War as Business in South Korea's Manchurian Action Films

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Toward a Typology of South Korea's Korean War Films

From the 1950s to the present, more than ninety South Korean films, both narrative and documentary, have dealt with the subject of the Korean War, treating the conflict as a historical calamity that left a profound impact on the subsequent development of both Koreas. Yet, as an unending war, the Korean War hardly marks a closed historical chapter, as many of these films imply; rather, the war is at the foundation of continuing tensions on the Korean peninsula where Cold War politics continue to structure the reality of people both north and south of the 38th parallel. Since the formation of North and South Korea as inimical states, both sides have witnessed massive ideological campaigns. Within this ideologically driven context, cinema has performed an effective cultural function by disseminating state ideology to

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the masses. As I explore in this essay, however, the ideological configuration of South Korea's Korean War films has generated a spectrum of nuances and implications, at times unsettling, rather than congealing, their meaning.

In seizing the scenario of war, South Korea's Korean War cinema has, to no small degree, sought to solidify a negative image of the enemy other. As Theodore Hughes notes, North Korea, over time, has been increasingly marked by and associated with decline, collapse, and demise in the cultural imaginary of South Korea. In contrast, South Korea has been rendered in overtly visible terms, both present and alive.[1] Through this discursive process in which South Korea is implicitly set against a negative reflection of the counter-regime to its north, the South Korean state, within war narrative films, is represented as the sole rightful Korean nation. Revealing little about South Korea's positive substance but a great deal about its anxieties about legitimacy and security, South Korea's Korean War films have rendered visible and tangible the various scenarios of struggle against the anticommunism that the state has maintained as an immutable political raison d'être.[2]

That cinema functions as the state ideological apparatus is, of course, not a new claim. Moreover, given that North Korea and South Korea went to war with each other to realize rival political visions of a single unified Korean nation, it is hardly surprising that both governments have tightly patrolled the ideological boundaries of their respective bodies of Korean War films. For example, the repressive censorship controversies surrounding the release of *P'iagol* (Yi Kang-ch'ŏn, 1955) and the confiscation of the film prints of *Seven Female Prisoners* (Yi Man-hŭi, 1965) indicate the draconic measures that the South Korean state imposed on the construction of the North Korean enemy and North Korea's political ideology on the screen.[3] Yet, in seeking to affirm South Korea's political and moral superiority over North Korea, South Korea's Korean War films have revealingly, for the most part, sidestepped the issue of origins so central to claims of political legitimacy.

This essay brings into view the interpretive parameters of South Korea's cinema of the Korean War, and in so doing, endeavors to read the war beyond the limits of its received cinematic framings. In this essay, I pay attention to the conceptual boundaries of Korean War narrative and imag-

ery, and I examine how these limits are closely related to the continuing iteration of anticommunist state ideology in South Korean films. South Korea's 1960s filmmaking scene is of particular interest here because this period ushered in various types of war narratives on the screen. Certainly, anticommunist Korean War films were a dominant type of war cinema—their production dating back to the early days of the Korean War conflict. The South Korean government mobilized film personnel and resources to produce documentary and newsreel films about the nature of the Korean War to inculcate the masses then under the hardship of total war.[4] In the 1960s, the collaboration between the state and filmmakers reached a zenith, as the state provided a complex form of institutional support for the production of anticommunist Korean War films. At the same time, the success of Yi Man-hŭi's *The Marines Who Never Return* (*Toraoji annŭn haebyŏng*, 1963) and Shin Sang-ok's *Red Muffler* (*Ppalgan mahura*, 1964) proved the commercial viability of the Korean War theme. These works were followed by a slew of Korean War or war-themed films, such as *The Inchon Landing* (*Inch'ŏn sangryuk chakchŏn*, Cho Kŭng-ha, 1965), *Bloody Kuwol Mountains* (*P'iŏrin kuwolsan*, Ch'oe Mu-ryong, 1965), *War and the Woman Teacher* (*Chŏnjaenggwa yŏ'gyosa*, Im Kwon-taek, 1966), *A Journey* (*Yŏro*, Yi Man-hŭi, 1968), and *Seven People in the Cellar* (*Chihasilŭi ch'ilin*, Yi Sŏng-gu, 1969), which largely adhered to the state's mandate of anticommunism and, in the case of Yi Man-hŭi's films, offered critical humanist perspectives on the futility of war. The conspicuous visibility of these films has given rise to an impression among film scholars, however, that Korean War films are the sole type of war narratives that gained recognition in the 1960s, leaving out much-needed discussion on the Cold War as a political structure of war.

The 1960s indeed witnessed the advent of a different type of war narrative film. The so-called Manchurian action films ("Manju action" or "Manju Western" in Korean) accrued a popularity that rivaled that of government-backed anticommunist Korean War films. Unlike the latter, however, Manchurian action films did not receive any institutional support from the government. Since they dealt with armed exploits of the colonial past, these works were often regarded as a separate film entity, apart from the contemporaneous concerns of the Cold War politics that Korean War films reflected. As I will illustrate, however, the distinctive critical stance

of Manchurian action films affords us an opportunity to engage with the formation and naturalization of South Korea's political discourse of war and experience. They register the perverse logic of Cold War politics in a way that few explicitly framed "war" films do. Although remote in generic, historical, and geographical relation to the Korean War, these films enable us to view how state power is consolidated through the state's involvement in perpetual war as an underground business.

