

Stepping into the Newsreel: Melodrama and Mobilization in Colonial Korean Film

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Abstract

As part of a project on melodrama in Korean film, this article examines the ways that films from the late colonial period (1937–1945) blurred the traditional boundaries between newsreel documentary and fictional features in an attempt to suture the film spectator into the cinematic representation of what André Bazin called, in relation to the newsreel, “total history.” Drawing on theoretical discussions of sentimentality and melodrama, the article compares the earlier fictional film *Sweet Dream* (1936) to the wartime film *Korea Strait* (1943) in order to trace how melodrama was transformed through its incorporation into political propaganda. It discusses how narrative cinematic techniques such as point of view, shot/reverse shot, and crosscutting allowed *Korea Strait* to draw the viewer into spectacles of mobilization that were formerly represented through the more anonymous mass medium of the newsreel documentary. The remainder of the article touches on the films *Volunteer* (1941) and *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* (1941), discussing how the interpretive excess enabled by melodrama remained visible after the hybridization of fictional film and newsreel, primarily through the disjuncture between the films’ melodrama narratives and their spectacles of mobilization. In conclusion, the article suggests that the gradual elimination of any narrative excess in 1940s films reflects an apprehension about the multiple codings, identifications, and interpretations enabled through the combination of melodrama narrative with political propaganda.

Keywords: Korea, Japan, film, documentary, melodrama, mobilization, total war, newsreels, colonialism, point of view, shot/reverse shot, spectacle, propaganda

In Ang Lee’s 2007 film *Lust, Caution*, set in the early 1940s, the former theater actress Wong Chia Chi has recently arrived in Japan-occupied Shanghai after being part of a failed assassination plot against the collaborationist police official Mr. Yee in Hong Kong. She goes to a movie theater to see a Hollywood production. Ang Lee constructed the scene that the audience watches by splicing together a shot of Ingrid Bergman from *Intermezzo: A Love Story* (1939) and a shot of Cary Grant from *Penny Serenade* (1941). The film is interrupted by a Japanese newsreel documentary promoting anti-Western and Pan-Asianist rhetoric, for which Ang Lee used stock footage. The audience, which

previously seemed sutured pleasurably into the fictional film and its continuity style, begins to complain when the newsreel documentary comes on, and many members get up and leave the theater. It is unclear whether the audience's distaste is more for the formal interruption of the Hollywood film or for the content of the interpolated propaganda.

Appearing as it does within a film whose primary concern is the psychosexual dynamics of colonial violence and "collaboration," it is disappointing that, in this scene at least, Lee maps the opposition between pleasurable Hollywood fiction and unpleasurable propaganda so simplistically onto the politics of collaboration and resistance. One also wonders about the historical accuracy of such a representation of cinematic experience in colonial Shanghai. Rather than being an entirely accurate depiction of the conflict between fictional film and Japan's anti-Western imperial propaganda, the scene encapsulates in allegory a problem that a great deal of colonial filmmaking in the late Japanese empire actively tried to resolve (often through the very techniques that made fiction films so appealing). The problem: how could the engaging style of feature films, with their powerful ability to suture the viewer into a fictional diegesis, be hybridized with the newsreel, the documentary, and the culture film (*munhwa yŏnghwa*), genres whose purpose during the era of total war was to represent and to transform the actual historical world? As French film critic and theorist André Bazin stated in a 1946 commentary on Frank Capra's wartime documentary series *Why We Fight*, the governments involved in the practice of total war sought to represent the "total history" of the period through the war report as a technological means of both communication and destruction ([1946] 2001, 60). Rather than producing the kind of unpleasurable breaking of the suture depicted in *Lust, Caution*, the style of late colonial Korean films suggests a concern with how the viewer could be made, through the techniques of fictional narrative cinema, to visually and linguistically "step into" the spectacle of total history exemplified in the war report, the newsreel, or the government documentary. Instead of forcing viewers to relate to the events of total history solely through the false objectivity that Bazin attributes to the combination of stock footage and authoritative voiceovers in the war report, late colonial Korean films employ the style and plot devices of earlier fictional cinema to absorb the viewer into a cinematic representation of the Japanese state's total transformation of historical reality. It is difficult not to impute to this hybridization an instrumental political attempt to create more intimate and emotive connections between the microsocial conflicts of earlier melodramatic film and the geopolitics of world history. The policies of imperial subjectification

(*kōminka*), including the volunteer soldier system, were dependent on new discourses and images through which the colonial subject could identify his or her personal ontology with the macropolitical process of mobilization. However, the incorporation of images formerly relegated to the government newsreel into the fictional feature was not just an interpolation of ideological content, but an uneven process of appropriating and transforming existing formal and narrative conventions. As scholars Takashi Fujitani and Nayoung Aimee Kwon have stated in general terms in relation to late colonial Korean film, the rules and regulations concerning film content were not just repressive, but also productive, and therefore the appropriation and transformation of genres and conventions was also a means to actively rearticulate how mobilization was to be represented (2013).¹

In the case of colonial Korean film, some comparison between the film styles prevalent before and after 1939 is useful for seeing how the stories and cinematic forms of earlier features were later mobilized to promote imperial subjectification. Among the films made in colonial Korea that have been rediscovered and made available in the past decade, there are presently only three extant full-length fiction films that do not contain scenes of overt propaganda for the Japanese empire and its policies of Japan-Korea unification (*naisen ittai*): *Crossroads of Youth* (1934), *Sweet Dream* (1936), and *Fishermen's Fire* (1939). We see a less overtly political image of everyday life in colonial Korea in these films (Chōng 2009; Sin 2008). They were produced before the formation of the Korea Film Production Corporation (1939), which unified film production under a single colonial state institution, and the Korea Motion Picture Ordinance (1940), which dictated the inclusion of political content in feature films, promoted culture films, and severely limited the distribution of what the governor-general of Korea considered to be entertainment films. These transformations in the film industry occurred concomitantly with and supplemented the mobilization of Japanese film companies into the total war effort in metropolitan Japan. The Korea Motion Picture Ordinance led to the registration and organization of film artists into monitored groups, such as the Korea Association of Film Artists and the Korea Association of Film Producers (Ham 2012, 272, 279). The unfortunate loss of prints of almost all films produced in Korea in the 1920s and 1930s means that the development of thorough textual readings of earlier cinema in Korea in relation to this later period, when cinema was employed for the mobilization of colonial subjects for total war, is nearly impossible. Through the print archive it is possible to get a sense of the film cultures and film

narratives of the earlier period, but with only a few feature films from the pre-1939 period in existence, it remains difficult to discuss the earlier period through close textual analysis.

Nonetheless, in order to interpret the formal and narrative conventions involved in the mobilization of film melodrama for the purposes of imperial subjectification after 1939, this article performs comparative close readings of *Sweet Dream* (1936) and *Korea Strait*² (1943), with reference to newsreels and culture films included in the Korea Film Archive DVD collection of rediscovered films. Through this admittedly limited comparison, I hope to begin to understand in both formal and historical terms how and why narrative and spectacular elements promoting the total mobilization of Koreans for the war effort began to appear in films whose primary themes belong to the more everyday register of melodrama (themes such as gender and class conflict, poverty, crime, seduction, popular folk tradition, and sentimental journeys). In posing such problems I am interested in the transformations that cinematic experience underwent during the era of total mobilization for war, as well as the filmic concepts and aesthetic ideologies that informed the particular confluence of melodrama fiction and political propaganda in late colonial Korean film.

