

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### REVIEW ESSAY

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#### ***Virtually Alive or Questionably Dead? The Ambivalence of Modern Korean Identity in Literature and Cinema***

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Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 241 pp. \$24.95 (paper).

Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 271 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

The studies by Kyung Hyun Kim and Theodore Hughes discussed in this essay are rich with information and insights but are also challenging, almost subversive, to some prevalent views on Korean cinema and literature. While Kim looks into contemporary, post-1990s Korean films operating in the global market as an important (but perhaps since 2000 not the most influential) wing of the *hallyu* (“Korean Wave”) trend, Hughes deals primarily with early postwar literature and visual arts (including cinema) from 1945 to roughly the early 1970s. Both authors are concerned with the history and contemporaneity of Korean identity and with the manners in which this localized identity is constituted, specifically in relation to colonial modernity, global late capitalism, and ethnocentric nationalism. They also address the problematic status of cinema in the context of Korean culture and history, sometimes developing arguments in unexpected directions.

Kyung Hyun Kim’s *Virtual Hallyu*, a long-anticipated follow-up to his seminal *Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (2004), starts off with a foreword by Martin Scorsese. Unlike some celebrity endorsements, Scorsese’s mini-essay is astute and thought provoking in its own right. The renowned director speaks of “unease” and “melancholy” in the best Korean films he has seen, regardless of their genre provenances or political orientations, and further questions

whether these qualities are produced by certain kinds of friction between Korean cinema and the “culture it sits in” (ix–x). As Scorsese suggests, *Virtual Hallyu* is in many ways a quest to explain this sense of unease and melancholy. Instead of dismissing it as a symptom of maladjustment or lionizing it as a sign of pointed resistance against the neoliberal hegemony over the global cultural exchange, Kim, taking cues from Gilles Deleuze, characterizes it as reflecting the “virtual” qualities of Korean cinema, in the sense that in the latter, “history and social referents can return only in forms that are both truthful and fantastic” (21). These films supply images that cannot be reduced to simple representations of “actuality,” but allow the past/fantastic, and the present/real, to coexist in the same frame, so to speak.

Wielding the arsenal of literary (psycho-)analysis, Kim explicates the traits that enable these films to remain viable products and/or significant works of art in the Hollywood-dominated global market and to avoid being absorbed into the “late-capitalist cultural revolution that unseated Hong Kong in a rotating chair” and eventually being “gobbled up and spat out by Hollywood when [Korean cinema’s] replacement [was] found” (xv). In the context of *hallyu*, the key cinematic mode of expression has shifted from political allegory and affect to self-reflective irony; thus, the monster that crawls out of the Han River to devour hapless denizens of Seoul in *The Host* (2006) can no longer be construed simply as a symbol of Korea’s pathological modernization or the mess created by the neo-imperialist United States; a South Korean protagonist trying to apologize to a North Korean student studying abroad in *Night and Day* (2008) ends up slipping into silly antics more appropriate for a silent comedy, far removed from the elocution and “seriousness” expected from the agents of reunification; and so on.

Kim displays the full extent of his intellectual dexterity when he teases out an array of insights from specific cinematic texts, even those works some might think are unlikely to generate fresh interpretations. He proves them wrong time and again. The most notable examples of his analytic acumen include: an analysis of Hong Sang-soo’s urban landscape as a site of modern alienation as well as of “massive interiorization” suffered by his characters (especially his male protagonists, who remain cringe-worthy—and, for me, vaguely myrmecological—realizations of those “impotent intellectuals” that infest South Korean elite circles); a trenchant critique of a series of commercially successful melodramas featuring “poor” female characters from North Korea and Lianbian, China, who, although ethnically Korean, are treated as the

ethnic “other”; and, an interpretation of Im Sang-soo’s *The President’s Last Bang* (2005) as a “virtual” illustration of fascism and dictatorship.

