Special Feature

Enlightening the Other: Colonial Korean Cinema and the Question of Audience

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History

One of the earliest surviving films from the colonial era, *Sweet Dream*[1] depicts a woman's all consuming love that destroys her and her family. The protagonist Aesun, a wife and mother with a young daughter, gazes in the mirror at her own beauty, constantly finds excuses to leave her home for the newly built department stores to browse expensive modern goods, lounges around in hotels, flirts with a stranger at a cafe (who quickly becomes her lover), and even chases after a modern dancer. Aesun's love is self-love, a desire for a different, glamorous life that somehow will place her within such new and modern spaces, surrounded by all the beautiful things she covets, including a new man in her life. The film depicts this desire through Aesun's direct gaze, and we feel this gaze, focused on various objects that constitute the mise en scène, which unabashedly zeroes in on the target with an almost tactile force. Her character might have been Korean cinema's first femme fatale, except for the fact that the demise she brings about is none other than her own. As it is true of many such flawed beauties, she compels, and each twist and turn of her narrative fascinates.

By 1940, however, it is no longer permissible to have such selfish desires and depictions of decadence on screen. I open this discussion by recalling *Sweet Dream*, as it is perhaps the most alluring film example of colonial Korea's modern decadence and its superficial beauty. And as such, it provides a strong contrast to the films I will discuss in the following pages, and their historical contexts. Cinematic representations of indulgent lifestyle and moral corruption, as we see in *Sweet Dream* which is, not incidentally, also called *A Lullaby of Death*, completely stops in 1940. With the Korea Film Decree announcement by the Government General of Korea, screening of Japanese military propaganda films became requirements for all theaters in the colony, along with a total ban of the films from the war time enemy nations. With the new film decree in 1940 movie theaters became "national schools" that only screened educational films (R. Kim 2006, 218).

Historians divide the colonial period in Korea into three distinct phases: the military, cultural, and the final periods, which correspond to 1910-1919, 1920-

1. *Sweet Dream* (*Mimong* in Korean, a.k.a. *A Lullaby of Death*) was directed by Yang Junam and produced by Gyeongseong Film Company in 1936.

1937, and 1938-1945, respectively. The ominous ring of the word "final" in the last period reflects the frenzied, total mobilization of resources and people in the colony, and the enforcement of the "New System" policies as Japan entered the last phase of what is commonly known in Korean history as the "Pacific War." Furthermore, there are two different but convincing theories that argue for the beginning of the "final phase" as either 1938, with the declaration of the "New System" as the new governing principle and the release of the film *Military Train*,[2] which begins the era of the openly militaristic propaganda movies, or as 1940, the year when Korea Film Decree was announced and it became impossible to make any other kind of films (Ham 2008, 24).[3] For the purposes of this essay I take the latter view, since the history of propaganda films targeting children in Korea begins in 1940 and the narrative quality of propaganda films seems to solidify in this fateful year. The next year, Korean language disappears from the school curriculum. From this point until the end of the war/moment of decolonization, schools essentially became military industrial factories and training camps for future recruits (R. Kim 2006, 206-07).

The so-called "New System" was introduced in colonial Korea at this time, which some scholars have called a fascist regime. The name refers to the "new world" envisioned by Japan, in which East Asia stands as an equal with the Western nations, restoring the balance of power that has been historically lacking, overcoming their "enslavement" by the West (Kim 2004, 86). For many colonial intellectuals, this was a tremendously powerful rhetoric that pulled them into the colonizer's developmentalist rhetoric, with its promise of the co-prosperity of the Greater East Asian Sphere. In the background of this logic was a philosophical critique of the universal humanism and enlightenment, the hegemonic knowledge regimes of the West, which eventually travelled to the rest of the world, including East Asia, after—and since—the 16th century (ibid. 115).

The 1940 film decree was nearly identical to the Japanese version announced in 1939, which in turn was modeled after the Nazi German film law of 1934.[4] While they shared some important similarities, one of the main

2. *Military Train* (*Gunyongyeolcha*) was directed by Seo Gwangje and produced by Seongbong yonghwawon and Dongbo Film Corporation in 1938.

3. Ham Chung Beom also considers 1940 as the beginning of the end of the colonial era.

4. This law also borrowed from contemporary Italian and American film laws, perhaps in an effort to emulate their legal language and embedded international relations policy. I thank an anonymous

differences between the two regimes was that while the Nazis propagated exclusion based on racism, the Japanese colonial authorities pursued imperial inclusion based on the logic of "Naisen Ittai," the argument that Japan and Korea shared the same ethnic and cultural origin, thus the two countries shared the same fate (M. Kim 2006, 92-93). That Japan only used this pseudo-scientific theory as a tool to mobilize the colonial subjects for the war is clear because the rhetoric was preached, and the films that served this rhetoric of cooperation and common origin made only in Korea, never in Japan (ibid. 93).

As Japan entered its "15 year war" phase, the colonial authorities allowed fewer and fewer films to be made and released, and that, only after a multi-level censorship, including the rationing of raw film stock. Compared to the first golden age of Korean cinema that stretched from 1925-1937 the number of films drastically dwindled, and *Angels* was one of only 7 movies filmed and released in Korea in 1940 (Ham 2008, 181). The "Total Mobilization" policy was implemented in Korea in May of 1938, and similar to many other colonial policies, it was more stringent because it was already tested and refined in the colonial motherland, Japan. Especially during this last phase of the colonial rule, film became one of the most powerful and effective tool of propaganda and governing because of its massive popularity in Korea since its introduction on the eve of the colonization, and also due to Japan's successful experiment in Taiwan (ibid. 40). The colonial authorities attempted to enlighten Korea on many fronts, and one of the most effective tools of enlightenment for the mostly illiterate colonial population was of course cinema, a new experience in sentiment and emotion through a technology that was simply magical for many. Out of 12 films released in the 1940-1945 period, 8 were propaganda movies serving the goal of mobilizing Korean soldiers for the war (ibid. 120).