The attempt to incorporate the spectacle of military and cultural mobilization into the conventions of earlier commercial cinema had a number of ambivalent effects. On the one hand, fundamental techniques of narrative cinema, such as close-up, shot/reverse shot, tracking, and crosscutting all contributed to a visual and somatic experience of absorption into the film's fictional diegesis, and thereby into the historical movement of mobilization that late colonial films also reference. In this respect, what film scholar Linda Williams (2012) refers to as the "democratic" quality of film melodrama, which invokes both the equalizing and the reifying aspects of film as commodity, could be employed for military and cultural mobilization. Through this appropriation of the film image as commodity form and its fusion with the spectacle of mobilization, film protagonists' active cooperation with empire appeared as a leveling force in society. Through the miracle of military service, romance across social classes was legitimated (*Korea Strait*) and landowners redistributed land voluntarily (*Volunteer*); through the organization of the Korean film industry into a single corporation, Korean national tradition—in this case *Chunhyang*—could make it to the big screen (*Spring on the Korean Peninsula*). These examples were no doubt a case of the total war system's particular "aestheticizing of politics" (Benjamin 2006, 279).

On the other hand, there was a danger in utilizing fictional narrative and the melodrama mode for the purposes of total war propaganda because of the kinds of interpretive and social excesses recognized and enabled by this mode (excesses that I explore in detail in my reading of *Sweet Dream*). While the commodified image world of commercial melodrama tends to rely on and to proliferate at least a minimal degree of interpretive excess, and to recognize the irreconcilability of social conflicts, propaganda for total war on every side of World War II had to present society as a national community unified in purpose, identity, and desire. The resulting tensions between the mode of melodrama and spectacles of mobilization appear in films such as *Volunteer* and *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* in the way that the narrative develops asymmetrically in relation to the spectacle of mobilization, and eventually depends on conflict resolutions that appear sudden and unrealistic even by the standards of fictional cinema. In this respect, the inability for the aestheticization of “total history” to completely integrate itself with existing fictions in the colonial context reveals the limitations to total war state policies and their integrated notions of national subjectivity.

Melodrama and Excess before Total War: *Sweet Dream* (1936)

In one of many strikingly expressionistic scenes in Yang Ju-nam’s *Sweet Dream*, Ae-sun (Mun Ye-bong) does hair while arguing with her husband about whether or not she should go out alone. The scene begins with a high-angle two-shot of the couple, in which she looks away from him and into a large vanity mirror. It moves to a shot/reverse shot that captures their argument, although Ae-sun’s eyes meet her husband’s for only a moment before returning to the mirror. Rather than conveying the sentiment of love between their points of view, this theatrical blocking and editing presents their relationship as a power struggle that the husband confronts head on and that Ae-sun attempts to evade through an insubordinate narcissism. Ae-sun states that she is a human being and not “a bird in a cage,” and the film cuts symbolically to a bird in a birdcage hanging outside their house.

Then the scene arrives at one of the most remarkable shots in the film and in existing colonial period film more generally: Ae-sun is captured from the back as she sits looking from the right of the frame into the mirror in the middle. However, in the place of her own reflection, which we would expect to see in the mirror, her husband’s spectral image appears. In a melodramatic act of defiance, Ae-sun pushes the bottom of the mirror, flipping her husband out of the frame as the mirror rocks

back and forth on its stand. She leaves the house and the tragic narrative of fallen motherhood begins.

In order to identify the importance of the above scene for an understanding of later productions that include propaganda for mobilization, I will contextualize it not only in relation to gender and other social issues of Korean colonial modernity, but also in relation to global modes of filmmaking at the time. The above scene in particular engages self-consciously with two modes that film scholars have more recently identified as fundamental to the development of early narrative cinema: the sentimental and the melodramatic. In *An Archaeology of Sympathy*, literary scholar James Chandler connects the aesthetics of classical Hollywood, from D. W. Griffith to Frank Capra, to the sentimental mode in literature and philosophy; he finds in the form of classical film an echo of earlier visualizations of sympathy in the novels of Charles Dickens, the moral philosophy of Adam Smith, and the sentimental journeys of Laurence Sterne. Central to Chandler's discussion of the sentimental in cinema are the techniques of point of view, shot/reverse shot, and close-ups, developed earliest and most effectively by D. W. Griffith in melodrama films such as *Broken Blossoms*. Shot/reverse shot is fundamental to the feeling of putting oneself in another's position (Smith's sympathy), as well as to the classical Hollywood film's psychological causality: "With the emergence of the point-of-view shot comes a corresponding reliance on shot/reverse-shot techniques. We see a situation; we see a character's reaction to that situation; and next we see something that the character does as a direct response to that situation" (Chandler 2013, 120). For Chandler, two central specificities of the sentimental mode are the way it transports spectators into other subject positions and the way it highlights the self-reflexivity involved in such movement—for example, in Scrooge's supernatural observations of his life in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* or in George Bailey's observation of a world without him in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. According to Chandler, the sentimental mode is tied to a politics of liberal humanism, or a politics of equality gained through shared sympathy, as suggested by his comparisons with Smith.

Another discussion of the modes of classical Hollywood, Linda Williams's work on melodrama, points to the more occult dimensions of this cinematic liberal humanism (2012). Whereas Chandler brackets the melodramatic, seemingly in an attempt to elevate the sentimental mode above the derogatory connotations of "sentimentality," Williams instead emphasizes that so-called classical Hollywood realism is not an integrated form against which we can oppose melodrama as a more excessive counterpart. What was once called the "classical realist text" always had deep connections

with melodrama, particularly in its occult defense of moral innocence and its use of horizontal (temporal) and vertical (spatial) suspensions of causality, sequence, and realist psychology. According to Williams, the narrative and visual forms of the classical owe more to the sentimentality, simplified moral problems, and suspension of space and time germane to melodrama than to the Hollywood realism discussed by film theorist and historian David Bordwell and his coauthors (1985) and Colin MacCabe (1974). She sees the melodramatic mode as so pervasive in film history that she warns against even continuing to refer to melodrama's "excess," because there is simply no standard realist text of which melodrama could be in excess.

While *Sweet Dream* employs certain continuity techniques, including point of view and (most prominently) crosscutting at the narrative climax, much of its cinematography and editing has a more theatrical style reminiscent of German expressionism (an unsurprising fact considering the popularity and influence of German films in Korea in the 1920s and 1930s) (Kim Sŭng-ku 2010). Nonetheless, the scene described above is engaged self-consciously with the sorts of formal and narrative devices that Chandler and Williams have recognized in the so-called "classical." The effect of the shot/reverse shot between Ae-sun and her husband, which is meant to foreground her narcissism and her rejection of her family, depends on the audience's awareness of the more typical use of the device to convey the exchange of gazes and the moving-between subject positions that Chandler identifies as primary to the sentimental mode in cinema. Read in relation to the use of the shot/reverse shot for the sentimental portrayal of heterosexual romance, the film presents a lack of sympathy between the two main characters. The birdcage and the mirror intervene expressionistically where shot/reverse shot could depict sympathy. These kinds of mediating objects, which continue to appear throughout the film, give expression to alienation and moral corruption in this scene, because they magnify the sense that neither character is able to identify with the other's position. The appearance of his body on the mirror's surface, rather than her face, highlights the origin of their alienation from each other in his patriarchal power and her inability to forge an independent identity despite her narcissism. When she pushes the bottom of the mirror angrily, the mirror also emphasizes Ae-sun's rejection of her husband and her imagination of a frame in which he would not appear. Rather than reflecting the sentimental mode, the space of the scene is the space of melodrama, which establishes a conflict between two irreconcilable moral positions through the embodiment of suffering.