South Korean Anticommunism: The Genre and Its Discontents

As a key corpus of the broader genre of South Korean anticommunist films, the Korean War film has often been subsidized and carefully regulated by the South Korean government. This was most conspicuous in the mid-1960s under the Park Chung Hee regime, when "the best anticommunist film" and "the best anticommunist screenplay" emerged as new categories in South Korea's prestigious annual Grand Bell Film Awards. This mandate of anticommunism within South Korean cinema would turn into an institutionalized creed, instigating the production of anticommunist films, which in turn brought material benefits and business incentives to film production companies. Making anticommunist films, in other words, was a safe and sound business option for the filmmakers of the 1960s.

The close collaboration between the state and film production companies often yielded to conventional cinematic configurations of the Korean War that thematized the collective victimization of all South Koreans, placing the South Korean state and its people within a shared field of suffering inflicted by North Korean communists. This body of anticommunist Korean War films routinely deployed familiar dramatic tropes and narrative trajectories: to wit, South Korea is suddenly exposed to horrific violence at the hands of North Korean communist forces who typically appear as machinelike ideologues, devoid of human integrity and warmth.[5] Such cinematic depictions of their excessive, ruthless devotion to their political creed coupled with their belief that they can succeed in politically converting the entire population were—it is not difficult to discern—aimed at generating a mass dread of communism.

In such anticommunist films, the South Korean camp derives its formal

coherence through the operation of negation—South Korea is figured, in other words, as that which is outside the political machinery of communism and its violent implementation. Rather, South Korea is represented as a community of innocent bystanders whose social interactions are saturated with humanist values and beliefs. At the heart of this binary opposition is an a priori distrust of not just revolutionary politics but any politics. Apolitical and therefore "pure," the South Korean body politic, as constructed in these films, is instead depicted as favoring and valorizing traditional mores as the necessary underpinnings of Korean society. South Korea's Korean War films, this is to say, served as a repository of dominant ideology and its naturalization.[6]

South Korea's war films at once construct and underscore the importance of the traditional social fabric of Korea, especially values such as respect for the elderly, love for family and neighbor, and so on, which are held to be time-honored and sacrosanct. The nation, this is to say, is conceived through a model of society in which each member is assigned a proper social role and function. Within this restrictive, deeply conservative social imaginary, the presence of the military is usually rendered as temporary, a requirement for the present that will soon pass. The implication is that South Korean society existed as a harmonious and idealized community, born of stable human interactions and custom-based social relations that had existed prior to the conflict of the Korean War.[7] The justification to fight communism, given this configuration of values, thus appears to stem from a restorationist impulse. Geared toward reinstating an imagined social order that apparently existed from time immemorial on the Korean peninsula, South Korean war narratives promote a vision of tradition-based humanism as the foundation for the national community.

Depending on how Korean War films articulate the terms of this humanism, the international dimensions of the war are either visually pronounced but simultaneously muffled or relegated to the margins. The presence of foreign forces in these films typically poses no fundamental problem to the ethnically homogeneous imaginary of the nation because they are not portrayed under the sign of the other but conceived along the lines of affinity and depicted as sharing deep human characteristics with South Korean victims. No film illustrates this theme more explicitly than South Korea's 1955

English-language film *Phoenix Hill* (Chŏn Ch'ang-gŭn, 1955), in which a US soldier and his South Korean counterpart find common ground in the cultural ritual of Christmas. This ritual is portrayed as compatible with Korean social mores and values—an apparent seamlessness of tradition that unites two men from radically different backgrounds. In short, the presumption of ideological harmony—between the state and its people as well as between South Koreans and US citizens—functions as a prerequisite for most of South Korea's Korean War narratives.

Violence culminates in a justification of humanism not only in anticommunist Korean War films but also in antiwar films. The most notable example is the 1955 film *P'iagol* (Yi Kang-ch'ŏn). Released less than two years after the signing of the Armistice Agreement, the film represents an early cinematic working through of the Korean War, while active counterinsurgency was still being waged against isolated bands of partisans in South Korea. Like many of South Korea's Korean War films, *P'iagol* offers an account of how South Korea fought the civil war, triumphed in battle against the communist enemy, and attained popular legitimacy. Unlike other Korean War–themed films that typically chronicle the war's outbreak and development, *P'iagol* presupposes the failure of the communists from the outset. On the level of narrative, the film is unmistakably critical of the guerrillas' communist doctrine and practice.