*Virtual Hallyu* is a good deal more self-reflexive and, dare I say it, personal than Kim’s first book, despite the carryover of his theoretical concerns. Indeed, in more than a few instances of his sophisticated and erudite analyses, Kim seems to betray an ambivalent attitude toward the films and filmmakers he studies and their putative “successes.” It appears that the problems of “national cinema” and of the localized identity for Koreans and Korean culture continue to haunt Kim. Of course, he is well aware that “the particular brands of sublimity or affect” that characterized the Korean cinema of previous generations—“torn flags, women’s tears, youthful revolt, or religious themes” (6)—are no longer tenable. All the same, he laments the indifference with which Hong Sang-soo’s masterworks are greeted by Korean mass audiences and associates such indifference with the neoliberal, right-wing *Weltanschauungen* of the American Republican Party, the Korean (former) Grand National Party, and the arch-conservative *Joseon ilbo* (p. 150). He points out that the hit films set in Korea’s premodern past tend to exploit history in a Hollywood-style, “metageneric” (a categorization derived from Frederic Jameson) manner that dilutes their analytic potency and trivializes political meaning (207–211). Has Korean cinema sold (at least a part of) its soul to the devil, in order to claim its own share of the global market?

The tensions in Kim’s gauging of the ironic “virtuality” of Korean cinema appear to reach their apex in his rather truncated discussion of the historical film genre (*sagŭk*). Here he brings to the fore the issue of “historical authenticity” and argues that the “deconstruction and demise” of that authenticity in historical films such as Lee Jun-ik’s *The King and the Clown* (2005) and *Once Upon a Time in the Battlefield* (2003) suggest that “there is no need [in these films] for representation, historical analysis, or an investigation into the current systematic failures that legitimize the increasing gap between the rich and the poor” (210). My interpretation of this issue is almost diametrically opposed to Kim’s; we agree on the outward display of symptoms, but our diagnoses of the root cause are entirely different. The problem with Lee Jun-ik’s historical dramas is not their indifference to “representation” or “historical analysis”; it is rather their analytic excess and relentless “presentism”—that is, their desire (destined to be permanently unrequited) 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 Korean history. In Lee’s *Blades of Blood* (2010) and *Sunny* (2011), two films not

discussed by Kim, this desire for allegorical presentation is even more pronounced and overwhelms any concern for the being-as-such integrity of the past, to the extent that Lee reshuffles the cause-effect relationship of such well-known events as Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea (1592) and Yi Mong-hak's rebellion (1596). It is not so much the "postmodern" or "inauthentic" reconstruction of the past as this 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, that I see as the primary culprit behind Korean cinema's "asphyxiating" of history in the *sagŭk* genre (201). After all, as Shin Gi-Wook (2006) and others have demonstrated, subscribing to ethnocentric nationalism and being plugged into the global, neoliberal market are not mutually incompatible; nay, they can even be nicely complementary.

Unlike *Virtual Hallyu*, Theodore Hughes's *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea* (hereafter referred to by its evocative subtitle, *Freedom's Frontier*) is chronologically structured in the more familiar form of history writing. However, its content is anything but "standard." Anchoring the book in his central insight that "the verbal and the visual" have always maintained a mutually reflective and interpenetrating relationship in Korean cultural expressions of the modern period, Hughes weaves a dazzling tapestry from his analyses of the works of many important but understudied (alarmingly so in the English language) writers as well as of notable (but not necessarily the most "artistic") works of late-colonial and postwar Korean cinema and fine art. The author's wonderfully textured yet grandly panoramic portrayal of these works is aptly reminiscent of the painting that adorns the book's jacket, Shin Hak-chul's "*Modern Korean History: Incantation of the Dead* (1994)," a stunning *pièce de resistance* of post-1980s "people's" art.

Hughes starts off by examining how the KAPF writers and other left-wing artists turned toward the visual, the body, and nativist invocations of the *hyangt'o* (a Korean version of *Heimat*, if you will) to problematize conditions of the colonial modern. This in turn segued into the modernist appropriation of the visual-verbal interface, which Hughes brings to light by focusing on hybrid or interstitial forms of text, such as "serialized screenplays" and "film-novels," exemplified by the partnership between the written text of Pak T'ae-wŏn's *A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist* (1934) and Yi Sang's illustrations for the novel's serialized edition. However, the nativist aesthetic and the interplay between the visual and the verbal were also