In their seminal book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno write against the anti-human, anti-life rhetoric of the "enlightenment" used as a ruling ideology and tool of mass deception, citing examples such as Confucius, Homer's Odysseus, and Crusoe. This is a kind of enlightenment that the Japanese colonizers also propagated, effecting a kind of leveling or flattening of differences among the colonized in the name of progress and improvement. The final aim here was both capitalistic and fascistic, in that

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reviewer for pointing out this interesting facet of the law and its global character beyond a comparison with the Nazi film law.

the monopoly power ultimately rested in the hands of the builders of the Japanese empire, the technocrats and bureaucrats who practiced "a technological rationale [that is] the rationale of domination itself" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994, 121). Though the context was of Nazi Germany for Adorno and Horkheimer, such logic shares much in common with the Japanese imperial efforts to "enlighten" others in Asia. As we see clearly in the ways in which both Germany and Japan used film as a propaganda tool during this era, the two regimes shared at least one important similarity of vision of what such enlightenment entailed, and how it should be achieved vis-a-vis racial, ethnic others.

Colonial Korean subjects were treated like pupils, and further, like metaphorical children by the colonial authorities in a number of ways, which range from public education and invasive examinations of health, hygiene, and lifestyle (as it is apparent in the records of public campaigns preaching cleanliness and punctual, regimented lifestyle as markers of enlightenment and modernity), to installing police boxes in the colony that was now divided into grids, and setting up bureaucratic offices such as "Ideology Observation and Police" meant to stamp out anti-colonial sentiments and to stem the tides of the wild popularity of socialism and Marxism. As for the education of colonial movie audiences, they had to first sit through short programs such as the "Allegiance to the Japanese Empire," "Culture Movie" (which contained various public announcements), and "News" about Japan's heroic war efforts, in order to watch any film during the 1940-1945 period (M. Kim 2006, 93).

With this background in mind, this essay provides a study of the "excavated" late-colonial era films released from 1940-1945, including *Homeless Angels* (hereafter, *Angels*),[5] *Love and Vow* (hereafter, *Love*),[6] *Volunteer*,[7] *Portrait of Youth* (hereafter, *Portrait*),[8] and *Suicide Squad at the Watch Tower* (hereafter, *Suicide*).[9] These are enlightenment films, which assume the position of the

5. *Homeless Angels* (*Jipeopneun cheonsa*) was directed by Choe Ingyu and produced by Korea Motion Picture Corporation in 1941.

6. *Love and Vow* (*Saranggwa maengseo*) was directed by Choe Ingyu and Imai Tadashi and produced by Korea Motion Picture Corporation in 1945.

7. *Volunteer* (*Jiwonbyeong*) was directed by An Seokyeong and produced by Korea Motion Picture Corporation in 1941.

8. *Portrait of Youth* (*Jeolmeun moseub*) was directed by Shiro Toyota and produced by Korea Motion Picture Corporation in 1943.

9. *Suicide Squad at the Watch Tower* (*Mangruei gyeolsadae*) was directed by Imai Tadashi and produced by Korea Motion Picture Corporation in 1943.

audience as that of pupils, that aim to educate and transform the audience. The Korean colonial audience, in particular, was always already targeted as collective recipients of knowledge and education from the very beginning era of Korean cinema. Taking this as the point of departure, my reading of the above mentioned film texts focus on the intertwined issues of colonial enlightenment and propaganda, as well as the issues of ethnography, censorship, and narrative strategies of the films. The films were often packaged as melodrama through a heavy use of music, but this genre façade actually led to the films' narrative failure as both melodrama and propaganda. In the end, I believe that the Japanese colonial authorities' attempt at enlightenment via propaganda films failed. Lastly, I will end with a consideration of postcolonial desire for a national cinematic tradition, and the implied ethics of film viewing in postcolonial worlds.

Homeless Angels and Censorship

A striking example of the enlightenment movie genre, *Angels* is a 1941 film by a colonial Korean director Choe Ingyu (1911-1950?). It was discovered and collected by researchers of the Korean National Film Archives in 2004 and released the next year on DVD as a part of Korean colonial film series. Until the excavation of this film in the China Film Archive, the late director was regarded as the most technically accomplished filmmaker of the colonial era, mostly remembered as the author behind the stirring anti-colonial action/melodrama *Hurrah! For Freedom*.[10] Choe is also a central figure in the history of Korean cinema, as he mentored some of the most representative filmmakers of Korea's Golden Age Cinema (1955-1970), such as Shin Sangok, Yu Hyeonmok, and Jeong Changhwa. It was the discovery of his much better-made film *Angels*, however, that revived his fame and simultaneously earned him a notoriety because, as it turns out, this was a pro-Japanese propaganda film that ends with a speech extolling the virtues of hard work for one's nation and a group salute to the Japanese flag.

10. *Hurrah! For Freedom* (*Jayu manse*) was directed by Choe Ingyu and produced by Koryo Film Co. Ltd. in 1946.

The film is based on a well-known Japanese true story of a man who rescues orphans from the streets and rehabilitates them by giving them shelter, education (he teaches them the right from wrong), and also significantly, work. In the colonial setting, the transformation of this Japanese narrative into a Korean one brings up the pivotal issue of the audience, specifically one that is already imagined as pupils who will learn a patriotic lesson through their viewing of the film. From its very beginning colonial Korean cinema aimed to enlighten and educate the masses. For example, some of the very first films were educational films about prevention of cholera, hygiene, and the importance of savings (Kim 2008, 82-108). *Angels* shows that the orphaned, homeless children live and work in a kind of commune on an island, and come to enjoy the fruits of their own labor by providing for themselves. Like some of the other films of this era, *Angels* is a coming-of-age tale featuring youthful protagonists. The "growth" that characters experience in these narratives follows a particular logic of the Japanese colonial propaganda, especially the rationale for militarism, self-sacrifice, cooperation, and a declaration of oneself as an imperial subject. These films show that boys become men only when they volunteer to serve—or sacrifice—themselves as imperial subjects, especially soldiers (M. Kim 2006, 91).

