

Review Essay

The Unsettled Legacies of the Colonial Period in Korea

Gil-Soo Han, Monash University

Han, Gil-Soo. 2019. "The Unsettled Legacies of the Colonial Period in Korea." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (e-journal) 32: 130–133. <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-32/Han-An>.

Jinsoo An. *Parameters of Disavowal: Colonial Representation in South Korean Cinema*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 204 pp.

Jinsoo An's *Parameters of Disavowal: Colonial Representation in South Korean Cinema* is a "serious re-enactment of [the] history" (27) of Korean nationalism intertwined with the legacy of Japanese colonialism, the film industry, and Koreans, as depicted in Korean cinema. The author brings together numerous films and provides a comprehensive and insightful picture of them in the broader historical context of modern Korea. Each of the films examined in the book represents Korean nationalist sentiments coupled with intimate human emotions and romance.

The author takes on the important task of examining films from 1945 through the 1970s as they reflect on Korean experiences of Japanese colonialism. How is Korean nationalism depicted in the cinema in the broader context of Korean society, since people struggled with polarized politics due to perceived ideological correctness over the value or disvalue of the legacies of Japanese colonialism in Korea? Indeed, Korean national cinema represents those struggles and the agonizing experiences that Koreans were attempting to overcome. Reading *Parameters of Disavowal*, I was vividly reminded of my middle-school principal in the early 1970s, someone who tried his best to eradicate any traces of Japan, especially many Japanese loanwords. The school's emblem was Admiral Yi Sun-Sin's Korean turtle ship, a vessel that destroyed numerous Japanese warships and led to Korean victory in the Imjin War (1592–1598). Our principal was a true warrior against Japanese culture: all students in the middle school were taken to a theater to watch such biographical films as Lee Gyu-Ung's *Sŏng'ung Yi Sun-Sin* (The great hero, 1971) and Chu Dong-Jin's *Ŭisa An Chunggŭn* (The martyr An Chunggŭn, 1972), experiences that injected nationalism as what An calls "an uncompromising political creed" (17) deep into students' psyches at a formative stage and influenced them throughout their lives. These films also provided young people with unequivocal role models as they imagined their future lives as patriots in a context in which anti-Japanese and ethno-nationalist sentiments were at a peak.

Ch'oe In'gyu's film *Hurrah! For Freedom* (1946) was produced decades before the births of those who are now reexamining it to make sense of the film's sociohistorical context and lasting impact on contemporary Korea and its people. The legacy of Japanese colonialism is very much alive and remains utterly

unresolved. I am reminded of the efforts involved in producing films in the historically tumultuous time when professional actors and film directors were looked down upon socially. The parts of *Hurrah!* that were censored and cut because of an actor who defected, and the parts that are missing from the original film due to the Korean War (1950–1953), reflect the complex historical context of the Korean peninsula for the last one hundred years. Indeed, as An notes, the nationalist discourse deriving from independence from Japan continues decades after that historical moment so long ago (22). For example, *Hurrah!* is still meaningful to An and me, though we did not directly experience Japanese colonialism (both of us live outside Korea). I wondered if *Sŏng'ung Yi Sun-Sin* would have been produced at all without Japanese colonialism.

Soon after independence from Japanese imperialism, the newly established Korean government commenced its attempt to rebuild the nation using all available means. The administration of President Syngman Rhee was involved in producing a propaganda film, *The Independence Association and Young Syngman Rhee* (1959) by Shin Sangok, to support Rhee's reelection (25). The goal of the film was to present "an anticipated leader for the future nation, not the colonized entity, but its successor: postcolonial Korea" (33). An describes how the production of this film utilized the complex national and international politics surrounding the peninsula prior to Japan's annexation of Korea and all of the rapidly developing filming technologies in the late 1950s. The state's involvement in supporting the production of popular culture—like K-pop today—may, indeed, have been initiated decades ago. In my view, today's relatively harmonious cooperation between the state and a range of industries for the purposes of national branding does not seem to pose an inherent problem. Rhee, a brilliant man by all means, got involved in exploiting and manipulating what the Independence Association¹ could offer. Rhee must have been the mastermind of the film, incorporating nationalist sentiment and consequently putting his own people in psychological captivity, though he was supposed to serve them. An notes that *Hurrah!* and *The Independence Association and Young Syngman Rhee* "do not directly engage with the colonial regime" (34). I wondered why they do not. Is this indirect approach an expression of nationalism in itself?

