to the foreground of the film, the use of Western historical objects is comparatively restrained. Objects such as a Rococo-style clock and telescope are kept as juxtaposed props. By keeping the appearance of these items understated, it could be said that 'hiding' these modern goods reflects the state of modernity at the time the film is set. In 1792, *Joseon* Korea was coming to the end of King Jeongjo's reign. Since the 1770s the celebrated king had been reforming the state of the nation, changing laws on discrimination and ushering in a cultural renaissance. However, his attempts to modernise the country resulted in a backlash from bureaucratic officials and is regarded as Korea's last chance at

¹¹⁰ E J Yong, quoted in, Paquet, *An Interview with E J Yong* (2003).

autonomous modernity. During this time, Catholicism had been imported into the country, and while proving successful, was banned for being a danger to the Confucian social order. In *Untold Scandal*, E highlights this conflict, and emphasises the ‘hidden’ nature of Western modernising culture in *Joseon* society. The Catholic mass attended by Lady Jung is a quiet and secretive affair, and when Cho Won talks with a *gisaeng* (female entertainer) one night, she tells him of gossip she knows about the church: ‘There are Royal Inspectors in the next room. I heard them say that they will crack down on the Catholics upsetting the custom [...] They say that the Catholics treat people of all status equal, don’t separate men from the women, and are allowed to have sex at will’.¹¹¹ The Catholic dimension to *Untold Scandal* and the original book will come up again in the next section of this analysis, in my protracted examination of Lady Jung’s character.

Finally, I will briefly analyse the presentation and utilisation of the landscape in *Untold Scandal*, which is romanticised in the manner of British heritage films. The heritage film trope of representing the natural landscape to mourn for a bygone way of life became an emergent trait in New Korean cinema of the 1990s. David E. James proposes that the ‘idealisation of the Korean landscape is for the domestic spectator overdetermined by the industrialisation and urbanisation that (as at the inception of industrialisation and modern landscape art in England at the end of the eighteenth century) cause the rural world to appear as the location not of agrarian labour or deprivation but recreation and spiritual renewal’.¹¹² While James is highlighting how the use of landscape is a trope used in contemporary Korean cinema to incite grief for the vanishing countryside, when thinking of *Untold Scandal*, it can also be seen as inspiring a melancholia for an un-modernised landscape of precolonial, feudalistic *Joseon*. This melancholic nostalgia manifests itself in

¹¹¹ *Untold Scandal*, dir. by E.

¹¹² David E. James, ‘Im Kwon Taek: Korean Cinema and Buddhism’, in *Im Kwon Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema* ed. by David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), pp. 47-83 (p. 57).

the scene of Lady Jung's suicide. As she walks out into the frozen lake, surrounded on all sides by tree-lined hills, she clashes with the monochrome colours of the landscape. Her red *hanbok* stands out against the white snow and sky. As she falls through the ice, the camera watches from afar in a wide shot of the natural landscape. The shot remains on screen long enough for the image to evoke a sense of melancholy, the crisp lines and colours of the environment appearing like those of a classical Korean landscape painting.

In summary, this section of my *Untold Scandal* analysis provides examples of the visual conventions that the film takes from Western heritage productions, but does so in a knowing, self-reflexive manner. From the fetishised shots of traditional heritage objects to the idealisation of the landscape, the film emulates the museum aesthetics that create a mourning-like gaze at the past. E plays with the satirically dubious nature of the narrative source, which, as written in the fake publishers' note, cannot guarantee its authenticity. He takes advantage of this by playing with notions of authenticity in his production design, and using contemporary influences with regard to the humour and tone of the film. Some see *Untold Scandal* as one of the key films that reinvigorated the *sageuk* genre in twenty-first century Korean cinema. Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient declare *Untold Scandal* to be a unique film that does not conform to any of the previous *sageuk* trends, stating that the film is 'a revisionist melodrama brimming with irony and cynicism, one that mocks and parodically reframes the *shinpa*-style sentimentalism and Confucian values that are so central to traditional historical dramas'.¹¹³ As a revisionist production, it is able to look back at Korea's precolonial heritage from a modern perspective. Through this perspective the

¹¹³ Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 130. *Shinpa* refers to the Japanese theatre tradition emphasising melodrama and realistic stories that developed in opposition to the more stylised *kabuki* theatre. It was introduced and localised into Korean culture during the colonial era. *Shinpa* has played an influential role in Korea's modernised forms of theatre and literature, and in the emergence of the national cinema.

film produces a commentary on Korea's past and present, and acts as a cross-cultural experimentation between the Western and Asian traditions.

In the second part of this section of my analysis, I concentrate on how the film can be read as a narrative that constructs an idea of Korean nationhood symbolised through victimised womanhood. Here, I maintain that *Untold Scandal* is a *sageuk* film that takes a critical view of Korea's heritage, and as such it should be regarded as a post-heritage critique, rather than simply mimicking Western styles. In its critique of traditional culture through the pastiche use of Western heritage film tropes, *Untold Scandal* stands out against the few other *sageuk* films of the era. As introduced in the previous chapter, *sageuk* productions of the late 1990s-early 2000s were part of the rise of the Korean blockbuster, which included numerous large-scale attempts to revive the failing form. Big budget war epics were undertaken by filmmakers in an attempt to include *sageuk* in the rising popularity of action spectacles and Hollywood-style thrillers. I argue that *Untold Scandal's* more critical engagement with Korea's heritage and contemporary condition could be one reason why the film stood out as a new kind of *sageuk* production in an era of cinematic change and mainstream experimentation. The inspiration behind my reading of *Untold Scandal* comes from two aspects: contemporary analysis of the early twentieth century writer, Yi Kwang Su, and the films of Im Kwon Taek. Both Yi and Im have been regarded as artists who address problematic notions of gender and nationalism in relation to Korea's heritage and modernity. Sheila Miyoshi Jager writes that Yi Kwang Su's romance narratives of the 1910s focus on the anxious relationship between sexuality and nationalism, critiquing traditional Korean society by using the female body as an allegory of the state of the nation itself. Jager writes, 'one of the consequences of this gender coding [...] was the merging of private and public spheres whereby political discourse translated itself through women into the private context of love, marriage, and loyalty. Just as women's personal happiness (most significantly in family life) was suddenly made the

consequence of national concern, so her private life was turned into a stage for politicizing desire'.¹¹⁴ She states that through the various conditions in which women are represented in Yi's writing, he is arguing for his personal political opinions that are also shown in his non-fiction essays. These opinions changed throughout his career but he consistently debated Japanese occupation, Western modernity, and Korean nationalism. The portrayal of his heroines varies from victimised femininity to devoted and filial womanhood, all the while commenting on the failure of traditional patriarchy. I argue that in *Untold Scandal*, E J Yong utilises his female characters in a similar manner, by attempting to critique contemporary society and sexuality, as well as the past and traditional culture he reconstructs. His reworking of the *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*' satirical decadence in a Korean context addresses the nation's culturally specific issues of identity, nationhood, and gender.

The second aspect inspiring this reading is the similar discourse and analysis surrounding the work of Im Kwon Taek. One of Korea's most prolific filmmakers, Im has been working consistently since the 1960s. Though he originally worked as a commercial director, at times making up to eight films in a year, from the 1980s he shifted into producing more personal, art-house films. His work frequently questions the position of traditional culture in a modernised society, and Korea's relationship with its cultural heritage. Hyangjin Lee claims that 'the most noteworthy contribution made by Im to the current renaissance of Korean national cinema lies in his pursuit of creating a national identity. In particular, his persistent cinematic enquiry into the notions of Korean-ness encourages the younger generation of filmmakers to redefine cultural tradition through

¹¹⁴ Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea: A Genealogy of Patriotism* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), p. 44.

new creativity and experimentation'.¹¹⁵ My argument considers how E J Yong, as one of these younger filmmakers, adopted the same line of experimentation for *Untold Scandal*. As mentioned in the introduction, E has stated that Im's production of *Chunhyang* influenced him and that he too wanted to experiment with reimagining and reinterpreting the past. For this section of the analysis, attention is focused on the characterisation of the female characters Madame Cho and Lady Jung, who each present differing, and often conflicting forms of femininity.

In order to present his critique on Korean society's past and present, E changes the tone of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* so that it becomes more melodramatic and romanticised than the original work and previous adaptations. E plays with the stereotypes and conventional histories of *Joseon*-era Korea as a society repressed by Confucian morality and social segregation based on class and gender. The imposing noblewoman, Madame Cho, is the film's source of infidelity and female dominance. While upholding the public appearance of a dutiful wife, her private affairs mock the social order of Confucian patriarchy. A scene in the opening of the film demonstrates how her character is introduced as a defiant and provocative woman. At a traditional public ritual, Madame Cho is shown participating in her ceremonial duties in a sombre and courteous manner. Her costume, however, clashes with the repressive and restrictive decorum of the situation. Her fully painted red lips and pure white dress with lavishly decorated sleeves conflict with the solemn tone of the ritual and the modest clothing of the people around her. As addressed previously, E specifically chose to use costumes that were not entirely historically accurate in an effort to give the film a more contemporary resonance. While traditional Confucian design is based around five principal colours, E chose to exaggerate

¹¹⁵ Hyangjin Lee, '*Chunhyang*: Marketing an Old Tradition in New Korean Cinema', in *New Korean Cinema* ed. by Chi Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 63-78 (p. 65).

these colours, making the costumes excessive, vibrant, and decorative. This alteration of tradition further emphasises the conflict of cultures that is a central theme of E's adaptation. Through the *mise-en-scène*, he makes subtle but impactful changes that further support the notion of *Untold Scandal* as a cross-cultural production.

Beyond the visual juxtapositions, the characterisation is what distinguishes *Untold Scandal* as a *sageuk* film that debates female sexuality and nationhood. Madame Cho can be regarded as similar to one of Yi Kwang Su's victimised heroines. She is openly a threat to Confucian order, without even considering her sexual promiscuity and manipulative behaviour. Like the inspiring character of Marquise Isabelle de Merteuil, Madame Cho is a middle aged, childless wife. In *Joseon* society, this was an added danger to her social position. Following Confucian doctrines of the time, a man could divorce his wife if she failed to bear him a son. Madame Cho begins the story in an unstable social position and has no authority to prevent her husband from taking So Ok as his concubine, who, he hopes, will bear him an heir. While she presents herself as an openly loyal and obedient wife, as many traditional Korean stories do, *Untold Scandal* also portrays her as scheming and jealous, fully utilising her emotions and desires. As Jager observes:

In a country where polygamous marriages were the custom, women were required to put aside their domestic jealousies and petty rivalries in order dutifully to serve their husbands. Likewise, custom demanded that a woman remain faithful to her husband even in the event of his death. Thus, the plot of the vast majority of Korea's romance tales revolved around the sufferings and frustrations of women *already* bound by the marriage vow.¹¹⁶

Untold Scandal makes use of both of these aspects, with Madame Cho presented as the dutiful wife and Lady Jung as the celibate virgin-widow. However, the film diverts from Jager's definition of traditional Korean storytelling, instead depicting modern sensibilities. Madame Cho is portrayed frequently expressing her disdain for the society that rules over her. She goes as far as to mock the gendered sexual repression that defines this society by

¹¹⁶ Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea*, p. 65. [Emphasis in original]

encouraging the young and naïve So Ok to be promiscuous. Shortly after falling in love with a neighbouring *yangban* scholar, Kwon In Ho, she loses her virginity to Cho Won. In her conflict over who to choose, the man she has already slept with or the man she loves, Madame Cho instructs So Ok to follow her example:

Madame Cho: Common people do not know this, but all the ladies of nobility have a secret lover or two in their room.

So Ok: Is that true? Then what about women's duties told from the books?

Madame Cho: Books are books but reality is different. Just as a woman's reality is to wed a man she doesn't love. Everyone does it, and everyone knows about it, but no one speaks of it.¹¹⁷

Madame Cho's proposition that 'reality is different' again supports the view of *Untold Scandal* as a *sageuk* film that purposefully distorts and plays with traditional culture as a means of critiquing it. Diane M. Hoffman states that 'behind or alongside the official ideology, cultural realities were quite different [...] wherever there exists a dominant ideology for women, one finds a popular culture that shapes everyday life in ways that subvert or even contradict the dominant ethos'.¹¹⁸ *Untold Scandal* brings into question notions of authenticity and our contemporary relationship with the past by breaking down idealised social constructs. It presents characters that go against the social constraints of the time, in favour of modernised and liberalised attitudes towards sexuality and gender.

While Madame Cho is dangerous because of her disregard for the patriarchal order, Lady Jung poses a different threat entirely. Inspired by the character Madame de Tourvel, the two are similar primarily due to the ways in which their religion influences their actions. Madame de Tourvel is a happily married young woman, who begins to doubt her faith when she falls in love with Valmont after he seduces her. In contrast, Lady Jung is a virginal widow, whose conflict is between traditional Confucian beliefs and her new found

¹¹⁷ *Untold Scandal*, dir. by E.

¹¹⁸ Diane M. Hoffman, 'Blurred Genders: The Cultural Construction of Male and Female in South Korea', *Korean Studies* 19 (1995) 112-138 (p. 116).

devotion to Catholicism. She is celebrated by the state that honours her prolonged widowhood, and is referred to (both admiringly and mockingly) as *yeolnyeomun*, or 'the Gate of Chasity'. Her Catholicism, however, adds a thematic aspect that is not present in any other *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* adaptation. In the original story, the Catholic Church is the embodiment of the enemy, a conservative force against the decadent sexuality of the characters. Conversely, in *Untold Scandal* Catholicism is depicted as a modernising force, accentuating Lady Jung as an enlightened and defiant woman. In 1792, when the film is set, Catholicism was a growing religion in *Joseon*, and regarded as a threat by the state. Since the introduction of the religion in 1777, converts were growing in number but being driven to worship in secret. Since these converts were no longer willing to partake in Confucian ancestral rites and other ceremonies, the religion was forbidden and its followers persecuted. By depicting Lady Jung as a devoted Catholic, it shows she is willing to risk her life for her faith, something which comes to fruition when Cho Won seduces her and they fall in love. In a sense, Catholicism changes from being a hindrance and threat in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, to an enabler for their love. The Church is what brings the two together, as Cho Won takes advantage of her Christian sensibilities for charity by donating to her congregation, an act that enables her seduction by him. As he tells her, 'Though I am the son of the old faction, I am very interested in Western studies and Catholicism. I deeply wish to learn from your good example'.¹¹⁹ Lady Jung, though, ultimately goes against the doctrines of her faith when she chooses Cho Won's love over her religion. After his defeat in a duel, defending their love to her brother-in-law, she commits suicide by falling into a frozen lake. The use of red-on-white imagery come in again in this scene. While with Madame Cho, these colours represent her eroticism and deviant sexuality, for Lady Jung these colours symbolise her union with Cho Won. Karen Hollinger argues that the image of red blood on white snow in Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons* is a symbol of Valmont's

¹¹⁹ *Untold Scandal*, dir. by E.

redemption for his actions, a final moralistic gesture.¹²⁰ E utilises the same image in *Untold Scandal* with his depiction of Cho Won dying as snow falls, his white robes covered in deep red blood, giving his final moments a sympathetic and romanticised tone. Similarly, Lady Jung's death is similarly vivid. She wears a white and red *hanbok*, with a red scarf Cho Won gave her as a romantic gesture, the bold colours contrasting with the stark snowy landscape. She looks down at her hand to see her nails are still tinted with remnants of red dye. In an old Korean custom, women would stain their nails in the summer with dye from *bongseonhwa* flowers. If the colour lasted until the first snow of winter, it meant their love would be fulfilled. Lady Jung was shown dying her nails earlier in the film, and by returning to this imagery in her final moment, it suggests that her love for Cho Won is true and will continue even in her death.

Overall, the characters of Madame Cho and Lady Jung depict differing forms of victimised womanhood. The former is repressed in a marriage that forces her to manipulate those around her to ease her frustrations, whereas the latter is depicted as an enlightened woman who is repeatedly punished for her devotions, either to her lovers or her faith. These can be read as allegories for the state of contemporary Korean society. At the time of *Untold Scandal's* release, Korea had solidified its position as a globalised postmodern society. At the same time the nation was in the aftermath of the IMF crisis. With regard to social affects, the post-IMF era was a time of shifting class and gender politics, causing widespread anxiety and frustrations over the state of contemporary values.¹²¹ Korea has become a nation where traditional Confucian conservatism and modernised Western/Christian values coexist in everyday life. Hye Seung Chung argues that

¹²⁰ See, Karen Hollinger, 'Losing the Feminist Drift: Adaptations of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24.3 (1996) 293-300.

¹²¹ For further discussion of these anxieties and frustrations, see *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea* ed by. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), which provides a background to the IMF crisis and its aftermath by exploring the increasing social mobility and consumer culture of the 1990s.

the punishment, exile, and escape from a homeland that occurs in *Untold Scandal*, and other E J Yong films, represents ‘postmodern discontent [and] the desire for expatriation [...] as a result of social frustrations and institutional constrictions’.¹²² Madame Cho’s self-exile to China and Lady Jung’s self-punishment of suicide demonstrate how these characters are dissatisfied and traumatised by the values of their culture that punish them for their desires. E’s postmodern viewpoint of the past and Korea’s heritage enables him to critique these issues and ‘official’ versions of history. *Untold Scandal* shows how the depiction of womanhood and femininity continue to be politicised and used as vehicles for discussing tradition and modernity.

Untold Scandal and Hallyu

While the previous section analysed *Untold Scandal* for its content, this section continues my argument for the film to be seen as a catalyst of generic change by focusing on the text in the wider context of Korean popular culture. I ask why this film proved so popular and influential to a failing genre, and what position does the film hold among wider cultural shifts. To start this section, I examine how the film appealed to culturally specific spectator groups, with my analysis focusing on the stardom surrounding the two lead actors, Lee Mi Sook and Bae Yong Joon, before moving on to consider *Untold Scandal*’s impact on the rise of Korean popular culture referred to as *Hallyu*. Through this discussion I demonstrate how *Untold Scandal* capitalises on their stardom to reinforce the film as cultural capital, reinvigorating domestic interest in the *sageuk* genre, and international audiences’ interest in Korea’s national cinema. As a cross-cultural production, mixing a Western narrative and generic style with the specificity of a traditional Korean context, *Untold Scandal* has a

¹²² Chung, ‘Reinventing the Historical Drama, De-Westernising a French Classic’.

hybrid appeal which attracts both a universal imagination and a local audience. For a Western viewer who perhaps might not be versed in East Asian, or more specifically, Korean traditional culture, the film's appeal lies in the orientalist and ethnographic style of the mise-en-scène. As discussed in the previous section, the film draws upon the style of Western heritage films, especially with regard to visual and generic conventions. Reviews of American critics, for example, repeatedly highlight the 'exoticism' of the landscape and costumes, in the same manner that British heritage films from the 1980s and 1990s were viewed. William Schwartz writes that '*Untold Scandal* is the story of a journey to a faraway place even by local Korean standards. The exoticism of the backdrop aptly coincides with the unusual behaviour of the actual characters'.¹²³ Derek Elley comments that the film is a 'lusciously lensed, lubriciously lined costumer [that is] a 10-course treat for the eyes and ears'.¹²⁴

The film also possesses specific appeal to a Western audience by presenting a unique adaptation of a canonical European literary text. *Untold Scandal* joins a list of adaptations that take a classic European text and recontextualise it within a new era or setting, for instance Shakespeare's historical epics being converted into Japanese *jidaigeki* films.¹²⁵ Rustom Bharucha considers these types of adaptation to be acts of interculturality and attempts at gaining cultural credibility. In Bharucha's essay on Asian interpretations of Shakespeare, he states that engaging with his work in 'neocolonial, postcolonial, and neo-orientalist contexts unconsciously [produces an] intensifying cultural capital around Asia and Shakespeare'.¹²⁶ The same can be considered for *Untold Scandal* and its treatment of

¹²³ William Schwartz, '*HanCinema's Film Review 'Untold Scandal''*', (Langley: HanCinema, 2014) <<http://www.hancinema.net/hancinema-s-film-review-untold-scandal-73541.html>> [accessed 30 March 2015]

¹²⁴ Derek Elley, '*Review: 'Untold Scandal''*', (Los Angeles: Variety, 2003) <<http://variety.com/2003/film/reviews/untold-scandal-1200538643/>> [accessed 30 March 2015]

¹²⁵ See, for instance, Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985), adapted from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, respectively.

¹²⁶ Rustom Bharucha, 'Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization' *Theatre Journal* 56.1 (2004) 1-28 (p. 2).

European literature and cultural heritage. It could be argued that through the export of the film as a transnational product, it is creating cultural capital for Korea and Korean Cinema, and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. I suggest that by promoting nostalgia through the two lead actors, Lee and Bae, *Untold Scandal* aspires to generate cultural capital both domestically and internationally. In his review of *Untold Scandal*, Darcy Parquet states that an 'internet poll posed the question of why the film was so commercially successful, and respondents gave primary credit to the cast'.¹²⁷ In my analysis, I focus on how Lee Mi Sook and Bae Yong Joon's stardom influenced the film's reception. In doing so, I draw attention to the reception of new *sageuk* by a contemporary audience and specifically how notions of nostalgia, not just towards the past and heritage but to the legacy of previous cultural texts, have an impact on the reaction to a film.

Lee Mi Sook, who plays the seductive Madame Cho, has established herself as one of Korea's best known and respected actors. After debuting in 1980, she became recognised as one of the best-known actors of the decade. Along with Lee Bo Hee and Won Mi Hyung, the three actresses dominated 1980s Korean cinema. Across the decade, Lee played various roles, from young, innocent victimised women to vengeful and power-hungry concubines. By the time of her hiatus from acting in 1987, when she married, she had come to represent what was referred to as the 'Missy' identity. As Korea's economy strengthened in the 1990s, a new consumerist trend emerged to take advantage of the growing demographic of middle and upper-middle class consumers. As Kim Soyoung explains, 'young housewives in their late twenties and thirties began to set up a new mode of consumption for married women. These new identities were constructed only to offer

¹²⁷ Darcy Paquet, '*Untold Scandal*', (Seoul: KoreanFilm.org, 2007).
<<http://www.koreanfilm.org/kfilm03.html#scandal>> [accessed 20 February 2015]

identification for new consumers in the expanding economy'.¹²⁸ Lee was seen to represent this Missy target demographic of the young, married female consumer. She in a sense helped the construction of a postmodern Korean femininity, though whether this identity is a self-affirming communal culture, or an enforced commercialising oppression, is an area of debate.¹²⁹ On her return to acting with E's 1998 film, *An Affair*, she found instant success, reigniting the public's interest in her and starting a new stage in her career. In *An Affair*, Lee emulates the stereotype she had been associated with, portraying a middle class housewife with a successful husband and comfortable life, who breaks away from this lifestyle, giving in to a passionate affair with a younger man. Her character in *An Affair* was just the first of many roles that built on Lee's status as a 1980s screen legend.

For *Untold Scandal*, she earned universal praise for her portrayal of Madame Cho, giving the character a certain presence and sophistication. For the domestic Korean audience who know her as the innocent and young star, there is a layer of nostalgic spectatorship established from Lee's former film and television roles. From Jang Nok Su, a dangerous consort who is thought to have encouraged the misruling behaviour of the tyrannical Yeonsangun, to Chun Ja, a traumatised mute prostitute who is helped by a lonely college student, Lee's portrayal of Madame Cho evokes these celebrated performances. Of particular note is *Untold Scandal's* final scene, in which Madame Cho flees Korea for China after her and Cho Won's exploits become society gossip when a *chunhwa* book is published (the book that structures the film's narrative). Considering her a disgrace to the family, her father-in-law sends men to kill her but they find she has already fled. In *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Merteuil is punished by ruining what she holds most precious: her beauty.

¹²⁸ Kim Soyoung, 'Cine-Mania' or Cinephilia: Film Festivals and the Identity Question', in *New Korean Cinema* ed. by Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 79-91 (p. 84).

¹²⁹ See, Lee Young Ja, 'Consumer Culture and Gender Identity in South Korea', *Asian Journal of Woman's Studies* 6.4 (2000) 11-38, for a discussion on how Korean consumer culture has interacted with identity construction and transformation.



Figure 6 Lee Mi Sook's appearance at the end of the film...

(*Untold Scandal*, E J Yong, 2003)



Figure 7 ...drew comparisons with a former character, Chun Ja, in *Whale Hunting*.

(*Whale Hunting*, Bae Chang Ho, 1984)

After her ruinous letters become public knowledge she escapes to the countryside, taking her most valued possessions with her and leaving her family in significant debt. Despite her resolve and duplicity, contracting smallpox leaves her humiliated and disfigured. E's adaptation of the ending, in contrast, gives Madame Cho a sentimental and romanticised send off. Having spent the whole film in colourful costumes and makeup, she is finally depicted in humble, coarse clothing and with a clear face. As if her sumptuous appearance was armour against people seeing the real her, she sheds her cold-hearted demeanour to express a melancholic and tender moment. The softening of her character was seen by viewers as reminiscent of Lee's 80s image. As she recalled in an interview, 'many fans told me that the last scene of *Untold Scandal* reminded them of my performances twenty years ago in such films as *Whale Hunting* [Bae Chang Ho, 1984] and *Winter Wanderer* [Kwak Ji Kyoon, 1986]'.¹³⁰ The former film, in particular, holds resonance with *Untold Scandal's* final scene, as the image of Madame Cho hunched over, cold, in plain clothes emulates her appearance as the destitute Chun Ja in *Whale Hunting*.

Bae Yong Joon's influence on the reception of *Untold Scandal* is best analysed by considering his popularity in Japan. Beginning his acting career in 1994, Bae did not become well known until starring in the television drama *Have We Really Loved?* (Park Jong, 1999). Playing a tragic and conflicted character stuck in a complex love triangle, the drama was well received by viewers. The airing of his next drama, *Winter Sonata* (Yoon Seok Ho, 2002), had a major impact, not just on his career but on Korean popular culture. In the year following its release in Korea, the drama was sold to numerous countries throughout Asia. In Japan, it generated a huge response, and turned Bae into an object of desire within a specific demographic. His popularity amongst middle-aged Japanese women became

¹³⁰ Lee Mi Sook, quoted in, Chung, 'Reinventing the Historical Drama, De-Westernizing a French Classic'.

known as ‘*Yonsama Syndrome*’.¹³¹ Taking part of his given name, ‘Yong’, and the Japanese honorific ‘*sama*’ used for people of high esteem, *Yonsama* shows the respect and devotion that his fans have for him. Despite his popularity and the adoration of his work, the release of *Untold Scandal* in Japan did not have the immense impact that was predicted. Critics and scholars have suggested that this could be because Bae’s character was not as the Japanese audience expected or wanted him to be.¹³² The seductive and voracious Cho Won goes against the mild-mannered and pure-hearted Joon Sang, his character in *Winter Sonata*. Despite the lacklustre response to the film, his popularity in Japan continued. Sun Jung argues that Bae’s popularity with *Winter Sonata* and failure with *Untold Scandal* is down to the contrasting manifestations of masculinity that he presents across his career. His continued popularity could be explained using Chua Beng Huat’s ideas on how audiences react and interact with foreign media. He explains that ‘identification is predicated on “abstract” categories of “human” and “Asian” that allow a presumption of similarities. Conversely, the specifications of the “culture” of the production location represented on screen in imported dramas are evoked by the same audience to create “difference” on the basis of distancing themselves. Audiences can and do switch between the two at will’.¹³³ This identifying and distancing is seen with the reaction to Bae’s masculinity on the part of his Japanese fans.

Jung maintains that Bae’s body is regarded with a retrospective desire and imagination, seeing his ‘soft’ masculinity in *Winter Sonata* as a spectacle of a better past. In an act of nostalgic retrospection, these fans view the politeness, purity, and nobility of Bae’s persona as an idealised form. *Untold Scandal*’s Cho Won, on the other hand, is seen as aggressive, sexual, and sly. In the opening scene of the film, Cho Won is introduced as

¹³¹ See, Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, p. 35-72.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³³ Chua Beng Huat, *Structure, Audience, and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p. 96.

being sexually domineering. He is depicted in a private room painting a nude woman. At first only his back is seen, as the focus is on his painting and the model. As she moves to yawn, the screen cuts to a restricted view of Cho Won's face, his eyes out of shot as he shakes his head in disapproval. After adding final touches to his painting, he abruptly beckons the model over and the two have sex. A series of eroticised close-ups then show him caressing and grabbing the woman's body, establishing Cho Won's domineering sexuality and him as a seductive character. Jung's study reveals that prior to watching *Winter Sonata*, Bae's Japanese fans' perception of Korean men was summarised by terms such as 'dark, scary, sly, aggressive, and violent'.¹³⁴ His fans, however, changed their opinions following Bae's performance as Joon Sang. These people came to view Korean men as tender, charismatic, and gentle.¹³⁵ Jung argues that Bae's charisma is a projection of Confucian masculinity, or more specifically *seonbi* masculinity. *Seonbi* was a class of Confucian scholar during the *Joseon* era for whom superior masculinity involved practicing the key moral virtues of trust, wisdom, compassion, politeness, and righteousness. According to Jung, 'because [Bae] exemplifies the characteristics of "tender charisma" and "politeness" [he] embodies the traditional values of pan-East Asian Confucian culture'.¹³⁶ Bae's possession of these attributes, both in his star persona and *Winter Sonata* character, creates a sense of nostalgia in his fans who feel that he represents what is lacking in contemporary Japanese society. In contrast to *Winter Sonata's seonbi* attributes, *Untold Scandal* promotes the conflicting ideology of *yangban* masculinity. As discussed earlier, the *yangban* class were the ruling elite of *Joseon*. Their strict observance of Confucian ideology created a domineering, patriarchal, and aggressive form of masculinity that can be seen in Bae's portrayal of Cho Won. His embodiment of an authoritarian and imposing masculinity can be argued as the reason why the Japanese fans had an adverse reaction to his image.

¹³⁴ Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, p. 45.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Cho Won's sexual aggression and arrogance go against the nostalgic imaginary that had been built up around Bae's star persona.

These two examples show how the stardom of an actor can affect the reception and interaction with a film. Returning to Rustom Bharucha's statement, *Untold Scandal* can be seen to work in neocolonial and postcolonial contexts. At the time of the film's release, Korea's national cinema had developed into a respectable and profitable domestic film industry. With the growing success of local blockbusters, Korean films were increasingly being exported in an attempt to show neighbouring Asian markets that contemporary filmmakers were capable of matching Hollywood's quality and audience appeal. By playing on the star power of the two leads, the film is projected, both domestically and internationally, as a piece of cultural capital, attempting to legitimise the Korean film industry and the exoticised traditional culture it presents. With regard to Lee Mi Sook's impact on the film's reception, her legacy in the collective memory of the Korean audience evoked nostalgia for her celebrated works in 1980s cinema. However, as Daniel Black comments, 'cultural products are not stable vessels of nationally specific meaning, carpet-bombing foreign countries with alien values and ideologies [...] global movement of cultural products is unpredictable and never one-sided'.¹³⁷ *Untold Scandal* provides an example of this instability. As argued earlier, nationally specific cultures are subjective to a non-domestic audience, who may choose to distance themselves from alien cultures. Bae Yong Joon's aggressive *yangban* masculinity in his depiction of Cho Won was poorly received by his loyal fans who admired him for his *seonbi* sensitivity.

¹³⁷ Daniel Black, 'Cultural Exchange and National Specificity', in, *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia* ed. by Daniel Black, Stephen Epstein and Alison Tokita (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2010), pp. 16.1-16.10 (p. 16.2).

Untold Scandal can further be seen as an example of *sageuk*'s involvement in what is referred to as *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave.¹³⁸ These terms are used to discuss the cultural phenomenon which began around the millennium. Starting in 1997, Korean popular culture started to become immensely popular in other Asian countries such as China, Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam. Initially focused on television dramas, the popularity of Korean stars, media, and consumer products emanated from a growing momentum that came as a surprise both domestically and internationally. Korea had only substantially opened its markets to cultural imports following the nation's increasing liberalisation from the 1980s. The fear of cultural invasion and imperialism from Hong Kong, Japan, and American markets meant that Korea was anxious to expand and open its creative industries. When this apprehensive expansion began to happen in the 1990s, the transnational popularity of the nation's own popular culture was unexpected. The unprecedented success of television dramas such as *What is Love?* (Park Cheol, 1991-1992, later aired in China in 1997) and *Star in My Heart* (Lee Jin Suk, Lee Chang Hoon, 1997), and large viewership of *Winter Sonata* and *Dae Jang Geum* (Lee Byung Hoon, 2003-2004), found Korean culture being consumed and celebrated in ways never seen before. Such popularity quickly followed suit for cinema. *Swiri*, Korea's first Hollywood-style blockbuster, topped the box office in Japan, and the romantic comedy *My Sassy Girl* (Kwak Jae Yong, 2001) became a runaway success across East and Southeast Asia. This sudden phenomenon has been attributed to numerous factors, from the specific advancements in Korea's expansion of its film market to the increasing liberal socio-political and economic environment that encouraged it. Joo Jeongsuk sees the rise in domestic film viewership as an influential factor in the emergence

¹³⁸ The term '*Hallyu*' used to refer to the Korean Wave is compound word from '*han*', meaning 'Korean' and '*ryu*', meaning flow. '*Hallyu*' was first used in Chinese and Taiwanese publications such as *Beijing Youth Weekly* and *China Times* from 1997 onwards to describe the adoration of Korean popular culture amongst teenagers, and the influx of Korean consumer goods across Asia. By 2000, the term began to be used by the Korean media and quickly gained traction as a means to describe the developing cultural phenomenon.

of Korean Wave internationally. He states, 'what turned the promising developments of the late 1990s into a full-blown renaissance was the simultaneous expansion of the Korean market [...] State-of-the-art multiplexes are often credited for this expansion of the market, a consequence that has in turn fuelled further growth in the form of a sizeable increase of the number of screens and multiplexes in Korea'.¹³⁹ The increased confidence in the local market inadvertently, but prosperously, contributed to Korean cinema's success abroad. Kyung Hyun Kim goes on to suggest that *Hallyu* is the product of ten years of liberal leaning government between 1998 and 2007 that fostered the development of the local film industry (and other cultural industries), with subsidies to help sustain and protect its success.¹⁴⁰ The government endorsement of *Hallyu* has led to debates about Korean popular culture being utilised as soft power and cultural capital to promote a positive and competitive image of Korea around the world.