Following the contours of Williams's definition of melodrama, the remainder of the film suspends realist narrative causality and becomes concerned primarily with whether or not Ae-sun will recognize her moral errors before she and her family have lost all innocence. She unwittingly becomes involved with criminal conspirators, and she destroys her marriage and her parental relationship with her daughter. In the last segment, she rides in a taxi, spurring the driver to go faster so that she can catch her final means of escape, a departing train, which is captured with dramatic tracking shots and edited in parallel with shots of the speeding taxi. In an incident whose causality can only be described as melodramatic (rather than psychological or realist), Ae-sun's taxi implausibly hits the daughter whom she has abandoned and who happens to be crossing the same street. Thinking that she is guilty of her daughter's death, Ae-sun commits suicide during her hospitalization, after which the daughter miraculously awakens from her injuries. The final scene employs somewhat grotesque close-ups of Ae-sun's face, as well as close-ups of the daughter's lifeless body and her father's panicked expressions, to accentuate the agony caused by Ae-sun's irredeemable immorality.

Ae-sun's interaction with her husband, as well as her later conversations with her lover, break from the more theatrical blocking of the two-shot through shot/reverse shot, but not with the same degree of magnified sentimentality that would appear, for example, in a Frank Capra dinner scene depicting a budding romance. However, it is important to note that *Sweet Dream's* engagement with shot/reverse shot, as well as its self-conscious avoidance of the technique to accentuate alienation, contrasts strongly with Pak Ki-ch'ae use of the technique for more explicitly political purposes in the central scene of his 1943 film *Korea Strait* (as I will discuss in detail in the next section). Although *Sweet Dream* is certainly a sentimental film that employs elements of the continuity style, it is less exemplary of the aesthetics of sympathy compared to this later propaganda feature.

On the other hand, a number of aspects of *Sweet Dream* point to the applicability of Williams's notion of melodrama. The film establishes a Manichaeian moral struggle between tradition and modernity, it weaves suspense into this primary problem (including the use of crosscutting in the climactic scene), and it attempts to redeem the possibility of innocence (albeit through tragedy). The film introduces two gendered poles that cannot be brought together through sympathy. The visuality of the opening and closing scenes conveys this failure of sympathy and the sense of a world divided irrevocably in two. This aesthetics of what Peter Brooks calls the "moral occult" brings out a tension,

or even crisis, in liberal humanism and colonial gender relations (Brooks [1976] 1995). Despite the film's expurgation of the immoral woman through suicide, it does not, however, reassert patriarchy with complete transparency. As in many melodramas, it remains unclear whether the film's exposition of the problems of the private sphere is irredeemably patriarchal or rather brings the symptoms of social crisis to the surface in a potentially radical manner. Despite Ae-sun's death, the question of whether or not her overbearing husband might share in the blame for the daughter's accident and Ae-sun's suicide remains open. What is more important than the film's ultimate didactic message is the way that it utilizes the melodramatic mode in order to explore the limits of certain social norms, and therefore to enter aesthetically into a social problem that the film cannot entirely resolve for the viewer. For example, it is possible that a viewer of the time could, despite the ending, read the film as a critique of patriarchy, particularly when the most visually powerful scenes accentuate the lack of love and the uneven power within the conjugal relation? Is Ae-sun driven to her immoral acts by a repressive family system, or does the fault lie in her individual ethical limitations? In leaving these questions unanswered, the film allows for an excess of interpretation, and it recognizes excesses in society that do not allow us to imagine it as a complete system that is given aesthetic form in the film. Melodrama is often associated with excess not simply because of its overdramatic acting and implausible scenarios. It is particularly adept at mobilizing these kinds of social and interpretive excesses in order to create emotional and cognitive effects. If the sentimental mode presents a closed and self-reflexive system of sympathies, melodrama more consistently explores the limits and social excesses of normative society, even when it ultimately defends that society.

Williams is correct that we should be careful in using the term *excess* when discussing melodrama, because we run the risk of assuming a normative realism that does not exist. However, there is a more specific definition of social excess that can be identified in order to see what happened to the choreographing of that excess in later-period colonial films in Korea. In the first economy of colonial Korean film, the cinematic image is a reproducible and consumable generality, part of what film historian Miriam Hansen refers to as the "vernacular modernism" of 1920s cinema (1999). However, the cinematic image is also an alienated social relation and the object of misidentification, mistranslation, and misappropriation, particularly in contexts in which the vernacular language of narrative cinema was not yet the lingua franca of visual culture. In the commercial era of colonial

Korean film preceding 1939, stories of romance, economic hardship, gender exploitation, moral corruptness, and other common themes of early narrative cinema were commodified through their imprint on celluloid and their distribution to the local audience. These stories and images of mass culture certainly reified social types and otherwise simplified worldly events into consumable and necessarily brief narrative and visual sequences. However, the vernacular modernism of cinema also performed progressive functions, including facilitating women's emergence as agents of public culture.

Film scholar No Chisŭng points out that cinema allowed women to enter mass culture in colonial Korea but also subjected them to commodification and the didacticism of male intellectuals (2010). Noting how much anxiety there was in colonial Korea about female cinema spectators, she writes that melodramatic narratives of entertainers and other morally compromised women provided a way to mediate between the emergent power of female spectatorship and male artists' felt need to control the gendering of narrative. The melodramatic mode is particularly effective at posing simplistic moral problems through the suspension of realist or psychological causality; however, its narratives also offer multiple moments of identification that can disrupt the otherwise regressive or conservative quality of the moral occult. In Ae-sun's act of pushing the mirror and asserting her humanity, she rejects patriarchal authority, refuses the position of the good mother, and insinuates that film cannot properly imitate the truth of women's lives in colonial Korea. The rest of the didactic story cannot subvert these ideas entirely. If the sentimental mode tries to produce images of a functioning liberal humanism, the Manichaeic worlds of melodrama point more directly to the crises of that humanism.

After Ae-sun leaves her home she goes to a department store, where she first encounters the criminal with whom she will have an affair and who will bring peril to her and her family. Close-ups of the dolls in the store emphasize that Ae-sun's liberation from her household is an ambiguous liberation, one that draws her into a world characterized by reification, greed, and modern modes of gendered exploitation—in other words, into capitalist modernity. Melodrama, with its attention to social excesses that cannot be properly included within normative society, is particularly adept at dramatizing and visualizing this kind of ambiguous feeling toward modernity and modern gender roles. One effect of the total war system and the reformation of the Korean film industry in the late 1930s was to recode gender relations, so that the interpretive and social excesses enabled by

melodrama could be both limited and exploited through their incorporation with genres of state propaganda, such as the newsreel documentary. While this led to more politically effective filmmaking that served state interests, the use of melodrama to draw viewers into the spectacle of history was also a perilous venture. It came with the risk that the colonial audiences for such cinematic fictions, including the large numbers of female spectators, would feel empowered to make new demands on historical reality.