But the film's insistence on the existential dilemma of the communist guerrillas inadvertently generated concern from the South Korean government in that it implied psychological complexity of the enemy other. Instead of adhering to state prescriptions regarding the war, which required producers to paint North Korean communists as ruthless ideologues, the film attributes humanity and emotional depth to the several guerrilla characters.[8] To the censors, this empathetic mode of representing the enemy was ambiguous and ideologically risky. Although the filmic narrative could be read as an endogenous dissolution of communist ideology, with the abandoned communist cell understood as an allegory for North Korea itself, its depiction of the guerrillas exceeded the prescribed political limits of Korean War cinema at the time. Indeed, the film was subjected to a protracted censorship battle, which very nearly jeopardized its release. The director and producer subsequently gave into political pressure by excising and altering several key

sequences to bring the film more closely in line with state propaganda. Yet the controversy surrounding the film's narrative content testifies to considerable lacunae and incongruities within the state's ideological operations during the period when the ideological parameters of Korean War narratives were still being worked through. Indeed, *P'iagol* signaled the advent of antiwar narratives of the Korean War in South Korean film history, a small body of films whose indictment of war can be read as a rupture of the smooth messaging of the state's ideological machinery.

Although many critics have valorized *P'iagol*'s departure from the ideological narrative template of South Korea's Korean War films, its firm place within the body of films that are classified as "Korean War films" points to the conceptual limits of this category. As noted earlier, the Korean War looms large over the sociocultural imaginary of war in South Korea, yet as a category, "Korean War films"—insofar as they are narrowly focused on the war of 1950–53—render the nature of the Cold War largely elusive, if not invisible. Here, it should be recalled that the Cold War, as a geopolitical system, gave rise to a state of war as an ongoing conditioning structure of Korea and its neighboring countries. In the service of US hegemony in the region, this complex system has organized and regulated sociopolitical, economic, security, and cultural relations and operations. In projecting and naturalizing a binary worldview that posits the liberal United States and its allies against their communist counterparts, the Cold War system has had a discursive and logical sway that must be theorized and narrated beyond specific instances of military action and engagement.

For this reason, inquiry into Cold War politics in cultural representation needs to go beyond the confines of Korean War stories, which, as a result of the South Korean state's intense ideological programming, offer limited terrain by way of which we can interrogate state power. As a body of film whose prescriptive parameters have been closely determined by South Korean state intervention, regulation, and scrutiny, South Korea's Korean War films depict military battles and conflicts yet curiously close off the larger matrix of perpetual war, which structured the 1950–53 instance of war in the first place. Instead of expanding the critique of war to compass the protracted nature and ubiquity of the state's military logic and militarized culture, South Korea's Korean War films, including antiwar films,

produce the opposite effect; they paradoxically foreclose critical debates on the complexity of war as a structuring imaginary of the Cold War culture of South Korea specifically and the region as a whole.

Nihilistic in character, South Korean antiwar films critique war and its destruction by highlighting humanistic values. Yet these films are not fundamentally different in kind from state-sanctioned, anticommunist war films insofar as both promote a pessimistic view toward politics without calling into question the structure and practice of the state power in the first place. Although differences do exist, these can be understood along the lines of an expansion and contraction of narrative focus. Antiwar films include a general critique of the state machinery of war. However, this critical expansion is complemented by an inherently reactive move; instead of problematizing the South Korean state's practice of violence, these films revert to the very framework of liberal humanism that anticommunist war films have developed as an ideological foil to the ostensible depravity and monstrousness of North Korea.

The broadened focus of the antiwar variant of Korean War films, in other words, does not lead to critical analysis of the expanded purview of South Korean state power and authority enabled by the Korean War, much less a reading of it as a sign and symptom of the larger geopolitics of the Cold War. Rather, South Korea's antiwar Korean War films obsessively resort to a nihilistic form of humanism, and in so doing, limit the discursive parameters of inquiry into the relationship of South Korean state violence to the overarching Cold War structure. Enlarged yet paradoxically myopic, the focus of these films may compass a universalizing critique of war violence in the abstract; yet by disavowing the broader structure of the Cold War, Korean War films, classified narrowly as such, remain obscurantist texts. Whether anticommunist or antiwar, South Korea's war films impede critical understanding of the Cold War as a permanent system, effacing the Korean War's geopolitical origins and context. More specifically, they block from view the business side of South Korea's military mobilization—a dimension of the war that has buttressed the South Korean state's role within the coordinates of the Cold War in East Asia.

The impulse to foreclose the war and its meanings from the viewpoint

of nihilistic humanism, I thus contend, is constitutive to South Korea's "Korean War films." Central to the reality of the unending Korean War yet effaced from view in South Korea's ideologically regulated Korean War films, the South Korean state seldom, if ever, surfaces as a meaningful object of perception. Sovereign in its capacity to dictate representation while simultaneously remaining beyond the ambit of representation, South Korean state authority thus can be understood as a constitutive ideological limit of "Korean War film" as a Cold War cultural text. Hardly passive, South Korean state authority wields its power in its demarcation of interpretive limits. Thus, to explore Korean War discourse—its rationale, mobilization, and logistics—beyond the confines of that body of films conventionally recognized as "Korean War films," I contend that its scope must be expanded to include cultural scenarios of the 1931–45 Pacific War, more specifically, the proto-Korean nation-state during the colonial period that waged a military campaign against the Japanese empire and its colonial apparatus. By directing attention to allegorical representations of the unseemly origins of the South Korean state, I aim to challenge how Korean War films can and should be understood.