Hallyu is recognised as a cultural phenomenon that is still continuously shifting and evolving alongside new media formats. However, critics have deliberated whether to consider it a movement in itself, like New Korean Cinema, which emerged in the late 1980s as a result of the changed generation of filmmakers and democratisation of film production. The cinema boom of the late 1990s similarly developed due to socioeconomic shifts. As addressed in the introduction, this boom has been variously labelled as a renaissance and a second Golden Age for Korean cinema, but has not acceded to the status of a distinct movement. Considering the large role that film played in the emergence and sustained presence of *Hallyu* in contemporary popular culture, Kim questions whether the cultural phenomenon can be considered as a movement. He writes, 'it would be an exaggeration to elevate *Hallyu* to the pantheon of celebrated aesthetic movements such as the modernist literature that blossomed in Paris during the early part of the twentieth

¹³⁹ Joo Jeongsuk, 'South Korean Popular Culture Goes Transnational', *Post Script* 27.3 (2008).

¹⁴⁰ Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, p. 1-2.

century, or Italian neorealist cinema of the period following the Second World War'.¹⁴¹ Kim suggests that what needs to be taken into consideration is how the decline of cultural values is addressed across texts. He continues:

Precisely what values would be on the wane in a country that had never gone through the kind of indigenous industrial revolution and modernisation processes experienced by the West or Japan? If new kinds of aesthetic movements take form in opposition to pre-existing establishments, what images and icons gave a sense of coherent identity to what we now know as *Hallyu*, and to the Korean cinema that played such a crucial part in it? And if modernism can be described as a mixture of mourning and revolt directed against the waning national bourgeoisie, can *Hallyu* be described as being motivated by postmodernism, an aesthetic sensibility that celebrates newly minted moneyed classes of dubious origins as well as the revival of conservative neoliberal values?¹⁴²

Though Kim broadly queries the role of Korean cinema in *Hallyu* and its status as a twenty-first century movement, I consider more specifically how these questions can address *sageuk's* contemporary change.

For *sageuk*, Kim's questions draw attention to what I am referring to in this thesis as a post-heritage and revisionist view of the past. In looking back at the nation's past and heritage from the perspective of the present, the cultural values that have been lost and gained become prominent in the ideology behind the text. As shown with *Untold Scandal*, and will again be seen with the following chapters, the effects of rapid social, political, and economic changes have had a profound impact on the historicism presented through *sageuk*. *Untold Scandal* in particular is a key film to discuss when considering the resurgence of the *sageuk* form and how these productions have contributed to the advancement of *Hallyu*. Another prominent *sageuk* text, the television drama *Dae Jang Geum*, began airing in late 2003, the same time as the release of *Untold Scandal*. The show depicts the life of the titular character, Jang Geum, a fabled female physician in the sixteenth century royal court. The impressive and unexpected successes of these

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 3-4.

productions led to a surge of interest in Korea's heritage and traditional culture, both domestically and internationally. Yet the revision of this heritage, which I argued in the previous chapter is construed as a 'historical imaginary', represents the past from the perspective of the nation's postmodern and postcolonial present. Kim speculates in the above quotation about whether *Hallyu* can be thought of as a postmodern cultural development, and I argue that *sageuk's* contribution to the phenomenon suggests this to be a possibility. The fractured lens that makes up postmodern Korea's view of the past has been criticised by those such as Kim, who consider the anachronisms of new *sageuk* to demonstrate a demise of authenticity. However, if considering *sageuk* and *Hallyu* to be postmodern, then these qualities could also be celebrated. As I continue to argue in the following chapter, *sageuk's* resurgence saw the genre become a self-conscious and self-reflexive form that willingly plays with the representation of the past as a means of hybridisation and to highlight the specificity of Korea's heritage.

Conclusion

Through the various discussions and examples raised in this chapter, I have shown that *Untold Scandal* can be considered as the catalyst of a new form of *sageuk* film. By highlighting elements that emulate the conventions of Western heritage films, I demonstrate that there is a high level of intertextuality and hybridity at work. The museum aesthetics that fetishise and exoticise Korean tradition are the same aesthetics that celebrate *Dangerous Liaisons'* eighteenth century France. Laurajane Smith explains that heritage can go beyond physicality and be engaged with as an intangible concept. She states that heritage is 'a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present'. I illustrate this notion in my analyses of the lead actors' stardom and the construction of a

contemporary allegory. I proposed that the promotion of nostalgia, either for Korea's cultural and cinematic past through Lee Mi Sook, or Japan's idealised past through Bae Yong Joon, was a way of using *Untold Scandal* as a form of cultural capital. Furthermore, I read the film's female characters as politicised bodies, used as social commentary on the state of postmodern globalised Korea.

Doobo Shim remarks that 'paradoxically, globalisation encourages local peoples to rediscover the "local" that they have neglected or forgotten in their drive towards Western-imposed modernisation during the past decades'.¹⁴³ With regard to the impact of globalisation on Korean filmmaking, Shim's observation could reinforce an argument that this trend in new *sageuk* films is down to the expansion of the film industry in general. As Korea's economy strengthened in the 1990s, so did the quality of the nation's film output. It seems inevitable, as Shim suggests, that this new pressure on rediscovering a sense of self though looking to the past would happen, and result in new creative cultural forms. The result of the New Korean Cinema phenomenon of the 1990s was a renewed confidence in local culture and a willingness to experiment. For the *sageuk* genre, this presented itself as a readiness to play with Western tropes and to use traditional culture as a prop for social critique. *Untold Scandal* was one of the first to engage in a new style of *sageuk* that reinterpreted established history and sought to depict a more complex relationship with heritage and the past. The next three chapters in my thesis continue to look at how the *sageuk* genre has developed and changed in the decade following *Untold Scandal*.

¹⁴³ Doobo Shim, 'Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia' *Media, Culture, Society* 28.1 (2006) 25-44 (p. 27).

CHAPTER TWO

The Past as Fantasy: Playing with Folklore and Form

Following the critical and commercial success of *Untold Scandal* in 2003, the *sageuk* form found a new lease of life. Audiences that had grown tired of the old-fashioned period dramas of the 1980s and 1990s had been replaced by a younger generation, who desired a portrayal of history that was more critical in its depiction of tradition. The film *King and the Clown* was released in 2005 and achieved enormous domestic and international success. The film depicts a story of the tyrant Yeonsangun in a homoerotic relationship with one of his court jesters. Lee Joon Ik, the director of *King and the Clown*, has stated in a conversation about historical filmmaking that ‘in terms of film production, the United States, Japan, and China have often drawn on literature and novels, but in Korean culture there are fewer fictional stories to adapt. This is why Korean filmmakers have been pushed to develop original stories. Often they do that by combining the emotions contained in their difficult past with the filming techniques of Hollywood’.¹⁴⁴ Here, Lee hints at the ongoing hybridity of Korean cinema under the influence of globalisation, a key area of exploration in this chapter. He also points towards the role of canonical literature when engaging with and depicting the past, continuing the assumption of quality that is associated with literary adaptations and historical films. While the previous chapter explored *Untold Scandal* as a Korean adaptation of a classic Western novel, this chapter’s analysis focuses on the Korean cinematic adaptations of local literature and folklore, specifically that of the film *Jeon Woo Chi*. The film’s eponymous character, Jeon Woo Chi (hereafter, Woo Chi), is drawn from the legendary folk hero and Taoist sorcerer from the fifteen and sixteenth centuries of the *Joseon* era. Released on 23rd December 2009, the film

¹⁴⁴ Lee Joon Ik, quoted in, Darcy Paquet, *Lee Joon-ik: A Passion for History Expounded Through Film* (Seoul: Koreana, 2016)
 <http://www.koreana.or.kr/months/news_view.asp?b_idx=4878&lang=en&page_type=list>
 [accessed 27 June 2017]

became a holiday event over the winter period, drawing over six million admissions and securing a position as the third most popular film of 2009.¹⁴⁵ Before introducing the plot of the film and my areas of analysis, I first introduce the film's director, Choi Dong Hoon, one of the most commercially successful genre filmmakers in contemporary Korean cinema.

Since 2004, Choi has made five films that have all been popular at the domestic box office. After graduating from the Korean Academy of Film Arts in the late 1990s, he made his directorial debut with *The Big Swindle* in 2004. This heist-caper film with an ensemble cast was both highly praised, winning many end of year awards, and a box office success. Kyu Hyun Kim praises *The Big Swindle* as reminiscent of classic Western capers such as French films *Du Rififi chez les Hommes* (Jules Dassin, 1955) and *Touchez pas au grisbi* (Jacques Becker, 1954), and Hollywood productions such as *Ocean's Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960) and *The Sting* (George Roy Hill, 1973).¹⁴⁶ Choi followed up his debut with an even bigger success with the 2006 film *Tazza: The High Rollers*. A similarly fast-paced crime caper, this time dealing with the underground world of illegal gambling, the film emerged as the second most attended film of the year with 6.8 million tickets sold. Choi was quickly becoming recognised as a filmmaker able to take on genre productions with a combination of accomplished technique and localised Korean cultural specificity. Following the success of *Tazza* came *Jeon Woo Chi*, the subject of this chapter. Diverting from the colourful criminal worlds he had become respected for, Choi's unique take on various genres created a film that has been labelled a historical-fantasy-action blockbuster. Darcy Paquet calls *Jeon Woo Chi* 'a strange and undeniably odd sort of film: a mix of martial arts, silly humour, memorable characters and CG pyrotechnics'.¹⁴⁷ Chris Horn remarks that the

¹⁴⁵ Though considered one of the bestselling films of 2009, the total of admission includes the film's continued run through to the end of February 2010.

¹⁴⁶ Kyu Hyun Kim, '*The Big Swindle*' (Seoul: Koreanfilm.org, 2005).
<<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm04.html#bigswindle>> [accessed 28 August 2017]

¹⁴⁷ Darcy Paquet, '*Woochi*' (Seoul: Koreanfilm.org, 2013)
<<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm09.html#woochi>> [accessed 17 July 2017]

story works like ‘an amalgamation of *Ghostbusters* [Ivan Reitman, 1984], *Big Trouble in Little China* [John Carpenter, 1986] and a Korean period film [...] The main criticism that could be levelled against Choi is that he seems to lack restraint and he will put a slew of disparate themes or elements in his films, but *Jeon Woo Chi* is so peculiar that it somehow works in his favour’.¹⁴⁸ I argue that Choi’s playful use of genre and representation creates a film which can be regarded as characteristic of the changes that occurred in Korean cinema during the 2000s, and especially of the changes in the cinematic use of the past.

More recently, Choi’s films have been huge blockbuster summer event releases, confirming his position as one of the most consistently successful directors working in Korea. *The Thieves* (2012) and *Assassination* (2015) each drew in 12.9 million and 11.79 million admissions respectively. With *The Thieves*, Choi returned to the heist genre that brought him fame with *The Big Swindle*. The production again included a star-studded ensemble cast, but boasted a much larger budget and international filming locations. After a series of comedic genre films, *Assassination* was Choi’s first attempt at a serious drama production, depicting a group of independence fighters during the Japanese colonial era. Numerous critics observed the Hollywood epic nature of the film, with Simon Abrams suggesting that *Assassination* is ‘the kind of overstuffed historical mega-production that Hollywood doesn’t make anymore’.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Mike Paarlberg writes that the film is a throwback to the 1950s era of Hollywood epics that Korea was unable to produce at the time, stating ‘for Korean cinema, it’s both a landmark and a rediscovery of form [...] It’s been over a decade since *Oasis* [Lee Chang Dong, 2002] and *Oldboy* inaugurated the current Golden age of Korean cinema, with bigger budgets, better direction and more adult

¹⁴⁸ Chris Horn, ‘Review: *Jeon Woochi: The Taoist Wizard* is a Purely Energetic Fantasy’ (Seoul: Modern Korean Cinema, 2015) <<http://www.modernkoreancinema.com/2015/03/jeon-woo-chi-taoist-wizard-is-purely.html>> [accessed 17 July 2017]

¹⁴⁹ Simon Abrams, ‘Korean Adventure *Assassination* is the Kind of Production Hollywood Gave Up On’ (New York City: The Village Voice, 2015) <<https://www.villagevoice.com/2015/08/04/korean-adventure-assassination-is-the-kind-of-production-hollywood-gave-up-on/>> [accessed 28 August 2017]

subject matter. *Assassination* feels modern in these respects [...] but also old-fashioned'.¹⁵⁰

Abrams and Paarlberg observe that the stylisation of both the form and presentation in large-scale Korean cinema is almost a regression to an era of filmmaking that was unavailable to Korean culture. With the renaissance of the national film industry, in terms of economic capabilities and audience expectations, ambitious films are becoming increasingly prominent. Both *The Thieves* and *Assassination* have become some of the highest-grossing films in Korean cinema and representative of the continually changing film industry in the country. Returning to *Jeon Woo Chi*, the film's unique use of Korea's heritage makes for an interesting case study regarding the cinematic use of the past and its position in the development of contemporary *sageuk* film. I argue that *Jeon Woo Chi* can be seen to represent how much the *sageuk* form has changed over the 2000s, and how by the 2010s the large-scale blockbuster use of history was becoming more commonplace than a restrained aesthetic. In doing so, I intend to develop my overall analysis of the changes in new *sageuk* productions in the twenty-first century. By engaging with *Jeon Woo Chi*, a rarely examined Korean blockbuster, I aim to show how the film can be viewed as a significant film in the genre's development.

The film begins in early sixteenth century *Joseon*. A magical pipe called the *manpasikjeok* has been used by the Arch God to imprison evil goblins for several millennia but when three lower Taoist Gods accidentally intervene, the goblins are awakened and steal the pipe. The three then turn to the two most prominent Taoist ascetics, Hwa Dam (Kim Yoon Seok) and a man simply referred to as The Master (Baek Yoon Sik), to help them retrieve the pipe and contain the goblins. However, The Master's student, Jeon Woo Chi (Kang Dong Won), causes trouble. Though a talented sorcerer, Woo Chi is also an immature

¹⁵⁰ Mike Paarlberg, 'Assassination is a Revelation for Korean Cinema' (Washington D.C.: Washington City Paper, 2015) <<http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/arts/film-tv/blog/13082202/assassination-is-a-revelation-for-korean-cinema>> [accessed 28 August 2017]

womaniser and trickster. After pranking the King by appearing at the palace as the Jade Emperor and demanding his adoration, the monarch orders all the Taoist wizards to capture Woo Chi for his punishment. A disciple of Hwa Dam almost catches him, but Woo Chi easily fights him off and leaves in order to kidnap a wealthy widow and steal her precious bronze knife. While returning the widow for ransom payment, he discovers the goblins hiding in human form and comes into possession of the *manpasikjeok*. Hwa Dam and the three Taoist Gods visit The Master to deal with Woo Chi's unruly behaviour and end up in a discussion over the pipe. The two equally powerful sorcerers split the pipe and each take half to protect, so that neither can gain full control of the goblins. Later however, Hwa Dam desires the full power of the pipe and murders The Master, framing Woo Chi for his death. As punishment, the Three Taoist Gods imprison Woo Chi inside a painting scroll, but as he enters the scroll, Woo Chi steals half of the pipe and it is sealed in the painting with him. The film then jumps forward 500 years to contemporary Seoul, in which the three Taoist Gods are living in disguise as a Catholic priest, a Buddhist monk, and a fortune teller, while Hwa Dam is thought to have disappeared long ago. As the goblins begin to re-emerge, the three desperately release Woo Chi from the scroll and ask him to help capture them, in return promising him freedom and the title of Taoist master. Woo Chi reluctantly agrees but quickly finds himself distracted by the spectacle of modern urbanised Korea. Before long, Hwa Dam returns demanding the half of the pipe that Woo Chi stole.

My analysis of *Jeon Woo Chi* focuses on two central features: the folkloric sources and narrative, and the status of Korean cinema in the 2000s. In the first part, I explore several elements of this film that represent the simultaneously conservative and dynamic use of traditional cultural heritage that has become common in contemporary *sageuk* film. I suggest that instead of being purely one or the other, the playfulness of *sageuk* historicist filmmaking involves a mixture of these conservative and re-inventive ideals. As quoted earlier, director Lee Joon Ik considers the comparative lack of classical literature in Korean

culture to be instrumental in the trend for Korean filmmakers to be increasingly creative with Korea's heritage and available literature. With my analysis of *Jeon Woo Chi*, I show how this playful use of the past is the most common form of historical representation in Korean cinema. In my analysis, I consider the development of the novel in Korea in relation to folklore and how it can be regarded as a reason for the more interpretive nature of the historical representation in contemporary cinema and culture. The source literature of *Jeonwoochijeon (The Tale of Jeon Woo Chi)* is not simply one novel but a myriad of retellings over centuries.¹⁵¹ From this varied source material, I propose that the film is the continuation of folkloric storytelling through modern popular culture. In the second part of this chapter, I argue that *Jeon Woo Chi* is representative of the state of Korean cinema at the end of the 2000s. My analysis continues my discussion of *Jeon Woo Chi* as an adaptation but moves on to consider the impact of digital cinema on the revision of popular or folkloric narratives. I approach how the concept of the 'well-made film' spread from mid-range productions in the early 2000s to the blockbuster form that was enveloping big budget commercial cinema by the end of the decade. I argue that *Jeon Woo Chi* marks a point of transition for Korean cinema and especially for the *sageuk* genre. The increasing digitisation and post-celluloid aesthetic stylisation that has come to emblematised postmodern cinema is especially present in new *sageuk* reconstructions of the past. I look at how the film can be read as the marker of a transition to the blockbuster use of heritage that is further illustrated in the following chapters on *Masquerade* and *The Admiral*. Finally, considering Kyung Hyun Kim's criticism of *Jeon Woo Chi*, which he sees as representative of the superficial flattening of Korean history, I discuss how the contemporary *sageuk* form can be seen to have developed into a metagenic self-reflexive form, one that embodies a postmodern, 'glocalised' view of the past. Following from the previous chapter's analysis of

¹⁵¹ The term '*jeon*' at the end of the title is generally translated as 'tale' or 'story' but more specifically refers to legends. It is used widely in the names of classic Korean novels, more of which are referenced later.

Untold Scandal, which focused on the resurgence of the genre in 2003, this chapter on *Jeon Woo Chi* moves our discussion to 2009. By exploring the film's use of folklore and heritage, and the film in the larger context of late-2000s Korean cinema, this chapter aims to continue my exploration into contemporary *sageuk* filmmaking.

***Jeon Woo Chi* and Folkloric Adaptation**

In her study of Korean folktale adaptations, Sung Ae Lee observes that traditional stories and culture have become an area of conflict. She argues that Korea's cultural heritage is caught between two types of representation: conservative retelling in an attempt to preserve a particular aspect, or significantly reinterpreting heritage to give it a contemporary appeal and relevance. Lee writes:

As South Korea becomes modernised, globalised, and Westernised, elements of its intangible cultural heritage – its folktales, folk customs, traditional performing arts, and indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices, for example – become increasingly endangered, and this threat is met by an artistic impulse to preserve that heritage in picture books, films, and television dramas. At the same time, however, ideological underpinnings of the cultural heritage may be called into question, so that contemporary retellings of [folktales] are apt to imbue them with contemporary significance.¹⁵²

As such, modern Korean cultural products such as film and television are embedded in an ideological positioning, whether the heritage it is representing is being reinvented, or whether it is being maintained conservatively to preserve its uniqueness or reverence. On the surface, *Jeon Woo Chi* may be read solely as a revisionist depiction of Korean heritage, which appears obvious due to the glaring fantasy elements of the narrative and its blockbuster stylisation. I argue, on the other hand, that *Jeon Woo Chi* can also be seen to display a more 'protective' attitude towards traditional culture. Although the film is definitely a Western-inspired production, using CGI aesthetics and Hollywood genre stylisations to tell its story of gods, goblins, and sorcery, I argue that the specifically Korean

¹⁵² Sung Ae Lee, 'Lures and Horrors of Alterity: Adapting Korean Tales of Fox Spirits', *International Research in Children's Literature* 4.2 (2011) 135-150 (p. 137).

heritage on display demonstrates an affirmation of local tradition. In Lee's essay, she focuses on the changing use of the *gumiho*, or fox-woman legend, in which a fox that has lived for a thousand years gains the ability to shapeshift and transforms into a beautiful woman who seduces and eats young men.¹⁵³ Lee claims that in recent decades there has been a shift in how this folktale is being used in popular culture, changing for instance the cultural Otherness of the original narrative. As she states, 'the script's representation of female sexuality as monstrous has been challenged by the attribution of moral awareness to the *gumiho* character, especially in conjunction with the narrative strategy of aligning perspective with her, of transforming her from object to subject'.¹⁵⁴ With *Jeon Woo Chi*, I argue in a similar vein that traditional cultural elements are being reinterpreted in contemporary society. However, I suggest that in *Jeon Woo Chi* this is done differently, by also including less commonly represented areas of Korean heritage. Over the first part of this chapter, I identify several aspects of the film's worldbuilding that display a protective use of folklore and tradition that could be read as conservation. In doing so, I intend to continue to highlight the use of heritage in new *sageuk*. Much like with *Untold Scandal*, *Jeon Woo Chi* experiments with the representation of traditional objects and culture, finding new ways for *sageuk* to explore Korea's past.

Firstly, I draw attention to a crucial aspect of the film's plot, the magical pipe, or *manpasikjeok*. The pipe is first introduced in the introductory scene, in which it is explained that it is used by the Archgod to subdue evil over thousands of years. The narrator states:

In the beginning, man and beast dwelled peacefully on Earth. Goblins were held within a dark, heavenly prison. The mighty Archgod blew the pipe for 3000 days and repressed the goblins. The prison doors had to be opened on the 3000th day but by the miscalculation of three lowly Taoist gods they were opened too soon. Just then, the evil within the goblins was awakened and these evil forces engulfed the Archgod's pipe. All of the goblins desired to be the pipe's master [...] consumed

¹⁵³ The *gumiho* myth originates in ancient Chinese mythology and has similar features to the Chinese *huli jing* and Japanese *kitsune* legendary creatures. While these two are depicted as ambiguously good or bad, the *gumiho* is traditionally viewed as an evil, bloodthirsty creature.

¹⁵⁴ Sung Ae Lee, 'Lures and Horrors of Alterity', p. 149.

by evil, the Archgod and goblins fled to Earth and hid in human bodies. They no longer remembered their pasts or true identities. Rumours spread that only the one with the pipe could rule the goblins.¹⁵⁵

The pipe is seen throughout this narration, brightly lit in contrast to the dark CGI surrounding of the prison. The pipe in *Jeon Woo Chi* derives from the legend of *manpasikjeok*, or ‘the pipe that calms a thousand billows’. The legend tells of a magical bamboo pipe that was gifted from a dragon in the sea to King Sinmun of the *Silla* dynasty (57 BCE -935 CE). When played, the pipe grew crops, calmed storms, waves, and floods, cured illnesses, and caused enemies to retreat, in doing so becoming a national treasure. The legend of *manpasikjeok* is thought to be a reflection of various significant changes to Korean society during the seventh century, an era of unification and reorganisation with *Silla’s* neighbouring states. It is said that the legend ‘depicts the mystical experience of King Sinmun’s acquirement of a divine token, which can be interpreted as a cultural symbol that signifies *Silla’s* religion, ideology, politics and music following the unification of the Three Kingdoms’.¹⁵⁶

In the film, the pipe becomes the drive behind many character actions but predominantly with Hwa Dam. When it comes into the possession of him, The Master, and the three Taoist gods, the morality and intention of each sorcerer becomes prominent. As they discuss what to do with the pipe, Hwa Dam hints that he wants full possession of its power and that he does not trust other sorcerers. The Master shares this feeling but out of suspicion over Hwa Dam’s intent. Equal in ability, their power ends up splitting the pipe in two. The Master takes this as a positive result, as no one person can now control it and, in turn, the goblins. This establishes him as a more neutral, pacifist character who does not want to fight over good and evil. Hwa Dam, in contrast, is visibly reluctant at its separation and goes on to become the film’s antagonist in his overwhelming desire for control and

¹⁵⁵ *Jeon Woo Chi*, dir. by Choi Dong Hoon (CJ Entertainment, 2009).

¹⁵⁶ The National Folk Museum of Korea, *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Literature* (Seoul: The National Folk Museum of Korea, 2014), p.192.

power. He starts *Jeon Woo Chi* as a positive and revered figure, and is depicted giving medical aid to impoverished people and helping with the King's command to capture Woo Chi. Later in the film, he becomes increasingly antagonistic. When Hwa Dam returns in the modern era, he is after the pipe for personal gain and infamy. He convinces the three Taoist gods that Woo Chi is dangerous because he murdered his master and attempted to control the goblins, when these are actually Hwa Dam's actions.

Another heritage aspect I draw attention to involves the goblins. The two goblins act as the primary antagonists for a large portion of the film, until they are finally captured and contained by Hwa Dam in modern-day Seoul. Referred to as *yogoe*, or 'monsters', the goblins do not take on the form of any specific creature from Korean folklore, appearing as a generally malicious threat. Unlike more defined supernatural beings from Korean mythology such as *gwisin* (ghosts), *dokkaebi* (trickster goblins), and the aforementioned *gumiho*, the goblins in *Jeon Woo Chi* are presented simply as evil creatures who can shapeshift from their 'monstrous' form to appear human. Their character design, however, draws from a particular area of heritage, that of the traditional zodiac. Essentially identical to the Chinese zodiac it is derived from, the Korean zodiac presents a classification of animals and personality traits based on a twelve-year astrological cycle. The animals associated with the zodiac are rooted in Chinese Taoist and Buddhist philosophies, and there are many folk narratives across Asian cultures regarding, for instance, each animal's position in the cycle, or their individual traits. In Korean tradition, the zodiac animals are associated with Buddhist symbolism and their likenesses are used in conjunction with the Twelve Heavenly Generals.¹⁵⁷ Statues and paintings at Buddhist temples incorporate guardian and militaristic imagery in the depiction of the anthropomorphised animals who

¹⁵⁷ In some denominations of Buddhism, the Twelve Heavenly Generals are part of traditional iconography and are considered protective deities. As the twelve deities began to be incorporated into Chinese Taoist philosophies, they became associated with the twelve animals of the zodiac.



Figures 8 & 9 The rabbit and rat zodiac guardians of traditional imagery.

(Tongsa Seongbo Museum)

are seen as protective warriors. Thus, the use of this imagery in *Jeon Woo Chi's* antagonistic goblins seems contradictory. The zodiac symbolism associated with safety and guardianship is used in the film to depict creatures of evil power and intent. Though several of the twelve zodiac animals are represented in the opening sequence as they fight for possession of the *manpasikjeok*, the rat and the rabbit are the two that continue to be seen throughout the film. The rat and the rabbit goblins are depicted in military garb in a darker, toned down palette compared to the vibrant, bold colours frequently used in Buddhist art. Figures 8 and 9 depict typical representations of the guardian animals, showing the bold use of colour. Especially prominent is the red, free-flowing fabric that frames each figure, adding an ethereal quality to the heavenly guardians. In contrast, figures 10 and 11 show how the goblins are depicted in the film. While most of the colours are muted and dark, the character design retains the red billowing fabric that flows around them. Both the rabbit and rat goblins appear with a dark red swell of fabric, drawing on the established imagery



Figure 10 The rabbit goblin.

(*Jeon Woo Chi*, Choi Dong Hoon, 2009)



Figure 11 The rat goblin.

(*Jeon Woo Chi*, Choi Dong Hoon, 2009)

but altering it to fit with their reinterpreted characterisation. This use of traditional imagery and symbolism can be taken as a means of recycling intangible heritage. Like the use of the *manpasikjeok* legend, the incorporation of Buddhist and Taoist imagery in the production design demonstrates a playful and flexible use of tradition. This inclusion of less represented aspects of heritage can be seen as both preservative and reinterpetive, following Lee's argument regarding contemporary significance.

These two examples illustrate the sources behind the film's depiction of the magical pipe and the goblins. Another aspect of Korean heritage I want to discuss is the use of Korean painting. While my previous examples show how more obscure Korean traditions are being portrayed with a mixture of preservation and reinvention, here I explore how *Joseon* painting is emphasised in the production. I draw attention to two ways in which traditional painting is depicted in *Jeon Woo Chi*: as inspiration for the mise-en-scène, and as a diegetic element of the narrative. Firstly, I draw attention to a scene that establishes the use of *Joseon* painting as visual inspiration. After fighting the goblins and gaining the pipe, causing a commotion in the process, Woo Chi rests at The Master's residence. When he wakes, he is beaten and chastised for his reckless behaviour and insolence. Woo Chi is reprimanded for not having what it takes to become a true Taoist master. Hwa Dam then arrives at the residence to find Woo Chi and take him to the King, by royal command. As the two feud, Hwa Dam demonstrates his superiority, holding Woo Chi precariously over the edge of an immense cliff. The screen pulls out to an increasingly wide shot showing the surrounding landscape. The Master's small house is revealed to be atop a tall rocky mass, accompanied by a few scattered trees. As the camera pulls further out, this enclosed rocky mass is seen to be surrounded by more similar mountains, some taller, some greener, one with a giant waterfall cascading down its side. The entire scene is encased in a white mist obscuring a view of the distance and emphasising the height and scale of the environment. While the set for The Master's residence is a physical space, as the image expands, the digitally produced landscape takes over the shot, with the physical set and actors still visible but diminished in the centre of the screen by the scale of the surroundings. This setting depicts a fantasy landscape that emphasises tranquillity and otherworldliness. I argue that the visuals of this landscape are an emulation of *Joseon* painting styles in the era that the first half of the film takes place.

Set in the early sixteenth century, *Jeon Woo Chi* starts in the later part of the early *Joseon* period. A key cultural figure during this era was the court painter An Gyeon, who is celebrated as a prominent and influential artist. His style of landscape painting would continue from his productive years in the fifteenth century until the seventeenth century, prompting contemporary art historians to acknowledge his influence on other artists as the 'School of An Gyeon' (or *An Gyeon pa*). His most celebrated work is the painting *Dream Journey to Peach Blossom Spring*, completed in 1447. Due to the common theme between this painting and the landscape in *Jeon Woo Chi*, I claim that the film is preserving the heritage of not just the tradition of landscape painting, but also the philosophy behind it. The painting depicts a dream vision, as commissioned by Prince Anpyeong. The Prince had dreamt he was wandering through the paradise landscape of the *Peach Blossom Spring*. This paradise originates from a famous Chinese fable written by Tao Yuanming in 421. The fable tells the story of a fisherman who chances upon a utopian paradise closed off from the political instability of the outside world. An paints the pastoral world by emphasising a fantastic and dream-like geography of dramatic mountain ranges surrounded by ethereal mist. Yi Song Mi remarks on the painting:

As it is based on Chinese literary theme, paintings of the *Peach Blossom Spring* are by definition once removed from reality. An Gyeon's *Dream Journey* is yet another step further removed from reality as it depicts the vision of Prince Anpyeong's dream. The mountains and waters in this landscape painting masterfully evoke the beauty of that 'unreal world'. There are many Chinese and Japanese paintings that depict [Tao Yuanming's] *Peach Blossom Spring*, but none show such a high degree of otherworldliness as this.¹⁵⁸

An's painting, therefore, represents the idealised Taoist landscape of harmony with nature and social utopia. Taoist asceticism that emphasises seclusion and enlightenment is addressed in the film by The Master, whose character is respected as one of, if not the, most powerful ascetics in the land. In contrast, his peer, Hwa Dam, is shown as living

¹⁵⁸ Yi Song Mi, *Korean Landscape Painting: Continuity and Innovation Through the Ages* (Elisabeth, New Jersey: Hollym Corp., Publishers, 2006), p.14.

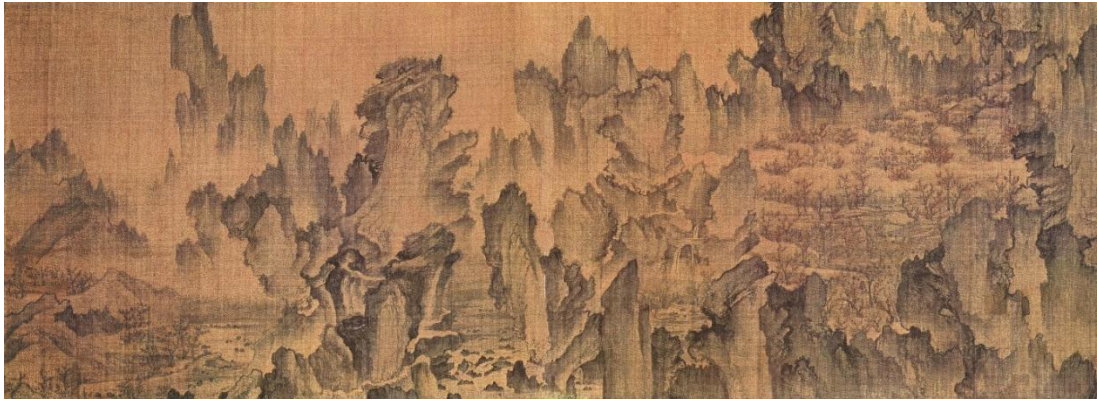


Figure 12 An Gyeon's *Dream Journey to Peach Blossom Spring*.