Mobilizing Melodrama: Military Spectacle from Newsreel to Fiction Film

The most striking use of shot/reverse shot in the wartime film *Korea Strait* (Pak Ki-ch'ae 1943) is in some respects the visual and semiotic opposite of the self-conscious quotation and then avoidance of this technique at the beginning of *Sweet Dream*. The protagonist of *Korea Strait*, Söng-ki, is the younger brother of a war hero who has died in battle. At the beginning of the film he does not follow in his brother's footsteps. He has had a relationship and a child with Küm-suk (played by *Sweet Dream*'s Mun Ye-bong), but her family is from a lower social class and the couple has become estranged. Eventually he decides to volunteer for the Japanese military. Söng-ki's sister hopes that the couple will reunite and has told Küm-suk that Söng-ki has enlisted and will be marching in a military parade. In a scene that Takashi Fujitani has discussed in detail, Küm-suk comes out of the house with their baby to see the parade (2011, 358–359). Her first response to the parade is to turn away, to block her illegitimate child from the view of Söng-ki's family members, who stand waving flags and cheering. However, once she catches a glimpse of Söng-ki marching, she is captured by a tracking shot as she follows the parade. Close-ups of her face and Söng-ki's face, edited through shot/reverse shot, convey the couple's collective immersion, as actor and as spectator, in the spectacle of the parade. The scene begins with a conflict between the single mother and the social totality. Her illegitimate baby marks her as immoral, and she also seems hesitant to express patriotism. However, when she sees her lost love in the parade, the personal becomes intertwined with the political and she recognizes herself in the military spectacle, a recognition conveyed through the shot/reverse shot. Because of the more theatrical staging and editing in most colonial period films, Pak's employment of point of view and shot/reverse shot stands out as a forceful attempt to incorporate a new kind of gendered fiction. The extreme close-ups of their faces call further attention to the film's conscious

appropriation of an aesthetics of sympathy in order to give visual form to Kŭm-suk's witnessing of and ideological immersion into the spectacle of mobilization.

This scene is one of the clearest examples of the appropriation of the formal and narrative aspects of fictional film in order to combine its suturing techniques with spectacles of mobilization. The ideological and aesthetic effects of this hybridization become apparent when we contrast the documentary depictions of military mobilization that appear in the Korea governor-general's newsreel documentaries with the way that Pak Ki-ch'ae uses Kŭm-suk's point of view and shot/reverse shot to individuate the fictional protagonists within the spectacle of the military parade. The newsreel *Japan Chronicles* (1943) provides information about the growing number of volunteer trainees and soldiers in Korea from 1937 onward. In a striking scene of a large group of volunteer soldiers chanting in unison, the soundtrack shifts back and forth between their voices and the disembodied and authoritative voiceover that explains the discursive meaning of the shot. In all the extant newsreel documentaries of the time, extreme close-ups are very rare and medium close-ups are usually reserved for high-ranking officers and colonial officials (those likely to be captured that way at the moment of filming the footage). In the case of military scenes, there is usually little attempt made to give the soldiers individual identities, with the exception of the story of Captain Takeyama in *Chosŏn News no. 11*. Although newsreel documentaries were meant to highlight the voluntarism and imperial subjectivity of Koreans, the national masses often appear as a passive object of the camera's observation and the voiceover's explanation of the historical meaning of the visual sequences. In *Chosŏn, The Home Front* (1937) and *Chosŏn, Our Rear Base* (1939), the crowds that greet the military trains and military parades are usually filmed from the back, rather than from the front, as Sŏng-ki's family in *Korea Strait* is. Medium close-ups of individuals waving flags and cheering serve as mere synecdoche for Korea as a whole. More important than any individual's story are the historical events to which the masses respond collectively, as well as the factual examples of their patriotism—celebrations of the taking of Wuhan, civilians' contribution of airplanes, prisoners' contribution of anti-aircraft guns, and of course volunteer military training. The voiceover narrates even the more intimate shots of women performing various patriotic duties for the troops—such as *sennin bari* embroidery, haircutting, and the setting aside of rice to raise funds for the Imperial Army—in a homogenizing rhetoric of “Chosŏn women.”

We cannot assume that these “culture films” produced by the governor-general had no appeal, but their form and their method of construction largely preclude them from developing narrative structures other than the homogeneous unfolding of Japan’s linear national history. In an immediate postwar essay (1946), André Bazin analyzed the *Why We Fight* series that Frank Capra produced for the U.S. War Department during World War II. Bazin offers insight into the newsreel as a method of documenting history. He points out that the ethos behind the newsreel in the total war era is that every event, from the signing of a treaty to an actual battle, can and should be documented in real time. However, when it comes to editing these images into a sequence, the newsreel is completely dependent upon the soundtrack to provide a language, a discursive meaning, to the string of captured events. The result is that each moment in these films is made to refer back to the same causality and the same reality, which Bazin refers to as “history-in-the-making” and “total history.” He writes,

But the war report above all fulfills another need, which explains its extreme popularity. The taste for such documentary news, combined with that for the cinema, reflects nothing if not modern man’s will to be there, his need to observe history-in-the-making, not only because of political evolution, but also because of the evolution as well as irremediable intermingling of the technological means of communication and destruction. The days of total war are fatally matched by those of total history. The governments of the world have understood this very well; this is why they try to show us film reports of all their historical acts, such as the signing of treaties or the meetings of the various superpowers. ([1946] 2001, 60)

Bazin suggests a high degree of formal homogeneity between the newsreels of the various governments involved in World War II, and Korean governor-general newsreels were definitely constructed by similar methods and with a similar end result. In charting the progress of the war in China alongside the everyday dedication of Koreans to the total war effort, the films communicate each event of technologized destruction and voluntarist patriotism as though it were all part of the same story, the same “total history.” For example, *Chosŏn, Our Rear Base* moves from a segment depicting celebrations following the capturing of Wuhan, during which the voiceover asserts, “We would not know such joy if we were not imperial subjects,” with documentation of a garden party at the governor-general of Korea, where an Italian mission led by “Paorichi” is in attendance. The voiceover refers to the anti-Communist pact forged between Japan, Italy, and Germany and Paorichi’s “observations” of Korea while the delegate enjoys a snack, as though this visit were somehow

organically connected to the previous scene's celebration of the Imperial Army's exploits in China.

German film theorist and cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer remarks about National Socialist newsreels, "To keep the totalitarian system in power, they had to annex to it all real life. And since, in the medium of the film unstaged reality is reserved to newsreel shots, the Nazis not only could not afford to set them aside, but were forced to compose from them their fictitious war pictures" (1947, 303). In colonial Korean newsreels a similar "annexation of reality" results in the newsreel documentary drawing together footage from disparate locales—the governor-general, the farm, the fishing village, the factory, the train station, the frontline—and presenting the events at these locales as though they were part of a single story, the true story of Japan's advance in history. While the voiceover is usually charged with communicating this illusion of simultaneity, *Patriot's Day in Chosŏn* achieves its visual image. A particularly poignant scene comprises a series of shots of people in various parts of the peninsula all stopping their work or leisure activities at the same time, to bow their heads in respect for the war dead. The idea of total war requires this kind of temporally unified patriotism, and its representation is only achieved through the cinematic illusion of documentation that Bazin describes. This is the illusion of observing "history-in-the-making."