The narrative of *Angels* presents a slight variation on this theme, since this time children's growth stems from a collective labor that binds them together as members of a micro-society, depicted as a kind of self-contained utopia. Like in other similar films of this period, self-sacrifice and effacement of the individual to achieve the greater communal goal are relentlessly emphasized as necessary virtues in *Angels*. Curiously, the crises the young orphans face are not children's crises but distinctly adult in nature, which (perhaps unwittingly) hints at the dark realities facing such children at this time in the extra-diegetic world of colonial Korea. Perhaps it contributed to the result that, despite the film's initial government-approved status, *Angels* was heavily censored and today, the only surviving version is missing over two thousand shots. Some have speculated that such stringent censorship against this seemingly innocuous and obviously pro-Japanese film is partly due to the government's discomfort with the visible signs of poverty and suffering in the colony, captured in this movie meant for the general audience.

Angels was produced as Japanese government's Ministry of Education recommended film for general audiences in 1941 (M. Kim 2006, 88). Korea was already deeply involved in the Japanese war mobilization system by this

point, and even this feel-good story was transformed into a propaganda film. Propaganda films teach the audience the proper kinds of desires—and the proper way to feel about their world. *Angels* is a fascinating film text for a number of reasons—not the least of which is that one can actually see the transition between selfish and selfless desire, the movement towards a yearning for a greater good from the pursuit of individual happiness. It is at this point a narrative becomes a propaganda: at the precise moment when desire, which has been thus far selfish in nature (for the Other to return one's love, to become beautiful, or to own expensive modern goods, for instance), becomes altruistic, a love of one's community, in this case the glory of the Japanese empire. In colonial Korean cinema, this is a change that comes only through a kind of moral education, or one might even describe it as education in affect. *Angels* depicts this new kind of love, and instead of a returned gaze that reciprocates a character's selfish desire, this love is expressed through a one-sided gaze, full of longing and awe, at something much bigger than a mere individual.

If a gaze expresses such (newly discovered or learned) patriotic love and awe, what is the object of that gaze? In the film's climax, the criminal city life the boys left behind comes back to haunt them in the form of thugs who follow them from the city of Kyeongseong. After a physical struggle, they attempt to get away but get hurt when a bridge collapses. Dr. Ahn, the boys' benefactor who has been largely missing in the narrative, suddenly appears to deliver a dialogue that chastises, enlightens, and eventually moves the bad men to change their ways. Then even more abruptly, the boys stand at attention in a neat militaristic formation, raise the Japanese flag and pledge allegiance as imperial citizens. This visual image, accompanied by the young boys' shrill recitation of the allegiance, is the other, far more memorable climax of this film. The lasting image of the last sequence, after the Dr.'s speech praising the children, is of the flag flying high, the object of the collective, reverent gaze at the film's closure. In fact, many of the propaganda films of the 1940-1945 period feature similar high- and low-angle shots, of characters gazing up at the Japanese flag or at the sky, and also more interestingly, high-angle shots of characters from the *perspective of the flag*. The visual messages emphasize the insignificance of squat, bug-like human forms by juxtaposing them against the vastness and immensity of the sky, which is in fact a theater of war. The flying flag also symbolically represents the new object of all good imperial citizens' desire, which is none other than the empire itself.

E. Taylor Atkins (2010, 54) writes in his study of Japanese ethnography of colonial Korea about a new trend in recent historiography; namely an argument that "colonialism was as much involved in making the metropole, and the identities and ideologies of colonizers, as it was in (re)making peripheries and colonial subjects." In this vein, he posits that colonial ethnography "*maximized* Korean difference to enhance the…empire" while simultaneously depicting Korea as minimally different from Japan to show the "common ancestry" (*nissen dosoron*) in order to fulfill the conflicting needs of the empire (ibid. 53). The solution was "what Johannes Fabian has called a denial of coevalness." It is a theory that Japanese and Koreans were same people who were at different temporal stages of development; "Japanese thus envisaged Koreans as their 'primitive selves.' Gazing upon them was theoretically like looking into a mirror through a time warp." If one is same as the other but only marked by a temporal difference, a time lag, then the relationship is essentially that of a teacher and student. And this educational process of learning to become like the other who is designated superior by the fact of his early arrival/state of enlightenment, is "*kominka*" or *hwangminhwa* (becoming imperial citizen) (ibid. 57).

Education in colonial Korea was designed to stamp out Korean belief system and replace it with Japanese "enlightenment" (Lee et al. 2013, 283). However, in reality, the colonial authorities never achieved a complete and thorough enlightenment of the local population. It was partly due to their own policies: for instance, primary school's educational goal during different colonial phases was first to train students in simple manual labor, then to foster the farm development movement, and eventually, to conscript Koreans into military (ibid. 31-134). On the other hand, the colonial population's passive resistance also could not be ignored. It was often a battle for the Government General to implement those policies that might have actually led to enlightenment. For example, the authorities opened evening schools to make Koreans speak Japanese, but it was nearly impossible to enforce attendance, especially in the rural areas where about 8 out of 10 Koreans lived (ibid. 272).

In his discussion of the Japanese war time film, Aaron Gerow argues that such films' "Japaneseness—its status as the epitome of a national film (*kokumin eiga*)—is," among other things, "its efforts to teach spectators to perceive in a more purely Japanese way," and that "national cinema is not simply a set of textual or conceptual features but a practice of spectatorship" (Tansman 2009, 187). He further explains the nature of this seemingly impossible task facing the

imperial cultural authorities, which is none other than the colonized population's education in affect and taste. It is not surprising then, that Japanese film critics felt anxiety (*fuan*) because some Asian audiences did not understand Japanese film during the period. The imperial response was to "correct" such audiences through "forced dissemination of the Japanese language and things Japanese" and also by relying on the "technological superiority of cinema itself"…to overwhelm the spectator....Indeed, Japanese cinema improved tremendously during this period in terms of "special effects...animation...and spectacle." The author concludes that the war time Japanese cinema, a "fascist idea of a pure, controlled cinema" was an impossible ideal and therefore, it was neither national/Japanese nor fascist (ibid. 205-07). In fact, during this period Japanese film industry was never nationalized, unlike the German film industry—and for that matter, the Korean film industry. Japan could not completely control their film arts the way it wished, but could attempt to do so in the colonies. The fact that the colonial authorities forcibly combined all film companies into only one film production and distribution company during the 1942-1944 period, which was directly managed by a branch office of the colonial Government General, clearly indicates the colonial authorities' control over the film industry (Han 2008, 18).