(Tenri University, Nara, Japan)



Figure 13 The Master's hermitage in a fantasised landscape.

(*Jeon Woo Chi*, Choi Dong Hoon, 2009)

amongst the populace in a crowded and noisy area, as if to imply his lesser status as a Taoist master, who aims for worldly fame and power instead of Taoist enlightenment. The Master's hermitage in the isolated and fantasised environment bears a resemblance to the dream world of the *Peach Blossom Spring*. Figures 12 and 13 show the similar visuals of pale jutting mountains that fade into the distance, while any sign of human settlement is kept small and diminished in comparison to the landscape. The Master's secluded home, positioned impossibly on top of an unscalable mountain, matches the isolated and barely

visible habitation in the painting. *Jeon Woo Chi* suggests an association of the heritage of *Joseon* painting and the era that the film reconstructs.

My second example illustrating painterly tradition in the film concentrates on the diegetic use of paintings as part of the world's sorcery. While An Gyeon's artistic style is incorporated into the film's visual design, the use of traditional paintings as objects and props has a more direct impact on the character's actions and the narrative. In *Jeon Woo Chi*, Taoist magic involves shapeshifting, flying, and summoning. In addition, objects within this fantasy world are also able to be manipulated with sorcery. Talismans can transform body parts into stone, and bottles are used to imprison goblins. In this respect, paintings are used by the sorcerer characters as magical objects, able to transport people between places or encase them for hundreds of years. In the former case, several examples are seen during the film. As Woo Chi is tricking the King by appearing in front of him as the Jade Emperor, he brags about his supreme abilities as a painter, claiming that the images he draws come to life. He presents a painted landscape to the King, who praised his talent. He stops the King's admiration to announce that the horse in the painting is in fact for himself, the wizard Woo Chi, at which point all the illusions of splendour that marked the 'Jade Emperor's' arrival have turned back into their original form as simple brooms. Woo Chi's clothes change from the elaborate heavenly robes to a brown cloak. After arrogantly showing off his talents as a sorcerer, Woo Chi leaves through the painting he presented to the King. When he jumps into the scroll, his image resembles the inkwork of the art, and he rides away through the painted landscape as the paper itself flies away, escaping the scene. Woo Chi uses the painting as a way of transporting himself and in doing so also draws attention to the period detail of the heritage object.

A second occurrence of the transportive use of paintings occurs during the scene earlier described in which Hwa Dam is searching for Woo Chi at The Master's residence.

Hwa Dam leads his servants and the three Taoist gods to a small remote temple, the inside walls covered with scrolls and paintings. His eyes are drawn to a landscape painting to one side. When he approaches it, he pushes his hand into the paper and it disappears into the ink, displaying a similar effect to when Woo Chi escaped through the scroll in the palace. The painting is established as a 'portal' of sorts to The Master's hermitage in the fantasised mountains, as previously discussed. The depiction of the landscape seen on the scroll in the temple is a precursor to its appearance later in the same scene. While later it is represented through digital effects, here it is reconstructed via a replication of traditional artwork. The imitation of period detail in this case is highlighted not just as a means of reconstructing the look of the era through heritage objects, but also as a way of recycling traditional elements. By imbuing a typical heritage object with magical properties, *Jeon Woo Chi* displays its playful attitude when representing a version of the past. At the same time, this gaze maintains a degree of conservatism due to the celebration of localised tradition. Following the success of films such as *Untold Scandal* and *King and the Clown*, new *sageuk* in the 2000s increasingly made use of traditional culture in innovative ways. *Jeon Woo Chi* continues along the same vein of recycling heritage objects for both conservation and localisation within the Korean blockbuster.

Over the first section of my analysis, I have highlighted period elements of the film that can be understood as attempts to simultaneously preserve and reinvent cultural heritage. I now move on to explore the depiction of folklore in the *sageuk* film, specifically through the adaptation of classical literature. In doing so, I address notions of authenticity in the adaptation of Korean classical literature and argue that *Jeon Woo Chi's* creative use of heritage is simply part of a naturally reinterpreted folkloric tradition. As quoted at the beginning of this chapter, director Lee Joon Ik comments that the comparatively smaller canon of classic literature in Korean tradition, in contrast to that of neighbouring countries such as China and Japan, has caused filmmakers to push more original stories when

depicting the past.¹⁵⁹ The use of literary sources, as contextualised in the introductory chapter, goes back to the emergence of Korean cinema. Amongst the earliest films made were adaptations of classic novels such as *Chunhyangjeon* and *Janghwa Hongryeonjeon*, themselves based on traditional folk tales. As Lee states, however, the limited sources available saw adaptations of modern and contemporary novels become more commonplace. The character Woo Chi is derived from the legendary folk hero who has been depicted in Korean literature since the sixteenth century. His legacy also coincides with the emergence of the novel as a literary genre. Prose literature initially developed under Chinese influence, both in content and form. Korean fiction written in Chinese was formulated under similar genres to Chinese literary culture. Kim Honggyu summarises these genres as ‘tales of wonder’, in other words the literary embellishment of folk tales, ‘biographical fiction’ that highly fictionalised individual’s lives, and ‘unofficial histories’, which collected short narratives from urban areas and common people.¹⁶⁰ *Jeonwoochijeon* appears to incorporate all of these forms, presenting a highly fictionalised, folkloric interpretation of Woo Chi’s life, who uses his Taoist magic to help commoners. Though telling stories of Korean culture, these classic novels are considered to have been influenced by Chinese tradition. Lee Hai Soon claims that comparative studies of Korean novels show similar plots, characters, and themes to Chinese literature. She specifically notes how *Jeonwoochijeon* is one of several novels that is influenced by the sixteenth-century Chinese work *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng’en.¹⁶¹ While in early *Joseon* culture

¹⁵⁹ The use of the term ‘classic’ literature in Korean literary studies does not denote that a book is especially noteworthy and timeless, but simply that it was written up until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Kim Honggyu explains that the classic novel is also referred to as ‘the old novel’ or ‘the ancient novel’. See, Kim Honggyu, *Understanding Korean Literature* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 107.

¹⁶⁰ See, Kim Honggyu, ‘Chosŏn fiction in Chinese’, in *A History of Korean Literature* ed. by Peter H. Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 246-49.

¹⁶¹ Lee Hai Soon, ‘Korean Literature and Adjacent Literatures’, *Anthology of Korean Studies, Volume IV Korean Literature: Its Classical Heritage and Modern Breakthroughs* ed. by Korean National Commission for UNESCO (Elizabeth, New Jersey: Hollym International Corp., 2003), pp. 387-401 (p. 389).

such folk tales were passed through oral traditions, written preservation of these stories was initially restricted to Chinese characters, or *hanja*, until the advent of the Korean alphabet, *hangeul*, in the fifteenth century. The privileged position of literary Chinese in Korean upper class culture meant that these works of literature were not accessible to most people.

Korean fiction written in Korean using *hangeul* emerged in the seventeenth century with the work *Honggildongjeon*, initially attributed to Heo Gyun. The development of vernacular fiction initiated the conception of new genres and themes. The most prominent genre was that of heroic fiction, which told stories of contemporary *Joseon* society and the fictionalisation of a real or historic person. The nature of this vernacular Korean fiction is different to that written in *hanja*. While the latter was written, favoured and consumed by the *yangban* elite, *hangeul*-written novels had a more widespread audience and were anonymously penned. As Kim writes, 'except for a small number, classic novels were written by anonymous authors. This reflects the fact that not only was there little regard for novel writing at the time, there was also a lack of respect for individual creativity [...] many novels underwent considerable revision during the review process of printing and reprinting, giving rise to a large number of different versions of the same work'.¹⁶² As such, the repeated retelling of Korean narratives and folk tales within the emerging novel format, both canonised and vernacularised local heritage. The development of the Korean novel written in *hangeul*, as opposed to Chinese characters, enabled common people to access literature, instead of being restricted to the intellectual *yangban* elite. The anonymity seen with the authorship of classical Korean novels is characteristic of folkloric storytelling, and, as Clare Foster argues, wider Asian culture. In her discussion on the history of adaptation, she comments that the perceived value of the original source compared to the adapted

¹⁶² Kim Hunggyu, *Understanding Korean Literature* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 114.

text is a redundant Western bias. She points to how non-Western cultures, in her example specifically South and Southeast Asian cultures, do not place as much importance on the notions of authenticity with regard to heritage culture. Instead the emphasis is on the natural tendency for reinterpretation. Foster suggests that Western notions of individual voice and the ownership of the written word are overruled by the traditions of multiple (often anonymous) retellings and less subservience to the 'original'.¹⁶³ In line with her ideas, I consider *Jeon Woo Chi* to be a continuation of the natural cycle of folkloric reinterpretation which, as an adaptation, attempts to act both as a preservation of traditional culture and a modernisation appealing to contemporary sensibilities.

The adaptation of Woo Chi's character in the film suggests an ongoing interpretation of the narrative in line with traditional storytelling. The figure of Woo Chi appears in both *hanja* and *hangeul* written novels, including the folklore miscellanies *Eou's Unofficial Histories (Eouyadam)* by Yu Mong In, and the *Collection of Tales from the Great Eastern Kingdom (Daedongyaseung)*, compiled from various authors.¹⁶⁴ Over the centuries, the story has been retold to encompass numerous different plots and themes, but they generally focus on Woo Chi as a heroic figure who comes to the aid of common people suffering at the hands of the wealthy elite. In one version of the story, Woo Chi finds people in grief over the bad harvest and indifferent officials, so takes it into his own hands to confront the King. The story begins with the following passage:

Long ago there lived beside Sung-In Gate in Song-Gyeong a scholar named Jeon Woo Chi. By assiduous study he had acquired supernatural powers and had attained a remarkable proficiency in magic. He was careless of worldly fame, however, and never made any public display of his powers, so that no one knew of his capabilities. Now for some years the harvest had been bad in the lands along

¹⁶³ Clare Foster, 'Adapting History and the History of Adaptation', in *The Adaptation of History: Essays on Ways of Telling the Past* ed. by Laurence Raw and Defne Ersin Tutan (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013), pp. 117-128 (p. 122).

¹⁶⁴ The exact date of these publications is unknown. *Eou's Unofficial Histories* was published in over thirty different editions, but the first is believed to have been compiled in 1622. The *Collection of Tales from the Great Eastern Kingdom* is estimated to have been written in the early to mid-eighteenth century.

the south coast, and moreover a plague of vipers assailed the land, so that the people were in dire distress. But the officials and leading citizens took no measures to relieve the suffering of the people, for they were more interested in amassing wealth for themselves by intrigue and quarrelling among themselves. Jeon Woo Chi, on the other hand, was grieved to see the wretched conditions in which the people were living, and so at his own expense he undertook measures for their relief. Before long his own resources were exhausted, and so he turned his attention to magic. One day he transformed himself into a superhuman being wearing a golden crown, and, accompanied by two small boys dressed in blue, he mounted upon a cloud and rode through the air towards the Royal Palace. It was the second day of the First Month, and all the courtiers had come to offer him New Year greetings. Jeon Woo Chi descended at their head, before the King, and solemnly proclaimed, 'I, Emperor of the Heavenly Kingdom, declare you, King of this land, that it is my intention to build in heaven a 'Palace of Peace' dedicated to the memory of all those men and women who had the misfortune to die in poverty. I call upon every country to prepare one beam of gold.'¹⁶⁵

Jeon Woo Chi utilises this scene when introducing the titular character. In this narration of *Jeonwoochijeon*, the emphasis is on Woo Chi's altruism and virtue. In the film, he is transformed into an arrogant and immature student, who is reckless with his powers. The Master chastises Woo Chi for only seeking fame, and not the enlightenment of a true Taoist master. Woo Chi's superficiality is demonstrated through his search for the ritual props of the knife (*sinkal*) and the mirror (*myeongdo*). The latter he steals from the King during his prank, the former he attempts to steal from the widow when he kidnaps her. Woo Chi believes that by possessing these two objects he will become one of the most powerful Taoist sorcerers. He shuns the asceticism of Taoist tradition in favour of the wealth that comes from Confucian philosophy. While *Jeon Woo Chi* changes the characterisation of the legendary protagonist, it maintains some elements of the source literature, seen with the above narration. Woo Chi's introduction in the film is during his prank on the King, and he is first seen while in disguise as the Jade Emperor. Similar imagery is evoked, including his gold crown and riding through the sky on a cloud, accompanied by heavenly servants.

¹⁶⁵ Zǒng In Sǒb, *Folk Tales from Korea* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952), p. 224. In his text, Zǒng romanises Jeon Woo Chi as Zǒn U Czi, which I have changed for consistency.

The reinterpretation of Woo Chi as a character can be viewed as part of a larger trend within new *sageuk* of creating transgressive narratives using *Joseon* heritage as a resource. In particular, the popularity of outlaw-based films in contemporary *sageuk* films demonstrates a cathartic use of transgressive characters to tackle issues of corruption and misuse of authority in both the past and modern society. In *Jeonwoochijeon* narratives, Woo Chi is frequently portrayed as a trickster sorcerer, who uses his Taoist magic for social good, but usually in a mischievous and humorous way that takes advantage of peoples' insecurities. Similarly, in the film he is depicted as a vain, shallow character who begins the story wanting fame but ends it performing heroic, selfless deeds that defeat Hwa Dam and bring about peace. Other recent films based on classic novels of trickster characters include *Seondal: The Man Who Sells the River* (Park Dae Min, 2015) based on *Kimseondaljeon*, and *Phantom Detective* (Jo Sung Hee, 2016) from the *Honggildongjeon* narrative. The latter presents a modernisation of one of the most famous premodern Korean folk characters, Hong Gil Dong, whose cultural legacy has been spread through all manner of media including musicals, video games, and comic books. The former, perhaps more interestingly, is a lesser known novel of a similar outlaw figure also based on a real historical person, which had been adapted to film twice before, in 1957 and 1968.¹⁶⁶ In *Seondal*, the eponymous con artist is presented as a young, alluring figure and reconstructs several episodes from his varying schemes.

As seen with *Jeon Woo Chi*, the trickster protagonist is used as a transgressive attack on social norms but ends the film by conforming to the traditional heroic narrative. By the end of each film, both Woo Chi and Seon Dal become heroes that maintain the social order, not disrupting them as is typical of outlaw narratives. Woo Chi defeats Hwa Dam who is imprisoned with a scroll for eternity. Seon Dal reveals that his scam of selling

¹⁶⁶ See, *Bong-I Kim Seondal* (Han Hong Yeol, 1957) and *A Great Hero, Kim Seon Dal* (Im Won Jik, 1968).

water from a river is a long con enacted under the authority of the King to catch a corrupt politician in his court. By performing his immoral schemes with the reinforcement and help of the King, can he really be viewed as an outlaw if he is acting to strengthen the King's authority? The Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Literature states that 'Kim Seon Dal legends are trickster narratives that offer entertainment while jolting and attacking the existing social order, and Kim can be seen as a character contributing to the collapse of the medieval order and the preparation of a new order for the modern times'.¹⁶⁷ The same can be said for *Jeon Woo Chi*, in more ways than one. As I discuss in the next section of this chapter, the film represents the collapse of old Korean cinema and the emergence of a new era, one of CGI effects, high-concept narratives, and large-scale aesthetics and spectacles. Narratively speaking, though, Woo Chi's trickster behaviour is typical of popular outlaw stories, and the re-adaptation of his character, like others from Korean tradition, is a common cultural motif used to confront social norms. Speaking on the pervasive use of Robin Hood in popular culture, Thomas Hahn comments that it is not just the appeal of transgressive characters that propels the repeated representations of his tale, but also the general relationship between folklore and popular culture. He argues that, 'popular culture refuses the confinement of 'genuine', stable, canonical forms, and that may be why Robin Hood, that most mobile and elusive of heroes, seems so fitted to its protean inventiveness in all times and places'.¹⁶⁸ *Jeon Woo Chi*, and other *sageuk* adaptations of Korean folklore, operate in the same way. There is an adaptability inherent in Korea's literary heritage and folklore tradition due to the legacy of anonymous authorship and the social function that comes with retelling folk tales. The regular recycling and variation when approaching the past in the contemporary *sageuk* film is partly the product of this tradition which has

¹⁶⁷ The National Folk Museum of Korea, *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Literature*, p.148.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Hahn, 'Playing with Transgression: Robin Hood and Popular Culture', in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice* ed. by Thomas G. Hahn (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 1-12 (p. 3).

continued into the popular culture of the modern era. Traditionally, folk tales were retold by oral dissemination or through the publishing of different versions of the same novel. In postmodern culture, this has developed into the mass media landscape of film, television, video games, and comic books, among others.

Returning to Lee's discussion of Korean folklore as being conservative or reinterpretive, the examples I have shown in this part of my analysis can be interpreted as presenting both qualities. Contrary to Lee's binaristic conclusion, Peter Narváez and Martin Laba propose that while folklore and popular culture are both ways of ritualising human experience, there persists an idea that folklore represents a stagnant hold on the past. They lament that 'although the contents of the folklore-popular culture continuum exhibit conservative *and* dynamic qualities, the proclivities or biases of the media and artistic communities have sometimes led to the oversimplified association of folklore with conservatism, and popular culture with dynamism'.¹⁶⁹ Instead, Narváez and Laba insist that folklore is by definition a display of variation and change, and that popular culture has become a continuation of the folkloric process, disseminating continuous reinterpretations of the same traditions. Through the manipulation of heritage objects and the reinvented characterisation of Woo Chi, the film shows how contemporary popular culture continues to use tradition in the same folkloric process. *Jeon Woo Chi*, in particular, continues the celebration of the outlaw, trickster narrative common in classic novels. The popularity of outlaw narratives in contemporary Korean film extends beyond the heritage of classic literary adaptations and into the revisionist, playful creation of original productions. In recent years, *sageuk* blockbusters such as *The Grand Heist* (Kim Joo Ho, 2012), *Kundo: Age of the Rampant* (Yoon Jong Bin, 2014), and *The Pirates* (Lee Seok Hoon, 2014) have been

¹⁶⁹ Peter Narváez and Martin Laba, 'Introduction: The Folkloric-Popular Culture Continuum', in *Media Sense: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum* ed. by Peter Narváez and Martin Laba (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986), pp. 1-88 (p. 1). [Emphasis in original]

successful. Despite not being based on any particular folk tale or novel, these popular and inventive films make use of the adaptability of Korean tradition to create entertaining spectacles that also confront social inequality and transgressive justice.

***Jeon Woo Chi* and Digital Cinema**

For the second section of this chapter's analysis of *Jeon Woo Chi*, I concentrate on the film's position within contemporary Korean cinema, particularly with regard to the emergence of digital filmmaking in the local industry. Through this exploration, I intend to illustrate how the release of *Jeon Woo Chi* at the end of the 2000s marks a transitional period between traditional celluloid filmmaking and digital production. Despite being made with analogue film, the production demonstrates key qualities of the Korean blockbuster and *sageuk* genre's emergent embrace of digital cinematography and Hollywood-style spectacle. *Jeon Woo Chi*'s blend of traditional culture with action sequences, pyrotechniques, and CGI monsters shows how contemporary Korean cinema is capable of producing blockbuster-style films and willing to playfully display the nation's premodern heritage. I argue that *Jeon Woo Chi* can be viewed as a film that marks a significant shift in the *sageuk* genre. In my discussion, I draw attention to the changes to Korean cinema and specifically to the *sageuk* genre in the years before *Jeon Woo Chi*. I show how *sageuk*, since the surprise success of *Untold Scandal* in 2003, has developed into a postmodern form that embodies what I refer to as a metageneric form. I use this term to highlight the self-reflexive and self-consciousness of contemporary *sageuk* productions, which present the past and traditional cultural heritage through the construction of a historical imaginary and pastiche. To illustrate my reading of *Jeon Woo Chi* as a transitional and self-conscious film, I analyse scenes that draw attention to an increasing superficiality found in the representation of the past in Korean productions. In my discussion of some key scenes, I point towards the encroachment of digital cinematography and *mise-en-scène*, but first I

explore the build-up to *Jeon Woo Chi's* release to provide some context as to why I argue that the film marks a key transition in *sageuk* filmmaking.

While the late 1990s and early 2000s were dominated by what has been referred to as the Korean blockbuster (discussed in detail in the fifth chapter), industrial and critical discourse quickly moved on to discuss the emergent trend of the 'well-made film'. The initial Korean blockbuster trend that developed in the late 1990s following the success of *Swiri* quickly diminished following a series of high-budget box office failures. In 2003, spectacle-driven films such as *Tube* (Baek Woon Hak), *Natural City* (Min Byung Cheon), and *Sword in the Moon* (Kim Ui Seok) repeatedly failed to draw in either a large audience or critical acclaim. In contrast, the same year saw the unprecedented success of numerous mid-budget commercial films. Among the most successful films of the year were *Memories of Murder*, *Oldboy*, and *A Tale of Two Sisters*. These releases combined the commercial appeal reminiscent of the Korean blockbuster, featuring big-name stars, generic conventions, and quality production values, with the inclusion of social issues and the personal directorial styles associated with arthouse filmmaking. The well-made film phenomenon, as it was dubbed by both the film industry and critics, appealed to the changing tastes of the Korean audience for domestic productions, and, as Kim Kyoung Wook summarises, 'constitut[ing] a Korean combination of auteurism and the high concept films of the New Hollywood Era'.¹⁷⁰ Jinhee Choi also compares the term 'well-made' to the Hollywood notion of the high concept film, noting the translation of 'well-made' in English discourse as 'high quality film'.¹⁷¹ She argues that the appeal of films considered part of the well-made trend can be seen not just for their combined aesthetic and narrative quality, but also in the simplicity of their marketability. She notes:

¹⁷⁰ Kim Kyoung Wook, 'The Endorsement of Well-Made Films', in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance* ed. by Kim Mee Hyun (Seoul: Communication Books, 2007), pp. 385-387 (p. 387).

¹⁷¹ Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), p. 145.

Well-made films are marketed with a simple catchphrase or one-line concept that can encapsulate the plot structure, star, genre, and film style [...] the marketing strategy of [such films] reinforces the local-global (and East-West) rhetoric employed in promoting Korean blockbusters as a brand [...] Hollywood or other national cinema's influence in marketing Korean well-made films not only provides a point of reference to help convey a sense of the film's content but also becomes a point of departure for its cultural specificity.¹⁷²

In her discussion regarding the affinities between Korean well-made film and Hollywood's high concept strategy, Choi draws attention to the cultural hybridity that has become characteristic of contemporary Korean cinema. She argues that the rise in acclaim and popularity of local films in the twentieth century is a result of the early stages of Korean blockbusters and well-made films combining Hollywood conventions and production strategies with Korean experiences and specificity.

Discussion surrounding the well-made phenomenon began with the success of films released in 2003, though, as Choi notes, films that can be categorised as such include precursors such as *Marriage Story*, *Christmas in August* (Hur Jin Ho, 1998), and *JSA*. She also comments that the term carries unwarranted connotations regarding the success of commercial cinema from previous eras, suggesting that the use of the term implies such films do not deserve recognition of their success when compared to contemporary 'well-made' films.¹⁷³ The vague term attempts to promote discourse around the continually shifting and changing attitudes in Korean cinema when viewed from a number of perspectives, such as aesthetic value, commercial popularity, social critique, subject matter, and the level of spectacle. It can be argued that the main distinction between the success of Korean New Wave of the 1990s and the boom in contemporary Korean cinema of the twenty-first century is that the latter sought to channel a localised cinephilia towards Korean productions. While Korean New Wave created largely separate upsurges of arthouse and commercial cinema, the emergence of the well-made film combined these

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 147-148.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

two forms. The resulting films aimed to diversify the local cinema landscape, offering mid-sized, mainstream productions that presented an accessible middle ground between arthouse and blockbuster.

Referring back to the introductory chapter of my thesis, the discussion surrounding hybridity has been raised by several Korean film scholars, including Dal Yong Jin, Sun Jung, and Hye Seung Chung. Rarely, however, do they address how the hybridisation of domestic productions has impacted upon the *sageuk* form. Here, I briefly explore a few key *sageuk* productions that show how the form has changed since the beginning of the twenty-first century up until the release of *Jeon Woo Chi*. A few weeks following the release of *Untold Scandal* in October 2003, another distinctive *sageuk* film debuted that found similar commercial success. *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield* tells the story of the Battle of Hwangsanbeol in 660 and incorporates anachronistic humour into its depiction of warfare and political conflict, featuring slapstick physical comedy and the use of modern regional accents. These creative choices received derision from both critics and audiences who saw the film as a meaninglessly inauthentic portrayal of a historical event and criticised the cheap use of comedy. Kyung Hyun Kim, for instance, writes, ‘not only was [the] directorial decision to use modern regional accents seen as a way of authenticating history but it was also seen as a cheap way to exploit regional dialect, which had become popular at the time’.¹⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the film proved to be a substantial box office success, becoming one of the top grossing releases of the year and, along with *Untold Scandal*, acted as a catalyst for change in the *sageuk* film. These films did this by proving the commercial potential of the form as part of the well-made trend, and highlighting that *sageuk* did not have to be restrained by notions of historical accuracy to be successful with audiences. As such, the

¹⁷⁴ Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, p. 209.

use of anachronisms, humour, and Western tropes when depicting a Korean past became the norm.

The form continued to explore the potential of this new found creative freedom within the industry's well-made phenomenon, which pushed the production of quality mainstream films. A major success associated with these developments is the overwhelming popularity of 2005's *King and the Clown*. The film's focus on typically maligned subjects such as traditional arts and homosexual desire meant its substantial box office success came as a surprise and inspiration for both the industry and audience. Subsequent productions began to mine Korean tradition and heritage for more 'hidden' and 'untold' stories. In the years that followed, well-made *sageuk* films about largely undocumented areas of history became standard. Homosexuality was represented again in *A Frozen Flower*, and stories addressing women's position in *Joseon* society became popular, such as the lives of *gungnyeo* (court ladies) in *Shadows in the Palace* (Kim Mee Jung, 2007) and *gisaeng* (female entertainers) in *Hwang Jin Yi* (Chang Yoon Hyun, 2007). The emphasis in such productions was on a combination of historical subject matter and aesthetic value. In both these aspects, the key was to possess a careful balance between contemporary relevance and Korean specificity. 2008 proved a significant year for *sageuk* films, with *A Frozen Flower*, *The Divine Weapon* (Kim Yoo Jin) and *Portrait of a Beauty* (Jeon Yun Su) amongst the most attended films of the year. However, while these productions portrayed their sensationalised subject matter with a restrained and frequently erotically-charged style, the year's comedy-focused *sageuk* films such as *A Tale of Legendary Libido* (Shin Hae Sol) and *The Accidental Gangster and the Mistaken Courtesan* (Yeo Kyun Dong) failed to pull in as large and enthusiastic crowds. The legacy of *Untold Scandal* proved more long-lasting than that of *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield*, with the former film's inclusion of Western music and unconventional use of Korean tradition setting a new standard for *sageuk* in the twenty-first century.

With the release of *Jeon Woo Chi* in late 2009, another catalyst for *sageuk* emerged, one where the focus of a successful historical film was the emphasis on spectacle and digital imagery, and on big budgets and big stars. As the following two chapters discuss, the *sageuk* form in the 2010s became preoccupied with portraying history on a grand scale, turning the release of *sageuk* films into cinematic events. I argue that *Jeon Woo Chi* marks the beginning of this trend, with its focus on action sequences and dramatic landscapes over portraying an 'authentic' view of history. In turn, the film adds to Korea's historical imaginary surrounding *Joseon* heritage. One particular aspect of *Jeon Woo Chi* that highlights this is the presentation of landscapes and settings, which are an essential characteristic of the film's irreverent tone. The film creates an intentionally jarring juxtaposition between traditional and modern spaces. This can be seen from the outset of the film. After the opening sequence explaining the origins of the *manpasikjeok* and the goblins, the scene cuts to a present-day doctor's office. The CGI setting of the Arch God's cave is presented in muted grey colours, with only the occasional use of some brighter golds and whites to draw attention to the pipe or the cave entrance. In contrast, the doctor's office is lit with a clinical blue palette. The busy room is filled with medical equipment, children's drawings and textbooks, and flooded with light from the large background windows. Aside from the dialogue between the scene's two characters, the only other predominant sound comes from a dolphin pendulum on the doctor's desk. Its rhythmic and mechanical sound provides contrast when transitioning into the next scene, which also takes the narrative back in time. One of the three Taoist Gods, who is living in present-day Seoul in disguise as a Buddhist monk, tells the doctor he used to be a god who was tasked to search for goblins. As he tells her this, the scene fades into the depiction of the *Joseon* era. He is seen walking through a traditional gateway surrounded by bamboo groves. The sound of the trees in the wind is mixed with the continued noise of the pendulum in the doctor's office. This effect remains for a brief moment after the narration

has stopped and the scene has completely transitioned. The blending of modern, mechanical and rhythmical sounds of the present with the natural, arboreal and hazy sounds of the past is one way in which *Jeon Woo Chi* blurs the boundaries in its relationship between past and present.

As the film progresses, the juxtapositioning becomes more prominent. During the scenes set in the past, the visuals are dominated by iconography of traditional spaces and landscapes. The previous section of this chapter analysed a sequence of the film that presented a fantasised and idealised hermitage, wherein the fog-drenched, exaggerated mountains were reminiscent of traditional landscape painting. This dream-like construction can be considered alongside other heritage spaces in *Jeon Woo Chi*, such as the depictions of the royal palace during the Jade Emperor ceremony, and the traditional tavern known as a *jumak*, where Woo Chi joins the widow's travelling party. These spaces are emphasised, so they contrast with the narrative's eventual transition into a modern-day setting. The jagged mountains, ornate architecture, and communal places are transformed into the iconography of contemporary Seoul. These are replaced as the characters find themselves amongst high-rise skyscrapers, drab hospital wards, and clustered film sets, and surrounded by neon signs and Western food. Such contrasts demonstrate the altered use of history in the *sageuk* films. The postmodern emphasis on hybridity, in this example being the narrative's amalgamation of past and present iconography, uncovers anxieties about Korea's changing society in the grip of compressed modernity.

Kyung Hyun Kim says of the film, 'Woo Chi's disappearing act, along with Korea's ability to fantasise such wizardry, the film seems to argue, has been imprisoned for centuries, until now'.¹⁷⁵ He refers to the obsession with space and speed, both in the film and Korean cinema in general. He continues, 'The sheer speed of time, which first impacted

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 210-211.

the New Hollywood during its multiplex era created the consumer base for young audiences, fascinated filmmakers in the United States, Hong Kong and elsewhere'.¹⁷⁶ Kim considers the development of the contemporary Korean cinema boom to be a product of the nation's economic and sociological changes in a similar way to the way New Hollywood developed in the late 1960s. However, in Korea's case, the local industry was also influenced by this New Hollywood movement. Similarly, Kim Soyoung, in her essay on the use of the fantastic to explore issues in Korea's modern capitalist society, argues that the contemporary Korean film renaissance is the final product of the nation's compressed modernity, which has instilled an uncertain sense of scale to local culture. She writes, 'a composite state of urgency and criticality operating at a vertiginous pace drives South Korean society into a condition of perpetual dromology or logic of speed [...] recently this condition has produced a distinct "state of fantasy" that imbues the Korean mode of blockbuster cinema'.¹⁷⁷ Like Kyung Hyun Kim's reference to an obsession with the pace of cultural change, Kim Soyoung describes the anxiety associated with Korea's fast-paced economic development. In *Jeon Woo Chi*, the fantastic use of different social eras and the presentation of space and imagery are linked to a similar anxiety towards what such commentators suggest is a process of rapid change over a short period of time. For *sageuk* in general, the absorption of the blockbuster mode, that Kim sees as creating a state of fantasy, refers less to the frank use of fantastic tropes such as magic and time travel, but rather to the tendency towards hybridity, excess, and playfulness with representation in recent cinema. As she continues, the Korean blockbuster mode attempts 'not only to offer a critical analysis of a society that is changing excessively rapidly but also to offer "room for play", performance and taking a gamble with cinema; in short, a fantasmatic space'.¹⁷⁸ The

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁷⁷ Kim Soyoung, 'The State of Fantasy in Emergency: Fantasmatic others in South Korean films', *Cultural Studies* 27.2 (2013) 257-270 (p. 258).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 259.

'room for play' in the *sageuk* form involves the construction of a historical imaginary in which it has become increasingly common to play with notions of performing the past as a means to deal with tensions associated with modernity.

Another aspect of *Jeon Woo Chi* that marks the film as a transitional *sageuk* production is related to the changing aesthetics of the form, a change that reflects a wider shift in contemporary Korean cinema. I argue that the increase in digital production and aesthetics in the late-2000s can be seen to have had a noticeable effect on *sageuk* films. To illustrate this, I examine a short sequence from early in the film of digital cinematography and compositing. Woo Chi's first appearance in the film is in disguise as the Jade Emperor during a palace ceremony. To herald his arrival, the palace is filled with servants, musicians, and decorations, captured in a number of medium shots before an aerial view of the ceremony is used to show Woo Chi's viewpoint as he descends. This crane shot sweeps over the palace and the ceremonial carpet lined with guards to celebrate his arrival, before Woo Chi appears on a cloud at the bottom right of the screen. In the next frame, he is seen descending from the sky, flanked by his own servants, musicians, and guards. The shot follows his movement down and across the screen, the flying servants crossing his path and travelling ahead of him. His descent occurs against the backdrop of the Gyeongbok Palace buildings and the bright, sun-drenched sky.