In Chandler's discussion of the sentimental mode in Frank Capra's work, he symptomatically occludes any analysis of *Why We Fight*, forgoing any insight into the significant relations between sentimentality, melodrama, and the (racialized) politics of total war in Capra's career. Interestingly, however, it was precisely through the techniques of fictional cinema that Capra took up from Griffith that Pak Ki-ch'ae was able to incorporate to great effect the aesthetics of the continuity style with the spectacle of mobilization. In the parade scene discussed above, Pak used point of view, close-up, and shot/reverse shot to communicate a sense of the individuality of the participants and observers of the spectacle. As protagonists of a melodrama narrative, neither Kŭm-suk nor Sŏng-ki is an anonymous member of the Chosŏn masses that appear in newsreel footage of the military or patriotic civilians. In a way that Capra's wartime work did not achieve, because he stuck to the method of repurposing existing documentary footage, Pak orchestrated the viewer's entrance into the spectacle of history, giving a fictional life to the members of the masses and creating a more intimate and emotive suturing into the presentation of historical events. The politically contradictory aspect of this achievement—that it at once lent humanity to Korean protagonists through the cinematic convention of fictional film and potentially increased the emotional intensity of the cinematic experience of imperialization—

perhaps reflects a contradictory colonial situation in which the desire to gain political and individual equality with metropolitan Japanese could be achieved only through cinematic fantasy.

Pak's and other directors' incorporations of the continuity style into the representation of mobilization belonged to an aesthetic ideology of militarism, but it was also a response to an impasse in fascist ideas about the aestheticization of politics that were prominent in intellectual discourse at the time. In both film and literature, images of military formations were thought to have their own spectacular and poetic beauty autonomous from the surrounding narrative. In his 1943 text *Korean Literature in a Time of Transition*, the Korean literary critic and primary theorist of the journal *People's Literature* (*Kokumin bungaku*), Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, provides a concrete aesthetic philosophy of military spectacle. The following quotation appears in a tract on literature, but the aesthetic experience discussed lends itself well to the cinematic medium. It describes the visual content and some of the intention behind a number of scenes of military mobilization in colonial Korean films of the late 1930s and early 1940s. In a section aptly titled "What is Poetic?" Ch'oe writes,

It is possible for beauty to be perceived in the actions or poses of individual children, but we feel something truly beautiful when we see all the children of a national school marching in file. There is a cooperative beauty there that cannot be explained thoroughly with formalist aesthetic concepts like the beauty of order or the beauty of groups. Individual humans are demonstrating their own power to the greatest limit; however, they are by no means desirous. Because they are being conducted by one absolute idea, they show a majesty that has no individual plan and in this a sublime beauty is produced. This also differs from a formalist rhythmic beauty that arises from a wooden doll or machine that is only moving mechanically. There is a condition of strain between extreme repression and the demonstration of extreme life and there shines forth an austere beauty that seeks only to scatter sparks. For that matter, one can say that modern warfare demonstrates the ultimate extreme of cooperative beauty. (1943, 256)

In this statement, we can see the degree to which assimilation through mobilization was not just a political exercise but also an aestheticization and cinematization of politics. Ch'oe discusses the cooperation between Japan and Korea demanded by the policy of Japan-Korea unification not in terms of political instrumentality or even political duty, but rather in completely aesthetic terms. He presents the spectacle of children of a national school marching in file, under the banner of a single, absolute idea, as the most beautiful form that overcomes all other previous notions of taste, from

Kant's formalist notion of *sensus communis* to the idea of the beauty of order common in British aesthetic philosophies at the time.

Reading the whole of *Korean Literature in a Period of Transition*, it becomes clear that this notion of poetics and beauty was both an aesthetic philosophy and a social theory, and that Ch'oe thought of the writing of national literature, with poetic images of military mobilization at its center, as a way of "overcoming" in the aesthetic a number of social contradictions and problems. Throughout the text, Ch'oe refers to a "state of division" (*bunretsu no jōtai*) in the (national) subject brought about by capitalism and colonial modernity. These divisions resulted from the intrusion of commodified mass culture, the separation of artists from national community, the evils of profit motivation, and a number of other negative tendencies that he associates with modern capitalist society. For Ch'oe, all the social and ideological excesses created by capitalist society and its crises are to be overcome through aesthetic experiences, such as viewing the children of a national school marching in file.

There is a problem, however, in the notion of spectatorship presumed in Ch'oe Chae-sō's ideal poetics. In viewing the image of children marching in file, Ch'oe proposes that the onlooker not be separate from the scene, but completely immersed in it. Yet the spectator of the students' single-minded dedication to the "absolute idea" remains outside the "mass ornament" itself (Kracauer 1947).³ Just as the social crises of colonial modernity were allegorized in *Sweet Dream* through a morality tale based in a naturalized notion of good motherhood, in *Korea Strait* the participation of the female spectator is decisive for the drama of Sōng-ki's transformation of himself into a male Japanese subject. The formation of the parade, the close-up of Sōng-ki's face, and the depiction of Kūm-suk's response to seeing him together create a sense of causality similar to that featured in Chandler's discussion of the psychological causality of shot/reverse shot. And yet the editing also emphasizes melodrama's feeling of late arrival and melancholy, because the eyes of the characters do not meet. It is not important for Kūm-suk to gaze into Sōng-ki's eyes through a sympathetic eyeline match, but rather to behold his spectacular face and body, which have become one member of a sublime military formation. The scene reverses the form of the melodramatic beginning of *Sweet Dream*, because rather than the modern woman pushing the male gaze out of the frame, the male soldier's body becomes a pure spectacle for her, a love object through which she too will become an imperial subject. Takashi Fujitani has analyzed this gendering of desire as integral to the biopolitics

of the total war system. In his convincing reading, “Colonialism and nationalism thus sought, albeit with mixed results, to mobilize their subjects not simply through repressive means but also by producing gendered desires and presenting opportunities to fulfill them” (2011, 342).

Korea Strait deals quite differently with the social and interpretive excess implied by female spectatorship and discussed by both Miriam Hansen and No Chisŭng. It creates a situation in which the female character’s gaze is empowered through point of view and shot/reverse shot, but at the same it captures and represents this spectatorship in a more closed aesthetic and narrative system. Because the most important object of Kŭm-suk’s gaze is the soldier’s body, the purpose of her individuality—as well as her overcoming of class difference and her return to moral acceptability—is to provide a fictional and diegetically embedded perspective from which the beauty and historical significance of mobilization can be verified. Needless to say, as Sŏng-ki’s former lover and the mother of his child, her spectatorship provides a stronger emotional charge to what, in a newsreel, for example, would appear as lines of anonymous volunteers. In the appropriation of fictional film for the expression of aesthetic ideologies like Ch’oe Chae-sŏ’s, female spectatorship and heterosexual romance became key to attempts to suture the viewer into the poetics of imperial subjectification.