Censorship is the most apparent and elemental practice of the above mentioned "pure, controlled cinema." Censorship in Korea is long and colorful. It begins in 1907, even before the official colonization. What is telling is that the very first, pre-colonial censorship focused on crowd control in performance spaces. Given Korea's popular performance tradition that often took place in open air spaces such as market sites and incorporated audience participation into itself, public performance spaces, both indoors and out, were indeed politically meaningful and even dangerous sites of popular protest and public expression of colonial resentment. And later, movie theaters were not simply spaces of entertainment but those fraught with political and cultural meanings, a site requiring strict surveillance and restrictions (R. Kim 2006, 54). In colonial theaters the rupture of "spectator-identification" stemming from anti-colonial sentiments was a constant possibility; colonizers could control which films to show (and which parts to show, through censorship) but could not control the colonial audience's emotional response to the films, however carefully selected (ibid. 46). Furthermore, silent films had "intentional ambiguity" as the narrative could be improvised by the *byeonsa* (J. *benshi*, movie storyteller who narrated

silent films for the audience) to reflect anti-colonial, nationalistic sentiments, but such ambiguity disappeared with the arrival of "talkies" or sound films in 1935 (ibid. 124).

Film censorship begins in earnest in 1922, with the reiteration of the first law from 1907, "Entertainment and Entertainment Venue Regulation." Then several versions of "Motion Picture and Film Censorship Regulation" are proclaimed from 1926 on, ultimately resulting in the above mentioned draconian "Korea Film Decree" of 1940. We should note here that the colonial authorities kept meticulous (one might even say obsessive) records of all material submitted for censorship and for various reasons, failed to pass. Looking over these materials, one cannot help but recall Walter Benjamin's assertion that all documents of civilization are at the same time documents of barbarism.

One scholar divides the films of this period as *eoyong*, *chinil* and *gukchaek* films: although the categories are often used interchangeably, the first are films that cater to the powers of the day, the second are those that voluntarily help and cooperate with the colonizer's goals, and the third are films made by government or military institutions, essentially policy films, and can be categorized as *eoyong* films (Kim 2008, 405). Perhaps more helpful, however, is another's claim that at least for the duration of the colonial period, there was no such thing as Korean cinema—that Korea became a market, a captive audience for Japanese cinema, and that it was simply added as a part of Japanese cinema (Yi 2008, 163). Indeed, the imperial Japan "provided a relatively stable, captive market [in Korea] with an expanding urban middle class, while the culture industry provided products that facilitated the proliferation of Japanese as the national language and the creation of affective attachments as 'communities of taste' binding metropole and colony together through consumption" (Atkins 2010, 149). Korea's consumption of this era's "national" cinema was both a result of—and cause for—such cultural changes taking shape in the colony.

Not surprisingly, like all institutions of ideology that assume naturalness, propaganda film narratives contain multiple ruptures and interruptions.For instance, as several film scholars have pointed out, *Angels* makes visible the widespread poverty of colonial Korea's capital city (M. Kim 2006, 91).This narrative of homeless orphans, whose hard-scrabble condition is nothing extraordinary in the film's diegesis, already, and clearly, betrays the problematic conditions of the colony. For this reason, the film is often touted as an example of realist cinema. Realism is a keyword in Korean cinema and occupies a privileged position in its

film history. The origin of this preoccupation with cinema realism goes back to the colonial period, and it only becomes even more apparent in the postcolonial period, when *the methodology of realism becomes a value*, the last line of anti-colonial defense that imbues realist cinema with ethical meaning. And one particular example is the criticism of *Angels* by the pioneering film scholar Yi Young Il (2008, 199). Furthermore, the film's censorship history is used as proof that it is indeed a realist, nationalist cinema.

Films for Militarism

A typical film of this era, *Volunteer*, is a story of a promising young man named Chunho, who suddenly finds himself without his inherited position as the tenant manager for his absentee landlord. He is engaged to be married to Bunok, a beautiful young woman coveted by other local men, although she questions whether she is worthy of someone as wonderful as Chunho. He is the family's patriarch since his father is dead, and his old mother and young sister heavily depend on him as the center of the household. But the real problem Chunho faces, which we discover through a contrived dialogue, is the fact that although he ardently wishes to join the imperial army, he does not qualify to enlist because he is Korean. In the film, he is seen gazing smilingly at a group of school children engaged in war drills. His smile shows both his approval of the children's war games but also a kind of wistfulness, given his own reality. *Volunteer* and other military propaganda films often feature such pseudo crisis, which always seems to involve questions about one's identity, or a painful recognition of one's delimited place in the colonial scheme of things. The crisis as such in these films feel unreal and manufactured: it in fact functions as a red herring because the depth of the character's depression and despair seem out of proportion with the so-called crisis. It is nevertheless central to each narrative and ends with a ready-made resolution, the deux-ex-machina of one's sudden ability to serve in the imperial army, or becoming an imperial subject.

In *Volunteer* the resolution to Chunho's crisis is conveyed to Bunok when the two young lovers accidentally meet at the village well. Against the aural backdrop of a melodramatic music, Chunho tells her that he is going to enlist in the Japanese military. She tells him to become a good soldier. The scene comes after a misunderstanding between the two characters, who each believes him/

herself competing against a romantic rival. The moment is stilted and even a bit surreal, as though the propagandistic dialogue was inserted in place of the original dialogue, one that would actually make sense in terms of the narrative's emotional flow. Instead, the public intrudes on the private in this scene in an obvious manner that calls attention to itself, effectively blocking the audience empathy.