appropriated by the Japanese militarist state in producing a series of “total mobilization” cinema, including *The Volunteer* (1940) and *Springtime on the Peninsula* (1941) (referred to as *Spring of the Korean Peninsula* in Kim’s work), to create the self-replicating yet perpetually moving—that is, “mobilized”—subject, who is made to suffer from ceaseless dislocation, never actually achieving (or being allowed to achieve) oneness with the Japanese nation. According to Hughes, nativist and modernist perspectives in these films directing their protagonists toward the imperatives of “imperialization” (*kōminka*) are at once subnational, invoking the local via nativist aesthetics, and supranational, gazing toward the future of the pan-Asian unity, recast as a step toward the “overcoming of (Western) modernity.”

In the chapters on the postcolonial period, Hughes discusses the reappearance of nativist concerns with visibility, the body, and the originary or primordial “home” in the works of such South Korean writers as Hwang Sun-wŏn, Kim Tong-ni, and Yi T’ae-jun. These concerns are manifest in the complex interaction between the imagery of North Korea, rendered “invisible” on select occasions, and anticommunist statism constructed within the Cold War ideological framework. Ultimately, the supposedly postcolonial configuration of the ethnocentric Korean national narrative generated its own dissenting works, including Son Ch’ang-sŏp’s *The Scribblers* (1959) and the filmic adaptation of Chŏng Pi-sŏk’s *Madame Freedom* (1956), wherein the visual (the image) overwhelms or decenters the verbal (the discursive) and ends up disrupting the ethnocentric narrative.

Hughes presents perhaps his boldest arguments next, expanding the scope of his investigation to a transnational level in his engagement with Cold War developmentalism, culminating in detailed critiques of Nam Chŏng-hyŏn’s *Land of Excrement* (1965). Hughes argues that Nam’s celebrated anti-imperialist nationalism is in significant ways a rearticulation of the imperial Japanese discourse of “overcoming modernity” and gestures of “self-summoning” found in the late colonial mobilization programs. For this reason, Nam’s “rejection of the ‘modern’ draws upon but cannot name the critique of the West and United States that informed late colonial statist imperialization” (153). The disturbing correspondence between “masculinisms and essentialisms” informing Korean ethnocentric nationalism and those found in Japanese imperialism and U.S. neocolonialism is to “remain unseen and unspoken” (163).

Hughes posits Ch’oe In-hun as a counterpoint to Nam Chŏng-hyŏn. The former is seen as having attempted to overcome colonial/anticolonial, East/West, nation/empire, and other binaries

and to develop fundamental criticism of Cold War ideologies by deliberately returning to the colonial modern of Pak T'ae-wŏn's urban landscape. Ch'oe also tried to envision a counterhistory of Korea in which the legacy of the colonial empire is addressed without surreptitiously replicating its mobilizing discourses within the ethnocentric narrative. Hughes's reading of Ch'oe's *The Tempest* (1973) as a counterfactual alternative to William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's *The Ugly American* (1958, and its filmic adaption [1963]) is nothing short of brilliant. So is his marshaling of lucid and compelling arguments toward characterization of the Korean author as the truly dissenting voice of 1960s and 1970s Korean literature, and not simply a writer who sought to publicly address the issue of reunification (between North and South) under oppressive political circumstances.

*Freedom's Frontier* can lay claim to a number of strengths that keep it head and shoulders above its competition. Hughes effectively challenges prevailing assumptions of discontinuity between colonial and postcolonial Korean literature; he implicitly critiques the manners in which modern Korean writers are canonized or labeled according to their ideological proclivities; and, perhaps more significantly, he questions the bifurcation between "realism" and "modernism" (as Kim also does in his readings of the films of Hong Sang-soo, Bong Joon-ho, and Lee Chang-dong) in the genealogical charting of modern Korean literature and aesthetics. Hughes does all this without introducing lumpy essentialisms about Korean culture (for example, the ever-quotable *han*, cultural expressions of *ressentiment* supposedly unique to the Korean race), while always carefully balancing archival research and theoretical analyses.