Manchurian Action Film as Korean War Narrative

The structural limitations of Korean War films relative to the perpetual politics of the Cold War raise the question of whether South Korean war narratives are capable of directly addressing the state's Cold War political function. Even as the argument can be advanced that the South Korean state consistently appears in Korean War films as a problematic entity in that it is represented as lacking full political authority or initiative, this depiction nowhere accords with the historical truth: namely, the South Korean state asserted its dreadful power and violence against its own population before, during, and after the war. Indeed, the authoritarian state promulgated a developmentalist ideology accompanied by massive programming to control its populace for decades after the 1950–53 war. The inconsistency between filmic representation and sociopolitical reality compels us to consider whether South Korean cinema is capable of critically reflecting upon the

contradictory features of the state as it has functioned within the Cold War system. Are there any filmic texts, in other words, that confront the thorny matter of the state's culpability within the "business" of warmongering?

I submit that Manchurian action films of the 1960s and the 1970s furnish a critical aperture by way of which the war-profiteering nature of the South Korean state can be discerned. To the extent this body of films imaginatively reflects upon the colonial past, the historical connection of this body of film to the contemporaneous condition of the Cold War—the juncture in which they were produced—is far from self-evident. This apparent disconnect is compounded by the historiographical constraints of South Korea's Cold War culture, in which the colonial past is often myopically conceived as a demarcated window of time that preceded the emergence of the South Korean state. I contend, however, that Manchurian action films of the 1960s are remarkably reflexive of the capitalist war politics of the Cold War South Korean state and in particular shed light on the role of state power in rationalizing and maintaining the war as a perpetual business. Albeit set in the colonial past, these films extend beyond their temporal setting in terms of their significance. They demand analysis relative to the Cold War as a system. Offering crucial insight into the structural dimensions of the Cold War, they assert what most other popular war narratives fail to thematize: the workings of the partitioned capitalistic state in authorizing and managing the prolonged business of war.

Set in Manchuria during the colonial period, Manchurian action films are war narratives of a particular kind. As part of a hybrid film cycle that gained popularity in 1960s South Korea, these films inherit their nationalist ethos from biography films from earlier decades, which glorified the heroic anticolonial, independence struggles of Korean patriots. Manchurian action films, however, replaced the didacticism of the earlier nationalist films with a new narrative approach toward colonial history. Instead of highlighting the lives of actual historical figures, these films emphasized the adventures of armed militants who waged war against the Japanese imperial army. In the late 1960s, these war narrative films incorporated conventions of both the Western (hence the hybrid generic term, "Manchurian Western") and martial arts action films, while keeping the masculine ethos of loyalty par-

ticular to earlier nationalist films intact. A hallmark of Manchurian action films, tough masculinity has subsequently cast a long shadow on the action film genre as it has developed in South Korea.

I have previously examined this body of films to inquire into the changing terms of cinematic nationalism during the 1960s.[9] Manchurian action films can be read as an attempt to reformulate and reenergize anticolonial and anti-Japanese nationalism during a period when, in response to the pressures of Cold War realpolitik but against the overwhelming opposition of the South Korean people, the South Korean state normalized relations with Japan. As texts that engage the colonial period not only within a postcolonial juncture in which anti-Japanese sentiment was at a high but also in a moment in which Japanese culture encroached upon South Korea, these films occupy a unique place in South Korea's cultural history of the Cold War. The realpolitik of the Cold War moment in which these films were generated can be discerned, I further contend, in the strained logic of their cinematic form, which on the whole is characterized by ideological equivocation.

In this essay, however, I propose a rereading of these films as war narratives. To do this, I examine Manchurian action films through the conceptual lens of genre while attending to the constitutive problematics of genre-based analysis. In examining Manchurian action films as war narratives rather than as action films or Westerns, as they are more typically categorized and treated in existing scholarship, I argue against narrow preconceptions of genres when it comes to cultural narration of the Korean War. By situating the Korean War within the broader political economy of the Cold War, I aim to show how Manchurian action films complicate the generic template and periodized framework of Korean War films. Proceeding from the observation that constant war and military mobilization have structured—indeed produced—a false sense of stability and prosperity in the East Asian region, I argue that Manchurian action films reflect the material contradictions of South Korea's Cold War culture.

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Following the Money

Criticism on Manchurian action films has strongly favored the later period films at the expense of a close overview of the early works. By "later period," I mean the late 1960s and early 1970s films in which the genre's hybrid features were more pronounced, and its mantra of anti-Japanese nationalism was more ironically represented. Whereas the early Manchurian action films had a strong generic affiliation with war films, the later works began, so to speak, to don Western garb. As the critical ascendancy of *Break Up the Chain* (*Soesasŏrŭl kkŭnŏra*, Yi Man-hŭi, 1971) illustrates, South Korea's Manchurian action films' generic shift to the Western, the most recognizably transnational genre of the time, facilitated a reading in which the later examples of the genre appear to mark a departure from the dominant state ideology. By valorizing the later films over the earlier ones, film critics, perhaps inadvertently, equated the earlier war narrative of Manchurian action films as uncritical repositories of state propaganda. As the logic goes, the earlier works show total support for the nation, whereas the later works deviate from such political programming. It is only the later works then, that is, the generically Western Manchurian action films, that deserve critical analysis and retrieval.