If there is any cinematic realism (in the sense of immediate audience recognition of their social reality represented on screen) in the depiction and resolution of crisis in *Volunteer*, it is located in the last sequence, which belies the patriotic dialogue. The sequence shows Chunho, his mother, and Bunok in close up shots as he leaves for the training camp to prepare for his enlistment. Although his dream has come true, Chunho, not to mention his mother and Bunok, does not smile. Instead, his face only shows a grim determination. More revealing, and unexpectedly poignant, is his mother's face that registers nothing —no joy or pride—but a tragic resignation as the camera lingers on her for a haunting few seconds.[11]

This film's pseudo-crisis, its anti-climactic, almost non-sensical resolution, and the revealing last sequence all point to a problem that faced the military propaganda films of this period—the failure of propaganda.We can find a discussion of this particular paradox of colonial propaganda films that fail to propagandize in contemporary film criticism as well. For instance, in his 1943 discussion of *Straights of Cho Sun*[12] a contemporary critic writes that the film utterly fails to deliver its message because the main plot, of a debauched young man who becomes reborn as an imperial soldier, is buried under the family drama (Yi 1943; qtd. in Park 2009, 148). And as I illustrate in this essay with other film examples, awkward coexistence of two main themes in a single narrative often led to films that were not only emotionally confusing to the audience, but more significantly for this discussion, failed in their mission.

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11. As a reviewer of this paper noted Japanese films of this period, such as the 1941 film by Kumagaya Hisatora's *A Story of Leadership* (*Shidô monogatari*), also depict characters who embody such resignation, self-sacrifice, and pathos, perhaps to draw out the audience sympathy. A comparative analysis of Japanese and Korean films of similar themes, film language, and characterization would be a fruitful future study.

12. *Straights of Cho Sun* (*Joseonhaehyeop*) was directed by Pak Ki-chae and produced by Korea Motion Picture Corporation in 1943.

What is also remarkable is that each military propaganda film features a male protagonist who invariably seems depressed and restless. These protagonists also all express that they are "nothing," a worthless person. This self-image indicates in each drama a kind of invisibility, an awareness that they count as "nothing" in the (colonial) world. The way to gain worth as a human being—and visibility—it seems, is found in imperial subjecthood and citizenship (*hwangminhwa*). The (male) Korean subject thus finds happiness and his attitude changes into that of cheerfulness (or *myeongrang*, an attitude whose significance I will discuss below). Such is the typical narrative arc of military propaganda films encouraging Koreans to enlist in the imperial army.

Takashi Fujitani (2011, 293), whose recent work is greatly informed by Michel Foucault's notions of biopolitics and governmentality, writes that the process of incorporating Koreans into Japan's war "unleashed a massive machinery of institutions and agents that sought to make all people visible to power, and then worked to turn them into usable Japanese subjects. This was a regime that proclaimed itself a force of reason, history, morality, and even freedom." In other words, the regime promised both visibility and enlightenment. Once the total war began, Koreans "were to be targeted as living human beings…and the purpose of government would be to enhance their health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, education and general well-being." Furthermore, he continues that "the war years…were a transitional moment in the passage of Koreans from the outside to the inside of the 'Japanese' population, a shift managed by the logics and technologies of bio-power and governmentality," and that "in Foucault's formulation, under the bio-political regime the right to demand death is the flip side of the 'right to make live'" (ibid. 39-40; 76).

The right to make (a colonial population) live manifested partially as the authorities' demand for a cheerful attitude or *myeongrangham*. *Myeongrang* is a concept introduced by the Government General of Korea in the 1930s, which was part of the program to transform the colony as a modern, healthy, *hygienic* place (So 2011, 42). In contrast, *buron* was used as the antinomy of *myeongrang*; the former indicates people, things, and even mood that goes against the (colonial) system such as threats to peace, decadence, pessimism, while the latter refers to same things that are merry, cheerful, healthy and wholesome, and in the end, therefore, good (ibid. 70). The emphasis and indeed enforcing of *myeongrang*/merriment took place as a result of the ruling ideology finding a

synergistic campaign of capitalistic management of affect (ibid. 260).

After 1941 only military propaganda films are made in the colony. In other words, in these films the transition that the narrative of *Angels* captured, of characters' desire transforming from selfish to selfless one, is complete. Moreover, the films of the 1940-1945 period strenuously strive to inculcate the ideal that there isn't (and shouldn't be) any distinction between the individual good and the greater good: namely, militarism, imperial expansion, and co-prosperity of the Greater East Asia. This education, of teaching proper affect to its colonial subjects, aims to turn Koreans into proper Japanese imperial subjects by giving them a new purpose in life and identity. Three films in particular represent this lesson: *Portrait*, *Suicide*, and *Love*, categorized by some scholars as *gukchaek* (policy) films. These films show Japan's colonial rule as a kind of result of Koreans' coming to enlightenment by Japanese. The major difference between these three and other military or colonial propaganda films is that in other films, Koreans come to recognize the need for their Japanese patriotism, and Japanese do not make any appearance in the narrative (Kim 2008, 402; Kang 2005, 22-23).

In the above mentioned and other military propaganda films made during the last five years of the colonial period, the characters' direct gaze that signifies desire is replaced by hesitant looks and stealthy, oblique glances. It is as if the colonial subjects in these films do not know their own desire or perhaps fear its revelation—unlike Aesun in *Sweet Dream*—until they achieve their new identity. It is only after they find a purpose in life that such hesitant, confused looks ultimately transform into a direct gaze, now directed at objects that do not return that gaze: the Japanese flag, a photograph of a soldier who dies a hero's death for the empire, or the sky. These repeated shots in fact quickly become clichéd, but it is often through repetition that one learns. The shots project significance through a visualization of the static images of objects whose symbolic meanings are larger-than-life.

Now let us go back to the curious case of *Angels*. Why was it censored, and so severely, when it had already won the Japanese government's Ministry of Education award? Challenging earlier scholarship that suggests it was due to the fact that Korean was spoken in the film, a film scholar Yi Yeongjae (2008, 186-205) persuasively argues that it cannot be the reason, as other films also featured bilingual dialogue of Japanese and Korean. Rather, as she argues, the censorship was the result of the film narrative that transgressed its boundaries of an implicit

hierarchy of the subject of enlightenment narrative, and depicted elite colonial Korean men leading Korean children. The colonized can never be such subject in the imperial regime's episteme, and it caused anxiety—*buran* or *fuan*, the same sino-Korean word concept that Gerow used earlier—among the censors/colonizer.