Moreover, although Walter Benjamin, Ferdinand de Saussure, Slavoj Žižek, and other luminaries make dutiful appearances in the study, it also contains extensive dialogues with Korean critics and scholars, such as Kim Chul, Sin Hyŏng-gi, and Kwŏn Podŭrae. The efficiency and care with which Hughes engages this recent Korean-language scholarship could serve as a model for graduate students and junior scholars working on Korea in any field of the humanities. It should also be added that Hughes amply demonstrates a mastery of the nuances and shifting contexts of the Korean-language terms and discursive formations that he tackles (for example, differences among *wŏllnam-in*, *sirhyangmin* and *t'albukcha*, all of which can be translated into "North Korean refugees" in English), without making a big theoretical fuss out of such differentiations.

Despite their contiguity in subject matter and temporal scope, *Virtual Hallyu* and *Freedom's Frontier* are not complementary in the usual sense. They are best served by being put into dialogue with each other. Imagine a surgeon (who examines, probes, samples, cuts open, extracts, and sutures) and a psychiatrist (who observes, talks, listens, records, analyzes, and evaluates), with significantly overlapping skill sets, diagnosing symptoms of the patient named Korean cinema (or Korean culture). The reader must listen closely to Kim's and Hughes's diagnoses and guard against being misled by superficial differences in theoretical positions or occasional polemical asides, as the substance of their analyses and arguments almost unfailingly enrich our understanding of the materials under discussion. The reader might consider, for example, how Kim's analysis of the "virtual landscape" in Im Kwōn-t'aek and Hong Sang-soo would (or would not) be consonant with Hughes's argument regarding the invocation of *hyangt'o* nativism. Or he or she might compare Hughes's interpretation of *Springtime on the Peninsula* as an example of the simultaneously subnational (nativist, linguistically and otherwise) and supranational (pan-Asian) invocation of the new "Korean/Japanese" identity under the total mobilization regime to Kim's provocative analysis of the film as a showcase of the devolution of colonial masculinity, inscribed in the weakened and damaged body of the film's protagonist, who can neither join the Japanese empire nor rehabilitate Korean nationalism.

Conceding that these studies touch upon so many levels of significant issues, I still wish the authors engaged more deeply with the Japan-Korea axis compared to the U.S.-Korea axis. For instance, what does Hughes think of the so-called "national literature" (*kokumin bungaku*, or *kungmin munhak*), in terms of transition from the late-colonial period to the postwar period? At one point, he tantalizingly hints at the relationship between the Japanese theory of "national body" (*kokutairon*) and the anti-American variety of Korean nationalism. Are these connections genetic (as in the five digital bones that mammals such as whales, bats, and humans all share in their frontal limbs) or isomorphic (as in the wings of a bee and those of a hummingbird)? Likewise, Kim could have addressed in greater detail the critical impact that Japan, in either its (neo-)colonial or global-capitalist incarnations, had in shaping today's Korean cinema, from its "invisible" presence in the popular culture (as important as the "invisible" North Korea) to its contribution to kindling the fire of the *hallyu* phenomenon. Could Im Kwōn-taek, for one, move on to the critical success of *Sopyonje* (1993) if he had not invested so much energy in "authenticating" Japanese language and culture in the colonial setting in the box-office smash

*Son of a General* (1990), one of the motion pictures that could be said to have paved the way for the advent of *hallyu*?

As I have observed above, Kim and Hughes both critique and deconstruct the ethnocentric national narrative in their respective works (although Kim's almost subliminal ambivalence in some instances has been noted). This process necessarily leads to the rehabilitation of a multiplicity of perspectives, orientations, perceptions, and positions hitherto suppressed: gendered, nonheterosexual, multiethnic, transnational, genuinely multicultural (as opposed to English-dominated and ethnically hierarchized "multiculturalism" of the contemporary Korean variety), and complexly class-based (not reducing a social conflict to the basic opposition between "capitalists" and "working class"), among other configurations. Their works serve as excellent launching pads to expand our perspective toward deeper engagement with or "thicker" descriptions of Korean literature and cinema.