It is apparent that the mode of melodrama has been transformed by its mobilization for political propaganda. Kŭm-suk’s sublime beholding of the force and might of the Japanese military, as well as her admiration and love for Sŏng-ki as one of its members, creates a different way to resolve the melodramatic conflict. Like the couple in *Sweet Dream*, in *Korea Strait*, Sŏng-ki and Kŭm-suk are also involved in a seemingly irresolvable situation, because they are from different social classes and have a child despite not being able to marry. However, the film presents a potential resolution to the conflict that is very different from Ae-sun’s expurgation by suicide at the end of *Sweet Dream*. In *Korea Strait* the social excess embodied in the modern woman is recuperated for national and imperial society through the spectacle of the military parade. Her witnessing of Sŏng-ki’s military mobilization transforms the entirety of the narrative, as Kŭm-suk dedicates herself to the nation-state through factory work and there arises a promise of eventual marriage with Sŏng-ki and their formation of a proper Japanese family. The image of Sŏng-ki’s mobilization therefore provides another way to choreograph social excess, because Kŭm-suk’s witnessing of the spectacular image of mobilization creates new narrative possibilities for the modern woman as symptom of social crisis. At the same time, the choreographed bodies of the military parade, and Sŏng-ki’s stoic look to the

horizon, replaces the former images of patriarchy (the overseeing husband and the duplicitous lover) with the collective body of the military troop, now given an individual identity through the fictional male protagonist.

As Fujitani clarifies, both the U.S. and Japanese empires were able to figure their internal and external colonies as “spaces of freedom” only by coding national consciousness as homogeneously male national consciousness, while at the same time making good national motherhood a precondition for the “liberation” of ethnic minority women from the patriarchal past (2011, 347–348). The use of Kūm-suk’s point of view solely to bolster the emotional pull of the film’s representation of national mobilization contains within it the contradictions of this national mode of liberation, in which, according to Fujitani, women are simultaneously feared and loved. In this sense, the overt fear of women that is expressed in *Sweet Dream* persists in the political fiction of *Korea Strait*, even as Kūm-suk becomes, through the nation, capable of a proper way of loving.

Another repetition and difference that appears between the (fiction) techniques of *Sweet Dream* and those of *Korea Strait* is the use of crosscutting to create suspense at the climax of the narrative. The devices of crosscutting and sound bridges provide a particularly fictional illusion that Sōng-ki and Kūm-suk have overcome the class and gender differences of the melodrama narrative in order to become imperial subjects. The penultimate scene moves quickly back and forth between shots of Sōng-ki fighting and being wounded in Japan and shots of Kūm-suk collapsing from overwork in a textile factory back in Korea. Through the use of aural bridges of machine guns firing in Japan and Kūm-suk testing the productive limits of her sewing machine in Korea, the former couple is brought together by way of the machinery of the war economy. Despite their necessary separation due to their immoral past, they now belong to the same collective political project by virtue of their shared dedication to the Japanese state and economy. Rather than an abrupt turn of events (the daughter’s injury) intervening in the action, *Korea Strait* instead employs crosscutting and sound bridges to produce an illusion of the simultaneity of the national community. In this way there is an attempt to integrate the machine of fictional film with the organicist ideology of an industrial community at war. Abandoning the imaginary community of print capitalism discussed by Benedict Anderson—which, as I will show, still plays an important role in *Volunteer* and *Spring on the Korean Peninsula*—the conventions and techniques of film become entirely responsible for representing Sōng-ki and Kūm-suk as imperial subjects belonging to the same community. The phone call that

they make to each other after their respective recoveries serves to further affirm the bond they have created through mass communication.

These visual and aural continuities break from the stock footage and retrospective soundtrack that provide a code for presenting total history in the newsreel or culture film. While effective in its own right, the scene of collective bowing in memory of the war dead that appears in *Patriot's Day in Chosŏn* still presents the voluntarist national subject as an object of the camera. By the climax of *Korea Strait*, the two protagonists have come to act in concert out of an experience of deep psychological and moral conflict, as individuals who both suffer from and regain their dedication to social norms. Instead, Pak Ki-ch'ae employed a specifically fictional cinematic fantasy of visual and aural simultaneity to provide redemption *through the nation* to two protagonists who are both tied together and separated by their moral transgression.

This sort of transformation of fictional film and the newsreel documentary was an uneven process, and persistent discontinuities between narratives and spectacles continue to reveal the impossibility of subsuming all social relations into the equalizing image of a beautiful, completely mobilized community. The final shot, when Sŏng-ki looks out over the Korea Strait invokes hope that his volunteering and Kŭm-suk's factory labor have allowed them to work off the debt of their immorality, but standing by his side is an anonymous nurse character and not his lost love. As in any coherent melodrama, it remains ambiguous whether the primary narrative tensions around lost opportunities and the desire for redemption have achieved any kind of satisfactory resolution through the protagonists' decisive actions (in this case, their decisions to volunteer).

Narrative Ambivalence in *Volunteer* and *Spring on the Korean Peninsula*

If *Korea Strait* uses crosscutting and sound bridges to create the simultaneity of the imagined community, *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* and *Volunteer* depend on representations of the newspaper medium. The plots of both of these films rely on the newspaper to convey information between different locales and to attempt to resolve the tensions between story and spectacle that remain after the integration of newsreel and melodrama fiction. The protagonist of *Spring on the Korean Peninsula*, Yŏng-il (Kim Il-hae), finds out about the formation of the Peninsula Film Corporation and the completion of the film *Chunhyang* through the newspaper. In *Volunteer*, the absentee landlord, also played by Kim Il-hae, finds out about Ch'un-ho's enlistment through the

newspaper, and proceeds to return the land of the agricultural cooperative to Ch'un-ho's family. The diegetic appearance of the newspaper as the link between subject and locale highlights an attachment to precinematic ways of imagining the social, and perhaps a hesitation in the face of the effective aesthetics of total history that a film such as *Korea Strait* accomplishes through its hybrid form. Whether intentional or not, in these two films the newspaper creates a degree of ironic distance from the cinematic illusion of integrated national community. As self-reflexive as *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* is about the film medium itself, the fact that the protagonist is absent from the propagandistic climax and finds out about the resolution of the main plot conflict only by reading about in secondhand in the newspaper effects more estrangement from the fictional world of the film than any of the scenes showing the filming of the film within a film. Likewise, for a film as invested in realism as *Volunteer* ostensibly is, there is little concern for plausibility in the idea that rural class conflict in colonial Korea could be resolved if absentee landlords would simply read more news stories about the courageous volunteer soldiers from the countryside.

The newspaper, then, is the most direct way that *Volunteer* and *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* magnify the duplicity in their own narratives of mobilization. However, there are many other significant moments in which military and cultural mobilization is represented in a twofold manner, similar to the two-sided character of the commodified cinematic image. Just as the commodified images of earlier cinema drew the viewer into an ambivalent relation to modernity, military and cultural mobilization for empire are represented in the aesthetics of mobilization not only as ends in themselves, but also as the means toward achieving modernization out of feudal class antagonisms, creating modern gender roles, and potentially saving the cultural identity of Korea. Mobilization is equalizing not only in terms of ethnic difference between Koreans and Japanese but also in terms of gender and social class. However, just as the commodified cinematic image presents a spectacular fictional world fundamentally alienated from everyday life, mobilization often appears ambivalently in even the most patriotic films of the colonial period. In the cases of *Volunteer* and *Spring on the Korean Peninsula*, these ambivalences appear primarily in the way that the narratives remain at odds with the aesthetics of absorption exemplified by the spectacles of mobilization.