Going one step further, I would suggest that it is in fact the rather fluent Japanese dialogue spoken by the colonial elites that led to this film's censorship and the film being dubbed into Japanese. The dubbing speaks of an attempt to erase the aural clues of the narrative as a Korean one, as there are many examples of the era's films being released with Japanese subtitles. The colonial censors no doubt found this film disconcerting despite the film's enlightenment, pro-Japanese message, because such uncannily dead-on imitation of the colonial master by Korean actors who *look and sound Japanese* was indeed a cause for concern. Such uncanniness is also, ironically, what the postcolonial audience experiences upon their initial viewing of this and other films in which colonial Korean cast speak Japanese, or even play Japanese characters seamlessly.

Colonial subjects can imitate the ways of the colonial master but this imitation becomes a crime, something obscene (to be censored) if it is too good, and thus confused with the original. The difference must be maintained at all times, especially given the racial sameness between the colonizer and the colonized. In the context of Manchukuo, Prasenjit Duara (2003, 18) asserts that "the principle of belonging to a national territory was incommensurate with the historical principle of multiple affiliations and flexible incorporation into empire." The principle of "multiple affiliations," to borrow his words, is at the heart of a strangely affecting film I will discuss next, *Love*.

A film by the Japanese director Imai Tadashi and Choe Ingyu, *Love* was released mere 20 days before Japan's surrender in 1945 (Watanabe 2012, 99).[13] It is a story of a Korean teenager named Eiryu who is adopted by a Japanese couple, a newspaper editor Shirai and his wife. Although he struggles with a nameless malaise and restlessness and often runs away, he eventually overcomes his inner turmoil upon learning about a local war hero, a dead kamikaze pilot named Murai. In the end, he also volunteers to be a kamikaze pilot and redeems himself. Planned and financially supported by the Japanese navy, it

13. The naval branch of the Imperial Headquarters of Information Board guided the film script.

is one of the most transparently militaristic colonial propaganda films made during the 1940-1945 period (M. Kim 2006, 96). The title of this film, a bit of a slight of hand, is yet another attempt to disguise a propaganda film as a melodrama genre movie, as a kind of narrative strategy. There is a pronounced melodramatic music in this and other, similar films of this era such as *Volunteer*, which supports this theory.

Shirai visits Murai's home with Eiryu as a pilgrimage, but also to enlighten his charge and instill hero-worship. There Eiryu sees the shrine dedicated to Murai's memory with the dead man's memorial portrait. He watches as his father and wife, a Korean named Eiko, receive his voice recording done a day before he left for war and we hear Shinichiro Murai's voice, which thanks and bids goodbye to everyone and confirms Japan's victory. He tells Eiko to smile and laugh no matter how difficult things get (he commands her in fact, to be cheerful, i.e., *myeongrang*). Witnessing all this, Eiryu is greatly moved by both the recording—the ghostly voice of a dead war hero—and the family's reverent response to it. In a significant subplot, we discover that Mrs. Murai used to live in Shanghai until the First Shanghai Incident of 1932, when her parents died and her five-year old brother went missing. She is not sure if Eiryu is her lost brother but wants to think that her husband led her to her brother. Eiryu is also not certain about his past but recognizes that her baby has the same bell he used to have. The film strongly hints at their sibling relationship.

Meanwhile, a young Korean man named Song is about to enlist in the army and when his family hosts a feast the evening before his departure, the whole village participates. The next morning, elementary school children line up to sing a song for him, and the mood is celebratory. But the car that was to transport Song to the train station is broken, and it is soon revealed that Eiryu removed gas because he likes the village too much and doesn't want to go home. Song then opts to run for the train in order to arrive on time for his enlistment. At this point, the whole village, including children, begin to frenetically cheer and run with Song. The breathless pacing and visual composition of shots in the sequence speak of a mass hysteria visualized through the bodies of the running children.

Upon discovering what Eiryu did, Mrs. Murai says that her brother is also Murai's brother, and that he led Eiryu to her. But even if she were to find her brother, she wouldn't want to meet a foolish brother. She first accepts him as her blood and then disavows him in the name of the nation. Her dialogue reveals that

the empire's cause/war is like religion, in that it requires one's faith. This is also borne out by several characters' speeches announcing their belief in the empire.

Even after all this, Eiryu runs away again when he's faced with the difficult task of writing his report about the visit to Murai's village. Predictably, his adoptive father, Shirai, intercepts him and chastises him for not realizing the kamikaze spirit. In a true enlightenment narrative mode, the film shows that Shirai is also Murai Sr.'s student, just as Eiryu is Shirai's student/son. Finally, Eiryu matures and declares that it doesn't matter whether he is Eiko's brother because he already thinks of himself as Murai's brother, and that he wants to enlist in the naval kamikaze unit, just like Murai. Further, he confirms that he is not alone, but that there are many younger brothers of Murai in the peninsula. The penultimate scene shows Eiryu walking down a cherry tree-lined street, with Mrs. Murai and Mrs. Shirai on either side of him. The film ends with a shot of Eiryu who has become a kamikaze pilot.

Love looks like a "family melodrama" (R. Kim 2006, 332), but who belongs in this family? The unchallenged center of the narrative is Murai, even though he is dead. The narrative twists and turns pivot around the dead soldier's relationship to various characters such as his father, wife, and Shirai, who in turn all come to have a relationship with Eiryu, the film's nominal protagonist. This is a film in which the melodramatic psychic energy is concentrated on the ghostly figure of Murai, who represents the larger-than-life heroism of Japanese imperial cause. Seen in this light, it is not very strange that Eiryu's coming of age begins and ends in Murai's orbit of influence. Towards the film's end, Eiryu begins to truly live when he embraces (his future) death by enlisting as an imperial soldier by emulating Murai's example. He also earns the approval and membership of his (real) family when he declares to Mrs. Murai/his own sister that it doesn't matter whether he is her brother, because he thinks of himself as Murai's brother. His gesture of giving up—forfeiting family and life itself—brings him precisely those things that he seems to be searching for throughout the narrative. Eiryu's seemingly endless and existential wanderings finally stop at the end when he finds his life's purpose, which actually turns out to be a death wish. It is as though he had been lost but has been finally found, has seen the light and found peace. He is now joined in the same faith in the empire shared by Murai, his father, Shirai, Eiko, Song, and indeed, the whole village.