My specific focus here is on the use of digital compositing effects and the deliberate presentation of lens flare. As the servants fly across the screen, they cross the path of light from the sun to the screen, drawing attention to the large lens flare that occupies the centre of the frame. This lens flare is visually dominant enough to obscure Woo Chi during most of his cloud descent. The shot is constructed through the digital composition of live action footage of actors performing wire work with a CGI-modified backdrop that deliberately presents a light glare on the camera lens. This sequence reflects



Figure 14 CGI lens flare obscuring Woo Chi's descent as the Jade Emperor.

Jeon Woo Chi (Choi Dong Hoon, 2009)

the transition to digital aesthetics in contemporary Korean cinema, especially within the *sageuk* form. Referring back to Kyung Hyun Kim's statements discussed in the previous section, the development of this digital aesthetic, that he argues creates a superficial representation of history, can, again, be related back to the filmmaking styles of New Hollywood. While Kim states that this link is predominantly based on the similar sociological and economic changes that influenced each of these cinematic movements, I draw attention to how Korean digital aesthetics can be seen as derivative of the persistently influential cinematography of 1970s Hollywood.

Julie Turnock explores how certain aspects of 1970s New Hollywood cinematography are demonstrative not of a perceptual realism, but of photorealism. Emulating the visual cues of photography, this photorealism creates an aesthetic based around what an image would look like through a camera lens, not to the naked eye. Turnock argues that photorealism became the desired look of New Hollywood and that its standard continues to be the dominant visual style even in the digital era. As she states:

It is clear that in contemporary special effects, digital imaging does not simply try to imitate a common sense notion of perceptual realism, but instead, replicates an accepted aesthetic photorealistically [...] More specifically, contemporary effect

aesthetics allude to a specific time period – the look of certain aspects of 1970s cinematography [...] This style was developed at the time to accentuate – not hide – the process of filming, and included such techniques as lens flares, hand-held cameras and rack focus, among others.¹⁷⁹

While in the 1970s the photorealist style was, as she suggests, paradoxical in its construction of realism by drawing attention to the artificial nature of production, in contemporary cinema this aesthetic is further exaggerated. Returning to my example shot in *Jeon Woo Chi*, the lens flare effect that dominates the frame is used deliberately in a way that corresponds to these aesthetic standards. The addition of lens flare in both *Jeon Woo Chi* and in contemporary digital cinema in general, is a cue to photorealism. On the issue, Turnock writes:

Whatever aesthetic uses lens flare served in the 1970s, they have now evolved into a stylistic cue *associated* with or promoting a sense of immediate docurealism, and, in fact, have become the go-to additive element to the mise-en-scène in contemporary special effects, to cue a photorealistic aesthetic [...] the CGI addition of lens flares is a chief indication that digital designers of photorealistic special effects are more often than not referencing the *cinematography* of earlier films, not as is often assumed the perceiver's actual visual experience of the world.¹⁸⁰

She remarks that the prevalence of the lens flare as a digital effect in contemporary filmmaking has become accepted as an element of cinematic realism, which is rooted in a specific form of digitally manipulated photorealism. As such, Kim's comments on new *sageuk*'s postmodern flattening of the past can be seen in the effects used in *Jeon Woo Chi*. Due to the rise in superficial aesthetics and the digital recreation of Korea's heritage and iconography, Kim laments that the nation's past has been 'asphyxiated' through persistent interpretation and revisualisation.¹⁸¹ Returning to my argument for post-heritage filmmaking, the revisionist representation of the past is not just reliant on the shifting choice of subject matter but also this shift in cinematography.

¹⁷⁹ Julie Turnock, 'The ILM Version: Recent Digital Effects and the Aesthetics of 1970s Cinematography', *Film History* 24.2 (2012) 158-168 (p. 158).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161-162. [Emphasis in original].

¹⁸¹ Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, p. 201.

Another aspect of the sequence that demonstrates these kinds of digital aesthetics is the use of digital composition as a method of creating the frame's mise-en-scène. The imagery of Woo Chi's flying servants is a composition of live action footage and special effects. Costas Constandinides discusses this process as a key element of digital cinema and what he refers to as 'post-celluloid'. He applies the term to his study of modes of film adaptation in contemporary filmmaking, where he describes the post-celluloid adaptation to be a process wherein 'a pre-existing fictional source expressed in a traditional medium (novel, film, television) is recreated, directly or not, in a new medium (digital cinema)'.¹⁸² By applying the term post-celluloid specifically to a study of film adaptations, Constandinides draws attention to the overlapping transitions of both the cinematic medium and the very process of adaptation. In the digital era of mass media, he suggests that contemporary cinematic texts can be seen as a new medium, wherein the post-celluloid adaptation highlights the digitisation of cinematography and challenges the traditional use of a text's source material. As he maintains, 'post-celluloid adaptations should entail the general understanding of adaptation as the transition and metamorphosis of narrative units and popular characters from a traditional medium to a new medium'.¹⁸³ Similar to how I discussed the nature of folkloric adaptation in the first half of this chapter, the role of aesthetics during this transitional period, for instance digital composition and lens flare, show how the reinterpretation of narratives is interdependent on the developing cinematic technology.

Belén Vidal raises similar ideas, instead using the term post-heritage, addressed in my introduction. She discusses the term with regard to questions of authenticity and hybridised aesthetics in relation to postmodernism and pastiche. She particularly

¹⁸² Costas Constandinides, *From Film Adaptation to Post-Celluloid Adaptation: Rethinking the Transition of Popular Narratives and Characters across Old and New Media* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p. 23.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

emphasises the role of genre and narrative conventions in the representation and reconstruction of a nation's past. Vidal explains that the emergence of the post-heritage debate reflects 'the need to address the hybrid styles of the period film beyond the no longer satisfying association of period aesthetics with conservative nostalgia'.¹⁸⁴ To Vidal, the heritage film in the West entered the twenty-first century with a more adventurous style but still struggles between being defined as arthouse or mainstream commercial cinema. As she states, 'the popularity of the heritage film largely depends on its ability to offer a readable mise-en-scène of the past, which allows for endless variation but offers limited room for disruptive experimentation'.¹⁸⁵ *Sageuk* and its own changes in the twenty-first century suggests the opposite for Korean cinema. While Vidal observes that, for the most part, Western heritage films suffer when engaging in too much of an experimental and playful reconstruction of the past, for *sageuk* the form has taken on a new lease of life by embracing this style. Since *Untold Scandal*, *sageuk* is seen to take on more of this 'disruptive experimentation' with regard to both narrative and mise-en-scène. For the latter, the inclusion of anachronistic details combined with the increase of hybridised generic conventions allowed for *sageuk* filmmakers to take more risks in their storytelling. By the release of *Jeon Woo Chi*, the form had become hugely popular. Instead of the maligned genre it had been over the previous decades, since the 2000s historical productions have earned large box office attendance and acclaim. With *Jeon Woo Chi*, the film's success also marks the transition of the form, and of commercial Korean cinema in general, into digital production and aesthetics.

However, this success is not without criticism. Referring again to Kyung Hyun Kim's commentary, he considers *sageuk* of the 2000s to represent the demise of historical authenticity. He considers this to be the result of Korea's emergence as a postmodern

¹⁸⁴ Vidal, *Heritage Film*, p. 104.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103-104.

culture and the nation's ascendancy to an advanced economy. Kim remarks that the nation's cinema became a 'visual pastiche' and that 'through [Korea's] *sageuks*, a new chapter in search of the most persuasive special-effects visual imagery for its metageneric production has been launched'.¹⁸⁶ Drawing on the writings of Fredric Jameson, Kim uses the term 'metageneric' to refer to the self-reflexivity of the visual form that he argues freely combines generic conventions, a knowing artificiality demonstrated through its production style, and an impulse to create nostalgic, if superficial, imagery. My analysis of the presence of an encroaching digital cinematography in *Jeon Woo Chi* highlights how *sageuk* of the 2000s became increasingly driven by high production values and special effects. *Jeon Woo Chi* is not only built upon the localised trends of the Korean blockbuster and the well-made film, but also upon the legacy of the *sageuk* genre and its relationship with the nation's heritage. *Sageuk* becoming a metageneric form suggests a self-consciousness and self-reflexivity within the genre, where the present production context is illustrated as much as the past that such films ostensibly seek to recreate.

Conclusion

This chapter on *Jeon Woo Chi* explored two key elements, namely the adaptation of folklore and traditional heritage, and the emerging impact of digital cinema on the film and on wider Korean cinema. I argued in the first section of my analysis that the folkloric reinterpretation inherent to Korean classical literature is a tradition that has persisted in *sageuk* filmmaking. *Sageuk* productions of the 2000s, as shown by my chapters on *Untold Scandal* and *Jeon Woo Chi*, show how traditional Korean heritage began to be used differently. Both occurred through hybridisation. With *Untold Scandal*, Korean traditional culture is blended together with a Western narrative and stylisations. For *Jeon Woo Chi*, the focus is on genre hybridisation and the reimagining of a folk hero. But while *Untold Scandal*

¹⁸⁶ Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, p. 211.

acted as a catalyst for the resurgence of the form, *Jeon Woo Chi*, I argue, can be regarded as another catalyst, this time signalling the impact of digital filmmaking on the *sageuk* form.

This chapter has shown how *sageuk* has re-emerged in the twenty-first century in a metageneric form that emphasises a self-reflexive gaze at the past, and construction of a superficial historical imaginary. In the case of *Jeon Woo Chi*, this construction disregards authenticity to promote a special-effects laden fantasy, which juxtaposes the iconography of the past and present. Through the next two chapters, I explore how *sageuk* production in the 2010s moved towards increasingly epic scales and fully embraced the blockbuster mode. I also consider the ongoing trend of producing and releasing *sageuk* films as cinematic events. Since this move into the blockbuster style, the historical genre in the 2010s has for the most part become a form of spectacle cinema, being released during the height of the busy summer and winter seasons or attached to national holidays such as *Chuseok* (harvest festival) and Liberation Day.

CHAPTER THREE

Reimagining Kings: The Rise of the Factional Trend

As the 2000s approached the 2010s, Korean cinema became divided. The increasing polarisation between big-budget genre blockbusters and small-scale independent productions was manifested in the decline in audience figures. The mid-sized well-made commercial cinema that had experienced a growth throughout the 2000s had too begun to decline in success. As argued in the previous chapter, the release of the blockbuster *Jeon Woo Chi*, on the other hand, can be seen to mark a turning point for the local film industry and more specifically the *sageuk* genre. *Jeon Woo Chi* can be regarded as a catalyst for the increasing use of digital aesthetics in *sageuk*, and representative of the form's increasing reliance on big budgets and big stars. Into the 2010s, mid-sized commercial films once again began to find success with audiences, and 2012 started off with several of these productions dominating the box office. The diversity in the style and subject matter of such films showed the Korean film industry was regaining strength following a brief creative and box office decline. Films such as *Unbowed* (Chung Ji Young), *Helpless* (Byun Young Joo), *Architecture 101* (Lee Yong Ju), and *All About My Wife* (Min Kyu Dong), illustrate the range of subject matter and genres that proved popular with local audiences. *Unbowed* is a courtroom drama that depicts the true story of a mathematics professor who attacked the judge presiding over his wrongful dismissal trial and was subsequently charged with attempted murder. *Helpless* is a psychological thriller based on the 1992 Japanese novel *All She Was Worth* by Miyabe Miyuki. Kyu Hyun Kim credits the success of the film to be part of a larger phenomenon in Korean cinema of adopting stories from Japanese-language sources and capitalising on their popularity among Korean readers.¹⁸⁷ *Architecture 101* is a

¹⁸⁷ See, Kyu Hyun Kim, *Helpless* (Seoul: Koreanfilm.org, 2012) <<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm12.html#helpless>> [accessed 15 May 2018]. Kim states 'One of the less commented-on phenomena in relation to Korean genre cinema in recent years is the latter's increasing reliance on Japanese-language sources, especially novels'. He goes onto to list numerous

romantic melodrama that follows the relationship between two college students in the 1990s and their reunion as thirtysomethings. The well-drawn characters and exploration of 1990s Korean culture proved popular with audiences, with the film dominating at the box office over high-profile Hollywood imports like *Battleship* (Peter Berg, 2012). Lastly, *All About My Wife* is a remake of the Argentine romantic comedy *A Boyfriend for My Wife* (Juan Taratuto, 2008), and sees a timid husband, scared to ask for a divorce, hire a man to seduce his overbearing wife in the hope she will leave him. The diversity and popularity of these successful local productions demonstrate the range of genres and subject matter being utilised in mid-budget commercial cinema.

What is perhaps more interesting is the diversity of source material in this range of films. From locally sourced stories of true crime and 90s nostalgia, to international sources such as Japanese literature and South American cinema, Korean films of the 2010s began to look widely for narratives that would appeal to the increasingly globalised and hybridised contemporary Korean society. And yet one of the most successful films of 2012 was sourced not from recent or international culture, but from Korea's own past. *Masquerade*, the focus of this chapter, was a critical and commercial success, becoming an instant hit with audiences upon its September release during the lead up to the *Chuseok* holiday. It went on to become the second most attended film of the year and the third most attended Korean film of all time, with over 12 million admissions.¹⁸⁸ Whereas *Untold Scandal* is a completely fictional narrative, adapted from a French novel, *Jeon Woo Chi's* narrative engages with folkloric storytelling tradition, and *The Admiral* depicts historical events and documented people, *Masquerade* is part of a popular trend of the 'factional film', a key

examples throughout the 2000s until 2012. His observation on the phenomenon is still relevant today, as Japanese source material is still utilised in Korean cinema, with recent examples including *Burning* (Lee Chang Dong, 2018) based on Haruki Murakami's short story, and *Little Forest* (Yim Soon Rye, 2018) adapted from Daisuke Igarashi's manga of the same name.

¹⁸⁸ As of 2018, *Masquerade* is now the 9th most attended Korean film of all time.

component to contemporary *sageuk*'s success. A portmanteau of 'fact' and 'fiction', 'factional' refers broadly to a blend of real people and events with fictional storytelling techniques. In the context of Korean cinema and *sageuk*, I relate this term to discussions of hybridisation in modern Korean culture. Scholars such as Sun Jung and Dal Yong Jin comment on the state of contemporary Korean cinema, suggesting that it is in the midst of hybridisation, caught between a dominant Hollywood culture and production methods, and Korea's own cultural specificities. Jin, in particular, claims that 'it is premature to say that domestic popular culture constructs its own cultural spaces, not as a simple mixture of two different styles, formats, and content but as a resource to create new spaces, encompassing domestic cultural specificities as well as dominant Western cultural genres'.¹⁸⁹ With regard to historical film in general, Eckart Voigts-Virchow remarks that 'in both historiographical and fictional reimagining, identity is in part determined by décor, costume, and makeup, rather than by historical knowledge or literary fidelity'.¹⁹⁰ He goes on to argue that in democratising history and heritage, it becomes more accessible and communal. The disposition of recent *sageuk* films is more towards de- or re-mythologising the past by creating factional narratives, blending modern politics and attitudes with a historical backdrop of the *Joseon* era. In doing so, I argue that contemporary *sageuk* is primarily concerned with the creation of a new historical culture, one that treats tradition and the past as a reusable resource, not just an unyielding fact. Since the early 2000s, and increasingly so in the 2010s, films that deal with Korea's *Joseon* heritage have been more likely to employ factional narratives that put historical figures into fictional events rather than real ones. I consider the appeal behind this mentality when dealing with the past, querying the implications this has on the historical film form.

¹⁸⁹ Jin, *New Korean Wave*, p. 90.

¹⁹⁰ Voigts-Virchow, 'An Introduction to Syncretic Heritage Film Culture since the Mid-1990s', p. 24.

Masquerade portrays a factional narrative surrounding the royal court of Gwanghaegun, who ruled from 1608 to 1623.¹⁹¹ During his twenty-four-year rule, Gwanghae was a controversial ruler but not just due to his politics. As King, he led *Joseon* well, reforming taxes and land laws, and aiding the restoration of the country following the Imjin War of 1592 to 1598. Controversy surrounding him started before his rule began. Since the preceding ruler, King Seonjo, had left only one legitimate heir, Prince Yeongchang, who was too young to rule, his successor was chosen from the older sons of his concubines. Amongst them, Gwanghae was favoured due to the strong leadership he demonstrated during the Imjin War, but he faced opposition from various political factions who supported the infant Prince Yeongchang or one of Seonjo's other sons. Many *yangban*, scholars, and politicians were unwilling to support the son of a concubine as a king, and despite his qualities as a leader would later plot against him. Upon becoming King, Gwanghae dealt well with the political instability, violence, and famine in the social restoration after the war. In addition, he showed talent in diplomacy, attempting to maintain peace through neutrality regarding the conflict in China between the Manchu's and the Ming Dynasty. His neutral stance caused conflict amongst *Joseon's* political factions and the suzerain Ming state, who believed *Joseon* owed a debt of honour to the Ming for assisting during the Imjin War. He was eventually deposed in a coup led by pro-Ming factions, dethroned, and exiled until his death in 1641. The film uses the contradictory reputation of Gwanghae to its advantage, drawing on his legacy as both a wise but victimised political leader, and that of a poor ruler and a despot in the eyes of his opposition.

Masquerade takes place during the middle-period of his rule in 1616. The narrative is an interpretation of fifteen missing days from the Annals of the *Joseon* Dynasty, the court

¹⁹¹ Because he was deposed following a coup, Gwanghaegun was not given a temple name and is usually not referred to as King Gwanghae, but instead with the honorific '*gun*' meaning Prince.

documents that recorded extensive details on the king's affairs, as well as general diplomatic, cultural and economic affairs. In these fifteen days, the film proposes that an impersonator ruled in the King's place. Paranoid due to the constant plots of assassination against him, Gwanghae (Lee Byung Hun) secretly orders that a body double is found to take his place at night in his bedchamber. Chief Secretary Heo Gyun (Ryu Seung Ryong) finds such a body double in Ha Seon (also played by Lee), a bawdy brothel jester, who impersonates the King in farcical performances. The double is introduced to Gwanghae, fully made up in royal attire. Convinced of their likeness, Gwanghae hides for the night with his concubine, while Ha Seon stays in the palace bedchamber. The next day, Ha Seon is paid for his time and told to return in three days to do the same again, but when Gwanghae is suddenly ill from an apparent poisoning, he is called to be the King's stand-in. Convinced the court would fall into chaos if word got out that the King had been poisoned, Heo Gyun decides Ha Seon should impersonate Gwanghae until he recovers. Under the sole guidance of Heo Gyun and Chief Eunuch Jo (Jang Gwang), Ha Seon is coached to act like the King. He is kept away from the King's concubines and the Queen (Han Hyo Joo), fearing they would easily discover the secret. In matters of politics, Ha Seon is told to take a neutral stance on every proposal but soon begins to have his own insights into issues of the court. He starts initiating more humanitarian legislation. He treats the palace servants compassionately, and frees the Queen's brother from false claims of treason. The morale of the palace improves to the point that the King's opponents become suspicious. Interior Minister Park Chung Seo (Kim Myeong Gon), who is revealed to have poisoned Gwanghae, is wary of the King's sudden change and begins questioning his governance. The film's factional narrative blends the use of real historical people and settings with constructed characters and events. This chapter considers the influence of the factional narrative form on new *sageuk* filmmaking.

My analysis of *Masquerade* is in two parts. First, it looks at the representation and usage of the royal subject in the film. Taking place almost entirely within the confines of the royal palace, the film is by definition a ‘royal court *sageuk*’. Understood by Yun Mi Hwang to be a distinct subset of the *sageuk* film, she states that such films ‘foreground the conspiracy and intrigue inside the palace, where the power struggles amongst royalty, faithful subjects, and rebellious retainers are played out [and the genre] requires large production budgets, cutting edge technology and historical research’.¹⁹² I explore how *Masquerade*, as a royal court *sageuk*, demonstrates these key aspects, but due to being a factional narrative, also disrupts them. I view the film as demonstrative of the factional trend in contemporary Korean cinema’s representation of the nation’s *Joseon* heritage. A key component of this heritage is that of the monarchy, and the use of the *Joseon* king as a character is essential to the genre. In the factional film trend, kings are utilised either as lead characters in a fictional narratives (for instance with *Masquerade* and *King and the Clown*), or as secondary or unseen characters, their presence establishing the historical context for an original story (examples include *The Grand Heist* and *The Face Reader* (Han Jae Rim, 2013)). With *Masquerade*, I consider what the narrative about body switching and compassionate leadership suggests about contemporary attitudes with regard to modern-day politics. I ask if these types of post-heritage *sageuks* can be considered a kind of anti-biopic, or even what has been dubbed ‘biofantasy’.

Secondly, I consider the role of detail and authenticity in the film. While I look generally at the film’s fetishisation of heritage details, as with the other chapters, here I specifically examine the film’s tableau vivant aesthetics. Drawing on Belén Vidal’s study on the tableau aesthetic as a conservative style in the period film, I consider how moments in *Masquerade* fetishise the costumes, architecture and ritual of the Korean royal court. Vidal

¹⁹² Hwang, ‘Heritage of Horrors’, p. 79.

uses the term 'tableau' to refer to 'an instance of temporal manipulation of the film frame and narrative interruption. Tableau and portrait moments draw attention to the strategies of double-framing, superimposition and deframing, all of which make the frame visible'.¹⁹³ She argues that moments of the tableau aesthetic cause a disturbance between the narrative and spectacle of the film. I aim to explore how these still moments in *Masquerade* are used to reinforce the self-consciousness of the contemporary *sageuk* form. With *Masquerade* I also concentrate on the performance of authenticity with regard to the historical body. In this part of the chapter, I draw on Jean-Louis Comolli's writings on 'a body too much'. His idea suggests that the actor playing the role of a real historical figure has a jarring effect on the spectator, wherein the character on screen is secondary to the famous actor portraying him or her. With *Masquerade* this becomes especially jarring due to the dual roles played by Lee Byung Hun, as both Gwanghae and Ha Seon. I discuss the dual roles gimmick as having an effect on the aesthetics of realism inherent to the historical film and argue that this playfulness with representation is a key part of post-heritage *sageuk* conventions.

***Masquerade* and the Factional Narrative**

Oh Young Sook's writings on the *sageuk* form attempt to further break the genre down into subsections, taking into consideration the history of the genre in Korean cinema. In her discussion on the post-war revival of the film industry, she categorises the *sageuk* form from its early popularity in the 1950s. As summarised in the thesis introduction, she explains that historical and period films can be divided into three types: films based on Korean classical literature, films based on historical events, and finally, films depicting the

¹⁹³ Belén Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), p. 25.

lives of national heroes and notable historical figures. However, she also comments that the boom in period film production in the mid-1950s was a divisive trend. While the genre's popularity helped bolster the reviving film industry, the way the *sageuk* form was used was criticised for its creation of a stagnated presentation of history, driven more by commercialism than artistic enterprise. Oh summarises the criticisms of the time, stating that:

[These *sageuk* films] were not at all accurate in their description of historical facts and events (something not confined to the 1950s, of course). The subjects of period films were, in fact, limited to insignificant and vulgar material, and most were only historical in their costumes and some background elements. The psychology of the characters as well as social customs and manners depicted were in fact those from the 1950s.¹⁹⁴

Oh raises the issue of historical authenticity when dealing with recreating the past, and as she claims, this is not something specific to traditional *sageuk*. I aim to discuss with this chapter's analysis of *Masquerade* how the notion of authenticity continues to be a complex issue in contemporary *sageuk*. Rather than being viewed as simply an 'incorrect' presentation of the past, I continue to argue that the new *sageuk* form displays an intentionally playful use of heritage that embraces, to a degree, a sense of inauthenticity. I engage with the narrative conventions at work in *Masquerade* by first narrowing down the film's subgenre. As quoted earlier, Yun Mi Hwang categorises the royal court *sageuk* as dealing particularly with stock characters based around royalty and the nobility. Amongst the power play and tensions of the court, she observes that the palace itself can be seen as a domineering force in the narrative: 'Many tragedies occur inside the palace walls, including castration, miscarriage, massacre, rape and suicide [...] The figuring of space – layered windows, sliding doors, secret passages [and] long and confined corridors – defines the palace as a claustrophobic and perverse space'.¹⁹⁵ While the use of setting and space is

¹⁹⁴ Oh, 'The Period Films Boom', p. 142.

¹⁹⁵ Hwang, 'Heritage of Horrors', p. 80.

an aspect I look at in more detail in the second part of this chapter, here I explore how *Masquerade's* factional narrative utilises *sageuk's* narrative conventions, such as stock characters and their roles in the plot. I aim to show how the form has shifted, not only through contemporary twenty-first century developments, but also from *sageuk's* generic history.

In my examination of royal *sageuk* stock characters and their use in *Masquerade*, I first identify the supporting characters, namely the servants, retainers, and the queen, before paying close attention to the role of the king in the film. In doing so, I aim to highlight how these characters are used in the subgenre and how the politics behind the film is ultimately reliant on how the film intends to portray the monarch. With *Masquerade*, the portrayal of Gwanghae as a paranoid and fearful ruler also has an influence on the representation of the surrounding stock characters. To begin with, there are what Hwang dubs 'faithful servants'. This type of characterisation can be seen through the roles of Chief Secretary Heo Gyun, Eunuch Jo, and the King's personal bodyguard Captain Do. The first two are initially the only characters who know Gwanghae has been swapped for Ha Sun. Their loyalty to the King is demonstrated from the start of the film. In the opening scene Gwanghae is paranoid that his food has been poisoned after his silver spoon turned black in the soup. In a rage, he throws bowls and furniture around the room, and orders a palace maid to drink the soup first. She takes the bowl but refuses to drink it out of fear and claims she should be killed for her disobedience. The dozens of other servants also cry to be punished. At this moment, Eunuch Jo announces Secretary Heo Gyun's arrival. Heo Gyun immediately bows to the Gwanghae as Jo tells him of the blackened spoon. After Gwanghae requests that his private chambers be quickly moved, Heo Gyun advises him not to act hastily. He understands the precarious position that the King is in. As explained in the introduction to this chapter, Gwanghae's rule was fraught with political turmoil and threats to his character and sovereignty. The film makes use of

this history by grounding the narrative in the pervasive paranoia of the court at this time. When Gwanghae asks for a private audience with Heo Gyun, they discuss previously established plans to arrange a body double, while he laments that he cannot trust anyone. He urges him to hurry and find someone identical in appearance just to take his place in the bedchamber, but after he is poisoned, Heo Gyun decides to have Ha Seon, the jester, replace him full time. Heo Gyun's dedication to the King goes beyond his position. In order to protect Gwanghae, he and Jo begin the elaborate scheme to disguise a commoner as the king, training him in the bureaucratic and ritualistic intricacies of palace life. As faithful subjects to Gwanghae and his court, they put their positions and lives at risk.

The characters Lady Han and Interior Minister Park Cheong Seo represent Hwang's 'rebellious retainers' character type. Park and Han are revealed to be responsible for the poisoning of Gwanghae that leads to him being replaced. They represent both sides of court life, with Park as a court official and Han as a lower class but high-ranking servant. Both have considerable access to the King and abuse their power and position against him. Park is seen as one of the most influential and highest ranking in court. When Gwanghae is shown leaving the throne hall early in the film, he is followed closely by Heo Gyun, Jo, and Park, showing the three as having the closest influence on the King. Without even speaking, Park is clearly established as an antagonistic figure in the court. During his first scene, in which the court is discussing the execution of the Queen's brother, Yu Jeong Ho, he says nothing but looks suspiciously at those who plead for the King's mercy. Heo Gyun is aware of the plots against Yu, and the plans to dethrone the Queen in order to replace her with a pregnant concubine. When Ha Seon acts as the King, he releases Yu from being tortured, going against the orders of the real King. Yu accuses the King of being a tyrant, blinded by treacherous subjects (such as Park) and being preoccupied by concubines. Ha Seon, taking these words personally despite them not being about him, frees Yu in an act of compassion that shocks the surrounding officials. In the subsequent scene, Park sits alone and considers

how to continue his treasonous plot now Yu has been freed. Throughout the film, he continues manipulating the power play of the court. Not only the mastermind behind Yu being framed of treason, he also enacts the plot to poison Gwanghae. Together with the senior palace servant Lady Han, they poison Gwanghae with poppy seed. Han is also responsible for informing Park of the rumours that the King is an imposter. When Ha Seon is warned that there are eyes and ears all over the court, Han is shown passing through the palace corridors under the submissive gaze of the surrounding servants. Park is similarly portrayed as suspicious and rebellious, sending men to spy on other members of the court.

Lastly, King Gwanghae and the Queen consort are the key components in the royal court *sageuk*. As the name suggests, the royal figures are a crucial aspect of the subgenre. The dynamics of the servant characters are dependent on how the film portrays its monarchs. Here, I briefly consider how the queen consort is represented in the film before looking in detail at the key role of the king within the *sageuk* form. The Queen's role in *Masquerade* is predominantly concerned with the plight of her brother and his falsified accusations of treason. As previously mentioned, the plot to execute Yu is the first part of a plan to rid Gwanghae of the Queen and her family from the royal court. The tensions represented in the film are inspired by the political instability of Gwanghae's reign. The division between the nation's political factions following the Imjin War was a major issue in Gwanghae's court. Ha Seon is warned, 'as long as the daughter of a Northerner remains the Queen, plots of treason shall not cease', and reminded that 'he' had previously agreed to depose her.¹⁹⁶ The politically inexperienced Ha Seon sees the issue not as one of political division but a personal attack on the Queen, whom he has grown to admire. *Masquerade* displays a subtle portrayal of the Queen as someone who more than anything lacks and seeks intimacy. It is established early in the film that Gwanghae prefers to spend time with

¹⁹⁶ *Masquerade*, dir. by Choo Chang Min (CJ Entertainment, 2012).

his concubines than his wife and seriously considers the court's call to execute her brother. The distance between them is felt when Ha Seon takes the King's role and has to intentionally keep away from the Queen, should she discover him as an imposter. Each time she attempts to visit him she is rejected, and thinks that the King finds her unbearable, one time attempting suicide assuming that she is likely to be killed anyway. Ha Seon, who refers to the Queen as the 'nation's mother', grows to personally respect her and continually tries to help both her and Yu's positions in the palace. The scene in which she discovers the King is an imposter is when she is finally able to share an intimate space with him. Upon hearing rumours that Gwanghae's scar has mysteriously disappeared, she attempts to get him into bed to discover for herself. Overall, *Masquerade's* depiction of its queen consort character is sympathetic of her need for intimacy. The film portrays her as someone confined in the palace walls knowing that she is married to someone who could have her deposed and executed. In other recent factional *sageuk* films, this type of situation is often used to depict royal figures being led into treacherous acts in attempts to gain power (see, for instance, *The Concubine* (Kim Dae Seung, 2012), and *Empire of Lust* (Ahn Sang Hoon, 2015)). *Masquerade's* queen is a more subdued portrayal of a character being manipulated by a corrupt court. In the end, however, her characterisation as a victim is ultimately constructed in order to make her appeal to Ha Seon's character as the chastised 'nation's mother', whom he must save not for political reasons but out of compassion.

The depiction of the monarch within the royal *sageuk* subgenre, and *sageuk* in general, is, I argue, the most essential aspect of the form. As I proposed in the introduction to this chapter, the *Joseon* king is a key component, whether he is seen as a lead, supporting or unseen character.¹⁹⁷ Also important is the narrative style used to portray

¹⁹⁷ I use the term 'Joseon king' due to the fact that the *Joseon* era had no female rulers, unlike previous Korean dynasties. Over the 505 year *Joseon* era there were 26 kings. Some consider the

him. In new *sageuk*, it has become most common to see a factional depiction of a king than a factual, biographical one. As such, I explore the role of the king in *Masquerade's* factional plot and how the body swap narrative disrupts a typical reading of the past. To begin with, I draw attention to certain debates surrounding the factional form. Though the term originated in literary criticism of the 1970s to discuss the genre of the 'non-fiction novel', it has been adopted by film critics to address the similar representation of the past in the historical and heritage film.¹⁹⁸ Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell, in their work on Hollywood depictions of queens and empresses, pose a number of questions regarding the nature of interpretation in recreating historical lives:

What slice of life do film biographers choose to tell? Which events are treated, which deleted? Does film chronology mirror or depart from the life's time line? Are fictional scenes added? If so, how do these affect the overall view of the subject? [...] How far is too far from the established truth? What responsibilities does an auteur have to the life held up for viewers' pleasure?¹⁹⁹

They draw attention to the repeatedly debated notions of 'accuracy' and 'authenticity'. In saying 'how far is too far', they imply that they are exclusively dealing with films that are positioned as biographical representations, intent on portraying an individual's life as faithfully as possible. When discussing factional narratives, these types of questions become a setback. It is in the nature of the factional mode to present an interpretation of the past, in which history is used more as a resource to create a fiction based on fact. Robert Brent Toplin states that 'the creators of faction employ history in a manner that is less subject to debate over veracity than are biopics or historical epics [...] these movies send only a nebulous message about truth claims. Faction references history but does not

dynasty to include the change to the Korean Empire of 1897-1910, in which the last king, Gojong, was declared an emperor for the last ten years of his reign. If including the Korean Empire, the *Joseon* dynasty had 27 rulers, ending with Sunjong. As stated earlier, in my thesis and arguments I refer to *Joseon* as the monarchy that lasted from 1392 to 1879.