The script that the former Marxist critic Pak Yŏng-hŭi wrote for the film *Volunteer* contains many of the same themes of class conflict that he explored in his literary works. For example, his most famous short story, "The Hunting Dog" ([1925] 1997) is an allegory about class consciousness

that describes a landowner whose greed leads him to buy a dog to guard his money box from the villagers. The villagers are living on the edge of starvation due to flooding, but the landowner is too greedy to help them; however, the landowner ends up being killed by the very dog he buys to protect his money.

Volunteer also deals with class issues in the countryside, in an equally critical and allegorical way for much of the film. The main antagonist is an absentee landlord, one of the most reviled social types in Korean proletarian arts literature of the 1930s. This landlord is a profligate son and former exchange student in Japan whose more ethical father was, before his death, friends with the family of the protagonist, Ch'un-ho. He calls the humble Ch'un-ho to Seoul to let him know that he is replacing him as supervisor of the farm with Tök-sam, who has been lobbying him for a position. The rest of the plot revolves around a typical love triangle between Ch'un-ho, the absentee landlord's sister, and a woman from the countryside. The narrative of class conflict and the love triangle transforms, however, as Ch'un-ho daydreams of becoming a volunteer soldier for the Japanese military while watching the village children play war with their toy guns and Japanese flags. When the volunteer soldier system is instituted, Ch'un-ho takes the exam and enlists. In melodramatic fashion, the absentee landlord sees in the newspaper that Ch'un-ho has enlisted and decides to return the farm to Ch'un-ho's family; likewise, Ch'un-ho makes amends in a pastoral scene by a well with his rural love interest, whom he informs of his decision to join the military. Unlike Pak's proletarian literature stories, in which those with and without property are deadlocked in class conflict, in *Volunteer* there is a third term that allows for the resolution of the class conflict and the love triangle—the military state. The spectacle of Ch'un-ho as one body in an organism guided by an absolute idea, displayed most vividly in his daydream about soldiering, can only artificially and melodramatically resolve the tensions in the story. It is an unlikely coincidence that the absentee landlord's sister reads of Ch'un-ho's enlistment in the newspaper and that the landlord decides to give the land back to Ch'un-ho's family. This ending creates a false image of a social totality in which people of different classes come to act with the same sense of ethical mission once they collectively recognize the equalizing force of Japanese militarism. Not only does Ch'un-ho gain equality with other Japanese imperial subjects by enlisting, but he also liberates his mother and sister from the lecherous supervisor, Tök-sam, who had replaced him on the family farm.

In this way, *Volunteer* represents the volunteer soldier system as a means to resolve various problems, such as the remnants of feudal cronyism, “premodern” gender attitudes and conventions, and class conflict between the displaced tenant farmer and the absentee landlord. It was largely because the volunteer soldier system could be imagined as an equalizing and progressive force for modernization that former Marxists like Pak Yǒng-hŭi were willing to write such narratives, which used all of the tropes of proletarian arts narratives but also fell into the trap of recognizing in the nation-state and in military mobilization a solution to class conflict. In other words, Pak was in some manner intrigued by the cinematic image of an imperial society in which the interests of the absentee landlord and the displaced farmer could be one and the same. Nonetheless, in *Volunteer*, the proletarian arts narrative clearly remains at odds with the spectacle of mobilization, because the conflicts in the former can only be resolved through the latter by the unlikely and melodramatic plot event of the absentee landlord returning the farm to Ch’un-ho’s family out of his respect for Ch’un-ho’s dedication of his life to Japan. In historical reality, no civil institutions could offer such rewards to Korean soldiers, so the proletarian realist story remains unreconciled with the spectacle of mobilization. This discord both gives the film its sense of fallacy and makes it somehow representative of both the power and limitations of the aesthetic ideology of imperial subjectification.

Spring on the Korean Peninsula (1941) portrays Korean filmmakers, musicians, and theater actors struggling to make a film version of the Korean folktale “Chunhyang.” As film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim (2011) points out, *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* is self-reflexive about the conditions for film production, and through the film within a film device it introduces complex questions about nationality and film capital. Some of these questions include: 1) Can an ethnically ambiguous actress (Anna), enamored mostly with Japan and her own career, but with more experience, play the character Chunhyang, or should the directors choose a less experienced but more talented actress who better fits the mold of a “Korean” woman? 2) Is it still possible, in 1941, to adapt successfully Korean national narratives to film? and 3) How will the creation of the Peninsula Film Corporation (a thinly veiled reference to the Korean Film Production Corporation) enable or restrict the creative vision and financial stability of Korean film artists?

The answers that *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* provides to these questions are not transparent. The end of the film contains the expected ideological content: the film producer and music agent, Yǒng-il, and the director of the diegetic film *Chunhyang*, Hŏ Hun, overcome their

financial difficulties and their forays into embezzlement to produce *Chunhyang* by benefitting from the establishment of the Peninsula Film Corporation. The film within a film, *Chunhyang*, ends up starring the Korean actress and Yǒng-il's talent discovery, Chǒng-hŭi, rather than the more modern and assimilated actress, Anna, who is fired for insubordination. The film ends with the opening night of *Chunhyang* and Chǒng-hŭi's touching live vocal performance. With the success of the film within the film, *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* presents an image of compatibility between the Japan-centered Co-Prosperity Sphere and the filming of Korean cultural tradition. Through the financing and infrastructure offered by Japanese firms and the colonial state, Koreans, too, will be able to have the film company and national cinema that both Yǒng-il and Hō Hun desire to construct from the beginning of the story.

Despite this narrative, in which Korean cultural tradition makes it to the big screen through the formation of the Peninsula Film Corporation, a number of events in the plot are off-kilter with this macropolitical narrative arc, and the self-reflexivity of the film allows for the introduction of ambiguities concerning the colonial relation. For example, the producer and main character, Yǒng-il, happens to fall ill right as he is caught for embezzlement and right before the Peninsula Film Corporation is established. Yǒng-il's illness spares him from the climactic and spectacular scene of the corporation's establishment. The scene includes a patriotic speech in Japanese by the head of the company, Pang Chang-sik, and a long tracking shot exhibiting the faces of the fictional directors and producers of the new film corporation. After the speech, two random attendees remark on Yǒng-il's absence, and *Chunhyang's* director, Hō Hun, appears but has no lines. Chǒng-hŭi is also absent, as the scene crosscuts to her room, where she says to the assistant that she has no need to go to the reception, because her love interest, Yǒng-il, will not be there. Finally, Yǒng-il reads about the formation of the corporation and the completion of *Chunhyang* from his sickbed, where Anna takes care of him.