There are several strange moments in this film, even discounting the stilted affects of morbid, ardent death wish, the renouncing of blood ties, and a hero

worship that manifests as necrophilia. One such moment arrives with a sudden explosion of jubilant sights and sounds of Korean folk music performance and dancing during the village feast on the eve of Song's enlistment. Men dressed in Korean clothing sing a folk song "Ppong taryeong," which creates a mood of perverse joy, for Song, the young Korean volunteer soldier, is about to enlist in the army, perhaps never to come home again.

The sequence also looks like ethnography depicting a slice of life in the colony. The way that many propaganda films of this era inserts a sequence of Korean characters performing their native identity through traditional singing and dancing is a nod towards the popular tastes of the time (Atkins 2010, 148). Such sequences also provide both authenticity and exotic local color for Japanese films made in the colony, with local cast and staff.[14] In these sequences one can see the self-exoticization, or in cases of films directed by Japanese filmmakers, an orientalist aesthetic combined with a racist view of Koreans as carefree, singing, dancing natives. The overall effect is a strange cinematic experience of orientalism-by-proxy.

As a latecomer to colonialism, Japan often mimicked and replicated other colonial situations, and its ethnographers also operated in a similar fashion, turning "their attentions and cameras toward rural folk, traditional rituals, and other signs of arrested development" and capturing "images of Koreana… profoundly shaped by a worldwide flow of images and impressions about colonized populations, [that] became part of a global visual archive documenting 'vanishing' peoples and their folklives" (Atkins 2010, 28; 83). Perhaps in the case of these military propaganda films, the "arrested development" of the exotic, savage colony concerns none other than its youth, filled with impotent, pervasive but as yet unfocused rage, and perhaps more importantly as well, a potential for unrest and violence.

Propaganda's Incoherence: *Portrait* and *Suicide*

Portrait begins with a military marching drill at a middle school. The film is

14. From 1925 to 1944, the Government General of Korea made 67 films for Japanese designed to promote Korean tourism and to spread the news from the colony to the metropole (*naichi*) (R. Kim 2006. 86).

made of short episodes and is largely without narrative continuity; there are scenes of children's school dorms, *gungseong yobae* (J. *kyojo-yohai*, bowing in the direction of the imperial palace), and a recitation of the allegiance to the emperor, for instance, all presented without context, like ethnographic cinema. The film shows that the school children train like soldiers and that it culminates in a week's training away at the actual army base.

Aside from such ethnographic footages, the narrative reiterates the need for Japan to educate and reform Korea. For instance, Matsuda, a teacher at the middle school, preaches to a young Korean neighbor, Eiko, that it is a bad habit of Koreans that they don't all raise pigs. Another character chimes in to say that Korean women are like decorations because they simply don't do anything useful. She goes on to say that this is why Japanese women must teach them to do better. Then, after overcoming a dangerous moment that leads to a spectacular sequence of a crowd of soldiers coming down the mountain on skis, the school's principal sets up Matsuda and Eiko, who agree to be married. The film ends with a slowed-down marching sequence as the characters walk out of the army base to return home.

Portrait is a peculiar film because any narrative or even visual coherence is notably missing, leaving the lasting impression of a curiously unformed and incomplete film despite its technical accomplishments. However, because the film is so obviously lacking in narrative coherence, it actually provides a good opportunity to consider genre in colonial era film, made by both Korean and Japanese directors. That is, whether we can even consider these films in terms of their genre, other than propaganda. The answer seems negative, since film genre as such was not firmly established until the end of the 1950s in Korean cinema, and it takes at least one generation of audiences and filmmakers to watch enough film examples of various genres to recognize and practice them in any competent manner.

The last film I will examine is *Suicide* by Imai Tadashi, with Choe Ingyu serving as the assistant director (Watanabe 2012, 93). The film is set in a border town between Korea and Manchuria, and is dedicated to the brave border patrol stationed there protecting the territory. The narrative centers around a battle between the Chinese bandits and the town, made up of Japanese, Koreans and Chinese. In the end, everyone bands together to protect their town. Like other propaganda films I discussed earlier, this film also features a Korean character who performs his ethnic identity through a traditional song and dance. In

the sequence, "Kim san" sings a folk song, "Doraji taryeong" which was very popular at the time in Japan. His exuberant manner and the way it is regarded by other characters suggest a kind of behavioral norm of happy, cheerful natives. Among those watching him, one comments that were it not for his dance, he seems completely Japanese, while another replies that this is not surprising because he himself could easily become "Hayashi" instead of "Im" after all, and that his wife even wears a kimono. This portrays a total and harmonious integration of Asians in this border town on the margins of the empire. The film also features the inevitable ethnographic footages of the Korean New Year's Day traditional celebrations.

The most interesting aspect of the film is, however, the way in which everyone accepts mass suicide as the best option in case of the town's fall. In the diegetic world of the film, the characters' vow to kill themselves and to help their loved ones choose death is presented as a normal occurrence, and even as something praiseworthy. Ultimately, the incoherence, lack of a narrative unity or flow, and the chilling depiction of what passes for social norms within the diegetic universe of the last two films, all indicate that we might locate the significance of *Portrait* and *Suicide* not as film texts but actually as documents of the real politik. Despite their fictional nature, the films show all too clearly the real-life context of their fictionalized world, of the frenzied last few historical moments of the Japanese empire.