¹⁹⁸ See, J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1999).

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell, *Royal Portraits: Filming the Lives of Queens* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009), p. 5-6.

represent it specifically'.²⁰⁰ He also suggests that 'often the leading characters in fiction are fictional people who represent a composite of several historical figures or who are largely invented to advance the drama'.²⁰¹ With the case of *sageuk*, fictional characters are often depicted through the king. He and his court of stock characters become a set up for a fictional story that uses the context of his reign to (re)create his character. In *Masquerade*, Gwanghae's turbulent court and the political division of the nation during his rule inspires a story about a conspiracy to dethrone him and his wife. The narrative also proposes to 'fill in' the gaps of historical records by suggesting that entries missing from the Annals were a cover up for a fantastical body swap incident. Toplin argues that films such as *Gladiator* and *The Patriot* (Roland Emmerich, 2000) are less vulnerable to claims of inauthenticity and inaccuracy than films like *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982) and *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) due to their factional narratives based on constructed, fictional characters. Many *sageuk* films cannot maintain the same distinction. He states that 'works of fiction do not place real people or events at their core. Invented characters and situations dominate the foreground; historical figures and actions appear principally in the background or at the periphery of the story'.²⁰² With factional *sageuk*, however, a reinvented version of a *Joseon* king is often at the centre of the narrative.

Masquerade's depiction of Gwanghae is dependent on the inclusion of his imposter, Ha Seon. Though almost identical in appearance, from the outset of the film their personalities and attitudes are shown to be wildly apart. The contrast can especially be seen in the introduction of each character. In one of Gwanghae's first scenes, he is in front of his court officials who are encouraging him to proceed with the execution of the Queen's brother. He sits on the throne with a confident stance but also appears weary, almost as if

²⁰⁰ Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defence of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), p. 92.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

he is not listening to the debate between the officials. When he leaves the throne hall a proclamation is made, and hundreds of retainers bow to his arrival before throwing themselves at his feet to stop him from leaving without permitting the execution. The tensions of the court are quickly established between Gwanghae and his officials, and this is abruptly paralleled in the following scene. While Gwanghae is left staring at the mass of people grovelling at his feet, the film cuts to a brothel late at night. The same proclamation that announced the King's arrival is made again, this time in a joyful manner. A masked man in a cheap imitation of the royal garbs is shown in a crowded room of people who watch as he tells a story of the King in an erotic encounter. When he takes his mask off, he is revealed to be physically identical to Gwanghae, but his mannerisms portray him as a more expressive and unreserved individual. Ha Seon's pantomime performance of the King that exaggerates his preference for the company of concubines is well received by the brothel's patrons. These two characters' introductions establish the differences between the King and his replacement, where Gwanghae's weariness is contrasted with Ha Seon's carefree attitude. The film parallels the two by introducing them with the same proclamation.

Masquerade's depiction of Gwanghae as a tired and paranoid king reinforces the view that he was a victimised leader. In An Sihwan's essay on recent *sageuk* films, he remarks that the portrayal of a *Joseon* king as distressed or mentally ill has become a common feature over the past decade. As he comments, 'to the kings in the period films of the 2000s, the weight of the crown is too difficult to bear'.²⁰³ An's focus is on the film *The Treacherous* (Min Kyu Dong, 2015) and its depiction of the tyrant Yeonsangun, whom Darcy Paquet describes as 'one of Korea's most famous and notorious monarchs who possessed

²⁰³ An Sihwan, 'Period Films in the Postmodern or the "Enjoy!" Era', *International Journal of Korean History* 20.2 (August, 2015) 189-197 (p. 191).

concentrated power but lacked the sanity to use it effectively'.²⁰⁴ An argues that the recurring representation of monarchs undergoing identity crises is a reflection of the influence of postmodernism on our understanding of history. He explains that in the postmodern era, the disruption of a stable identity in society has led to a fractured relationship with the past, wherein previous social structures cannot be relied upon. For the depiction of *Joseon* kings, An explains, 'in the era in which metanarrative is disbelieved, the symbolic order is destroyed, and identical identity is threatened, the subject stands dangerously on shaking ground [...] The collapse of metanarratives announces the disappearance of the foundation of the symbolic order (king). In this era, the king who is summoned on the screen does not know how to define himself as a king'.²⁰⁵

I add to his argument by suggesting that this type of characterisation disrupts the 'Great Man' view of the past that pervades the traditional representation of historical lives. Dennis Bingham and Robert Brent Toplin write on the Great Man theory of history as having a profound influence on how the past is presented, related to, and commented on. Bingham writes that 'the biopic subject, at least in the Great male variant, is usually posed as a visionary with a pure, one-of-a-kind talent or idea who must overcome opposition to his idea or even just to himself'.²⁰⁶ Similarly, Toplin suggests that the Great Man approach 'brings history to a personal level, portraying it through the experiences of fascinating and often heroic people for whom audiences are encouraged to show sympathy'.²⁰⁷ Films such as *Masquerade*, that foreground the factional use of real lives, disrupt a Great Man view of history, showing *Joseon* kings as deeply flawed characters, either due to mental instability, detachment from positions of power, or being unable to control a corrupt court.

²⁰⁴ Darcy Parquet, *'King and the Clown'* (Seoul: Koreanfilm.org, 2005)

<<http://www.koreanfilm.org/kfilm05.html#kingandclown>> [accessed 7 September 2016]

²⁰⁵ An, *Period Films in the Postmodern or the "Enjoy!" Era*, p. 192-193.

²⁰⁶ Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives are they Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), p. 7.

²⁰⁷ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, p. 20.

Masquerade, in particular, further disturbs the traditional form of biographical representation by having the imposter Ha Seon depicted as the king throughout most of the film. During his time as king, Ha Seon's compassionate gestures towards the palace servants and changes to the nation's unjust laws shift the morale of the court. These gestures can be seen in relation to one servant in particular, the character of Sa Wol. She is depicted early in the film as the food taster whom Gwanghae orders to taste the poisoned soup. His rage at her disobedience and her fearful response establish his treatment of the servants. In contrast, when Ha Seon learns that Sa Wol had specifically ordered the royal chef to make *patjuk*, a red bean soup, so he could recover his strength after his 'illness', he is touched. Having been told earlier by Eunuch Jo that the palace servants only get to eat the King's leftover food, Ha Seon intentionally leaves most of his meal, eating only the *patjuk*. Jo recognises his kind-hearted gesture towards his fellow commoners with a small smile, while the servants happily eat back in the kitchen. They comment that the King appears to have changed, not just with his appetite but that he seems to be smiling more.

Ha Seon's influence on the palace goes beyond his duties as the (fake) king and towards the servants' changing view of their ruler. He acts with such respect for the servants that the court officials become suspicious. By having Ha Seon assume the role of king throughout the majority of the narrative, the film raises questions about who is really being represented. When discussing *The Treacherous*, An highlights a scene in which a concubine, Dan Hee, reprimands the King. He states that her plea to Yeonsangun, 'Be human, even if you can't be a king', represents the public's perspective towards his tyranny.²⁰⁸ An suggests that Dan Hee's character of a commoner, who rises to the position of royal concubine only to seek revenge, acts as a way of democratising history to comment

²⁰⁸ *The Treacherous*, dir. by Min Kyu Dong (Lotte Entertainment, 2015).

and criticise it. The same can be said for Ha Seon in *Masquerade*. As a commoner in the palace, he is shown as someone who diverts from tradition and expectations in order to create a more considerate and benevolent court. This representation breaks from the Great Man (*Joseon* king) view of history by putting a commoner in his place and showing him as superior in the role. When the real Gwanghae returns at the end of the film, a sense of fear and tension returns to the palace. In the scene, the same proclamation that announced each character's arrival at the beginning of the film is used again, however, it is not obvious which king will emerge from the throne hall. Having heard the rumours that the King is a fake, hundreds of ministers and soldiers storm the palace demanding the man be brought forward. Due to the previous scene, it is not clear whether Ha Seon has fled and Gwanghae returned, or if Ha Seon continues to stubbornly refuse to leave. When the emergent King demands his people's respect, Park responds by saying, 'that fake has been sitting on the throne for so long, he's losing his sanity'.²⁰⁹ The film, again, draws attention to the mental state of the King. After his shoulder is stripped and the real King's scar is revealed, most of the King's accusers bow in remorse. The remaining few who stand are arrested as traitors. This scene is cross-cut with another that shows the returned Gwanghae sat with Heo Gyun. The latter is informing the King of the past fifteen days in court. Heo Gyun repeatedly refers to Ha Seon as the King, instead of his replacement or double. This suggests the level of respect Ha Seon has gained as a ruler, with Heo Gyun revering him just as much as the real king. As Gwanghae reads the records of his missing days, he discovers the compassionate orders his replacement has made, such as distributing the palace's rice to the people, and the level of respect Ha Seon has shown for his nation. Gwanghae is moved by what he reads, as he looks directly into the camera with teary eyes. The shot gives a sense of both understanding and accusation. It implies that

²⁰⁹ *Masquerade*, dir. by Choo.

Gwanghae acknowledges Ha Seon's competence as a ruler and by looking into the camera, catches the viewer's gaze, as if to ask if this is what people want from a leader.

Returning to the debate over inauthenticity and the heritage film, factional films such as *Masquerade* demonstrate how contemporary *sageuk* possesses a playfulness when using Korea's past. On a narrative level, the film can be seen to express what Belén Vidal calls a 'present-in-the-past' mode, which she describes as being 'at the basis of contemporary cinema's fascination with certain historical junctions that provide meaningful narratives to the contemporary cultural imagination'.²¹⁰ She goes on to suggest that the resurgence of nineteenth century representation in the late twentieth century is postmodern culture's search for a historical break. Vidal explains, 'this [search] becomes apparent in the shifting tone and sense of instability [of the *mise-en-scène*] (less reverential towards conventional notions of authenticity, bolder in its approach to the past as inextricably modern)'.²¹¹ The same can be thought of the resurgence of *sageuk* in the twenty-first century and the more creative, unconventional use of *Joseon* heritage. Specifically, the use of the monarch in *Masquerade* can be understood as a critique not just of history but present-day society. Writing on British heritage films, Kara McKechnie remarks, 'the filmic depiction of the monarch always depended on the contemporary situation'.²¹² The same can also be seen in post-heritage *sageuk* films. The recently emerged trope of the distressed *Joseon* king acts as a reflection of contemporary society's search for a quality leader and a fractured postmodern identity. In using real premodern historical figures to work through these contemporary issues, factional *sageuk* films become, in a way, 'anti-biopics'. While Bingham uses this term to describe a film parodying the biopic, for instance by depicting a life of someone 'undeserving', I propose that the

²¹⁰ Vidal, *Heritage Film*, p. 101.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² McKechnie, 'Taking liberties with the monarch: The royal bio-pic of the 1990s', p. 220.

anti-biopic in a *sageuk* context describes a factional attitude towards representing real figures. A *Joseon* king in an anti-Great Man biopic says more about the context of contemporary society than the man himself. The historical context behind a king's reign, such as Gwanghae's in *Masquerade*, is utilised to create a fictional story relevant to a modern audience. Another prominent example of this can be seen in *The Throne* (Lee Joon Ik, 2015). Though not a factional narrative, the film depicts the eighteenth century power struggle between King Yeongjo and his violent and unfilial son, Crown Prince Sado, whom he condemns to death by locking him in a wooden rice chest. The historical incident has been reassessed over the centuries regarding the mental competency and political victimisation of both individuals. *The Throne* depicts both Yeongjo and Sado's perspectives with sympathy and is notable, in comparison to other adaptations of the incident, for focusing its depiction largely on the familial dynamics instead of the political struggles. When considering the use of the distressed *Joseon* king, the film's representation of Yeongjo as a desperate Confucian patriarch and the focus on a father-son relationship struggling under the pressures of tradition and duty, explores the brutalities and anxieties surrounding male identity in Korea's postmodern, post-authoritarian society.

The factional recycling of historical lives has led some academics to refer to the excessive use of fiction in biographical portraits as 'biofantasy'.²¹³ This term refers to the heightened use of fictionalised representations that construct revisionist and self-reflexive caricatures of real people. The tendency towards biofantasy narratives and representation in the factional *sageuk* trend can be seen in other productions beyond *Masquerade*. *Portrait of a Beauty* and *I am a King* (Jang Kyu Sung, 2012), for example, also construct factional stories centred around iconic historical figures and make use of body swap

²¹³ See, George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 36., and James M. Walsh, 'Hollywood "Faction" and the New Biofantasy', *Studies in Popular Culture* 15.2 (1993) 57-66.

narrative devices. The former film depicts the life of acclaimed court painter Shin Yun Bok (known by the pen name, Hyewon). *Portrait of a Beauty* takes advantage of the gaps in historical records surrounding Shin's life to propose a fantasied plot, wherein Shin is a woman who entered the elite Royal Academy of Painting in disguise as her brother. The latter film, much like *Masquerade*, is centred around a commoner and royal figure who trade roles. Particularly notable with *I am a King* is the focus on Crown Prince Chungnyeong, who would later become Sejong the Great, the most celebrated of *Joseon's* kings. The film suggests that by trading places with a slave and experiencing life outside the palace, the Crown Prince learns of the poverty and hardships that befall the common people of his land, thus inspiring his future efforts as king to improve the stability and prosperity of the nation. New *sageuk* productions such as these construct a historical imaginary to explore the present-in-the-past mode of representation. They re-examine traditional cultural figures through metafiction, in which the viewer is aware that the historical persons being depicted on screen are caricatures used in imagined stories.

Leading on from this discussion of factional authenticity, I explore *Masquerade* by considering the influence of Western canonical literature and Hollywood's historical representation on the *sageuk* form. Here, I aim to give an overview of how the contemporary *sageuk* genre has taken on both Western narratives and attitudes in the recreation of Korea's premodern past. The dominance of the factional form over the presentation of factual historical events, at least regarding the *Joseon* era, is a phenomenon I aim to touch on by exploring similar Hollywood narratives. I start by drawing attention to Sung Ae Lee's study on the fairy tale script in Korean culture. Her essay discusses the dialogue between Western and Korean folktales that has become embedded in Korean popular culture over the past century, in turn creating new hybrid narratives, or 'scripts'. Lee grounds her argument in the theory of conceptual blending. Following the writings of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, conceptual blending describes the notion of

the mind's ability to blend two opposing or contradictory elements to create a third, hybridised concept. Lee observes that this action, when applied to cultural scripts creates new forms of narrative structure. She states, 'when European folktales are naturalised in Korea, the process of intercultural blending can produce that "third story" in striking ways'.²¹⁴ In her study, she principally deals with the blending of the *Cinderella* tale (associating with Grimms' *Aschenputtel* and Charles Perrault's *Cendrillon*) and the Korean localised variant, *Kongjwi and Patjwi*. Lee summarises her argument by suggesting that the resulting hybridised form plays a key role in contemporary glocalised culture. She concludes: 'A powerful outcome of the process of conceptual blending is to develop a conceptual position, neither entirely global nor entirely local, which can examine how the past haunts the present, either as tradition or suppressed trauma, and hence can demand a rethinking of many aspects of modern society'.²¹⁵ In the process of blending intercultural traditions, Lee argues that the past is used to comment on modern society. Considering this notion with regard to the *sageuk* form, it is clear that Western canonical narratives have made an impact on the types of stories being told and their narrative styles. With *Masquerade*, this can be seen through the influence of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881). The novel similarly presents a factional narrative regarding a royal figure, in this case the British Prince of Wales, later Edward VI, who trades places with a peasant boy, identical in appearance.

The increasing influence and inclusion of Western canonical literature in Korean cinema is a reflection of the continuing effect of globalisation and hybridisation of the nation's culture. Jonggab Kim remarks that Korea's relationship with the Western canon is entrenched in the nation's legacy of post-colonialism and compressed modernity. He

²¹⁴ Sung Ae Lee, 'Fairy-tale scripts and intercultural blending in modern Korean film and television', in *Grimms' Tales around the Globe: The Dynamics of their International Reception* ed. by Vanessa Joosen and Gillian Lathey (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), pp. 135-150 (p. 277).

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

summarises the attitude towards Western literature in Korea as being split between a desire for an independent subjectivity following the era of colonisation, and an antagonism towards cultural imperialism and encroaching Westernisation:

If it is necessary to historicize a phenomenon of split subjectivity caused by a trauma of colonisation, then it is also necessary to universalize such a split subjectivity produced by history rather than relativizing it. If so, the self-alienation of Korean scholars of English-language literature is not only the burden they have to endure as 'Third World' intellectuals, but the methodological necessity for them to accept for their project of overcoming modernity.²¹⁶

To Kim, the emergence of the Korean Wave in the 1990s, along with the democratisation of society and academia, allowed for Korean scholars to be more self-confident. With a new-found assertiveness, a new perspective towards the Western canon can be seen in Korea's popular culture through intercultural conceptual blending. It is not just present in the *sageuk* form, but across all genres. The blending of Western texts with a Korean context occurs throughout contemporary Korean cinema. Beyond *sageuk*, Western folk tales can be seen in the horror films *Hansel and Gretel* (Yim Pil Sung, 2007) and *The Red Shoes* (Kim Yong Gyun, 2005), and post-war based mystery *The Piper* (Kim Gwang Tae, 2015), the latter based on the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Nick James puts forward the term 'Natopudding' to describe these type of Hollywoodised recreations of the European past. Influenced by the rise of the European co-productions, which in turn is dubbed 'Europudding', he argues that the transnationalisation of heritage culture has created a muted and mythological view of European tradition.²¹⁷ He sees the Natopudding, Hollywood heritage form, as an attempt to replicate the success of European heritage films. Films such as *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallström, 2000) and *Captain*

²¹⁶ Jonggab Kim, 'Reading English Literature and Korean Scholars' Search for "Authentic Subjectivity"', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.6 (2014) <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/3>> [accessed 7 September 2016]

²¹⁷ James' term 'Natopudding' is derived from 'Europudding', a depreciative term used to describe a transnational film, television show, or song that involves multiple European countries in its production but lacks any cultural specificity to one in particular. Natopudding, in turn, uses 'Nato' as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the military alliance between North American and European nations.

Corelli's Mandolin (John Madden, 2001) promote clichéd and idealised images of a European past. Because of these types of productions, James remarks that 'now American cultural and economic dominance is accepted as a fact of life. It has its advantages [...] but with such cultural homogenisation comes the danger that the stories told within this Americanised global subconscious will be vapid ghosts of what they might have been had cultural diversity survived'.²¹⁸ While his examples are films based on recent novels, Hollywood adaptations of canonical texts add another aspect to his debate. *Dangerous Liaisons* and *The Man in the Iron Mask* (Randall Wallace, 1998) for instance, are based on works of classical French literature, presenting the elaborate mise-en-scène of the French court with American stars. Hollywood's international dominance and influence means it is not unfair to suggest that Korea's *sageuk* form has been influenced by this Natopudding. With *Masquerade*, the influence of the canonical novel *The Prince and the Pauper* and Hollywood heritage productions such as *The Man in the Iron Mask* on the film demonstrate the hybridisation of Korean cinema. The naturalisation of Western narratives that Lee describes has led to the trend in which contemporary *sageuk* views the *Joseon* era as a factional resource. As Doobo Shim states in relation to Korean cinema's hybridisation, 'Koreans have provided their own twists to the foreign styles and forms, by blending and adding their indigenous characteristics and unique flourishes in innovative ways'.²¹⁹

***Masquerade* and (In)Authentic Aesthetics**

While the first section of this chapter analysed the narrative aspects behind the nature of authenticity in *Masquerade*, this part engages with the aesthetic choices of the film. With *Untold Scandal*, the opening narration mimics the satirical introduction of the source novel,

²¹⁸ Nick James, 'British Cinema's US Surrender – A View from 2001', in *The British Cinema Book* ed. by Robert Murphy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 21-27 (p. 27).

²¹⁹ Shim, 'Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia', p. 35.

which, as argued previously, establishes the intertextual and transcultural nature of the film. A similar attitude can be read from the opening of *Masquerade*. The film begins by presenting a sense of self-consciousness and knowingness about its form and representation. The first shot depicts a symmetrical image of the royal palace in the snow, slowly zooming out. Morose orchestral music plays over the image as an onscreen text introduces the context of the film's plot. The text describes the tense atmosphere of the palace and the rumours of treason, and specifies how the film is set during the eighth year of Gwanghae's reign. It then goes on to introduce the key feature of the film, that of the body swap. As the text superimposed over the images fades into the next sentence, the tone of the music changes to become more sprightly and joyful. The text then tells of the King's instructions to leave no trace of the incident in the Annals of the court. The change in the score shifts the tone from serious to playful, showing a self-awareness of the film's position as a historical construction and invention. The screen fades to white and then into a shot of a brightly lit room, in which numerous maids are dressing the King. This scene, which portrays a ritualistic dressing ceremony, has become a standard trope in contemporary *sageuk*. A similar scene is used in *Untold Scandal*, wherein Madame Cho is dressed in a dreamlike atmosphere of bright light and graceful music. Scenes like these fetishise a heritage gaze by using a romanticised visual style when representing historical artefacts and costumes.

In *Masquerade*, the scene begins by showing the King sat at the far end of the room, centred in the frame. He appears almost in silhouette, only the slightest blue colour of his robe showing as he is backlit by the natural light streaming through the windows. Surrounding him are palace servants by tables, waiting reverentially to play their role in the dressing ritual. Hung up beside the King is his *gonryongpo*, the everyday dress of the monarch. The vibrancy of the red robe and gold leaf emblem, known as *geumbak*, stand out prominently due to their position in front of the bright window. The following sequence



Figure 15 The first image in the film, that of the royal palace.

(*Masquerade*, Choo Chang Min, 2012)



Figure 16 The first appearance of the King is distant and obscured.

(*Masquerade*, Choo Chang Min, 2012)



Figure 17 Lee Byung Hun as Gwanghae or Ha Seon?
(*Masquerade*, Choo Chang Min, 2012)

of shots close in on the use and presentation of traditional objects. Oil is poured into a small bowl then applied to a comb used to pull the King's hair into a top knot, or *sangtu*. Each shot is smooth and rhythmic, not lasting more than a few seconds. The camera lingers on the objects used to 'construct' the king, close ups of the maid's hands emphasising this process of physical construction. Each time the King's face is almost shown, the image fades back to another object. A maid is shown waving fragrance onto the *gonryongpo*, as another finishes tying the king's headband, or *manggeon*. His beard, though already meticulous, is trimmed to ensure that each hair is of the correct length, and his nails delicately cleaned. Finally, the King's *donggot* is put on, a piece of jewellery that covers the top knot. In each of these shots, light streams in through the window, bringing out the colours of the garments and palace décor to great effect. As the maids step away, the camera pulls towards the King as he reclines in a chair. His gaze looks down as the frame keeps moving in closer, until raising his eyes to look directly into the screen, meeting the spectator's gaze. With the *gonryongpo* still hanging behind him, he stares knowingly into the camera, before the music fades out, the screen fades, and the film's title card is displayed. This opening sequence emphasises the notions of appearance and performance that permeate the film. An important aspect to note also is the ambiguity of the scene. In

the context of the body swap narrative that had been setup in the onscreen text of the previous scene, there is no indication which king is being portrayed. It could be either the real Gwanghae or his imposter Ha Seon. By looking directly into the spectator's gaze at the end of the sequence, the film displays an awareness of its form, as a reconstructed and fictional representation. The elegant and fetishised portrayal of the heritage objects is contrasted with the self-conscious visual style, typical of postmodern film. Even when not breaking the fourth wall, new *sageuk* demonstrates a postmodern self-awareness of its own form and artifice. While the previous section of this chapter argued that this is evident in the factional narrative form, here I discuss how *Masquerade's* aesthetic choices also show a knowingness of *sageuk's* reconstruction of the past.

I use the remaining part of this chapter to examine the ways in which *Masquerade* displays a self-conscious post-heritage aesthetic. Firstly, I analyse the use of the tableau vivant in the film. Belén Vidal is a key figure writing on the tableau effect in relation to the heritage film. Her work suggests that the effect is a key element of the period film, as it is used as a method of validation in recreating the past. Vidal describes her usage of the term as follows:

By tableau I refer to the various effects provoked by the irruption of painterly textures and still movements in the temporal system of the film shot, as indexes of self-reflexivity in the visual text. The emphasis on framing as artifice is often achieved through double-framing devices that introduce an immobile frame within the mobile (film) frame [...] However, instances of temporal and special manipulation of the shot should also be considered: fixed framings, long takes, slow motion, zooms or superimpositions strain the narrative as a whole, drawing our attention to the visual textures of the film.²²⁰

She argues that the visual presentation of a film's reconstruction of the past, while using the tableau vivant, is a way of disrupting the narrative to focus on the visual. The function of the tableau is to fragment the narrative as a postmodern aesthetic that could be considered a form of pastiche. In her own words, 'the "strangeness" introduced by the

²²⁰ Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic*, p. 111-112.

shot-tableau conflicts with the forms of classical narrative'.²²¹ Likewise, Barbara Schaff's essay on the tableau vivant draws attention to the self-reflexive inclination of the effect. She considers how the concept of authenticity with regard to heritage film is made more complex by the use of a highly referential visual style. She writes:

[Heritage films'] iconography quotes certain historical modes of representation such as portrait, landscape and genre painting, or *tableau vivants*. Representation in heritage films is very often turned into representation in terms of art. The meticulously displayed visual splendour, the pictorial lushness, aesthetic grandeur and tasteful reconstructions of the British past make many heritage films appear as a chain of carefully composed single shots.²²²

To both Vidal and Schaff, the tableau effect as used in the heritage film pertains to cinema's relationship and references to traditional art. According to Vidal, characters in tableaux become trapped in landscape paintings and family portraits. While both are taking into consideration European heritage films, predominantly those of Britain, I explore how similar observations can be made about the aesthetic style of contemporary *sageuk*. By engaging with *Masquerade* in this way, I aim to see how a tableau effect is utilised and to what end.

While Vidal and Schaff's work largely deals with how tableau vivants emulate paintings to create stillness and spectacle, I consider *Masquerade's* use of the effect in relation to architecture, specifically that of the royal palace. Through the use of space, setting, and décor, the palace plays a vital role in the *sageuk* film. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the royal court *sageuk* is dependent on its setting within the confines of the palace compounds, to which the narrative is often restricted. The palace's importance spreads to the point that it could be considered a character in its own right. In *Masquerade*, the action only leaves the palace confines on a few occasions, and only when related to Ha Seon's

²²¹ Ibid., p. 117.

²²² Barbara Schaff, 'Still Lives - *Tableau Vivants*: Art in British Heritage Films', in *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s* ed. by Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004), pp. 125-134 (p. 126). [Emphasis in original]

character. On a visual level, the palace is the first image seen in the film, as an imposing building taking up the length of the screen. The painterly stillness involved in the image suggests a sense of awe, as if the palace is on display for the viewer. With regard to the use of the house in the heritage film, Vidal writes that the space is used as a microcosm to reflect postmodern commentaries on the past from the privilege of the present. She writes:

The house as projection of fantasies of memory, confinement and desire is the figurative backbone in a myriad of films. In the haunted chambers of the gothic house, the charged spaces of family melodrama or the complex rituals of seduction played out in the ballroom, the literary tradition meets with its extended offspring: pastiches and retellings that remap familiar spaces.²²³

When applying her view of the domestic space to the Korean royal palace, the same cannot be said about the notion of remapping familiar spaces. As a confined and exclusive place, restricted to royalty, politicians and servants, the spectator has a different relationship to the palace, as it is depicted in film. The connection is more of a voyeuristic gaze into a fetishised space. In modern society, Korean royal palaces are, like in other country's heritage cultures, now used as tourist attractions and filming locations. As a consumable commodity of the *Joseon* legacy, the *sageuk* form and Korea's heritage culture use the royal palaces as a resource for cultural and economic purposes. *Masquerade's* depiction of the palace is one which emphasises it as a space of repression, tension and confinement. While the characters in the confines are the most powerful people in the nation, they are trapped both physically and mentally by its walls and rituals. This confinement can be seen through how the characters are shown in relation to the space and setting of the palace. The use of tableau effects such as stillness in these instances creates a duality of the individual and the palace.

²²³ Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic*, p. 66.

Peter Bartholomew notes that *Joseon's* architectural aesthetics are based less on principles of symmetry, as seen in Korea's neighbouring suzerain state China, but display more of a harmony with the peninsula's hilly landscape. He explains:

Superficially the Korean palaces, since they were formed of many square compounds, would appear to conform to the Chinese pattern of perfectly symmetrical squares. However, the spatial relations of the compound and of the buildings within them are rarely symmetrical. They are not necessarily aligned in perfect relation with their neighbouring compounds, nor are the buildings within the compounds in perfect symmetry. The uniqueness of the Korean compounds is that their design and juxtaposition to each other is intended to create pleasing effects with hills, gardens and adjoining buildings. It is the Korean independence of mind and aesthetic feelings which take precedence over pre-determined forms derived from the Chinese.²²⁴

The asymmetry of the palace is illustrated in *Masquerade*. The scene in which Ha Seon defends the Queen against the accusations of treason displays a large variety of shots within a short space of time. Once Ha Seon leaves the throne hall to stand before his retainers, the camera alternates between symmetrical and asymmetrical framing, and from wide to close ups of the King's position. As he emerges, the camera is looking up at Ha Seon, centring him against the backdrop of the entrance to the throne hall and its ornate décor, known as *dancheong*. The scene then cuts to a similar shot facing the other way, showing Ha Seon's back as he looks onto a perfectly organised crowd of retainers. The framing and characters are symmetrical but the palace buildings are not. Beyond the square courtyard, the roofs of other buildings are scattered. The next series of images show Ha Seon and Heo Gyun in mid-shots before displaying a wider angle of the courtyard from the side. The imagery is arranged diagonally, on the left splitting the space evenly between the sky and the retainers, but on the right, the throne hall where Ha Seon is stood dominates. This reflects the power structure of the palace hierarchy, with the king raised above his subjects. As Ha Seon's words regarding the treasonous accusations become more

²²⁴ Peter Bartholomew, 'Choson Dynasty Royal Compounds – Windows to a Lost Culture', *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch* 63 (1993) 11-44 (p. 15).



Figure 18 Ha Seon framed by a backdrop of the palace's *dancheong*.

(*Masquerade*, Choo Chang Min, 2012)



Figure 19 The symmetry of the retainers, from Ha Seon's point of view.

(*Masquerade*, Choo Chang Min, 2012)



Figure 20 Asymmetry starts by dividing the screen, raising Ha Seon above his court.

(*Masquerade*, Choo Chang Min, 2012)



Figure 21 The frame's shifted angle emphasises the disorder of the scene.

(*Masquerade*, Choo Chang Min, 2012)

impassioned, the camera cuts to a closer shot of his face, and the palace surrounds can barely be seen. The symmetry of the character's positions is broken as Ha Seon moves to leave. The retainers move to his feet blocking his way, which the camera depicts from a high-angle. Instead of being parallel with the architectural lines of the courtyard, as the scene has displayed so far, this shot is shifted to the side, creating a visual disorder. The whole scene recreates the same incident that happened to Gwanghae at the start of the film. As previously discussed, the scene in which Gwanghae is pleaded with not to leave without reconsidering his words is presented in similar shots, but with Ha Seon it includes more close ups. In Gwanghae's version, the palace's architecture is given pride of place with a number of successive wide shots, taking in the expanse of his surroundings. With Ha Seon, the close ups imply that he is a ruler who is more concerned with the personal and emotional aspects of leadership. In order to escape the tense atmosphere of the pleading retainers, he runs away from the courtyard with the Queen in hand. The two are shown to run through the twisting paths between the buildings and through a succession of gates. As they come closer to escaping, slow motion effect is introduced and the depiction of the palace buildings diminishes, being replaced by an overarching treeline in the background. The slow motion effects in these shots, as Vidal suggests in her analysis of similar scenes in European heritage films, draws the spectator's gaze towards the visual texture and artifice of the film. As they escape the tensions of the court, the stiff grandeur of the palace is replaced by nature.

In the final part of this chapter, I analyse the implications of the dual role of Gwanghae and Ha Seon on *Masquerade's* engagement with the concept of authenticity. So far, I have engaged with this dual role on a narrative level, to see how the depiction of the fake king changes the perception of the real one. In terms of having an influence on the aesthetics of the film, I look at three aspects that show how the dual role device has a further effect on the nature of authenticity in historical reconstruction. To start with, I

consider this in relation to Jean-Louis Comolli's work on performance in historical films. His writing suggests that the actor's body in portraying a historical figure, whether real or fictional, disrupts the nature of the film as a constructed spectacle. He argues: 'If the imaginary person, even in a historical fiction, has no other body than that of the actor playing him, the historical character, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imaginary and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in competition, one body too much'.²²⁵ The idea of 'one body too much' is used to debate the relationship between the spectator and historical fiction. In his argument, he believes that there is little difference between concealing the actor's body behind the historical character and emphasising the actor's presence in the costume. Both have an effect on the spectator's understanding of the film's historicism. Comolli continues, '[historical films] usually try to ensure that the actor's body is forgotten, to cancel it, to keep it hidden, at least, beneath the supposedly known and intended pre-eminent body of the historical character to be represented'.²²⁶ In contrast, he focuses his analysis on texts that put the star behind the performance in full display. His 'body too much' displayed by the filmed body imitating a historical one is often made the focus of the scene. In *Masquerade*, the representation of Gwanghae and Ha Seon by Lee Byung Hun possesses this kind of display. Lee is one of the most recognisable faces in Korean cinema and has had leading roles in some of the most successful films at the domestic box office. Prior to *Masquerade*, he had mostly appeared in melodramas and action roles, and as such his casting in his first historical film was highly reported on. Lee's presence in the film, consequently, is highly noticeable. The film puts Lee's body on full display through his depiction of the King. From the knowing looks into the camera to the fetishised ritualistic shots of him being dressed and fed, the character on screen is always self-aware and constructed as Lee Byung Hun

²²⁵ Jean-Louis Comolli, 'Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much', *Screen* 19.2 (1978) 41-54 (p. 44).