Under Rhee's regime, government bureaucrats thought it was irresponsible to suppress nationalism or allow the import of Japanese films. However, as An explains, the market soon prevailed "for the mutual benefit of both countries" and "as an act of reciprocity and exchange" (37). Cultural products were at the forefront for the sake of political and economic benefit of the two nations back then, just as K-pop is today.

In chapter 2, An moves into the 1960s, which were marked by the normalization of diplomatic relations with Japan. Here, I wanted to ask, "What are the 'parameters of disavowal'?" It was a time of chaos, and there was a sudden flux of Japanese films. "Japanese visual and cultural elements" (43) were blamed for

¹ The Independence Association was a political club initiated and founded in July 1896 by reform-minded civilians, such as the Korean-American activist Seo Jae-pil, to promote public education, national sovereignty, journalism, language reform, and the abolition of slavery. The association was disbanded by force in December 1899.

corrupting Korean mind and culture, and “narrative materials from Japanese film and literature” (45) became prevalent. Yet it was also considered unacceptable to present Japan in an overly negative light that might harm the development of diplomatic relations between the two countries. What a conundrum of antinationalism in the historical context of the 1960s! Japan continued to be seen as a villain nation in the minds of Koreans. It was during the Cold War when Japan, often used as the backdrop for espionage films fighting against communists, finally made a legitimate entrance into Korean cinema (50).

In chapter 3, the author discusses Manchurian action films, which are rich in love, hate, romance, betrayal, sexuality, morality, femininity, tangled familial relations, patriotism, and nationalism. Yet, all of these human feelings and emotions were “virtually” under strict Japanese surveillance. The films portray the unjustness of that surveillance, which was a breach of human rights. The broader contexts of many films are Japanese colonialism. Thus, the films, film industry, and people involved are those representing the process of the Korean *han* (feeling of sorrow).

Anticommunism in the government-backed Korean War films during the Cold War period was both supported by and under the surveillance of the Korean nation-state. An makes the point that a dictatorial government is well equipped to legitimize and consolidate its regime (65). Having just passed through the Korean War, the Korean film industry brought to the screen numerous creative topics, such as “the Marxist notion of money as the matrix of social relations” (71), the introduction of “war as business” (71), the Hollywood Western cinema genre (72), and Kim Il Sung as an anticolonial revolutionary legacy (72). I am unable to fully appreciate the films without having watched them, but it is clear from An’s descriptions that their rich content must have provided the Korean audiences with unlimited fascination. Whereas Manchurian action films are distinct from other films from the past, the Korean “cinematic nationalism” against Japanese-ness continues, still sustaining “the promise for the masculine characters” required by the logic of war (75). An’s notable analysis of Manchurian films explains that the portrayal of political authority shifts from “a moral figure to the regulator of materialist desire” (75). South Korea’s authoritarian state during the Cold War could not claim to be completely uninvolved in the production of those films.

Chapter 4 analyzes *kisaeng* (courtesan) and gangster films. The film *Kang Myŏnghwa* (1967) portrays the love story of the Korean *kisaeng* Kang Myŏnghwa and Chang Pyŏngch’ŏn, a noble Korean male, tragically embedded in the Japanese colonial context and subject to the prejudicial Korean culture concerning human relationships. The story is much like a Korean version of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Following her marriage to Chang, Kang Myŏnghwa’s visible transformation in Japan is most evident through her adoption of Western attire, which frees her from the social stigma attached to the national costume worn by *kisaeng* in Korea (91–92). I found myself wondering why wearing the Korean national costume continued in some entertainment industries in the 1970s and 1980s and seems to continue even today.