In Place of Conclusion: Viewing Colonial Cinema in the Postcolonial World

During the last decade when colonial cinema could be finally collected and studied—positively combed through, in fact—many scholars searched for clues that will lead them to a coherent narrative of Korean national cinema tradition and history, a story of artistic, historical integrity that will present us, postcolonial scholars and audiences, with something beyond a viewing pleasure. But the search was in vain. Thus, the disconcerting question of authenticity in Korean cinematic tradition, as it pertains in particular to its origins, located in colonial cinema, lingers. Let us remember the moment of *Angels* discovery and the consequent disillusion. What is at the heart of this disillusion? It is a search for a spiritual authenticity in colonial era Korean cinema that will confirm our

collective belief in the continuity of national cinematic tradition. Authenticity of a national tradition is fated to be a politically fraught question, and in the end, the pursuit of this question may reveal more a collective will and desire than a historical set of facts. Those who wished for such authenticity have been disillusioned by their own willful blindness to the differences within the sameness, ruptures within continuity, and the historical specificity of cinematic texts under scrutiny. In our particular case, what is at stake is no less than Korean cinematic tradition itself, implacably invested with inherent value of ethno-nationalism.

Writing against ethno-nationalistic scholarship that insists on interpreting colonial collaboration as purely a narrative of victimization, the Korean scholar Kim Jaeyong (2004, 27) argues that despite popular belief, Japanese colonial collaboration is entirely volitional, because unless the action is performed voluntarily, it cannot be considered collaboration. And voluntary actions always have an internal logic. Kim (ibid. 39) thus correctly criticizes ethno-nationalistic scholarship for their position that Japanese colonial rule was not hegemonic. On the contrary, historical evidence shows that the colonial rule in Korea often enjoyed consensus of the ruled population, and also that it was not entirely dependent on threats of, or actual, violence and repression.[15] Writings from the period often reveal this aspect of life in colonial Korea. For instance, the film director Seo Gwangje (1940; qtd. in Ju 2012, 147-49) complained in 1940 that generally speaking, people in the colony did not internalize the "New System" but rather, saw it as a temporary trend that could be easily replaced by another with the passage of time.

Viewing colonial cinema in the postcolonial world, one cannot assume that the contemporary film viewing practice and attitude would have coincided with those of today's audiences. This is the ethical viewing position and attitude one can assume at present. Further, the colonial audience might have been indifferent or glad, even, to watch these propaganda films as they were free entertainment. It is pointless to conjecture just how effectively the propaganda films convinced colonial subjects to enlist, to fight in the war for the imperial cause. Instead, I would like to end with a reminder of the impossibility of

15. For instance, when Japan began mobilizing and enlisting Korean men in the Japanese imperial army, it also began the universal compulsory education in the colony (R. Kim 2006, 119).

propaganda film as a tool of enlightenment.

Imperial Japan's ideals of "germ-free utopia" began in the early years of Korea's colonization and spread to the entire country by 1920. The government authorities showed films about proper hygiene practices in elementary schools, parks and government halls, and given cinema's popularity, the showings were apparently well attended. Ironically, however, these were also typical places filled with people and thus, germs, as well (R. Kim 2006, 68). Historical anecdotes such as this abound, referencing the immense difficulty the colonial authorities faced in Korea when they tried to control and transform the masses, especially through education. Although many among the colonized population were unable to actively resist the colonial rule, they were also unwilling, or perhaps unable, to view movies in a way that was intended by the propaganda filmmakers as they never got properly educated in imperial desire, unlike the fictional characters in those films. Fujitani (2011, 297) writes about an old Korean couple he interviewed, for example, who lived through this period. Surprisingly, they remember films such as *Suicide* with fond nostalgia and call it a "fine movie." Instead of propaganda, audiences will see and remember only what they want to in the end—the allure of film as science-infused magic that transported them to another reality.[16]

The colonial authorities' failed effort to make the colonial Korean subjects watch propaganda films correctly is a testament to the emotional powers of cinema itself, if not, perhaps, the deep-seated nationalistic feelings of the colonized population. The regime catered to the tastes of the masses—both in the colonies and in the motherland—with insertions of melodrama and ethnography in these films, but it was not always enough to draw crowds to the free screenings. And even when they watched the films, they were more likely to be dazzled by its visual pleasure ("it was a fine movie") rather than agree with the films' intended lessons of imperial subjecthood. The unintended pleasures and disappointments of Korean colonial cinema, therefore, make this body of work a curious instance of a kind of double perspective and viewing practices, in which the colonial masses—the metaphorical "students" trapped in the backwardness of the past, temporally separated, lagging behind the empire's

16. In a similar vein, a film scholar Yi Joo Young (2012, 563) argues that in the darkness of the theater, colonial Korean audiences were free to disregard the colonial master's speech and stop feigning obedience to the their messages, in part due to their lack of Japanese language comprehension.

time—reveal themselves to be a wily audience, who sought pleasure where they could find it, and ignored the unpleasant, uninteresting bits, to keep doing what they enjoyed, watching movies.

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Abstract

The Japanese colonial authorities treated Korean subjects like pupils, and further, like metaphorical children in a number of ways. They attempted to enlighten Korea, and one of the most effective tools of enlightenment for the mostly illiterate colonial population was film. It was a powerful material of propaganda and governing due to its massive popularity since its introduction in the colony. Upon the Korea Film Decree announcement by the Government General in 1940, the colony's movie theaters became schools that only screened educational films. With this historical context in mind, this essay provides a study of the late-colonial era films released in the 1940-1945 period, including *Homeless Angels*, *Love and Vow*, *Volunteer*, *Portrait of Youth*, and *Suicide Squad at the Watch Tower*. My analyses focus on the intertwined issues of colonial enlightenment and propaganda, as well as the issues of ethnography, censorship, and narrative strategies of the films. The films are often packaged as melodrama through a heavy use of music, but this genre façade actually leads to the films' narrative failure as both melodrama and propaganda. Thus I argue that the Japanese colonial authorities' attempt at enlightenment via propaganda films ultimately failed. In lieu of a conclusion, this essay ends with a consideration of postcolonial desire for a national cinematic tradition, and the implied ethics of film viewing in postcolonial worlds.

Keywords: colonial cinema, propaganda, melodrama, Korea Film Decree, militarism, colonial audience

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