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

playing a Joseon king. Throughout the film, the King is presented under a spectator's gaze. As Comolli states, 'the royal body seems to us both caught up in, and prisoner to, the ritual mise-en-scène of the court'.²²⁷ Gwanghae and Ha Seon are seen several times surrounded or followed by guards, servants and officials. They are protected as they move about the palace. Their bodies are hidden from the court when necessary. Gwanghae is removed from the palace when he is poisoned. His replacement has his movements restricted and is kept under near constant supervision by Eunuch Jo. When Ha Seon is first brought to the palace simply to spend the night in the King's bedchamber, he thinks he is alone and acts casually as he explores the room, only to discover Jo standing in the dark watching over him. Scenes such as these demonstrate what Comolli refers to as 'the paradoxes of the royal body'.²²⁸ Here, the royal body is defined by power and excess but lacks autonomy, and is unable to be self-sustaining without the help of servants or the constrictions of palace rules that override the monarch's personal desires.

Beyond Comolli's notion of the body too much effecting a singular performance, *Masquerade* further problematises the authenticity of the historical film by having Lee play dual roles. I use this section of my analysis to explore how these dual roles exhibit the current state of *sageuk* and Korean cinema in general. I argue that this is used as a gimmick to demonstrate the quality and capability of twenty-first century Korean cinema. First, I need to clarify my use of the term 'gimmick'. Writing on the device, Ryan Gibley considers the dual role an 'inherently gimmicky conceit of having one actor share the screen with himself [...] the suspension of disbelief demanded when an actor appears twice in the same frame is among the hardest of all imaginative leaps that a cinema audience is required to

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

make'.²²⁹ The device inherently disrupts the aesthetic and narrative flow by having an actor inhabit two spaces on the same frame. Especially when using famous actors, the spectacle of the dual role is a device that can disrupt the realism of a film. *Masquerade* was promoted through the hype surrounding Lee's portrayal of the dual roles. This aspect of the film was used, for example, on one of the posters for the film. In the actual film, however, his two characters only come face to face in one scene.

Towards the beginning of the film, Ha Seon is introduced to Gwanghae and impresses him with his impersonation of his voice and mannerisms. When Ha Seon is acting reverently to the King, he avoids eye contact as he has been told to do. Framed with the two in profile, the screen portrays both kings interacting with each other. Gwanghae presses Ha Seon's face to the side to inspect his likeness. When Ha Seon dares to look up at the King, the screen cuts to a low angle side shot of his intimidated and shocked face, before returning to the frame of both in profile. In doing so, the film avoids having the difficult moment of eye contact between the same actors. As Gibley notes, 'when the eye contact between an actor and his or her digitally inserted double is even a millimetre off, it can throw instability into the frame'.²³⁰ In one sweeping shot, the camera seamlessly curves around Ha Seon's back as he imitates the king, before completing its shot by focusing on Gwanghae's impressed face, again depicting Lee as occupying two spaces simultaneously. Overall, the scene is well constructed and I argue that by using this imagery in the marketing of the film, it becomes a gimmick used to show off technical ability in the era of digital cinema. James F. Austin, in his essay on the digitisation of French cinema, especially in the context of historical reconstruction, questions how the industry took on the Hollywood aesthetic of digital effects and localised them. He considers how the global

²²⁹ Ryan Gibley, *Can the device of one actor playing two characters in a film ever avoid being gimmicky?* (London: New Statesman, 2015) <<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/08/can-device-one-actor-playing-two-characters-film-ever-avoid-being-gimmicky>> [accessed 11 July 2016]

²³⁰ Ibid.



Figure 22 A poster for the film, emphasising the dual role of Lee Byung Hun.

(*Masquerade*, Choo Chang Min, 2012)

economic and cinematic trends around the turn of the Millennium ‘may have encouraged a moment of introspection about what would become of France, its identity, its place in the world in relation to the American superpower, and about what would become of its cinema. The future looked relatively bright, in fact, if not entirely clear, and so it was perhaps a propitious time to work out what to do with American technologies in the cinema’.²³¹ I argue that the same situation occurred in Korean cinema around the same time. In Korea’s specific context, the last years of the twentieth century resulted in the

²³¹ James F. Austin, ‘Digitizing Frenchness in 2001: On a “Historic” Moment in the French Cinema’, *French Cultural Studies* 15.3 (2004) 281-299 (p. 296).

economic disaster of the IMF crisis. The recovery in the next century caused the nation to look both globally and internally for solutions about what to do with its cinema. With the emergence of digital effects and the simultaneous renaissance of the film industry, it could be argued that the localisation of cinema's digitisation spurred on the hybridisation of Korean aesthetics. When relating this idea to *sageuk's* resurgence, the form appears to have gradually taken on the digitisation of the past that is consuming many national (heritage) cinemas. *Masquerade* demonstrates its digital spectacle in the scene of the two kings meeting, with the smooth filming and camera trickery showing how Korean cinema is capable and willing to display its heritage.

Finally, I briefly consider how the dual roles in *Masquerade* further enhance the postmodern quality of contemporary *sageuk*, by viewing the gimmick as a highly superficial characteristic. In his essay on recent *sageuk* trends, An Sihwan notices the rise in a lack of visual depth and the increased focus paid to the surface, which he sees as postmodern traits. An writes, 'no other genre in Korean cinema than period films from the 2000s obsesses over the surface as much. [They] attempt to translate historical spaces (including costumes and props) from a modern viewpoint, and as a result, "hybridisation" of the present and the past occurs'.²³² In his view, the hybridisation of modern issues with traditional iconography reduces the past to an aesthetic, nothing more than a visual tool to be viewed and fetishised. An considers that contemporary *sageuk* creates a voyeuristic and aesthetic space. Similarly, Kyung Hyun Kim debates the impact of globalised and hybridised Korean culture on its cinema's visual representation of the past. As quoted earlier, he claims, 'the virtuality rendered in this new *sageuk* is a Korea that insists on blurring the boundary between the way things really were and the way things are remembered, or the way things now appear in our consciousness'.²³³ He writes that through the acceptance of

²³² An, 'Period Films in the Postmodern or the "Enjoy!" Era, p. 196.

²³³ Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, p. 211.

digital effects in historical productions, *sageuk* has entered an era of superficiality and a demise of authenticity. With *Masquerade*, the dual role represents the use of postmodern aesthetics disrupting a premodern heritage. Kim believes that this disruption signifies a larger 'anxiety about forgetting' in Korean culture, which can be seen through the recycling and reconceptualising of Korea's past.²³⁴ The appropriation of *Joseon* heritage, as seen in films like *Masquerade*, demonstrates the domestic film industry's shift towards a hybridised form. Dal Yong Jin considers the film to be an example of Korea's hybridised national cinema. He observes that scenes depicting Ha Seon changing the exploitative tax laws based on his instinct and compassion show a blending of a Hollywood revisionist style with local traditional culture as context.²³⁵ As quoted at the start of this chapter, Jin believes that the hybridisation of form and aesthetics is a method of creating new and unique resources to compete with the dominant Hollywood culture.

Conclusion

This chapter on *Masquerade* has examined the notion of authenticity in contemporary *sageuk* in relation to narrative and aesthetic conventions. Released almost ten years after *Untold Scandal*, the film can be seen as a demonstration of how historical films changed in Korean cinema during the 2000s. While *Untold Scandal* works as an evocation of the popularity of erotica within 1980s *sageuk*, *Masquerade* functions as a homage to the royal palace subgenre that had success in the 1960s. The film plays with the conflicting reputations of Gwanghae by physically portraying him as two separate people. The emphasis on Lee Byung Hun's dual role performance of the historical body and the depiction of a skewed authenticity enhances the factional tone of the film. The key

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 212.

²³⁵ See, Jin, *New Korean Wave*, p. 85-86.

component of the film, having a commoner on the throne, continues the trend of democratising *Joseon* heritage, by representing history in relation to palace servants, eunuchs, and in the case of *Masquerade*, commoners. Kyung Hyun Kim remarks that:

Not only is Korea still scarred and traumatized by its colonial era and Cold War, but – given the continuing US military presence and occasional threats of war from North Korea – it has yet to claim a true postcolonial and post-Cold War identity. This is why Korean cinema has to resurrect its premodern past, which is surely filled with episodes that are just as humiliating as those of the twentieth century, but which can be rewritten to fill in for largely undocumented histories.²³⁶

With *Masquerade*, I provide an example of this historical revisionism, arguing that *Joseon* heritage is used more as a resource for an original story than viewed as history that needs recreating through cinema as a historical document. Kim's comments also suggest that the contemporary *sageuk* form, which this chapter has demonstrated, consists of postmodernist characteristics, is a product of social trauma. The use of factional narratives and postmodern aesthetics displays mourning for the past, not the nostalgia that is typically found in European heritage film.

²³⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Making (Cinematic) History with the Blockbuster *Sageuk*

In 2004, *Film Comment* published an article about the continual rise of the Korean film industry following the Korean New Wave of the 1990s. In it, Chuck Stephens comments on the rise of the blockbuster in the new millennium and the domestic film industry's reaction to increasing cinematic possibilities:

Like so many other film cultures today, Korea's blockbusters are cross-pollinated by the same matrix of action-mannerisms from Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Japan against which its art-house cinema attempts to stand resolutely counterposed. And yet there's something about modern Korean cinema's combination of international accessibility and internal self-confidence [...] that make it altogether unique.²³⁷

In his article, Stephens explores the increasing commercialism of both mainstream genre films and independent art-house productions. A decade later, *Film Comment* returned to the subject of Korea's national cinema renaissance, dedicating a prominent section of the magazine to successful filmmakers, genres, and industry practices from the past ten years. In this edition, Goran Topalovic speculates about Korean cinema's approach to genre filmmaking, suggesting that changes to the nation's production system, both technically and stylistically, have made the industry stronger. He writes that:

While American multiplexes are bombarded with comic-book and young-adult adaptations, and family-friendly CGI animation, Korean cinema offers a wide variety of thrillers, period epics, gangster films, adult dramas and comedies, i.e., a significant number of mid-range productions that allow for a degree of creative risk-taking.²³⁸

In Korea, a mid-range production is budgeted at an average of ₩2 to 5 billion (approximately \$2 to 5 million or £1 to 3 million) with large-scale productions surpassing ₩10 billion (still a relatively modest \$8 million). This chapter examines how the Korean

²³⁷ Chuck Stephens, 'Korea Prospects: Introduction: Local Heroes: The Many Faces of Korean Cinema's Perpetual Renaissance', *Film Comment* 40. 6 (November, 2004) 36-39 (p. 39).

²³⁸ Goran Topalovic, 'The Only Way is to Move Forward: A Decade in the Life of Korean Cinema', *Film Comment* 51. 3 (May, 2015) 34-39 (p. 39).

blockbuster has developed since the 1990s to become the standard form for the production of new *sageuk* films. For this analysis I focus on *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* directed by Kim Han Min. A war epic set in the sixteenth century, the film quickly became not only the most successful Korean film of all time but also the most popular film ever released in the country, beating Hollywood epic *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), which had held the number one spot for five years. However, before turning to my analysis of *The Admiral*, I will first introduce the filmmaker himself, as well as the historical period he explores in this film.

Kim Han Min has been active in the Korean film industry since the mid-1990s after graduating from Dongguk University. As a new filmmaker, he focused on creating short films that, from the start of his career, had success internationally. For instance, his 1999 short, *Sunflower Blues*, which follows two lost souls who meet through a car crash, was screened at the New York Independent Film Festival. His first feature length production, *Paradise Murdered* (2007), was a success both commercially and critically, being acclaimed as an intelligent murder mystery that Kyu Hyun Kim favourably compares to Agatha Christie's novel, *And Then There Were None* (1939), with its mixture of a remote island locale against the backdrop of the country's 1980s military dictatorship.²³⁹ The film's success ensured Kim would make a second production, *Handphone* (2009). However, this film, which depicts a violent story of blackmail and cynicism towards society, fell short of his acclaimed debut, being criticised for its poor structure and characterisation.²⁴⁰ It was at this point that Kim began to make *sageuk* epics. The release of *War of the Arrows* (2011) was predicted to be a box office failure. The film was produced during the turbulent era for the Korean film industry, wherein the initial high in audience figures of the early 2000s had

²³⁹ Kyu Hyun Kim, '*Paradise Murdered*' (Seoul: Koreanfilm.org, 2007)
<<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm07.html#paradisemurdered>> [accessed 7 January 2016]

²⁴⁰ See, Kyu Hyun Kim, '*Handphone*' (Seoul: Koreanfilm.org, 2009)
<<http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm09.html#handphone>> [accessed 7 January 2016]

begun to decline. By the late 2000s, the market was dominated by mid-budget genre pieces that struggled to make profit. Successful films were often big budget, contemporary action films such as 2009's *Haeundae* (Yoon Je Kyoon), standing out as Korea's first disaster film, and 2010's *The Man from Nowhere* (Lee Jeong Beom), designed as a vehicle for popular actor Won Bin. However, *War of the Arrows* became Kim's breakthrough film and 2011's surprise hit. Set against the backdrop of the Second Manchu invasion of Korea in 1636, the film was praised as a patriotic thriller and for celebrating Korea's archery tradition. The story follows orphaned Nam Yi (Park Hae Il), son of a skilled military officer, who grows up to become a proficient archer and hunter. On the day of his step-sister's wedding, the Qing Empire begins its invasion of Korea. When Nam Yi discovers that his step-father has been killed and his step-sister kidnapped, he sets out to track down the Qing army and rescue her. On his quest, he is discovered by Qing Commander, Jyushinta (Ryu Seung Ryong), and the two highly skilled warriors come into conflict. While the story and history comes from Korean tradition, the technical and visual conventions behind the film are grounded in Hollywood blockbuster aesthetics. *War of the Arrows* is a *sageuk* film that demonstrates the continual shift towards the blockbuster form and the generic hybridisation of *sageuk* conventions. Kim, reassured by the success of this film, went on to direct another historical project using similar epic and blockbuster stylisations.

Kim's next film, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, depicts the events of the 1597 Battle of Myeongnyang by following the fabled story of the naval commander Admiral Yi Sun Shin and his unprecedented victory over the invading Japanese forces. His successful military career, spanning from 1576 to his death in battle in 1598, has led him to be described as one of the greatest naval commanders in history, despite never having gone through naval training. He is venerated in Korea as a symbol of loyalty to the nation, self-sacrifice, strength of character, and resourceful intellect, especially in the face of adversity. His most famous victories occurred during the Imjin War of 1592 to 1598 (also referred to

as the Hideyoshi Invasions), in which Japanese forces invaded the Korean peninsula with intent to conquer both Korea and China. Yi's expansive knowledge of the peninsula's southern coastline meant that he was never defeated in naval battle as he sought to protect the region. I discuss Yi's life in more detail later when I explore how his life and career have become immortalised and idolised in Korean culture and society, and how this has been manipulated, not only in *The Admiral*, but also in previous films, literature, and political memorials.

The Admiral depicts Yi Sun Shin's life following his demotion from his position as Supreme Naval Commander in 1597, after false information by Japanese double agents led to him being court martialled and tortured for disobeying King Seonjo's orders. Yi (Choi Min Sik) is replaced in battle by an incompetent commander, whose humiliating defeat severely weakens Korea's navy, leaving a fleet of thirteen ships and around two hundred soldiers. Given his record of success, Yi is quickly pardoned and restored to his position as commander but left with a weak and demoralised fleet. From this point on, the film portrays Yi's last stand against the Japanese forces in the Myeongnyang strait, an area of coastline known for its treacherous waters. Yi uses his knowledge of the difficult terrain to his advantage, despite being severely outnumbered and overpowered by the Japanese fleet of three hundred ships. In spite of the odds, Yi is victorious in the battle and defeats the Japanese fleet without losing any of his own ships. The film has been criticised by some for its historical inaccuracy and overt nationalistic narrative. However, the objective of my analysis is not to debate the inaccuracies of the film's representation of the Battle of Myeongnyang, but to discuss how the nature of dramatic licence in retelling the past reinforces the mythic status of the story in Korean culture. The aim of this chapter is to question the politics behind representing factual history, and how the cinematic form is a tool in this construction. In doing so, I continue my investigation into contemporary *sageuk* and its use of Korean heritage in postmodern culture.

My analysis of *The Admiral* will cover two aspects of the film: the portrait of Admiral Yi as a nationalistic figure and the use of the blockbuster form in the contemporary *sageuk* film. In the first section of my chapter, I consider the ways in which Admiral Yi is used as a nationalistic symbol in the film through the shifting political characterisation of both him and, by extension, the characters around him. My analysis continues in the same vein as my previous chapter on *Untold Scandal*, in that I examine the utilisation and construction of gender. While the earlier chapters highlighted the liberalised and postmodern attitude to notions of gender roles, sexuality, adaptation and performance in new *sageuk* productions, *The Admiral* can be read as a far more conservative film. I demonstrate how the idolisation of Admiral Yi's physical and intellectual strength is channelled through the traditional ideal of 'martial manhood'. Utilising Shelia Miyoshi Jager's work on Korean nationalism, I suggest that Kim Han Min's depiction of Yi is a continuation of the many ways he has been manipulated in previous texts and patriotic dialogues. From the seventeenth century publication of his personal documents, anti-colonial writings in the fight for independence, and his symbolic memorialisation in post-liberation Korea, he has been manipulated according to the needs of each era. I ask, what does this most recent use of Admiral Yi tell us about contemporary society and how does this link to the film's phenomenal popularity? Seungsook argues that the tendency to focus on patriotic struggles, crises, and invasions in national discourses imposes a 'specific representation of Korean history, [revealing] the androcentric and often militaristic nature of official nationalism. This continuous necessity to defend the Korean nation masculinizes it by linking citizenship to soldiering'.²⁴¹ I examine *The Admiral* with Moon's comments in

²⁴¹ Seungsook Moon, 'Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea', in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* ed. by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 33-66 (p. 43).

mind, suggesting that the film reinforces this ideology, ‘remasculinising’ Korean heritage through its selective interpretation of history and attitude towards authenticity.

In the second section, I concentrate on how the classical Hollywood blockbuster form and the historical epic genre have influenced and changed the Korean film industry, leading to the emergence of what is referred to by critics and academics as the ‘Korean blockbuster’. As addressed in the thesis introduction, the phenomenon is regarded as the domestic film industry’s attempt to revitalise the market by pushing the production of large-scale films, using the logic that a big investment meant a big return, which Shin Ki Ju describes as an ‘anxiety for scale’.²⁴² I discuss how this anxiety developed by considering how the emphasis on the spectacular narrative effected *sageuk* productions. My analysis of contemporary *sageuk* began with *Untold Scandal* in 2003 and discussed how the genre was revitalised for the contemporary audience at a time when interest in domestic productions was growing. I aim to explore how, after a decade of industrial, audience, and generic shifts, *The Admiral* shows various ways in which Korean cinema has been transformed. I explore how the Korean blockbuster phenomenon was forged through the appropriation and translation of Hollywood conventions to create a hybrid form of Korean cinema. With regard to this hybridisation, HyeRyoung Ok asks ‘how to valorise the project of the Korean blockbuster that aims to globalise its national culture by way of localising dominant Hollywood convention’.²⁴³ I analyse *The Admiral* to see how it is a hybrid of epic and spectacular aesthetics, and a localised narrative of Korean specificity and tradition, querying what implications this has on the nature of the Korean blockbuster. Stephen Teo remarks that ‘[historical blockbusters] are national monuments of a kind, and the “monumental style” is [...] a style of historicist filmmaking that sets out to produce a

²⁴² Shin Ki Ju, ‘Film Industry at the Crossroads’, *Korean Cinema Today* Vol. 1 (May/June, 2009), 14-17 (p. 15).

²⁴³ HyeRyoung Ok, ‘The Politics of the Korean Blockbuster: Narrating the Nation and the Spectacle of ‘Globalisation’ in *2009 Lost Memories*’, *Spectator* 29. 2 (Fall, 2009) 37-47 (p. 38).

narrative of the nation. [...] This style is more devoted to capturing the spiritual essence intrinsic to a people and its history and this is perhaps more important than the mere details of accuracy'.²⁴⁴ I discuss how contemporary *sageuk* films reflect similar attitudes in the way that they prioritise feeling over facts through the manipulation of heritage, history, and tradition. Overall, I argue that the generic shifts and trends in representation that I have illustrated in the previous chapters, have led to a widespread appropriation of the Korean blockbuster mentality within new *sageuk*. As such, I view the *sageuk* genre to have entered another period of change in the 2010s, in which the historical blockbuster spectacle has become the predominant form.

The History behind Yi Sun Shin

The mythic status of Yi Sun Shin preceding *The Admiral* makes a politicised representation of him unavoidable. He is a mythologised figure, not just in Korean society but internationally, having been regularly manipulated, reinterpreted, and deified in the centuries since his death. The first section of my analysis engages with the characterisation of Yi in the film and the questions it raises with regard to conservative nationalistic narratives and the nature of authenticity in Korean historical film. Kyu Hyun Kim states with regard to attitudes surrounding this debate, that 'the standards for "historical authenticity" should be more than just fidelity to the material facticity of the bygone times, such as clothing, hairstyle, food or architecture. They must address the broader question of at what point a particular interpretation becomes so skewed and misguided that it becomes a "myth" or "half-truth"'.²⁴⁵ He suggests that academic historians are too focused on pointing

²⁴⁴ Stephen Teo, *The Asian Cinema Experience: Styles, Spaces, Theory* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 53.

²⁴⁵ Kyu Hyun Kim, 'A Whirlpool of History: *Roaring Currents* between A Determined War Film and a Deifying Biopic' *International Journal of Korean History* 19.2 (July, 2014) 271-280 (p. 274).

out factual errors and accuracy that they forget the inherently interpretive nature of history. What is more important to focus on, Kim argues, is the distinction between ‘interpretation’ and ‘distortion’ of the past. My aim with this analysis of *The Admiral* is not to call it an inauthentic representation because of its dramatic embellishments and omissions, but to ask why these alterations were made, and what implications this has for contemporary *sageuk* films. Any contemporary depiction of Yi Sun Shin is entrenched in a culture of reinterpretation forged out of political necessity. Before going into an analysis of *The Admiral’s* characterisation of Yi, it is important to first understand the changing interpretations of him over the past four centuries.

The Imjin War was a devastating shock in the *Joseon* era. It was the first major international conflict that the country had faced in its two hundred year history. During the sixteenth century, Korea’s navy was primarily used to defend the peninsula from Japanese pirates, known in Korean as *waegu*, and help maintain the country’s maritime trade.²⁴⁶ The Imjin War began in 1592 under the rule of King Seonjo, as Japanese forces invaded the peninsula with the intent of using the country as a step towards conquering the neighbouring Chinese Ming Dynasty. The combination of failed diplomatic efforts, division in the Korean court, and a weak military defence led to Japan’s initial strength in the invasion. Yi Sun Shin’s efforts as the navy’s commander substantially slowed the Japanese forces and strengthened Korea’s fleet. He never lost one of his 23 campaigns and is credited with having improved the navy’s firearms and warships, including the *geobukseon*, or turtle ship.

After the war ended in 1598 with the withdrawal of Japanese forces, victorious China and Korea were unstable politically and socially. During the post-war restoration,

²⁴⁶ *Waegu*, referred to in Chinese as *wokou*, literally translates to ‘Japanese pirates’ but these pirates were actually made up from various ethnicities across the East Asia, including Korean and Chinese. Their identity and the origin of the name is under debate but is thought to be because early *waegu* groups were based in the outlying islands of Japan.

King Seonjo began to select and record the achievements of meritorious, distinguished military subjects, most of whom died in battle. Amongst these were Yi and Won Gyun. While the two had led successful campaigns together, Won was characterised by his adultery, alcoholism, and desertion. Though he led a successful career in the navy throughout the majority of the Imjin War, Won was also held accountable for the most humiliating defeat of the Korean navy during the war while under his command, the Battle of Chilcheollryang in 1597. In spite of Yi's and Won's successes, Seonjo was reluctant to honour them as they were reminders of his own failures and mistakes as king during the war. False information by Japanese spies tricked Seonjo into removing Yi from his post, replacing him with Won, who followed the King's misleading orders and resulted in the near annihilation of *Joseon's* naval forces. Seonjo eventually acknowledged Yi and Won as meritorious subjects, but it was not until the reign of King Injo that Yi was elevated to the status of a great war hero.

In the unrest following the Imjin War, *Joseon* was in a difficult position regarding the political turmoil occurring in China. The united tribes that became known as the Manchus had declared war on the ruling Ming Dynasty. Gwanghaegun attempted to remain neutral in the conflict, denying requests from both sides for military assistance, but was met with controversy for not choosing to help Ming China which had contributed a lot to Korea's efforts in the Imjin War. More conflict soon followed, culminating in the first Manchu invasion of Korea in 1627 and the second Manchu invasion of 1636. Korea's overwhelming defeat forced the then ruling King Injo to surrender to the new Qing Empire, and recognise Qing as suzerain, instead of Ming China. This changing dynamic of power, wherein China was no longer Korea's ally but superior and victorious, led to a re-evaluation of former military subjects by way of emphasising loyalty, strength, and strategy. In this revision, Yi was highly praised as an organised military leader and a loyal patriot, in comparison to Won who had begun to be criticised by official historians for his idleness. By

the mid-seventeenth century, Yi and his descendants were being memorialised with shrines and monuments. It is during this era when Yi's persona and characteristics began to be remoulded in response to the political needs of society. This shift is based on *Joseon's* desire to remain vested to Ming China's culture after the fall of the dynasty, and question the legitimacy of the Qing Empire. Using Yi as a symbol, Korea emphasised the significance of loyalty and patriotism, recognising the Imjin War as a time of solidarity between the two cultures, and of sacrifice and protection. As Roh Young Koo summarises, 'Yi Sun Shin became an important object of recognition in the sense that he was a loyal subject of *Joseon's* king as well as a symbolical figure in *Joseon* as the centre of culture [...] in that he protected traditional Chinese culture with Ming China's forces during [the Imjin War].'²⁴⁷ The rationale behind seeing Yi as a symbol of loyalty was emphasized throughout the remainder of the *Joseon* era and demonstrates how he had been separated from historical fact early on.

During the era of Japanese rule from 1910 to 1945, Korean intellectuals were quick to look into the nation's history for figures who were emblematic of Korean nationalism and could be construed as national heroes for this disempowered society. Figures such as King Gwanggaeto the Great, who ruled during the Three Kingdoms era of Korea (37 BC to 668 AD), and Eulji Mundeok, a celebrated seventh century military leader, were recognised for their kingship and prowess. Yi stood out as significant alongside these national heroes as he himself had fought and defeated the Japanese. Nationalist historians, including Shin Chae Ho, Bak Eun Sik, Kim Chang Suk, and Yi Kwang Su, shifted Yi's characterisation again to fit with the anti-imperialistic, anti-Japanese sentiment of a nation fighting for independence. While he was still regarded as a great commander of almost superhuman heroism, the deification of his persona was toned down. Instead, historians depicted him as

²⁴⁷ Roh Young Koo, 'Yi Sun-shin, and Admiral Who Became a Myth' *The Review of Korean Studies* 7.3 (September, 2004) 15-36 (p. 23).

a perfect man of character, focusing on his humanity, courage, and filial piety. He still remained a loyal figure, but one who was manipulated by *Joseon* court politics. Yi Kwang Su, for instance, presented a more critical representation of Yi's character as a man who was victimised and sacrificial, and in doing so, criticises what he considered the weakness of Korean politics. By highlighting the negative aspects of Korea's *Joseon* heritage through the agency of Yi, Yi Kwang Su called for the moral reconstruction and re-evaluation of society that would in turn lead to independence.

Finally, in post-liberation society, Yi was again brought in to help restore national fervour in an era of national crises. But unlike the period of Japanese rule, during which intellectuals were responsible for much of Yi's historical interpretation, in liberated Korea, this evaluation was now being carried out officially by the government, through various channels, including educational textbooks and political addresses.²⁴⁸ During the presidential and dictatorial rule of Park Chung Hee, Yi continued to be reconstructed in the promotion of 'Korean manhood' and patriotism through the links between militarism and nationalism. Sheila Miyoshi Jager notes that attempts at nation building by intellectuals in the early twentieth century were grounded in the resurrection of martial and warrior male ideals. She writes that the reformist agendas of the Japanese colonial era make repeated connections 'between failed nationhood and failed manhood. The pervasive image of the weak and emasculated *yangban* that became a centrepiece of the rhetoric of nationalist self-critique had led Korean nationalists like Shin Chae Ho to embrace new and idealised images of the military man'.²⁴⁹ Yi was a key figure of this idealisation and this continued in the post-liberation era. Park Chung Hee set up projects and ideologies in order to 'promote the making of heroes'.²⁵⁰ As the economy of the post-war nation advanced, Yi's image

²⁴⁸ From this point on, Korea refers to the Republic of Korea, or South Korea, after the division of the peninsula in 1948.

²⁴⁹ Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea*, p. 5. [Emphasis in original]

²⁵⁰ Roh, 'Yi Sun-shin, and Admiral who Became a Myth', p. 30.

shifted to promote anti-communist, pro-development ideologies. For instance, by 1966, his image was being constructed as a prophetic strategist, and in 1967, he became associated with modernity through the technological ingenuity of his turtle ship design. Furthermore, as Park's rule became increasingly authoritarian in the 1970s, Yi's iconography as a national hero waned as Park turned himself into the object of such worship.

On the continual political manipulation of Yi as a symbol, Roh Young Koo writes that the 'overly positive evaluations on Yi Sun Shin as a national hero or needlessly humbling of him prevent his real character as a historical figure from being seen, and this turns up as a new distortion in recognising history'.²⁵¹ Over centuries of Korean history, Yi as a historical figure has been turned into a caricature and a symbol. Using the context of the diplomatic politics of the seventeenth century to liberation-oriented biographies of the colonial era, I engage with *The Admiral* to consider how the film continues this trend, asking whether it presents a more complex representation of his historical achievements, or if it continues this legacy of reinterpretation based on society's needs. Firstly, I explore elements in the film that root Yi's characterisation in these past evaluations. While I argue that *The Admiral's* depiction of Yi is mostly similar to the nationalistic endorsement of Korean 'martial manhood', I also highlight how the film presents elements that refer to colonial attitudes such as valuing humanity and leadership. The film's depiction of Yi as a tragic hero emulates the re-evaluation of his character that emerged in the early twentieth century. I then briefly move on to an analysis of the film's use of dramatic license in reinterpreting Yi's character, considering how the selective representation of the secondary characters influences the politics of the text. I focus this part of the discussion on the character Bae Sol (Kim Won Hae), based on a real naval commander who fought alongside Yi. His characterisation has been considered as controversial, especially regarding a scene

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 33.

where Bae conspires to assassinate Yi that has no basis in history. I argue that Bae Sol can be interpreted as a composite character that includes elements of Won Gyun's legacy, in ways that I discuss later. The antithesis between Yi and Bae's representation helps to exemplify Yi's 'perfect' character in contrast to Bae's cowardice.

Nationalism and *The Admiral*

When viewing *The Admiral* as an evocation of martial manhood and a conservative reading of the past, Yi's characterisation can be seen as an idolisation of a nationalistic and militaristic figure. Kyu Hyun Kim notes how *The Admiral* would not be out of place with the post-war biopics of Yi, such as *The Divine Hero Yi Sun Shin* (Lee Kyu Woong, 1971) and *A War Diary*. Kim recalls watching these films as a student and describes them as typical of stodgy *sageuk* productions made in the 1970s:

One could notice almost laughably fragrant anachronisms such as maps with modern contour lines used by the Korean navy, at least one hundred years ahead of their European invention, and the invading Japanese forces hoisting Hi-no-maru flags, again 280 years too early.²⁵²

These films were made during the age of state sponsored (and censored) productions and the emphasis in these Yi biopics was to exemplify his heroic figure. During the Park Chung Hee dictatorship, this endorsement of Yi meant revising his character to emphasise his masculinity based on military leadership and ingenuity, much like Park was doing with his own image in politics. With *The Admiral*, I argue that Kim Han Min's representation of Yi is a continuation of this idolisation, as can be seen through various aspects of the film.

Firstly, the depiction of Yi's turtle ship is celebratory and glorified, drawing on the memorialisation of his achievements in the post-war era.²⁵³ The turtle ship is first

²⁵² Kim, 'A Whirlpool of History', p. 273.