Although the interpretive valorization of the late Manchurian action films turns on the hybrid genre's subversive potentials, this identification of generic diversity with progressive politics misses the thematic axis that gives coherence to and regulates the imagining of war in the first place. The questions I accordingly would like to pose speak to the changing contours of cinematic nationalism, but they also relate directly to how South Korean war narratives engage the structuring context of the Cold War. In particular, I would like to inquire toward what end male protagonists in war situations, specifically, the armed anticolonial struggle, exert their power and strength. What are the specific gains and rewards of their actions and endeavors? And, how are these actions related to the overarching anticolonial discourse of the nation that seems to dominate this war imaginary? The answer to these questions is money. By money, I am referring to the way money as well as its metaphorical forms and configurations gain structural significance in the war imaginary of Manchurian action films.

Cinematic representations of colonialism prior to the advent of Manchurian action films depict money or wealth in a purely negative fashion—in the form, more often than not, of ill-gotten gains. This negative depiction of material gains enables a dichotomous mapping of the world in which virtuous Koreans are set against treacherous Koreans. Collaborators, for instance, are always associated with material enrichment; their wealth is, these filmic narratives make clear, the direct outcome of their treachery. The binary logic of seeking money or serving the nation dominates the narrative of films like *Farewell to Tumen River* (*Tumanganga charikk̆ŏra*, Im Kwon-t'aek, 1961), an antecedent of Manchurian action films in which Japanese monetary reward for Korean collusion is depicted as pure evil—a system of colonial collaboration that must be eliminated. The imperative of tracing, identifying, and punishing Korean traitors who receive reward money from the Japanese while exonerating those who have been wrongfully accused as collaborators structures South Korea's representations of colonialism.

The conception of money changes substantially by the mid-1960s, however. In fact, the advent of the Manchurian action film signals a radically different conception of money within the anticolonial war imaginary of South Korean film. Money is no longer conceived as a sign of corruption or betrayal—as something, in other words, at odds with the sacred aura of nationalist struggle. Instead, the guerrilla force now needs money desperately; specifically, the guerrillas are in dire need of war funds to carry out their military campaigns. Films like *The Continent on Fire* (*Pulbutnŭn taeryuk*, Yi Yong-ho, 1965) and *Soviet-Manchurian Border* (*Soman kukkyŏng*, Kang Pŏm-gu, 1964) are prime examples of this narrative reconception of money. These war narratives identify the procurement, the transfer, and the management of war funds as their principal action. In *Soviet-Manchurian Border*, for example, the male protagonist's prolonged suffering and melancholia derives precisely from his failure to complete business transactions, namely, the delivery of war funds, with the Soviet Army. In the wake of this failure, burdened by guilt and shame, the protagonist is unable to return to the guerrilla headquarters, becoming instead a leader of a local gangster organization. Only with his delivery of lost war funds to the guerrilla force is this figure morally redeemed by the end of the film.

The narrative of many early 1960s Manchurian action films is often structured around the theme of "following the money." The procurement of the war funds by whatever means necessary is featured as central to the struggle against the Japanese, so much so that this economic endeavor is virtually identical to, rather than inconsistent with, upholding the political mantra of nationalism. Here, the political creed and the economic agenda of the South Korean state appear to be in total unison. In order to serve the nation, one must bring money to the table. Patriotism is accordingly curiously defined in terms of purloined property or canny resource procurement. This, I argue, is a distinctively capitalist way of imagining the anticolonial struggle particular to South Korea's war narrative films.[10]

It must be noted that war funds never appear as bank notes as such. Instead, money appears in the form of objects, properties, or resources with monetary value: gold bullion, treasure maps, Buddha statues, jewelry, mineral and ore mine maps, and so forth. Strikingly, identifiably Japanese government notes or bank notes—the actual legal tender of Manchukuo as a Japanese colony—never appear as circulating currency in Manchurian action films. Like Japanese settlers and residents in Korea, who never appear in the nationalist imaginary of colonial Korea, Japanese money is structurally absent in Manchurian action films, even though the genre is thematically preoccupied—indeed obsessed—with money. Manchurian action films, in other words, are largely preoccupied with money—in nonmoney forms—this is to say, money unmarked as the legal tender of the Japanese empire. It is not too difficult to imagine the practical reasons for this obscurantist way of figuring the money.

In the representation of colonialism in Korea, Japanese rule must be rendered precisely as military occupation. Framing the Japanese colonial ruling as an unlawful foreign occupation thereby signals the political crisis of the temporary loss of the nation. The colonial occupation becomes manageable through the resistance politics of armed struggle. However, depicting the settlement of Japanese residents and circulation of government notes outright would engender a different, less recognizably anticolonial national story. The depiction of Japanese settler colonialists and the circulation of Japanese yuan (yen) would signify the deep penetration of the Japanese colonial power into the economic sphere of Korean people—into arenas

of daily activities. Outright depiction of this penetration could mean, then, the implication of all Koreans into a system of colonial rule so total that the space of resistance would difficult to conceive. Any such signifiers of a permanent colonial economy therefore have been omitted from the nationalist imaginary. In Manchurian action films, the male characters, whether villains, good guys, or nationalist fighters, are in competition, forming alliances or committing betrayal to get the prized objects, which are never explicitly Japanese bank notes. Korean nationalists cannot, after all, be seen in pursuit of Japanese bank notes—a quest that would signal the totality of Japanese hegemony.