Can we, to cite but one example, pick up on Hughes's initiative and map out the detailed topography of transnational cultural relations between South Korea and the United States since 1945, not merely from the viewpoint of "victimized" Korea against the "dominant" United States, but moving toward a truly dialogic history of trans-Pacific cultural exchange? (I can already envision the synergistic effect potentially produced by reading Hughes's volume and, say, Christina Klein's *Cold War Orientalism* (2003) side by side.) Likewise, Kim's potent analyses of such films as *Secret Sunshine* (2007) and *Woman is the Future of Man* (2004) open themselves up for further elaborations and challenges from feminist (and even feminist psychoanalytic) angles. Despite the ample display of ironic self-reflexivity, is Hong's "virtual nationalism" (to use Kim's designation) not in fact complicit in the objectification of women or the inscription of the national narrative onto the female body?

In this regard, Kim's quasi-dismissal of "diversity" in Korean cinema as a component of the global marketing strategy is something of a concern. As several cases absent from Kim's texts might demonstrate, diversity as pursued by today's Korean filmmakers is an important ingredient of Korean cinema's local identity, the very stability and naturalized status of which are constantly brought into question by such pursuits, pointing to the hybridity, porousness, and malleability of such an identity. A case in point: the Nepalese migrant worker, Chandra, institutionalized against her will in a Korean psychiatric ward in Park Chan-wook's semidocumentary short "Never Ending Peace and Love" (included in the anthology film *If You*

*Were Me* [2003], produced by the Korean Human Rights Commission), did not suffer that absurd and tragic fate because, as Kim claims, “she did not speak a word of Korean” (195). It was because Chandra was able to *pass* as a Korean, and most Koreans who encountered her—policemen, medical professionals, and ordinary citizens—took her Nepalese language as incoherent gibberish, albeit spoken in Korean. Park’s film thus slyly subverts the stability of Korean ethnic identity while on the surface propounding a message of tolerance toward the ethnic “other,” befitting the proper behavioral codes of the newly globalizing Korea, in much the same way insertion of homoerotic desire in *Joint Security Area* (2000) problematizes the ethnocentric narrative of North and South Korean soldiers achieving a symbolic reunification. In Park’s films, these “details” cannot be relegated to a secondary status as opposed to the allegedly “prioritized” objectives, such as the critique of Korean society through ruminations on acts of revenge. Contemplating the meaning of “diversity” can lead to reflections on how the disciplining impulse of the Korean ethnonational narrative produced and consumed by Koreans can be just as oppressive as the Hollywood-enforced global drive toward the hierarchization and commodification of works of art.

However, Kim’s study serves as a counterbalance against the unconscious parochialism of a historian like myself, who perhaps remains too fixated on the trees and misses the forest—the global ecology, if you will—of cinematic appreciation and evaluation that in itself creates a hierarchy and hegemonic power relations. Kim’s efforts to defend the “virtues” (not necessarily in terms of morality, perhaps, but in the original Machiavellian sense of *virtù*, as in *virtuoso*) of a series of superior works of Korean cinema give us a timely occasion to reflect on how Korean “trees” fit in with the “forest.” Ultimately, it appears that a thoroughgoing critique of the discourse of “artistic cinema”—which films are celebrated and championed as works of art despite their strongly localized identities and why—is as much needed for the advancement of our understanding of Korean cinema as a critique of global neoliberalism.

Finally, although these two studies are mostly concerned with the post-1945 period, reading them has confirmed my suspicion that the colonial period is unavoidably the origin point for the current shape of Korean literature and cinema, including its contested boundaries. Without a much more detailed mapping of that terrain, we are unlikely to contribute to the generation and nurturing of the truly “postcolonial” and “post–Cold War” *episteme*. However, I

remain optimistic for such a prospect, since, as all evidence indicates—as indeed Kim and Hughes demonstrate in their endeavors—things are only going to get better (and clearer).

We live in interesting times, despite some disheartening evidence to the contrary, especially for Korean studies. Indeed, Yi Sang, the arch-modernist poet, novelist, and (as Hughes incontrovertibly shows) visual artist, a ghostly *éminence grise* who haunts Kim's and Hughes's studies, would feel totally at home in the glibly globalizing yet stubbornly localized Seoul of today. And he would, I am willing to bet, greatly enjoy those Korean films that “do not sit well in their own culture.”

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### **References**

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