²⁵³ The turtle ship, or *geobukseon*, was a type of armoured warship designed for ramming and close-assaults. Yi Sun Shin is credited with the ship's design in the 1590s, intended for its use in the

mentioned in the opening scene following the film's introduction, in which Yi is discussing battle strategies with his subordinate officers. Bae Sol questions Korea's chances in battle considering the severe lack of resources, asking Yi, 'Aside from the turtle ship do we have any other plan?'²⁵⁴ The ship is established as the navy's last hope for survival and is first depicted a few scenes later at *Joseon's* naval base. In this sequence, the establishing shot of the shore is framed so that the ship is in the foreground but obscured from view behind trees, revealing only its spiked, ironclad roof. This concealed presentation is a recurring motif throughout the majority of the film. The ship is shown repeatedly but always obscured, for instance by building work or later by fire when Bae Sol attempts to sabotage Yi. This decision to hide the ship serves to glorify its presence later in the film when it is used during the final stages of the battle. In a later battle sequence when Yi's forces are struggling, his men urge him to realise the futility of their position as they are drastically overpowered by the Japanese ships. The subordinate officers finally arrive to aid Yi in battle bringing with them the fixed turtle ship. As the fleet get in formation, there are several wide shots, depicting the whole strait that give an aerial view of the state of the conflict. The fleet utilises the changing current to its advantage, riding the current's strength to ram into the Japanese ships, and Yi is shown under the admiring and faithful gaze of his men, a visual that occurs throughout the film. As they look to him for leadership, Yi is depicted as having a prophetic vision, the sounds of the war horn and waves combining to create a roaring effect, a sound effect that is later repeated with the turtle ship's arrival. When the turtle ship is finally used in battle, it is heralded by elder Kim, who we see advise Yi earlier in the film on the strategic use of the strait, and who is now part of a group of

Japanese invasions of Korea, and they were still used far into the nineteenth century. Though derived from older ship designs from the early fifteenth century, Yi is credited with their resurrection as powerful assault ships.

²⁵⁴ *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, dir. by Kim Han Min (CJ Entertainment, 2014).



Figure 23 The turtle ship obscured by builders...

(*The Admiral*, Kim Han Min, 2014)



Figure 24 ...destroyed by fire...

(*The Admiral*, Kim Han Min, 2014)



Figure 25 ...and its re-emergence in battle.

(*The Admiral*, Kim Han Min, 2014)

citizens escaping along an overlooking cliff edge. The group, led by Yi's son, Yi Hoe, cry with joy as they realise the turtle ship is being used. Elder Kim repeatedly screams, 'It's the turtle ship!' as Yi Hoe watches in awe.²⁵⁵ The ship is then seen emerging through the mist, waves, fire and debris with an accompanying tiger roar sound effect, recalling the similar effect used during Yi's prophetic depiction. The recurring glorification of the turtle ship in turn highlights the genius of Yi's innovation and leadership. The use of the ship in the final scene of the film demonstrates its use as an icon of Korean militarism. The film ends by going back to one of the turtle ship's first uses in warfare, during the Battle of Hansan Island of 1592. The shots flow in and around the ship's mechanisms as it sails closer to the fearful Japanese fleet. A dramatic roar is again used, this time to reveal the ship in its entirety, focusing on the dragon head on the bow as it fires a cannon, ending the film.

The representation of the turtle ship in the film draws from the established iconography and symbolism associated with it, which can be traced back to post-Korean War memorialisation. In Jager's study on the War Memorial of Korea that opened in 1994,

²⁵⁵ *The Admiral*, dir. by Kim.

she describes the State's commemorative culture of the country's post-military dictatorship society as disseminating a masculinist logic. She writes:

Not only has this official commemorative culture perpetuated and generated a view of the past in terms of a particular masculine ideal, memories of the war have affirmed the identification of the national subject with the authority of these masculine images aimed to perpetuate the State's vision of a future reunified Korea.²⁵⁶

Jager argues that the continual emphasis on militarism and masculinity, and the glorification of ancient military tradition is simultaneously an act of traumatic healing following the Korean War, and a vehicle of State power. She continues:

The connection made between the military, manliness, and nationalism throughout the War Memorial presents us with a window through which to view not only how history was written by those who saw themselves as privileged 'subjects' of the nation, but also, and more importantly, how gender ideals implicit in that history – in this case martial masculinity – were appropriated by the State for political ends.²⁵⁷

While most of the Memorial focuses on Korea's twentieth-century military heritage, Jager argues that the entire memorial is established around the idea of a heroic warrior tradition. A section of the Memorial on the *Joseon* Dynasty is devoted to Yi Sun Shin, and a replica of his turtle ship is prominently displayed. Jager comments on the implications on Yi's role in the exhibit, stating:

The extensive exhibition space devoted to Yi Sun Shin's triumphant role during the Hideyoshi invasions, when Koreans were able to overcome impending national disaster by relying on his 'unifying' force, becomes a clear metaphor for the present state of national division [...] the historical analogy symbolically presented by the prominent display of Yi Sun Shin's turtle ship is a testament to a past and a present of the Korean nation and the military's vital role in both.²⁵⁸

Returning to *The Admiral*, this triumphant and privileged display of the turtle ship is again utilised to reinforce Korea's heritage of militarism through a heroic warrior masculinity. The

²⁵⁶ Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea*, p. 118.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

politics and symbolism associated with the turtle ship and its glorified presence in *The Admiral's* final act support the film's conservative reading of the past.

Another element of the film that contributes to the idolisation of Yi is his sword, which can be seen in two key scenes. Early in the film, Yi is shown in private, contemplating the state of events. Korea's fleet and resources are still weak and there is news that Japan's forces are fast approaching. As Yi sits in his room, he looks at his swords mounted by the wall. The Chinese character inscriptions on the blades are shown translated through Hangeul subtitles. One reads: 'I swear by my sword to be feared by the world', the other: 'With one swing I will paint the world with blood'. Yi regards these words as he looks towards his mother's shrine. These inscriptions foreshadow the sword's usage and depiction later in battle, in a way that also signals the divine portrayal of Yi. In the midst of hand-to-hand combat with the Japanese, Yi stands still in a defiant, heroic stance. Starting from his blood-drenched sword, showing the same inscription about painting the world with blood, the camera pans up his armoured body to his similarly blood drenched face. This foreshadowing builds on the depiction of Yi as a divine and prophetic strategist. In this same scene, Yi's ship is trapped by a number of surrounding Japanese vessels who are ransacking the deck. He orders all the cannons to be fired from one side of the ship to blast themselves free. After the resulting explosion, there are a series of shots depicting the Japanese generals, the citizens on the cliff, and the Korean soldiers, as they wonder if Yi's ship survived. The film then presents a flashback to a conversation between Yi and his son. Yi Hoe is questioning his father's leadership, claiming the soldiers are too scared to fight in the upcoming battle. Yi answers, 'If you can somehow turn that fear into courage, that courage could be infectious'.²⁵⁹ Unconvinced, Yi Hoe still doubts him, asking 'How can you turn such fear into courage when they are so scared out of their minds?' to which Yi

²⁵⁹ *The Admiral*, dir. by Kim.

proclaims that he will have to die. Moments after the explosion, he pushes himself up on the weight of his sword, emerging triumphantly from the smoke under the stunned gaze of his soldiers. Immediately, the surrounding fleets and citizens, who all witness Yi's miraculous survival, throw their arms up in joy. True to Yi's statement in the flashback, the fearful soldiers, and even the citizens, are motivated into action, encouraged to fight back against the Japanese forces. The film represents Yi as a sacrificial and divine hero, whose very being inspires others.

The final aspect I that I highlight demonstrates how Yi's representation in *The Admiral* is also emblematic of his construction as a tragic hero and a man of character that occurred during the colonial era. As discussed earlier, during the era of Japanese rule, nationalist historians sought historical figures that could be moulded as national heroes. In the struggle for independence, Korea's history and traditions were exemplified as means of strengthening the nation's spirit. On this era of revisionism, Jager writes that 'in Korea, where human agency had always played a significant role in Koreans' view of the past, the question became not so much how to define the role of the hero in the new history of the nation, as it was about how much to *redefine* the very ideal of heroism'.²⁶⁰ In the colonial era, warrior heroes based in ancient military tradition became the mainstay of this redefinition. Historians emphasised past figures of strength, loyalty, and piety in order to empower a Korean nation under imperialism. Yi became a key figure in this historical revision and the legacy of his redefined character can be seen in *The Admiral*. In the film there are moments that emphasise a more personal depiction of Yi. A sequence of scenes early in the film demonstrate several aspects of him as an idolised but tragic national hero.

With the morale of Yi's soldiers at a low, he is called upon when a deserter, Oh Sang Gu, is captured when running away from the camp. Oh gives the excuse that he is

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 9. [Emphasis in original]

tired of watching all his comrades die by his side and is too afraid of dying to fight. Once Oh has finished speaking, Yi, in one quick motion, brandishes his sword and beheads him. The entire camp is shocked but Yi reasons that military rule must be strict. He reinforces his leadership through fear, in a way that also reinforces his image as a loyal militaristic and moral figure. In the next scene, Yi is taken to the Myeongryang strait by elder Kim who tries to persuade him to use the strait's fierce currents as a tactic during the conflict. On the journey through the strait, the boat's rower, Captain Ahn, gazes at Yi's back with a mixture of fear and admiration. As they stand on the shore watching the violent current, Ahn fears that the water is too strong and that the Japanese fleet would easily trap them. He advises Yi that it is an unwise decision, but Yi gives no response, instead continuing to watch the current. As Ahn and elder Kim discuss strategies and the mysterious sound of the water, Yi still gazes into the water in a visionary trance, almost as if hypnotised by the sound of the current. Back at the camp, he sits in private with his son to whom he confesses that the current sounds like the cries of dead soldiers. This brief insight into Yi's personal thoughts is used to present him as a tortured soul and a victimised character. He is haunted both literally and figuratively by the ghosts of his dead comrades, showing him as a man of loyalty to his fallen men. In the next scene, Yi is in a restless sleep. A quick succession of images represents his fractured dreams, depicting the beheading of his soldiers, by both him and the Japanese invaders, and a foreshadowing image of Yi watching over the Myeongryang strait from his ship. By relating the previous scenes of the Japanese invaders killing Korean soldiers and Yi himself beheading his men, the film suggests that he is worried about the state of his leadership. As a tortured soul, he feels conflicted and that his violence is making him no better than the invaders he is trying to stop, adding a sense of humanity to his characterisation. When he awakes from the dream in a sweat, he sees and hears the ghosts of his deceased captains calling for him to avenge them. The ghosts are not there to harm or frighten Yi but to plead with him for his leadership. As they leave, Yi is

left shuffling through his room, whimpering that they stay and drink with him. This moment moves away from the typical representation of Yi as a strong, capable warrior to a more compassionate one of a frail aging man haunted by his past.

The depiction of him as a tragic hero relates to the colonial discourse that sought to create a more realistic image of Yi that also commented on the state of the disempowered society. As Kyu Hyun Kim summarises, his status was readjusted to that of ‘a tragic hero fighting for the stagnant, corrupt regime wholly undeserving of his talents and martial spirits’.²⁶¹ The stagnant regime Kim is referring to can be read both as the colonial state of the nation and the perceived failings of the *Joseon* era. As depicted in the opening of the film, Yi was stripped of his rank and tortured for disobeying King Seonjo’s orders. In retrospect, this has been interpreted as an example of the weakness of *yangbang* rule, who, as a scholarly elite, failed to turn *Joseon* into a powerful nation. According to some colonial era historians such as Bae Eun Sik and Shin Chae Ho, *Joseon* could have become a powerful and dominant force had they fully utilised Yi’s turtle ship to take control of the seas. Instead, the *yangbang* are regarded as having weakened and emasculated the nation’s military.

The Admiral’s characterisation of Yi, which includes elements of the tragic hero aspect of his image, has implications for the politics of the film. As demonstrated so far, various aspects of the production help create Yi as a nationalistic figure based on the changing interpretations of him throughout the centuries. Quoted earlier, Roh Young Koo argues that the political manipulation of Yi as a historical figure has distorted the actual history surrounding him, turning him into a mythical figure. He suggests that only by understanding the shifting ideological influences on Yi’s character can he be understood and recognised as an objective historical figure rather than just as a heroic object of

²⁶¹ Kim, ‘A Whirlpool of History’, p. 277.

worship. I argue that *The Admiral's* Yi adds to the idolisation of his mythology. This the film achieves by treading a middle path in its characterisation of its hero that falls between Yi as a divine, militaristic warrior and a sacrificial, tragic hero. In so doing, the film presents a similar image of Yi to the one seen in the productions of the 1970s. The nationalistic narrative and representation in these productions make no attempt at reinterpreting his life or the events of the Imjin War. However, with regard to *The Admiral* specifically, the film does present a more human depiction of Yi than these earlier productions, with scenes of him battling his inner demons and questioning his position as a leader. Kim claims that depictions of Yi cannot transcend the pull of nationalist narratives due to the 'conventionally moralistic, court- and *yangbang*-centred, hyper-masculine narrative of the [Imjin] wars'.²⁶² Conversely, it could be argued that Yi's position as a mythical figure in Korean culture and his shifting political representation is demonstrative of Korea's colonial and postcolonial discourses. Marcia Landy writes that 'an understanding of history is essential to understanding political and cultural change; one must recognise the problematic nature of a quest for origins and authenticity that antedate colonialism, [...] the role of folklore as a repository of knowledge of the past, and especially the potential role of intellectuals in the dissemination of knowledge'.²⁶³ She argues that folkloric interpretations of the past are just as valid as factually based historical narratives as they represent the cultural shifts of a nation, not just the concern for memorialising the truth. She emphasises that this is especially the case for postcolonial nations. The legacies of the intellectual revision of Yi's character during Korea's colonial era, along with that of post-war commemorative culture, are still evident in contemporary representations.

The Admiral's conservatism is something that has been well noted by its commentators, with many repeatedly using terms such as 'patriotism', 'national triumph',

²⁶² Ibid., p. 278.

²⁶³ Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 30.

and 'heroic figure'. However, the same commenters also tend to use words such as 'malaise', 'mourning', and 'aggression' when describing this period of history.²⁶⁴ These terms also highlight what is considered an important aspect of the film's commercial success. It is important to mention the Sewol Ferry tragedy in this regard. The Sewol Ferry sank on the morning of April 16th 2014, four months before the film was released. The sinking that resulted in the deaths of 304 people was caused by a combination of human error in steering and the overloading of cargo, which caused the ferry to capsize. Sewol's captain and the majority of the crew were highly criticised for abandoning the ship and neglecting to help the passengers, and were subsequently arrested. The South Korean government also faced condemnation for its response to the disaster, with the public criticising the emergency services for being inefficient and the government's attempts to downplay their culpability. While it cannot be said that *The Admiral* was produced with the sinking in mind, it is undeniable that it had an effect on the way the film was received. Ha Seung Woo comments that *The Admiral* acted as an 'unconscious means of catharsis' and that 'Korean society seems to have projected its fears and anxieties, triggered by the Sewol ferry sinking, onto this film as its audience'.²⁶⁵ Many critics have argued that the similar maritime themes and the narrative of national triumph are connected to the lingering sense of shame and grief from the Sewol disaster. The film was taken to be the depiction of a strong leader that was needed in a time of (contemporary) national trauma. Against the reality of an incompetent government and cowardly captain, Yi Sun Shin represented a

²⁶⁴ See, Steven Borowiec, 'Heroic tale of "The Admiral" is a hit in South Korea', (Los Angeles: Latimes.com, 2014) <<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-ca-korean-film-20140817-story.html>> [accessed 17 May 2016], Pierce Conran, "'The Admiral: Roaring Currents" lays waste to Korean Box Office Records', (Seoul: Twitchfilm.com, 2014) <<http://twitchfilm.com/2014/08/the-admiral-roaring-currents-lays-waste-to-korean-box-office-records.html>>, [accessed 17 May 2016], Stephen Evans, 'Naval epic takes South Korea by storm', (Seoul: BBC News, 2014) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-29438401>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

²⁶⁵ Ha Seung Woo, 'The Return of Yi Sun-shin: Mediating the Present and the Past', *Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies* 1.1 (2014) 235-239 (p. 238-239).

capable and heroic leader from Korea's heritage. I argue that this is suggestive of a post-traumatic gaze, wherein an audience's anxieties and desires towards both the past and present are played out. Post-traumatic cinema in a Korean context is largely associated with the New Korean cinema of the 1990s. Kyung Hyun Kim's studies on New Korean Cinema suggest that the liberalisation of the film industry in the 90s led to an influx of filmmakers confronting transgressive subjects in order to deal with the past century of colonialism, war and dictatorships. Kim argues that the legacy of this post-traumatic identity lives on in contemporary Korean cinema. With *The Admiral*, for instance, it has been suggested that the presentation of one of Korea's most iconic historical narratives of success functions as a traumatic release, not just for the nation's defeat of the Japanese but the portrayal of an honourable leader. Yun Mi Hwang claims that *The Admiral* demonstrates:

How a film can offer a space for an emotional 'purge' and in what ways the contextualisation of historical drama becomes readily implicated with memory and trauma of the nation's past, or in this case, the present. The film would have usually served as a thinly-veiled comment on the contemporary geopolitical situation and a piece of entertainment to enjoy some visceral fun of seeing *our* military generals crushing evil foreign invaders, a regular motif in period actions. With the ferry accident looming large in the public consciousness, instead, the film acquired a new meaning and mission.²⁶⁶

In her essay, Hwang argues that the resurgence of *sageuk* productions over the past decade is symptomatic of Korean culture trying to purge itself of its traumatic past. She maintains that historical and period dramas are inherently allegorical due to their appropriation of the past to comment on the present. This is an aspect I will touch upon more in the next part of my chapter, when exploring the generic implications of *The Admiral* as a Korean blockbuster and one representative of a new kind of *sageuk* production.

²⁶⁶ Yun Mi Hwang, 'Allegory of the Purge Campaign: Memory and Trauma in South Korean Historical Drama', *The Journal of Literature and Film* 16.1 (March, 2015) 51-71 (p. 68). [Emphasis in original]

I finish this section of my chapter dealing with the characterisation of Yi by briefly examining the secondary character of Bae Sol. Here, I put forward the idea that Bae Sol can be read as a foil to Yi. While he only appears in the first forty minutes of the film, he is important in establishing the characterisation of Yi. By emphasising the negative aspects of Bae's legacy, his character serves to contrast with and enhance the positive qualities that Yi symbolises. Bae Sol was a naval commander under Yi and has been remembered for his idleness and cowardice. It is recorded on that several occasions he fled from battles. During the Battle of Chilcheollryang, which destroyed almost the entire Korean fleet, Bae had hidden the twelve ships under his command away from the Japanese attackers and escaped. In the film, Bae is portrayed as an antagonist to Yi's heroic leadership. This starts from the opening scene, where Yi meets with his officers to discuss strategies. Immediately, Bae is depicted showing animosity to Yi, criticising Yi's decisions and suggesting that *Joseon* surrender. He encourages the other officers to speak up against Yi. When Captain Ahn tells him to watch what he is saying, and that he should be ashamed for deserting the Battle of Chilcheollryang, Bae moves as if about to attack him. Yi stops the confrontation before it escalates. The contrast of personalities between Yi and Bae is shown to emphasise Yi's calmness in comparison to Bae's irrational behaviour. Bae continues to hold forth on the futility of the war and attempts to justify his cowardly behaviour, stating that had he not left the battle, *Joseon's* navy would not have his twelve remaining ships. Later, during the scene described above in which Yi beheads the deserter Oh, Yi's declaration that military law should be strict is made while staring intently at Bae. When it becomes clear that Yi is planning to continue in the war despite the lack of resources, Bae mutters that he will 'find a way' to change his mind. In his final scene, Bae is trying to escape by boat having sent his men to assassinate Yi and set fire to the turtle ship. The film's depiction of Bae's escape makes him seem almost manic as he yells that Yi is trying to get everyone killed and that the war is not worth dying for. Ahn, loyal to Yi, shoots

Bae dead with an arrow and he falls into the water. While several characters are shown to doubt Yi's plans, including even his son, only Bae is portrayed in such an antagonistic manner. In reality, while the two were known to have a hostile relationship, he was not shot down for attempting to sabotage Yi, he simply ran away before another critical battle and never served in the navy again. The embellishment upon and alteration of historical fact is done to reinforce the conservative politics behind the representation of Yi. This is done so within the scope of dramatic licence in order to present the story as an interpretation of the past. Bae is a composite character that includes aspects of Won Gyun's legacy. As addressed earlier, Won was honoured like Yi following their contributions to the Imjin War. However, in the process of history, his image has not been mythologised in the same way. Instead, the two were consistently ranked against each other both with regard to their achievements and personalities. In contrast to Yi's morality and strength, Won became vilified for his personal faults and perceived weakness in military organisation. His humiliating defeat during the Battle of Chilcheollryang that nearly annihilated *Joseon's* navy stands in juxtaposition to Yi's miraculous success at the Battle of Myeongnyang. Since he died in the Battle of Chilcheollryang, which occurred two months before the events of the film, he could not be portrayed himself. Instead, it could be read that his attributes and vilified legacy have been represented through Bae. As a foil, his negative portrayal elevates Yi's qualities that I have discussed. Yi's heroism, strategic leadership and militarism contrast with Bae's cynicism, desertion, and conspiring actions. The dramatic licence at use here is ingrained in the history associated with Yi. In spite of Roh's desire for Yi to be seen as an objective historical figure, it could be said that Yi has been too far mythologised to go back, and that he, and even those around him, cannot be free from embellished depictions.

The Admiral as Blockbuster

In this section of my chapter I examine the blockbuster and generic conventions of *The Admiral*. I highlight several aspects of the film that demonstrate a hybridised style of spectacular aesthetics and a nationally specific narrative. I specifically address the phenomenon referred to as the ‘Korean blockbuster’. Academics such as Chris Berry, Jinhee Choi, and HyeRyoung Ok have written on the specificities of the Korean blockbuster, asking what criteria should be used to compare them to Hollywood productions, and investigating their role in Korea’s national cinema. Ok writes that the hybrid tendency of Korean blockbusters ‘puts into play the two contradictory terms of *locality* and *universality*’.²⁶⁷ She notes that the Korean blockbuster is simultaneously engrained in Hollywood conventions and distanced from them. Starting with the film *Shiri*, the Korean film industry pushed the production of big budget, high action spectacles. As Ok continues, ‘Hollywood, which was once the antithesis against which Korean New Wave defined its aesthetics and political stance, turned into the “source” of styles and a market competitor’.²⁶⁸ While the political liberalisation of the Korean film industry in the early 1990s led to New Korean Cinema creating a cinema of realism to deal with the past, the emergence of the Korean blockbuster was instead based on an economic shift. Korean films began to outsell Hollywood imports but did so in a state of mimicry. Chris Berry claims that the appropriation of blockbuster conventions in Korean cinema acts to de-westernise the form, and localise the global. He states that:

The blockbuster is no longer American owned. The idea may be borrowed and translated, but this should not be understood in terms of the original and the copy, where divergence from the original marks the failure of authenticity. Instead, in the postcolonial politics and globalised economics of blockbusters, borrowing and translation are only the first step on the road towards agency and creativity.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ HyeRyoung Ok, ‘The Politics of the Korean Blockbuster’, p. 44. [Emphasis in original]

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Chris Berry, “What’s Big about the Big Film?” “De-westernizing” the Blockbuster in Korea and China’, in *Movie Blockbusters* ed. by Julian Stringer (London: Routledge. 2003), pp. 217-229 (p. 218).

I further this argument by also including the twenty-first century development of the *sageuk* genre. The use of heritage in recent Korean cinema has merged with the simultaneously accent of the blockbuster form. Throughout the past decade, the historical film in Korean cinema has taken on the blockbuster mentality of spectacle, scale and excess. With *The Admiral*, I explore how the film utilises typical Hollywood blockbuster conventions but localises them within a Korean tradition. I focus my analysis on the following aspects: the representation of the Japanese forces in a way that reinforces the Otherness of the enemy, the notion of excess in the depiction of violence and warfare, and the spectacular aesthetics established in both blockbuster and heritage film conventions.

In his essay on war film conventions in recent Korean cinema, Kyu Hyun Kim remarks that the generic conventions developed to portray World War II in Hollywood productions have become the set global standards for the genre. As such, Korean films depicting the Korean War have emerged with the same elements. He recognises that the following conventions are tied to both Hollywood and Korean War epics:

An assortment of soldiers from ethnically or geographically diverse backgrounds; the hero who is distanced from the others by virtue of his leadership responsibilities; a particular objective (or mission); internal conflict within the group; a faceless enemy; few, if any women; reminders of home; a last stand; propaganda; common behaviours (letter writing, singing); and death.²⁷⁰

The same could be said for any war portrayed in Korean cinema. *The Admiral* contains, to an extent, examples of all these elements. Here, I discuss the representation of its 'faceless enemy', the Japanese forces. The depiction of the Japanese can be criticised for its lack of depth and characterisation. The Japanese are portrayed as single-minded and cruel invaders, intent more on killing Yi than taking control of the peninsula. The characters operate on a functional level as villains who offer a counterpoint to Yi's honour. The film

²⁷⁰ Kyu Hyun Kim, 'Sniping at "History": War Film Conventions and Construction of the Enemy in Two Recent Korean Films, *The Front Line* (2011) and *War of the Arrows* (2011), *The Journal of Literature and Film* 15.1 (2014) 43-60 (p. 45).

presents the Korean and Japanese navies as simple binary enemies, following the war convention of us versus them. The enemy forces are restricted by the characteristics of Otherness that position them against the patriotic representation of the Korean soldiers. Several aspects of the film demonstrate this divide.

Early in the film a messenger relays to Yi that the Japanese fleet are acting suspiciously, because they have been seen preparing their ships and soldiers. The messenger is in tears as he recalls the atrocities of the Japanese invaders. He cries that anyone who fights back is killed and their noses cut off, and that they are using children for target practice. He ends by stating, 'It's what they do when they occupy a region'.²⁷¹ When he is describing the invasion, scenes of Japanese soldiers carrying out these very acts are shown. A man's nose is cut off in bloody detail and children are fired upon by laughing soldiers. From early in the film the Japanese enemy is vilified and depicted as dishonourable in warfare. This can be clearly exemplified by the character Kurushima Michifusa (Ryu Seung Ryong), a Japanese general sent to *Joseon* from midway through the conflict with a personal vendetta against Yi, Yi having killed his brother earlier in the war. The Japanese general Todo Takadora (Kim Myung Gon) is impatient as he is ordered to stall his attack until the arrival of his new officer. This new officer, Kurushima, is depicted as arrogant and barbaric, even in the eyes of his fellow soldiers. When he is first introduced, he is greeted with fear. In the scene, a group of Japanese soldiers are killing Korean militias and civilians. The screen starts by showing a pile of dead bodies filling the frame, close enough to see their injured bodies and blood-stained clothes. The next frame is a mid-shot, tilted on a hill. In the foreground, the pile of bodies lie, and in the centre of the shot a line of men are tied up and on their knees being guarded by Japanese soldiers. Finally the screen cuts to a wide shot of the landscape, this time showing the scale of this devastation.

²⁷¹ *The Admiral*, dir. by Kim.



Figure 26 A close up shot of murdered soldiers.

(*The Admiral*, Kim Han Min, 2014)



Figure 27 A larger shot, showing men waiting to be killed.

(*The Admiral*, Kim Han Min, 2014)



Figure 28 A wide shot, revealing the scale of brutality.

(*The Admiral*, Kim Han Min, 2014)

The line of tied up men are just a fraction of the people being held captive. To the right of the screen, a huddled mass of civilians are grouped together by a wall of soldiers. On the left is an organised assembly of soldiers with emblematic flags and banners, and the officer Wakisaka Yasuharu on horseback. This progression of shots from close up on the body to a wide landscape, each increasing the devastation of the Japanese encroachment on Korea's people and land, demonstrate the overwhelming presence of the enemy. The shots establish the scene and its representation of the Japanese aggressors through a display of overbearing strength and power.

As a loyal Korean militia is about to be beheaded in front of his family, he attempts to fight back but a sudden gunshot kills him. To everyone's surprise, a Japanese sniper was hiding in the tall grass. A herald of monumental fanfare signifies Kurushima's arrival, accompanied by a mass of emblematic banners. He, his men, and the sniper are referred to by Wakisaka's men as nothing more than pirates. Later in the film, a boat laden with the heads of Korean prisoners-of-war arrives at *Joseon's* naval base. It is revealed to have been sent by Kurushima. When Wakisaka confronts him on why he sent the heads without being

ordered to, he almost jokingly replies 'I sent their noses and ears, too'.²⁷² In this scene the Japanese military are depicted as slighted by the smallest of provocations. Indeed, it appears that they cannot even meet calmly amongst themselves. There is an implication of a lack of honourable leadership. Unlike the scenes in which Yi enforces military law on his own soldiers or stops his officers from fighting one another, the Japanese are portrayed as erratic and unable to agree on a way to take down Yi and take control of Korea. Kurushima proclaims that many of Wakisaka's soldiers 'secretly worship Yi', an assertion that provokes Wakisaka into attacking him. This claim is based on the ironic admiration of Yi from none other than the Japanese navy in the modern era.

In the early twentieth century, hero worship of Yi went beyond Korean culture. Following the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Japanese navy personnel spoke highly of Yi for his tactical brilliance and legacy. In his memoirs, Kawada Isao proclaimed that 'naturally we could not help but remind ourselves of Korea's Yi Sun Shin, the world's first sea commander, whose superlative personality, strategy, invention, commanding ability, intelligence, and courage were all worthy of our admiration'.²⁷³ Also, Togo Heihachiro praised Yi, saying 'It may be proper to compare me with Nelson, but not with Korea's Yi Sun Shin. He is too great to be compared to anyone'.²⁷⁴ By including subtle hints that even the Japanese are admirers of Yi, *The Admiral* continues to reinforce Yi's image and the portrayal of Japan as weak-natured. Admiration of Yi is raised again late in the film, towards the end of the battle. Todo expresses bitter admiration of Yi, having witnessed him survive the explosion that freed him from the whirlpool. Upon the arrival of the turtle ship and the formation of Korea's fleet attacking at full force, Todo asks if that was his plan all

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Kawada Isao, quoted in, Samuel Hawley, *The Imjin War: Japan's Sixteenth-Century Invasion of Korea and Attempt to Conquer China* (Seoul: The Royal Asiatic Society, and, Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 2005), p. 490.

²⁷⁴ Togo Heihachiro, quoted in, Ibid.

along. As the banners on his ship fall from increasing cannon fire, he is left merely uttering Yi's name, as if in recognition of his success and prowess, before calling his fleet to retreat. In line with convention, the film emphasises the 'facelessness' and Otherness of the enemy by accentuating the antagonistic binary of good versus bad, us versus them, and the more localised Korea versus Japan.

The inclusion of Japanese admiration of Yi further increases Korea's position of superiority. For this reason, *The Admiral* was seen as overly nationalistic and conservative. It could be argued however that this is the nature of the war epic, that it will always present a binary opposition. In the case of historical films, this adversary is based on true conflicts. With Korean and Japan, the tense history and relationship between the two countries is always present in any depiction that is represented in film. Conversely, the popular understanding of history is influenced by its representation. As Kim points out, 'generic characteristics of a war film becomes more important than ever, as the viewers tend to perceive "the real history" through "generic memories"'.²⁷⁵ With Kim's comments in mind, it is important to reflect on the relationship between nationalism and the Korean blockbuster. It has been noted that there is a strong link concerning the nationalistic sentiment, the epic, spectacular stylisation of a film, and how well a film performs at the domestic box office. Jinhee Choi, for example, suggests that the way in which a Korean blockbuster utilises heritage and tradition is key to a film's success, and this line of thinking could offer a possible explanation as to why *sageuk* blockbusters are popular, while Korean science fiction productions usually fail. Choi writes, 'one of the peculiarities of Korean blockbusters can be found in their appeal to a shared sense of Korean history as one means of product differentiation from Hollywood and other national cinemas'.²⁷⁶ She proposes that there is an evocation of victimology at the core of the Korean blockbuster

²⁷⁵ Kim, 'Sniping at History', p. 46-47.

²⁷⁶ Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, p. 35.

phenomenon. Films that focus on colonialism, the Korean War, and North/South Korea relations are consistently big hits at the box office. This can be drawn back to a point made earlier in the chapter regarding gendered nationalism. Seungsook Moon argues that the recurrence of victimology when representing Korean history reinforces a link to militarism, and in turn, to masculinity.²⁷⁷ While the past decade of new *sageuk* productions has demonstrated a more liberal depiction of previously underrepresented women's histories, such as those of *gisaeng* and *gungnyeo*, *The Admiral* focuses on an entirely masculine narrative of war and militarism. Because of this, the film has been criticised for being too conservative.

I continue this discussion on the militaristic masculinity of *The Admiral's* blockbuster style by moving on to explore the depiction of warfare and violence in the film. While there are acts of violence in the first section of the film, the majority occur in the depiction of the Battle of Myeongnyang. The naval battle, presented as a high octane and special effect-driven sequence, heightens the spectacle of the conflict. The film emphasises the struggle against the Japanese attack involving hand-to-hand combat, with the Japanese boarding Korean ships to fight. Historian Lim Won Bin, in relation to these scenes, remarks that such hand-to-hand combat would have rarely happened during this type of naval battle, and that most combat was at a distance through archery and cannon fire. This is based on the fact that Korea's forces were overpowered by Japan and under-resourced to attack at their level. Lim states, '*Joseon's* naval forces were strong in artillery battles, while the Japanese navy was old-fashioned, focusing on climbing onto enemy ships and fighting hand-to-hand [...] If the Japanese had made it onto [their ships] it would have been difficult for Korean soldiers to win the battle as the Japanese navy were good at sword fighting. The

²⁷⁷ See, Moon, 'Begetting the Nation'.