Manchurian action films also depict the original ownership of properties in intentionally murky terms; these filmic narratives are premised, however, on the assumption that the guerrilla camp has always had rightful ownership. In *Return of the Wanderer* (Kim Hyo-ch'ŏn, 1970), it is virtually impossible to figure out to whom the gold bullion originally belonged. All the involved characters dispute the history of gold bullion, but the original owner is never verified. Yet, the logical disarray over anterior ownership of the property, which inadvertently produces a series of unintended campy moments, becomes immediately cleared once the nationalist guerrillas enter the picture and declare their ownership claim. This conception of guerrilla treasure as the nation's anterior possession is achieved by portraying the nationalist camp as having greater and more precise knowledge of the properties' whereabouts and true value. Although the individual guerrillas are often depicted as not fully understanding the true value of the properties, they acquire such information as they are drawn more deeply into their mission. Guided by a higher authority, the desire of the guerrillas in the nationalist camp to pursue the property thus appears to be aimed at verifying and restoring the rightful order of things.

Not open to questioning, the authority of the nationalist camp is tied to its apparently unchallenged ownership claim to the treasure. This rightful lien is matched by the total commitment of the guerrilla agents, who simply follow their orders without reservation. Here, the Manchurian action film is explicit in its psychoanalytic figuration of the authority of the nation-state. Although Korea lost its sovereignty to Japan during the historical period described in Manchurian action films, the proto-state nevertheless asserts its

authority over its subject through a dyad of two psychoanalytically drawn subjects, which complementarily constitute the symbolic order of nationalism. On the one end of the spectrum is the subject who is supposed to know (the leader of the guerrilla camp), and on the other is the subject who is supposed to believe (guerrilla agents).[11] What sustains the authority of the proto-state, as figured by the all-knowing guerrilla leader, is the leader's knowledge of the specific location of the prized object. The leader, in other words, always already knows the whereabouts and the value of the properties; at the same time, the agent unequivocally believes the leader's knowledge of the properties. This pairing of these two subjects in their shared quest for treasure is indispensable to establishing the symbolic order of the Korean nation and society. Whereas war could easily signify the breakdown of the normal order, war as business, as rendered in Manchurian action film, serves to solidify the power and authority of the state.

The amorphous character of war funds, which structure, define, and regulate militant anticolonial struggle in these early Manchurian action films, demands further attention. Their depiction clearly echoes the Marxist notion of money as the matrix of social relations. Yet, the peculiarly topological aspect of money, devoid of any reference to actually existing Japanese legal tender, encourages us to conceive of war funds in these films in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms as "*objet petit a*": namely, as that which remains perpetually out of reach but, as a trigger, structures desire, setting it in motion.[12] In this regard, the proto-state, or the subject who is supposed to know all about money, not only commands service to the nation but also tantalizes each individual, compelling the guerilla into a cycle of action that never reaches final fulfillment. After all, the money that the nationalist guerrilla forces attain ultimately belongs to the state. In this sense, Manchurian action films offer a portrait of a state, which regulates not solely through the severity of order and coercion but, rather, by offering a powerful scenario of desire.

Not only do Manchurian action films compel a reconsideration of the South Korean proto-nation by figuring it as an anticolonial guerrilla force and of money by depicting it as ill-gotten gains; they also unveil the seamy underside of war as a profitable state business. Its authority far from righteous, the nation in these films appears as an underground quasi-criminal organization whose main business operations require the liquidation and

laundering of stolen goods into money—the conversion, in other words, of plunder into legal tender. In their refusal to figure the nation as a transcendental entity whose legitimacy is beyond question, Manchurian action films perversely identify war profiteering as the motor of the nation. In so doing, South Korea's Manchurian action films offer the possibility of a new interpretation of the Korean War narrative: set within the colonial period yet produced in the decade following the 1950–53 conflict, these films expose the shadowy—indeed, illegitimate—underside of the nation. Founded on ill-gotten gains and perpetuated by the same, the capitalist nation in the throes of war makes revealing recourse, in this filmic cycle, to perverse acts of criminal violation and transgression.

The radically ambivalent, primitive setting of Manchurian action films serves to displace the obscenity of the nation's self-sustaining activities, in effect, by relegating and sequestering it to the arena of fiction. In the Manchurian action film, the deeply ideological spatial imaginary of the Hollywood Western genre has been grafted onto the making of the South Korean nation. Unable to lay claim to the historic anticolonial revolutionary legacy associated with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung in the region, South Korea's Manchurian action films construct a different lineage—one that borrows from the settler colonial logic of Manifest Destiny in the United States. Indeed, the generic influence of the Western, particularly those films that come later in the Manchurian action film cycle, is unmistakable. Western films generally portray the West as empty, chaotic, and violent but ultimately in the process of becoming part of the nation's sovereign territory. Their narrative simultaneously erases local history and turns the space into a battleground for competing ownership claims. It is a space, in effect, that is up for grabs. Often the outsider who has no clear historical lien on the space emerges as the proprietor by virtue of being the victor of a violent contestation. South Korea's Manchurian action films appropriate this generic configuration of the West as the open, yet-to-be-claimed space. Borrowing its atmosphere of lawlessness from the Western genre, Manchurian action films feature Westernized spaces in which the guerrilla camp assumes prior ownership of property and resources and legitimizes their endless pursuit of the same. Those who know about or discover the valued objects first can claim the ownership according to the rationale of "finders keepers."[13]