In one sense, Yǒng-il's absence from the spectacular dinner scene inaugurating the establishment of the film company makes sense narratively, because his whereabouts play into the suspense of the love triangle story between him, Chǒng-hŭi, and Anna. However, in the final scene, Yǒng-il and Chǒng-hŭi, on the coattails of *Chunhyang's* success, leave for Japan to learn filmmaking. Each benefits personally from the creation of the Peninsula Film Corporation, but they remain unsullied and at a safe distance from the crass political economy involved in their ascent to mass

cultural prestige. In addition, Anna, who is initially hired to play the role of Chunhyang and is depicted as selfish and troublesome at the beginning of the film, somewhat inexplicably reappears at the end of the film as a benevolent and nurturing nurse to Yǒng-il. Therefore, even though the ultimate message of the film's narrative is that the dream of a Korean national cinema will come about through cooperation with Japan, the narrative elements borrowed from earlier film and literature—such as the love triangle trope, the penury of struggling artists, and the look back to the national past—are all ambiguously set into relation with the spectacle of mobilization. The film introduces a difference between the colonial relationship as it is experienced by the co-opted directors and as it is experienced, for example, in the intimate setting of Anna's nursing of Yǒng-il. The film asserts the possibility of Korean national cinema under the purview of Japanese film capital, but a political and cultural ambivalence toward this project is also apparent in the way that narrative elements related to the intimate relations between the main characters remain in conflict with the spectacular scenes of both the formation of the imperialist Peninsula Film Corporation and the production and screening of the national cinema artifact—the film within the film, *Chunhyang*.

Retreat from Narrative: *Dear Soldiers* (1944) and *Figure of Youth* (1943)

While the incorporation of fictional film into the themes and aesthetics of the newsreel in many respects created a more effective propaganda machine, using film melodrama in this way also presented a number of dangers to the colonial state's project of total mobilization. In the simplest terms, colonial and military officials must have worried that the film audience would be guided by these cinematic fantasies to make undesirable demands on historical reality. For example, all the fictional films discussed so far offer improbable utopian possibilities along with their representations of mobilization. *Korea Strait* suggests that class differences, ethnic differences, and the individual mistakes of the past can all be overcome and forgiven through submission to the state. *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* asserts that an autonomous Korean national film industry will flourish when the capital of the colonial state relieves the financial burdens of independent Korean film artists. *Volunteer* promises nothing less than the redistribution of rural lands to the traditional tillers of that land as one possible effect of joining the Japanese military. What happens when these improbable fictions are brought to bear on the historical reality that the colonial state is supposedly actively transforming? What if the mass audience begins to demand love, equality, national cinema, and the

leveling of class relations as the compensation (or even precondition) for soldiering, working as a factory girl, or performing the demanded rites of the colonial regime?

I would argue that the elimination of narrative information and the turn to a more completely spectacular film aesthetic in many 1940s films is partly explained by this danger in the appropriation of fictional film for the purposes of propaganda. Pak Han-jun's *Dear Soldiers* (1944) (produced directly by the military) and Toyoda Shirō's *Figure of Youth* (1943) are two examples of films that limit narrative information to only its most essential and basic elements. They instead glorify mobilization through spectacles that are reminiscent of the closed-off discourse of the newsreel, but that maintain an attention to the physical and emotional struggles of individual male soldiers with a minimal degree of character development. The social and personal conflicts that drive the plot of a 1920s or 1930s narrative film are almost completely replaced in these films by spectacles of soldiers' bodies in action (e.g., marching, skiing, running, shooting), as objects of measurement, improvement, and discipline, and as members of mass formations. The most striking scenes in *Dear Soldiers* are not related to the meager narrative information about the family life the soldiers have left behind, but are rather scenes of mass, abstract military formations that take various shapes, such as squares and spirals, as well as close-ups of the faces and bodies of the individual enlistees struggling to assimilate to military life. Nor does the subplot of the major's seeking a marriage partner for the protagonist of *Figure of Youth* exist as much more than a faint celebration of normative Japanese families in the background of the only story (or, rather, spectacle) that is given much emotional weight, which is the young males' mental and physical development into Japanese soldiers.

The gradual occlusion of complex narrative information is not necessarily a sign for some kind of primary contradiction in late colonial Korean films. However, it does point to an anxiety about the interpretive excesses that are always enabled, to some degree, by fiction film in general and by the melodramatic mode in particular. As artfully choreographed as these excesses might become through the repeatable conventions of narrative cinema, they can always be exploited consciously to introduce multiple codes into a film text. In this respect, however politically tendentious late colonial Korean films might be, much can be learned about that historical period through reading the ways that fiction was appropriated for the enlivening of propaganda, as well as the ways that propaganda was appropriated for the expression of new political possibilities for fiction.

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Notes

- 1 The transition to a total war film economy in the late 1930s has traditionally brought up a number of controversial and difficult political problems. First and foremost is the problem of how to understand the colonial dimension of the regime of censorship and control over film that emerged in the late 1930s. Film histories that are concerned with the development of an “autonomous” Korean national cinema tend to emphasize how the stricter colonial regime of censorship, incorporation, and organization of film artists that emerged in the late 1930s suppressed the continued development of the earlier film culture. However, in his reading of the scholarly attempts to identify “the first Korean film” in the 1920s, Dong Hoon Kim (2009) has shown the various difficulties and anxieties that arise in attempting to differentiate clearly between an era of Korean national cinema and an era of more severe colonial suppression, because the preceding decade—with its own versions of collaboration, incorporation, expression, and suppression under cultural policy—does not yield transparent answers to the question of the origins and development of a Korean national cinema. Chonghwa Chung has also shown how the interrelations between imperial Hollywood and Japanese film and the colonial Korean industry means that there was no such thing in the 1920s as a pure Korean national cinema (a possibility, I would add, that the global nature of the techniques and conventions of cinema would preclude in any case).
- 2 I have chosen to translate some of the titles of films differently from the Korean Film Archive DVD collection. I use *Korea Strait* [orig. *Straits of Chosŏn*], *Spring on the Korean Peninsula* [orig. *Spring of Korea Peninsula*], *Chosŏn*, *The Home Front* [orig. *In the Rear in Chosŏn*], and *Japan Chronicles* [orig. *Japanese Chronicles*].
- 3 In a pair of texts, *The Mass Ornament* (1995) and *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), Siegfried Kracauer analyzed the relation between early mass movements of human figures in cinema (i.e. “mass ornaments” such as the Tiller Girls) and later spectacles of National Socialism (a sort of development of the mass ornament that Ch’oe Chae-sŏ identifies in his contrast between the mechanism of wooden dolls and machines and the organic expressiveness of the student soldiers) (Kracauer 1995, 75–88; 1947, 301–303). Remarking on the way that mass ornaments in cinema reflect the mechanization of human movement in industrial labor, Kracauer connected the Tiller Girls to the labor of industrial capitalism. About the mass ornaments that appear in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, Kracauer writes, “Mass ornaments they appeared to Hitler and his staff, who must have appreciated them as configurations symbolizing the readiness of the masses to be shaped and used at will by their leaders” (1947, 302). Kracauer’s discussion of mass ornaments shows that the kind of spectacle of mobilization described by Ch’oe and appearing in colonial Korean films involves not just film, but also the choreographing of movement. In an elaboration on Susan Sontag’s well-known discussion of “fascinating fascism” (1975) Brigitte Peucker adds to Kracauer’s discussion by interpreting the use of *tableau vivant* images of posed bodies that appear frozen in time, almost corpse-like. According to Peucker (2004), in Leni Riefenstahl’s films the

choreographing of male bodies expresses a celebration and sexualization of death, a kind of necrophilia directed toward the bodies of the heroic soldier, the nation, and the political leadership. In *Korea Straits*, Sŏng-ki marches in the military formation with a stoic willingness to die. In the important and individuating shot/reverse shot close-up, he is not in a position to return Kŭm-suk's gaze, or those of his cheering family, because he must direct his eyes forward, guiding his life solely by Cho'e's "absolute idea" (in this case, the idea of the Japanese empire).

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