Joseon strategy was to avoid direct combat'.²⁷⁸ In the film, Yi's ship is mounted by a Japanese vessel. As the whirlpool in the Myeongnyang strait increases in strength, Yi and Kurushima's ships become swept up in the current and crash together. Kurushima uses the opportunity to have his men raid the ship. Yi's men, underprepared for such an attack, call on the ship's rowers to help with their defence. The scene of combat is presented in a stylised manner that makes the violence prominent and significant. In one fluid panning shot, the camera sweeps over the chaotic violence as monumental music emphasises the epic scale. Both the Korean and Japanese soldiers receive severe injuries. A Korean man has his hand cut off, another is hacked to death, and several Japanese soldiers have their throats slashed, while one has his head beaten in with a rock. The horror of all this death is heightened by being depicted in slow motion, with over-the-top blood splatters that add to the chaos. For a minute and a half, the camera pans over the mass of aggressive militarism, journeying around the ship until Yi himself is seen in direct combat with the attackers. As the pan comes to an end in slower visuals, Yi notices that the rest of his fleet has finally come to his aid and is in formation in the strait. When Kurushima decides to climb aboard Yi's ship himself and attack him, the Japanese ship is fired upon by the arriving Korean officers. At this point, the pace of the shots increase. From a single dramatic pan to shots of cannon fire and destruction, each shot lasts no longer than a couple of seconds. With his ship sinking rapidly, Kurushima finally boards Yi's vessel. In contrast to the earlier sequence of slowly depicted combat, which emphasised the dramatic spectacle, Kurushima's attack is quickly paced and the frame is more fragmented and jerky. The camera follows him on the deck as he hacks his way through the mass of soldiers to reach Yi. On his way, he is fired upon by numerous arrows and even stabbed but refuses to back down. When they are

²⁷⁸ Lim Won Bin, quoted in, Jung Hyun Mok, 'Separating historical film's facts from fiction', (Seoul: Korea JoongAng Daily, 2014)
 <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2993611>> [accessed 4 December 2015]

face-to-face, the screen cuts from images of the two to footage of Kurushima's ship sinking completely. It is almost as if to suggest he has already lost, so when he is killed instantly with one quick swing of Yi's sword, beheading him, it emphasises the strength of Yi and of the Korean fight. Depictions of violence like this scene in *The Admiral* are part of convention for the war film, and have become a staple of the Korean blockbuster.

One finds this violent heroism not only in Korean cinema but also in Hollywood. With regard to *Shiri*, Kyung Hyun Kim writes that 'the masculinity of *Shiri's* protagonist veered away from the Korean male icons of the 1980s, but did so by simulating Hollywood action heroes. Alert, expeditious, and physical, [the protagonist] represented a popular cookie-cutter version of blockbuster-type masculinity'.²⁷⁹ He explains that the remasculinisation at work in Korea's post-traumatic cinema was utilised not just in the realism of New Korean cinema, but also in the sensationalised manner of the emerging blockbuster form. As Korea appropriated the blockbuster and specific subgenre conventions, they were localised to deal with Korean issues. In this respect, Korean blockbusters took the trope of the hypermasculine and violent protagonist to fulfil the desired remasculinisation of Korean culture. I argue that this is the same mentality that developed the Hollywood blockbuster form originally. The hypermasculine heroism and narratives of patriotic vigour developed as a traumatic reaction from white heteronormative masculinity towards a post-civil rights era. In Joseph Vogel's essay on conflicting forms of masculinity in the Reagan era of American politics, he explains that the rising social power being gained by 'minorities, feminists, and gays' attacked the status of white male superiority, and as such, Vogel claims, 'what America lost and desperately needed again [...] were *real men* – men who reclaimed a "deep masculinity", a warrior

²⁷⁹ Hyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 10.

mentality that had gone missing in post-civil rights culture'.²⁸⁰ Hollywood's ideal of masculinity in this era reinforced its protagonists with traditional values regarding nationalism and gender. Because of the dominance of Hollywood productions, these depictions became the global standard of a heroic male protagonist. As such, the development of the Korean blockbuster and its appropriation of Hollywood conventions is rooted in this ideal of a violent hypermasculinity. I argue that due to the social and cultural changes in Korean society by the end of the twentieth century, the Korean blockbuster emerged as a similar reaction to the increasing vulnerability of postmodern Korean masculinity. As Kim proclaims:

The fermentation of masculine identity is historically precipitated by the dramatically changing urban landscape where territorial control is being violently contested. Violence necessarily engenders trauma when the ownership of land changes hands overnight [...] The 'dominant fiction' [...] seeks to neutralise the shock of trauma by channelling the individual experience of disruption and disorientation into a collectivised sense of fraternal identity.²⁸¹

The emergence of the violent male protagonist in Korean cinema and especially in blockbusters is a traumatic reaction to the rapid social changes of modernity. The depiction of violent acts is a way of remasculinising Korean cinema and culture by reinforcing hypermasculine ideals of strength and leadership. Referring back to *The Admiral*, the violence of the warfare could be seen as a way of remasculinising the *sageuk* form. As new *sageuk* productions have increasingly utilised alternative perspectives to explore heritage, for instance by including narratives of the lower class experiences, female oppression, and homosexual desire, hypermasculinity in war epics reinforces the idolisation of a heroic warrior past. *The Admiral*, along with other films that depict Joseon wars, such as *Blades of*

²⁸⁰ Joseph Vogel, 'Freaks in the Regan Era: James Baldwin, the New Pop Cinema, and the American Ideal of Manhood', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48.3 (2015) 464-485 (p.464). [Emphasis in original]

²⁸¹ Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, p. 33. Here, Kim's use of the term 'dominant fiction' refers to Kaja Silverman's psychoanalytical theories regarding masculine subjectivities. She writes that the dominant fiction represents a category for theorising hegemony, one that privileges certain images and stories with a specific ideology. See, Kim Silverman, *Male Subjectivities on the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Blood (Lee Joon Ik, 2010) and *War of the Arrows*, demonstrate a higher level of conservatism than other new *sageuk* productions due to the blockbuster mentality that gravitates towards masculinity and nationalism.

Before moving on to look more generally at the spectacular aesthetics at work in *The Admiral*, here I briefly examine one more war epic convention that appears in the film; that of the sniper character, Haru. The presence of the Japanese sniper serves as a unifier for the Korean soldiers who see him as an obstacle that must be defeated. Kim Kyun Hyun explains that an enemy sniper character is a recurring trope in the war film. Comparing scenes from *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) and *The Front Line* (Jang Hoon, 2011), he summarises:

The presence of an ace sniper in the enemy camp, who strikes fear in the hearts of the 'our troops', is a dramatic device designed to reinforce the communal identity of 'our' group, create the edge-of-your-seat suspense and ultimately differentiate the responses among the 'good guys'. The job of killing the sniper, and therefore eliminating one of the biggest obstacles against 'our boys' accomplishing their objective or 'mission', falls to the protagonist. His action [...] gives a full statement to the theme or agenda of the film.²⁸²

Along these lines, Haru can be seen to represent an objectified threat, who reinforces the division between the film's heroes and the enemies. The way in which the sniper character is defeated is a testament to the ideology of the film. In *Full Metal Jacket* this involves the sniper, a fatally injured Viet Cong soldier, being shot as an act of mercy, demonstrating the anti-war message of the film. For *The Front Line*, the sniper is instead stabbed in the chest during a brutal fight, in this instance, drawing on the tense North/South Korea relationship. With *The Admiral*, Haru's death is used to strengthen the depiction of loyalty between Yi and his men. In the scene of his death, Haru is preparing to shoot Yi as he attempts to raise the command flag that will have the surrounding fleet come to his aid. When the man who goes up the stairs to raise the flag is shot, Yi realises there is a sniper on an enemy ship.

²⁸² Kim, 'Sniping at History', p. 52.

With his ingenuity, he recognises the sunlight reflecting off the gun coming from Kurushima's ship. Yi quickly aims a cannon at the ship and fires to distract Haru's aim as Captain Ahn raises the flag. Frustrated, Haru moves to the top of the ship to get a better aim to take Yi down. While Yi is distracted as he bandages the wound of one of his shot men, Ahn fires an arrow at Haru, hitting him directly in the eye. The bullet he fired deflects off Yi's helmet, and Yi realises that Ahn has saved his life. The displays of loyalty and protection in this scene are down to Haru's functionality as a character to be eliminated. Unlike Kim's two examples, in *The Admiral* it is the secondary character Ahn that kills the sniper, not the protagonist.

In this final part of my chapter on *The Admiral*, I explore the hybridised state of contemporary *sageuk*. I argue that there is a combination of conventions at work in the genre that is based in blockbuster epics and heritage film elements. This hybridisation is especially apparent in the presentation of spectacle in the Korean blockbuster form. With the blockbuster, spectacle is defined by a level of intensity, excess and scale that leads it to be considered 'event cinema'. As Geoff King summarises, 'blockbusters continue to base much of their appeal on the promise of providing a variety of spectacle that befits that nature of the specifically *cinematic* context of exhibition'.²⁸³ The emphasis is not only on the aesthetics of a production but on its distribution. A big budget spectacle is reliant on large box office returns and as such is given more extensive promotion and exhibition, creating this cinematic event. Since the emergence of the Korean blockbuster in the twenty-first century, this type of release has become increasingly common. In addition, the appropriation of blockbuster conventions within new *sageuk* has, in large part, led to the 'eventisation' of the genre. Throughout the 2010s, big budget and spectacle-driven *sageuk*

²⁸³ Geoff King, 'Spectacle, Narrative, and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster', in *Movie Blockbusters* ed. by Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 114-127 (p. 116). [Emphasis in original]

films have been given prestige releases timed to coincide with national holidays and peak box office periods. *Jeon Woo Chi's* Christmas season release and *Masquerade's* debut during the run-up to the autumn *Chuseok* festival demonstrate the increasing attachment of *sageuk* films to periods of heightened public interest. The 'eventisation' of history, therefore, positions the past as a spectacle. Vidal refers to the historical blockbuster in European filmmaking as the 'epic heritage film', which she describes as 'downplaying specific cultural elements and foregrounding generic ideas about history'.²⁸⁴ In contrast, I argue that this is not the case in the context of the new *sageuk* film. With regard to war epics such as *The Admiral*, the militarism and nationalism that are ingrained in the genre's historical representation puts a conversation about Korean-ness and cultural specificity at the forefront.

In contrast to a blockbuster definition based on scale, for heritage film, spectacle is regarded more in relation to visual authenticity. The focus here is on how the past is depicted in relation to a nostalgic gaze. Sheldon Hall dubs heritage aesthetics an 'organisation of spectacle – the spectacle of the past and its contents – in an "aesthetic of display", a "museum aesthetic", which fetishises the objects as consumable properties and images as surface simulacra'.²⁸⁵ Together, these spectacles of scale and fetishisation are combined in the emergence of the blockbuster *sageuk*. With *The Admiral*, the full-scale spectacular battle scenes are also embedded with fetishisation towards the historical object, in this instance towards the weaponry and armoury of the navy, and especially the presence of the turtle ship, as previously discussed. The audience looks through the film's repeated use of slow motion panning to gaze upon the period details of the costumes. It is interesting to note that this slow motion gaze is mostly used in relation to the Korean

²⁸⁴ Vidal, *Heritage Film*, p. 71.

²⁸⁵ Sheldon Hall, 'The Wrong Sort of Cinema: Refashioning the Heritage Film Debate', in *The British Cinema Book 3rd edn.*, ed. by Robert Murphy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 46-56 (p. 53).

armour and not the Japanese. While the Japanese apparel is lavishly coloured and constructed from copious amounts of fabric, it is the Korean's more functional armour that gains the most attention. Especially with regard to Yi's armour, attention is drawn to the dragon embellishments on his shoulders and the detailed engravings on his helmet.

While the physical props of the film are an important aspect of its spectacle, it is also worth noting the importance of the special effects. *The Admiral* is full of scenes of digital imagery used to construct entire fleets of ships, from the small Korean fleet of twelve ships to the hundreds of Japanese vessels. Early in the film, there are establishing shots of the Japanese naval base filled with their mass of ships in a way that emphasises the scale of the devastation to come. In comparison, the same establishing shot of Korea's naval base is compact, only depicting a couple of ships, focusing mostly on the busy shoreline. This form of presentation functions more to emphasise Korea's lack of resources in comparison to the Japanese fleet. At the beginning of the battle, the same aspects are applied to represent the conflict. The Japanese fleet are depicted en masse in contrast to Yi's far smaller, single-lined fleet. When showing the Korean ships, the entire frame is filled with the sea, with the twelve ships only forming a small portion of the frame. For the Japanese, the screen extends to show hills surrounding the strait and the sky, with the fleet reaching to the horizon. The entire frame is this time filled with ships, only a small strip of skyline marks the top of the screen. The emphasis on scale in relation to the resources of each navy reinforces the dynamics between the two sides. These aerial shots over the strait recur throughout the battle. They are used in the film not just to show the progression of warfare, but also as part of the film's display of special effects technology. As King summarises:

[Spectacular] sequences are designed to show off the effects. If they are experienced as effects, something less than total engrossment in the ongoing events of the diegetic universe must be entailed: the viewer 'sits back', as it were,



Figure 29 The scale of Japan's resources on full display.

(The Admiral, Kim Han Min, 2014)



Figure 30 The resource-stricken Korean navy is shown in a more compact frame.

(The Admiral, Kim Han Min, 2014)



Figure 31 The Korean fleet takes up a small amount of the frame.

(The Admiral, Kim Han Min, 2014)



Figure 32 In comparison, the Japanese fleet dominates the frame.

(The Admiral, Kim Han Min, 2014)

distanced to some extent from the on-screen world, aware of the nature of the image as construct.²⁸⁶

While this experience of spectacle through effects is a core aspect of the blockbuster form, for heritage films, the spectacle of the past traditionally used different methods. In the recreation of the past, spectacle was made through the use of real locations and buildings, and emphasis put onto the reproduction of costume and props. However, in recent heritage film, there has been a shift in how the past is presented. As discussed in my *Jeon Woo Chi* analysis, the influence of the blockbuster style, digital cinema, and the internationalisation of the heritage form has led to a digitisation of the past, one which Vidal calls a 'hyperreal past-in-the-present'.²⁸⁷ She sees this altered representation as a move into a post-heritage phenomenon. While I have already shown how new *sageuk* has developed a post-heritage aesthetic, it is worth noting the shifting of the form over the past decade alongside the rising strength of the national film industry. I argue that *The Admiral* represents a sense of accomplishment in the Korean film industry and that it can be seen as a display of technical ability. There is almost a self-awareness in the presentational style of the film, with the special effect sequences used to show how Korean cinema can now make epics on the same scale as Hollywood.

Before concluding this chapter, I briefly demonstrate another aspect that can be read as a hybridised convention. Junsa, the Japanese defector working for Yi, can be seen as representative of a post-heritage *sageuk* character, one that considers history's marginalised and minority figures. As discussed earlier, recent *sageuk* productions have been more likely to portray traditionally unrepresented figures such as lower class workers and slaves. With regard to this convention, Junsa represents figures in Korean history that were typically ignored, those known as *hangwae*, or 'surrendered soldiers'. Though these

²⁸⁶ King, 'Spectacle, Narrative, and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster', p. 121.

²⁸⁷ Vidal, *Heritage Film*, p. 75.

Japanese soldiers would mostly act as translators and look outs, *The Admiral* embellishes on this to make his role substantially larger. Junsa is actively infiltrating the Japanese navy when he is first introduced, and is shown reacting empathetically when Korean soldiers are killed. Later, he is one of the first to attack Kurushima when he comes to kill Yi, causing Kurushima to ask him 'are you Japanese or are you Korean?'²⁸⁸ His character is politicised in a way that positions him as loyal to Yi, putting him in line with the rest of Yi's loyal soldiers. In reality, defectors would have led simpler lives without much influence on the war's occurrences. As Kim explains, 'neither "Japanese" nor "Koreans" during the late sixteenth century lived according to the internalised logic of ethnic nationalism: it is doubtful that most "defectors" from one side to another ever thought of their "patriotic" commitment to their "nation-states"'.²⁸⁹ By adding a political aspect to Junsa's character, the film is again reinforcing its portrayal of Korean nationalism. He figures as a hybridised blockbuster *sageuk* convention as he represents both the inclusivity of contemporary *sageuk* and the nationalism of the Korean blockbuster form.

Conclusion

Throughout this final chapter I have looked at the various aspects of *The Admiral* that demonstrate a shift in *sageuk* filmmaking. In the hybridised form of the blockbuster *sageuk*, the emphasis is on portraying a nationalistic view of the past, inspired by a militaristic Korean tradition. Due to the mythologised status of Yi Sun Shin, his representation in the film is already laden with a history of manipulation. As such, any cultural depiction of him will be a commentary of some kind. In this chapter, I argue that *The Admiral's* representation of Yi is marked by the political distortion of his character

²⁸⁸ *The Admiral*, dir. by Kim.

²⁸⁹ Kim, 'A Whirlpool of History', p. 278.

throughout the centuries. The focus in the film is on the twentieth century handling of this image, creating a mixture of a tragic hero and a warrior ideal. Because his portrayal is ingrained with histories of colonialism and militarism, the film can be seen as a return to conservative values, though these may just be due to the inherent masculine nature of the blockbuster, as discussed with regard to 1980s Hollywood. In the second section, I highlighted aspects of the film that demonstrate appropriated conventions from the Hollywood blockbuster and the heritage film form. From the excessive depiction of warfare to the use of spectacular aesthetics, the past in *The Admiral* is depicted with a politicised gaze. As addressed with *Untold Scandal*, the *sageuk* form has been reignited in the contemporary era of Korean cinema. This chapter has shown how the Korean blockbuster phenomenon has emerged and developed along the same industrial and cultural shifts. Together, the hybridised conventions combine a masculinised nationalism with a critical engagement with heritage.

The success of the film in the domestic market broke box office records and is likely to hold its position for a while. The film had recuperated its budget in the first four days of its release and eventually gained over 17 million admissions, with the next highest-ranking film *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds* (Kim Yong Hwa, 2017) at around 14 million. One aspect of the film's success I only briefly touched on in my analysis was the blockbuster method of distribution. The saturation booking method of the Korean blockbuster, creating the concept of event cinema, brings up issues of quality versus distribution power. It could be argued that part of *The Admiral's* success is due to the market being overwhelmed by its release. While the special effects and production value have been praised, criticism has been drawn towards the weakness of the narrative. Yun Mi Hwang comments that *The Admiral* became one of the most divisive films of the year, stating 'the dust has not settled on this therapeutic blockbuster, as some critics panned it as "the most overrated film of the year"', while the Daejong Film Awards (also voted by film critics) gave it the best film of the

year'.²⁹⁰ Regardless, *The Admiral* demonstrates the continual appropriation and reconfiguration of the past in the ever shifting *sageuk* form. Though seen as a return to a more conservative reading of Korean tradition, the film does show the persistent interest in the form that has emerged in the twenty-first century. Over the past decade *sageuk* films have gone from being ostracised productions to being top grossing and crowd-pleasing spectacles.

²⁹⁰ Hwang, 'Allegory of the Purge Campaign', p. 69.

CONCLUSION

Beginning this thesis in late 2014 after a strong summer for the Korean box office, I decided that *The Admiral* would make an appropriate stopping point for the scope of this study. The summer had seen the release of three blockbuster *sageuk* films that would end up among the most attended films of the year. *Kundo: Age of the Rampant*, *The Admiral*, and *The Pirates* were all released within a few weeks of each other to strong commercial success. By isolating my focus to the period between 2003 and 2014, I was able to concentrate on four key films that I consider to illustrate the ways in which there has been a genre shift within twenty-first century *sageuk*. In this conclusion, I first discuss the current state of the *sageuk* form in the years after my focus of study, before moving on to propose further areas of analysis for the genre.

From 2014, the outlook for *sageuk* appeared strong. The immense commercial success of *The Admiral* has sparked a new trend in historical filmmaking that relies on the epic and stylised reconstruction of Korea's premodern wars and its warrior heroes. Releases such as *Warriors of the Dawn* (Jeong Yoon Cheol, 2017), *The Fortress* (Hwang Dong Hyuk, 2017), and *The Great Battle* (Kim Kwang Sik, 2018) are recent examples of the continuing presence of ambitiously scaled historical productions that demonstrate a higher level of conservatism than other Korean period films due to the blockbuster tendency towards masculinity and nationalism. The 'eventisation' of this kind of historical representation associates Korea's heritage of militarism with contemporary nationalism. Though the rise in epic *sageuk* blockbusters as event cinema has proved the enduring appeal of the Korean past for audiences and filmmakers alike, this trend has led to the polarisation of the depiction of premodern history within *sageuk*. While the aforementioned films emphasise the scale and spectacle of historical representation through the epic reconstruction of war, the *sageuk* form is still seen in mid-budget commercial cinema.

Heung-boo: The Revolutionist (Cho Geun Hyun, 2018), based on the folk tale *Heungbujeon*, and *The Princess and the Matchmaker* (Hong Chang Po, 2018), for instance, demonstrate the continued reliance on the *Joseon* era as a source of traditional narratives and settings. The latter follows on from *The Face Reader* as a planned omnibus trilogy around Korea's fortune-telling heritage, to be completed with the upcoming *Feng Shui* (Park Hee Gon, 2018).

A potential new trend that could have an impact of the *sageuk* genre is the form's fusion with the horror genre. *Monstrum* (Heo Jong Ho, 2018) and *Rampant* (Kim Sung Hoon, 2018) are, as of writing this conclusion, two soon-to-be-released *Joseon*-set horror films. *Monstrum* is Korea's first fusion of the monster horror genre and the *sageuk* film.²⁹¹ A rarely used genre in Korean cinema, the monster film found huge success with *The Host* (Bong Joon Ho, 2006) that to this day remains one of the highest-grossing Korean films of all time. A later attempt came with *Sector 7* (Kim Ji Hoon, 2011), which only became a minor commercial hit after receiving mostly negative reviews. Similarly, *Rampant* also represents the first fusion of the zombie horror and *sageuk*, arguably following from the critical and commercial success of 2016's *Train to Busan*. This zombie thriller set in modern-day urbanised Korea became a domestic and international hit upon its release. *Rampant*, made by the same production company, places the zombie-action thriller format in the specific setting of the *Joseon* royal court. It will be worth observing how these films perform and how they continue to articulate *sageuk*'s twenty-first century genre hybridity.

Although my thesis has focused on the construction of a *Joseon* historical imaginary in new *sageuk* films, I conclude here by suggesting how study of the representation of Korea's past could be expanded through the addition of two areas: the television *sageuk*

²⁹¹ Shim Sun Ah, "'*Monstrum*' is first creature feature set in *Joseon* era' (Seoul: Yonhap News Agency, August, 2018) <<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/kwave/2018/08/16/3001000000AEN20180816008600315.html>> [accessed 11 September 2018].

genre, and the representation of different historical eras. Firstly, the inclusion of television *sageuk* productions is far beyond the scope of this study and would only benefit from being a separate project, partly down to the sheer scale the analysis would entail. Contemporary-based Korean dramas typically consist of twenty-four episodes, each one having a running time of over an hour. For historical dramas, the episode count is on average higher, often around fifty episodes and sometimes well into the hundreds. Textual analysis into Korean television is itself lacking, regardless of genre. Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi's study of the spread of *Hallyu* throughout Asia provides one of the earliest and most substantial investigations into Korean television. Recurring focus is drawn towards the vast international success of *sageuk* drama *Dae Jang Geum*, that to this day remains one of the most popular dramas ever made, having since been broadcast in over 90 countries and heightening the interest in traditional Korean culture.²⁹²

Comparable observations regarding the use of Korean heritage could be made to that of cinematic *sageuk*, but in television's case, the predominance of what is referred to as 'fusion *sageuk*' would provide further insight into the reconstruction of a *Joseon* historical imaginary. Fusion *sageuk*, like the factional narrative, describes the mixing of fact and fiction but more specifically refers to the practise of genre-blending. One potential avenue of analysis would be to explore the popularity and repetition of subject matters across mediums and examine the similarities and differences of representation between cinematic and television *sageuk*. It would be particularly interesting to address the same themes that each chapter of this thesis examines. Intercultural adaptations of European canonical texts also occur in television with the *Joseon*-based *The Three Musketeers* (Kim

²⁹² See, Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008). For further examples of studies into Korean television dramas, see, Jin, *New Korean Wave*, p. 43-67, Andrew David Jackson and Colette Balmain, eds., *Korean Screen Cultures: Interrogating Cinema, TV, Music and Online Games* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2016), and Jeongmee Kim, ed., *Reading Asian Television Drama: Crossing Borders and Breaking Boundaries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Byung Soo, 2014) based on the titular novel by Alexandre Dumas. Adaptations of local folk tales are also present, with the *Jeonwoochijeon* appearing on screen again with *Jeon Woo Chi* (Kang Il Soo, Park Dae Young, 2012). Lastly, the revisionist depiction of famous historical figures is a common theme in televisual *sageuk*, with Gwanghaegun and Yi Sun Shin each appearing in many *sageuk* dramas.

As addressed early in my thesis, my intention was to focus on *sageuk* productions that represent the *Joseon* period due to the prevalence of the era in cinematic representation. Since starting my research, however, a new trend has emerged that concerns the colonial past. In recent years there has been a rise in the number of films that tackle the sensitive subject of the Japanese occupation era. Jinsoo An remarks that ‘an important shift occurred in the 2000s in the area of colonial representation in South Korean films. Along with a growing suspicion of the “meta-narratives of nation”, a revisionist impulse became pervasive in the postdemocratic South Korea of the 1990s. The era witnessed a growing revisionist movement within various cultural fields to revisit and rewrite the modern history of the nation’.²⁹³ My thesis has argued that the representation of premodern history in the contemporary *sageuk* film has also followed this impulse. In addition, An has more recently highlighted *Assassination* as marking a new phase of colonial representation.²⁹⁴ Similar to *Untold Scandal’s* influence on *Joseon*-based *sageuk*, *Assassination* can be argued to have started a boom in colonial era-set films, leading to, for example, *The Age of Shadows*, *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan Wook, 2016), *The Last Princess* (Hur Jin Ho, 2016), *Love, Lies* (Park Heung Sik, 2016), *Spirits’ Homecoming* (Cho Jung Rae, 2016), *Dongju: The Portrait of a Poet* (Lee Joon Ik, 2016), *Anarchist from Colony* (Lee Joon Ik, 2017), and *Man of Will* (Lee Won Tae, 2017). These productions demonstrate the range

²⁹³ Jinsoo An, *Parameters of Disavowal: Colonial Representation in South Korean Cinema* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), p. 127.

²⁹⁴ See, Jinsoo An, ‘Through the Prism of Masquerade: The Colonial Past in *Assassination*’, *International Journal of Korean History* 21.2 (August, 2016) 193-204.

of budgets and subject matter under scrutiny from the current phase of colonial representation in cinematic *sageuk*. From the independence fighters given A-list blockbuster treatment in *The Age of Shadows*, to the crowd-funded drama *Spirits' Homecoming* about the experiences of comfort women, there has recently arisen a newfound enthusiasm for *sageuk* films that explore Korea's colonial past. Exploring this trend would provide a different perspective to the discussion of historical representation and Korea's relationship to the past.

Commenting on the controversy surrounding the *sageuk* television series, *Mr. Sunshine* (Lee Eung Bok, 2018), Jung Duk Hyun states that 'recent fantasy period dramas have made many viewers regard period dramas as more dramatized than historic. But the Japanese occupation is one of the most sensitive of eras because its holds a historical perspective that is connected directly to the present day'.²⁹⁵ Much like my use of the term fantasy in my discussion of *Jeon Woo Chi* and *Masquerade's* revisionist representation of the past, Jung points out how this form of fantasised dramatization has become the norm in Korean culture. Set during the early twentieth century, *Mr. Sunshine* depicts the love story of a Korean-American soldier and an aristocratic *yangban* woman, both moonlighting as resistance fighters against the growing Japanese presence in the nation. The show has received criticism for its perceived pro-Japanese stance, portraying premodern Korea as uncivilised and romanticising the incoming Westernising powers.²⁹⁶ As Jung stresses, depiction of the colonial era has a more direct impact on the audience due to its relative closeness to present society. Because of this sensitivity, tampering with authenticity and representation receives more criticism than when employed in *Joseon*-inspired *sageuk* productions. The difference between how the premodern past is depicted in comparison to

²⁹⁵ Jung Duk Hyun, quoted in, Park Jin Hai, "'Mr Sunshine" embroiled in history distortion dispute' (Seoul: The Korea Times, July, 2018)

<<http://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsIdx=252685>> [accessed 11 September 2018]

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

the history of the nation's modernity era, both from the contemporary postmodern viewpoint of the present, would provide a complementary analysis of Korea's visual relationship with its heritage.

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King and the Clown (Lee Joon Ik, 2005)
King Sejong the Great (Jang Il Ho, 1978)
Kundo: Age of the Rampant (Yoon Jong Bin, 2014)
Lady Vengeance (Park Chan Wook, 2005)
The Last Princess (Hur Jin Ho, 2016)
The Legend of Ginko (Park Jae Hyun, 2000)
Life (Lee Kang Chun, 1958)
Love, Lies (Park Heung Sik, 2016)
Madame Aema (Jeong In Yeob, 1982)
The Man from Nowhere (Lee Jeong Beom, 2010)
The Man in the Iron Mask (Randall Wallace, 1998)
Man of Will (Lee Won Tae, 2017)
Mandala (Im Kwon Taek, 1981)
Marriage Story (Kim Eui Suk, 1992)
Marrying the Mafia (Jeong Heung Sun, 2002)
Masquerade (Choo Chang Min, 2012)
Memories of Murder (Bong Joon Ho, 2003)
Monstrum (Heo Jong Ho, 2018)
Mother and a Guest (Shin Sang Ok, 1961)

Mr. Sunshine (Lee Eung Bok, 2018)
Mulberry (Lee Doo Yong, 1986)
Musa (Kim Sung Soo, 2001)
My Liberated Country (Jeon Chang Geun, 1947)
My Sassy Girl (Kwak Jae Yong, 2001)
Natural City (Min Byung Cheon, 2003)
The Night of Independence Day (Choi In Kyu, 1948)
Oasis (Lee Chang Dong, 2002)
Ocean's Eleven (Lewis Milestone, 1960)
Office (Hong Won Chan, 2015)
Oldboy (Park Chan Wook, 2003)
Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield (Lee Joon Ik, 2003)
Outcry of the Nation (Ahn Hyung Ho, 1948)
Paradise Murdered (Kim Han Min, 2007)
The Patriot (Roland Emmerich, 2000)
Peppermint Candy (Lee Chang Dong, 1999)
Phantom Detective (Jo Sung Hee, 2016)
The Piper (Kim Gwang Tae, 2015)
The Pirates (Lee Seok Hoon, 2014)
Portrait of a Beauty (Jeon Yun Su, 2008)
Prince Yeonsan (Shin Sang Ok, 1961)
The Princess and the Matchmaker (Hong Chang Po, 2018)
Prostitute (Yu Jin Seon, 1988)
The Puppetmaster (Hou Hsiao Hsien, 1993)
Rampant (Kim Sung Hoon, 2018)
The Red Shoes (Kim Yong Gyun, 2005)
The Robe (Henry Koster, 1953)
The Righteous Revenge (Kim So Dan, 1919)
Romeo + Juliet (Baz Luhrmann, 1999)
Sa Bang Ji (Song Kyeong Shik, 1988)
Schindler's List (Steven Spielberg, 1993)

Sector 7 (Kim Ji Hoon, 2011)
Seondal: The Man Who Sells the River (Park Dae Min, 2015)
Seong Chun Hyang (Shin Sang Ok, 1961)
The Servant (Kim Dae Woon, 2010)
Shadows in the Palace (Kim Mee Jung, 2007)
Silmido (Kang Woo Suk, 2003)
Spinning the Tales of Cruelty Towards Women (Lee Doo Yong, 1984)
Spirits' Homecoming (Cho Jung Rae, 2016)
Star in My Heart (Lee Jin Suk, Lee Chang Hoon, 1997)
The Sting (George Roy Hill, 1973)
The Story of Chunhyang (Goshu Hayakawa, 1923)
The Story of Janghwa and Hongryeon (Kim Hyeong Hwang, 1924)
The Story of Shim Cheong (Lee Gyeong Son, 1925)
The Surrogate Woman (Im Kwon Taek, 1986)
Swiri (Kang Je Gyu, 1999)
Sword in the Moon (Kim Ui Seok, 2003)
Sympathy for Mr Vengeance (Park Chan Wook, 2002)
The Tale of Legendary Libido (Shin Hae Sol, 2008)
The Target (Chang, 2014)
Tazza: The High Rollers (Choi Dong Hoon, 2006)
The Thieves (Choi Dong Hoon, 2012)
The Three Musketeers (Kim Byung Soo, 2014)
Touchez pas au Grisbi (Jaques Becker, 1954)
The Tragic Prince (Ahn Jong Hwa, 1956)
Train to Busan (Yeon Sang Ho, 2016)
The Treacherous (Min Kyu Dong, 2015)
The Throne (Lee Joon Ik, 2015)
Tube (Baek Woon Hak, 2003)
Unbowed (Chung Ji Young, 2012)
Untold Scandal (E J Yong, 2003)
The Vow Made Below the Moon (Yoon Baek Nam, 1923)

War of the Arrows (Kim Han Min, 2011)

Warriors of the Dawn (Jeong Yoon Cheol, 2017)

Whale Hunting (Bae Chang Ho, 1984)

What is Love? (Park Cheol, 1991-1992)

Winter Sonata (Yoon Seok Ho, 2002)

Winter Wanderer (Kwak Ji Kyoon, 1986)

Zatoichi (Takeshi Kitano, 2003)