Yet, here the ethics promulgated by spaghetti Westerns must be distinguished from those particular to classical Westerns, which have little to do with the former's explicit emphasis on personal greed and materialism. Whereas many classical Western films are preoccupied with the establishment of law and order of a frontier community, the former are not concerned with such lofty ideals. Instead, the main characters in spaghetti Westerns are focused on individual gains and private material rewards. Manchurian action films' persistent emphasis on resource procurement reflects how the narrative logic of individual greed and materialism in the spaghetti Western can be incorporated into the particular capitalist logic of South Korea's cinematic nationalist imaginary.

Manchurian action films thus project a distinctively capitalist way of conceiving anticolonial nationalism and in so doing expose the operations of war as a business. Manchurian action films accordingly furnish us with a critical opportunity to consider how Cold War bipolar politics and neoliberal logic have permeated deeply into South Korea's anticolonial imagination. Here, the nation is represented as a political entity that constantly demands individual action to procure money equivalents: namely, objects, properties, and resources that can be transformed into operational resources. The anti-Japanese guerrilla campaign is thus less about logistical specifics—where to fight, how to fight, with whom to fight, with whom to form alliances—than it is about how to secure war funds. According to this logic, bringing money home is the paramount nationalist act.

Produced during the Cold War, Manchurian action films feature war troves comprising sundry material objects, the ambiguity of which, I argue, can be read critically against the historical juncture in which these films were produced. Uneasily recalling the structural amorphousness of Japanese economic assistance so central to South Korea's economic miracle, the fungibility of funds—and the mystery of their origins—in Manchurian action films must be understood, I argue, against South Korea's historic normalization of relations with Japan in the 1960s. It is no secret that Park Chung Hee's principal reasons in normalizing relations with Japan were economic. And, without question, money from Japan in the form of compensation, grants, and loans was vital to the early stages of Park's development project. Considering this, I would argue that Manchurian action films' persistent

conjuration of money allegorizes how the secret of South Korea's financial rise remains hidden from view in South Korean society, much as the concept of "enemy properties" in the postliberation period effectively erased Japanese capital and properties. The fact that the original ownership of the properties is never in question in Manchurian action films is important insofar as it reinforces, in legerdemain fashion, South Korea's social myth of autonomous development and industrialization.

I conclude my essay with a question: If the basis of the nation is represented as war profiteering, what happens when that nation no longer is associated with war as a business? Put differently, will the profit-seeking individual still fight for and serve the nation when the latter has nothing to offer in material terms? Here, it is worth briefly turning to Yi Man-hŭi's 1970 Manchurian action film, *Break the Chain*, in which the decoupling of money and politics happens. Many critics valorize the film for its seeming resistance to the nationalist call of duty. The film ends with the dispersion of its main protagonists, three men who refuse to join the nationalist campaign, yet I would note that their decision comes after they realize that the object of their pursuit, the Tibetan Buddhist statue, has no monetary value whatsoever; rather, the statue has the names of the guerrilla force inscribed inside—identities that must be protected at all cost. In other words, this statue is politically important to the guerrilla camp alone. Upon realizing the purely political value of the pursued object, these men depart. If Yi Man-hŭi's film is unusual, it is not because their action signifies a willful rejection of nationalism in its totality. Rather, his film is uncommon because the anticolonial struggle is presented without any promise of material reward: it has emerged as pure politics. The protagonists leave behind the nationalist campaign because it is no longer attractive to them materially. The film's ending then reminds us of the disturbing truth of a state caught in the logic of the Cold War: without monetary objects it can offer up to compel action, the state is stripped of its authority. The only way to reverse this situation is for the nation-state to assume what is expected under Cold War politics: namely, to maintain war profiteering as its raison d'être.