A main tragedy in the film sits within the Chang family into which Kang Myŏnghwa married (93), rather than in the broader context of Japanese colonialism under which the Korean social order was remarkably maintained. Due to social

discrimination against Kang's life trajectory as a *kisaeng*, the extended family rejects her innocent intentions to be a respectable daughter-in-law. Both Kang and Chang seem unable to proceed in any constructive direction. They are locked up within a suffocatingly rigid culture, which may represent the fate of *Taehan Cheguk* (Korean Empire) at the hands of Japan and other superpowers in the early twentieth century. Perhaps this representation applies to a certain degree even today.

According to An, gangster and *kisaeng* movies engender what was missing or not possible "in the postcolonial imaginary of the colonial era" (103). Boys' (and some girls') fantasy about gangster films seems not to be a recent phenomenon. "A fantasy of individual success and social mobility in a hostile, and power-driven world" (76) seems to offer enormous fun to the audiences if it has any kind of justifying cause. In Kim Hyo-Ch'on's *Sillok Kim TuHan* (The true story of Kim Tuhan, 1974), Kim Tuhan's *kisaeng* girlfriend Sölhwa addresses the new gangster members as integral pillars of the nation. In the Korean cultural context, a *kisaeng*, as a marginal member of society, does not normally participate in national movements. In fact, irrespective of their social backgrounds, the independence fighters stand against and defeat the Japanese, who are depicted as observing "a minimum degree of humanity" (105). It is through cinematic nationalism that Koreans from all backgrounds can turn out to be heroes, nationally and internationally, thus promoting a cinematic fantasy and catharsis.

In Chapter 5, An shows how, even decades after independence, the memory of violence and oppression inflicted against fellow Koreans is "irrepressible and intolerable" (118) in postcolonial Korea. Indeed, the legacy of the conflicts and tension in interethnic and intra-ethnic relations continues to have an impact on Korean politics, everyday Korean lives, and the potentially productive diplomatic relations with Japan. The sorrows and agonies of "comfort women" sex slaves and forced laborers are beyond most people's understanding. In mid-2019, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe translated his political frustration with Japan's past misconduct into a trade war against Korea, which made the victims' suffering go from bad to worse. These women have little hope of hearing any word of apology even after several decades. They find themselves without a voice in the midst of the trade war against Korea. Germany's expression of remorse may offer Japan a reason for reflection.

In the cinema, the pain, scars, and suffering are reproduced as reminders of the past. As An repeatedly notes, the films analyzed in his book "frame the colonial past and its unresolved trauma as the source of a contemporary aporia of history" (124). That is, not only *Yeraishang* (Yeraishyang, 1966) and *Kidam* (Epitaph, 2007) but all of the films revisit "the unsettled legacies of the colonial period and the contemporary meanings of such encounters" (124) from the viewpoints of an independent and increasingly well-off middle power.

I have undoubtedly missed out on much of the nuance that film scholars might have noted in *Parameters of Disavowal*. It is a highly analytical historiography of Korean films since the end of World War II with reference to Japanese colonialism as it was inflicted on the lives of Koreans. The book is a history of a few of the most dominant ideologies in the last several decades as represented through the cinema, and it provides us with many insights as to why there is strong continuity between

conflicts on the matter of eradicating the legacy of the *ch'inilp'a* (Japanese-friendly) and ideological wars. The debates are likely to continue, and Koreans continue to hurt themselves and others due to colonialism's legacy. Today, I understand and appreciate the principal of my middle school more than I did during my school days.

Jinsoo An notes that new discourses on colonialism and a consequent reexamination of Korean identities have influenced film production, especially in the 1960s. For example, this influence was achieved through “restaging and revisualizing” what it was like and what was unaddressed in the colonial days, and then “transcoding the tropes and imagery” of the days in the context of the bipolar logic of the Cold War (79). This, to me, is the heart of studying history: understanding the past from the viewpoints of the people of the time, and then reinterpreting those perspectives from contemporary viewpoints in order to learn from the past. An's study is complex as he deals with people and culture at different times—colonial days, the days of producing the films, and contemporary audiences and critics. His painstaking work of sorting and collecting relevant films and analyzing such a huge data set indeed represents a tremendous effort and achievement. The memory of colonial days should not be forgotten; Koreans have to embrace, cherish, and be able to confidently live with this enduring *han*.

About the Reviewer

Gil-Soo Han is Associate Professor of Communications and Media Studies at Monash University.