Notes

1. Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 95.
2. Instead of using the generic term *Korean War film*, South Korean critics and filmmakers have historically used the catch-all category of *anticommunist film* (*pan'gong yŏnghwa* in Korean) to signal a generically varied body of films that strictly comports with state politics. *Anticommunist film* signals cinematic terrain far broader and representationally diverse than films narrowly featuring imagery of Korean War battles alone. It encompasses genres such as espionage, action, melodrama, film noir, musical, and children's animation. David Scott Diffrient aptly labels it an "umbrella genre" that not only corresponded to the ideological mandates of the authoritarian regimes but also entailed a greater degree of "genre intermixing." See David Scott Diffrient, "'Military Enlightenment' for the Masses: Genre and Cultural Intermixing in South Korea's Golden Age War Films," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 23.
3. For a detailed account on the censorship controversies of *P'iagol*, see Kim So-yŏn, "On Meaning of Realism in the Postwar Korean Film Discourse" ("Chŏnhu han'guk yŏnghwaedamronesŏ 'realism"ŭi ŭimie kwanhayŏ"), in *The Age of Fascination and Chaos* (*Maehoḳkwa hondonŭi sidae*), ed. Kim So-yŏn, An Chin-su (Jinsoo An), Cho Yŏng-jŏng, Yi Sun-jin, Yi Ho-gŏl, and Paek Mun-im (Seoul: Sodo, 2003), 17–60.
4. Han Hyŏng-mo's *March of Justice* (*Chŏngŭiŭi chin'gyŏḳ*, 1951) and Yun Pong-ch'un's *The Western Front* (*Sŏbu chŏnsŏn*, 1951) and *Footprints of the Barbarian* (*Orangḳaeŭi paljach'wi*, 1951) are among the earliest cases of government-sponsored filmmaking. These films were designed to propagate the moral and political justification of the fight against North Korean aggression. *March of Justice* was, moreover, the first official documentary film on the Korean War to be produced by the Ministry of Defense. Yi Sun-jin points out the film's significance on several registers. It was the first filmic attempt to chronicle the events of the ongoing Korean War, and it offered a cogent account of the war effort against communist aggression. The film also stresses the Korean War's international dimensions, which filmic representations of the war in later decades have tended to downplay. See Yi Sun-jin, "Representation of Communist and the Cold War Consciousness in the 1950s Korean Film" ("1950nyŏndae kongsanjuŭijaŭi chaehyŏn'gwa naengjŏnŭishik"), in Kim et al., *Age of Fascination*, 138–39.
5. The incendiary censorship cases of *P'iagol* and *Seven Female Prisoners* centered on the representation of the conversion of the North Korean communist. This dramatic focus on conversion was viewed as a violation of the larger precept of anticommunism, according to which, affiliates of North Korean ideology should occupy only the terrain of demise and death. Full conversion of the ex-communist, in other words, is impossible, as anticommunist ideology almost always requires that a "price" be paid for any prior affiliation with commu-

nism. The tragic death of the female protagonist in Han Hyŏng-mo's *The Hand of Destiny* (*Unmyŏngŭi son*, 1954), for example, derives from her failure to be ideologically converted.

6. Cho Chun-hyŏng stresses this ideological function as the central thematic tenet of South Korea's anticommunist films. Considering the absolute and immutable status of anticommunism, Cho argues that these films unequivocally serve the dominant ideology of South Korea. This symbiotic relation is apparent on three levels. First, the state regularly and consistently supported production of anticommunist films. Secondly, South Korea's national security agency and bureaus directly intervened in the content of the films through business incentives and censorship practices. Thirdly, the message of anticommunist films also reflected the changing international relations and diplomacy that the state engaged in with neighboring countries and political forces. See his "Evolution and Condition of South Korea's Anticommunist Films" ("Han'guk pangong yŏnghwaŭi chinhwawa kŭ cho'gŏn"), in *Landscape of Modernity* (*Kŭndaeŭi p'unggyŏng*), ed. Cha Sun-ha (Seoul: Sodo, 2001), 333.
7. This thematic preoccupation continues into the recent Korean War films like *Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War* (*T'aegŭkki hwinallimyŏ*, Kang Jegyu, 2004) and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (Park Kwang-hyun, 2005).
8. For a detailed account on the film's ambivalent portrayal of communists, see Kim, "On Meaning of Realism."
9. Jinsoo An, "The Ambivalence of the Nationalist Struggle in Deterritorialized Space: The Case of South Korea's Manchurian Action Film," *China Review* 10, no. 2 (2010).
10. South Korea's capitalist mode of imagining the anticolonial history becomes transparently clear when it is juxtaposed against North Korea's cinematic rendition of the anticolonial struggle. Although the issue of money does appear in North Korean films, it never rises to the level of principal concern in the anticolonial campaign. Nor does it function as the irreplaceable kernel of the nationalist narrative. Rather, North Korean films are mainly preoccupied with the formation of national unity. The political enemy is located not only externally, that is, in the form of the Japanese enemy other, but also internally, in the form of factional strife and divisive in-fighting. The latter is often conceived as a more serious threat to the very fabric of the nationalist campaign. Much of North Korean cinema's narrative impetus moves forward to overcome the divisive internal politics and forge the unified front for the struggle. Multivolume film series like *Star of Korea* (*Chosŏnŭi pyŏl*, Ŏm Kil-sŏn, Cho Kyŏng-suk, 1980–87) and *Nation and Destiny* (*Minjoggwa unmyŏng*, numerous directors, 1991–) illustrate this thematic convention most clearly. In Shin Sang-ok's North Korean film *Salt* (*Soḳŭm*, 1984), the female protagonist undergoes unending destitution and hardship. The abject poverty she suffers brings the tragic disintegration of family. Yet, despite the pressing economic issue, the film nevertheless takes a dramatic turn at the end, underscoring her renewed class consciousness and determination to participate in the anticolonial struggle.
11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008), 136–40.

12. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 65.
13. In *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (*Choŭnnom nappunnom isanghannom*, Kim Jeeun, 2008) Yun T'aegu, the "weird" character played by Song Kangho, gives a forceful articulation of this scavenging logic. Placed in fierce competition with two other men, that is, the good and the bad, in pursuit of the treasure map, Yun states that even thieves should respect others when it comes to stealing. He reasons that those who take action first, referring to himself, should claim ownership of the property.