Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier, by Theodore Hughes New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 304 pp., US$ 27.00, ISBN 9780231157490 (paperback)

The Prison of "Continuity," and a Possible Escape

The title of this book suggests an analysis of Cold War culture in South Korea beginning at the point of liberation, in 1945, but in fact Hughes traces the theoretical origins of Cold War culture as far back as the early 20th century. The book is thus as much about the author's theories of modernity in Korea, including the colonial era, as it is about culture per se. Of course, others studying Korean literature or history have also tended to explain the period from colonial Korea through to the post-liberation era in terms of continuity rather than of rupture, and the investigation of the internalized remnants of Japanese imperialism is a familiar theme from many recent post-colonial cultural studies. Hughes takes this trend much further, however, by portraying such continuity as distinctly radical, even as sinister. His analysis goes beyond singular or incidental events, and attempts to provide a fresh understanding of a process which some have seen as almost inevitable. Indeed, some analyses call to mind the way in which psychoanalytic theory treats neuroses: all suppressed things will definitely make a return.

In the introduction, Hughes lays out his hypothesis that South Korea's Cold War culture has its beginnings in the "disavowal" efforts of certain histories, especially the efforts to erase particular aspects of colonial modernity. What, then, was suppressed or eradicated? According to Hughes, it was part of the very foundations upon which Chosun's colonial modernity was built: firstly, the literary works and wider culture of the proletariat, which constituted an important center of gravity in contemporary culture, and secondly, the diverse "mass mobilization culture" which was extensively implemented during the Japanese imperial occupation. The denial of past proletarian culture is linked closely to the way in which all reference to North Korea is being systematically deleted from South Korean Cold War culture. What then would be the impact of the latter, denying the mobilization culture of Japanese Imperialism in the past? This would be problematic as well. The cultural structure in general—total mobilization and conformity—that prevailed during the late years of

the Japanese Occupation, would have been forgotten. Just as big as the parts forgotten, the actions of some individuals acting pro-Japanese would have had the tendency to be viewed from a diminished and simplified ethical standpoint only.

According to Hughes, what goes around comes around and thus, the two most powerful motivating codes of post-colonial South Korean national and political culture, "anticommunism" and "anti-Japanese sentiment," immediately reveal the two things that South Korea has been desperately trying to eradicate. The book presents South Korea's Cold War culture as having been constructed upon the negativity of denial and forgetting, but it also shows how some parts of the past previously deemed buried resurfaced during the Cold War era, and grotesquely returned to the lives of the people. For example, would the aspects and sensibility of collective group culture which prevailed among Chosun people in a loyal subject of war-faring Japan have disappeared? According to Hughes, it is not possible and furthermore cannot happen. This uncomfortable past which does not readily fit into the postcolonial world, has never gone away, and it found a renewed expression during the developmental dictatorship of the 1960s and 70s, in a combination of nationalism and militarism. In short, this book describes in minute detail, and with impressive erudition, the way in which modernity was manifest anew in the changed conditions following the Occupation. This book is more ambitious than simply describing the zombies rising from their shallow graves, however: Hughes' research is trying to provide an escape from the suffocatingly predetermined cycle of suppression and revival. With this in mind, the book digs directly into Korean literature and the archives of Korean culture, seeking to uncover an "open opportunity" or a "disruptive" lineage of authors. In a sense, therefore, Hughes' strenuous efforts to uncover every aspect of the formation of South Korean Cold War culture can be described as a faithful genealogy while at the same time being an anti-genealogy.

"Bad Blood" or a "Disruptive" Lineage

Rather than analyzing typical examples of how the Cold War order was implemented in society, Hughes devotes his most careful scrutiny to the few texts which attempted to question the obvious South Korean national

identity based upon anticommunism and anti-Japanese sentiment. The most representative examples of such "disruptive" writers are Son Chang-sop in the 1950s, Nam Jung-hyun in the 1960s, and Choi In-hun in the early and mid-1970s. These three diverse personalities were each motivated to take a stand against the imposed and artificial borders of nation, state, and ideology in the post-colonial era, and they are clearly exceptions in the history of Korean Literature: Son Chang-sop expressed himself with doubt and despair, Nam Jung-hyun voiced his anger through parody, and Choi In-hun devised an experimental project in which people are not confined by national identity but become transnational subjects instead.

From the extent and depth of analysis which Hughes devotes to Choi In-hun, it would seem that he considers him the preeminent writer of this persuasion. Those well acquainted with Korean literature will know that Choi In-hun drew uncomfortable parallels between the propaganda of the colonial era and that of the developmental dictatorship of the 1960s and 70s (*The Voice of the Governor General*), thus highlighting the similarities between colonial and postcolonial rule. Besides discussing Choi In-hun, Hughes also reevaluates Son Chang-sop, focusing upon one of his lesser-known works, *The Location of Stairs* (1956), for which he offers an original yet convincing interpretation. The story gives a glimpse into the life of a young woman working as a prostitute servicing US soldiers, and it therefore appears to fit into the category of "US-military-base literature." Hughes rejects this categorization, however, insisting that the story should be read as questioning this frequently used narrative frame and its orthodox elements of ethnic nationalism, political nationalism, and anti-communism. For Hughes, the text can be interpreted as a meta-narrative on the conventions of US-military-base literature.

Actually, the general consensus on US-military-base literature is that it symbolizes the relations between South Korea and the US as being essentially a national rape. When this kind of nationalistic structure is presented in a narrative, however, with "South Korea's weakness" and "US domination" as the key elements, its brute simplicity tends to obscure the existence of more complex relations between South Korea and the US, preventing any examination of additional layers of internal structure. In Son Chang-sop's metaphor, such structures are hidden, just as the position of a stairway may be concealed within a building. Plainly speaking, even the issue of prostitution and the US military can be seen as dependent upon the tacit acquiescence

and continuing public support by the South Korean government. Under the rubric of "nation," the role of such important categories as "class" and "gender" can be easily submerged, and more complex aspects of the situation, including clandestine collusion between the military and the government, can be hidden from view. Thus, in Hughes' interesting interpretation of Son's story: "The representation of national rape acts as a screen hiding an architectural structure." What we can see is "merely a fantasy frame of identity using a rape allegory of US/South Korean relations"; conversely, what we therefore cannot see are the possibilities for "alliance and intimacy, and the communal lives beyond ethnic and political nationalism."

Of course, Son Chang-sop had less success presenting an alternative subject in the 1950s than Choi In-hun in the 1970s. The protagonist of *The Location of Stairs*, after witnessing the act of prostitution involving a US soldier and a young woman who resembles his younger sister, ultimately abandons his questions about "the inner structure" of the building. He is described as deciding to "lie down as he is," in other words, he retreats into his inner self. It seems as if the author himself is making a confession that his previous doubts have evaporated, after witnessing the overwhelming scene of prostitution (or rape), with its nationalist connotations. Indeed, almost all of Son Chang-sop's works end in an incomplete state, where the issues raised remain unresolved, and in fact his best known story is titled "Unfinished Chapter." According to Hughes, however, Son Chang-sop's writing allows us to see in a specific way, and this ability to capture the existence of a frame which distinguishes "the visible" and "the invisible" puts him at the forefront of those writers expressing a "disruptive" imagination.

Expanding Our Understanding of Visual Culture

In Hughes' attempt to uncover the recurrent themes which establish cultural continuity throughout the colonial and postcolonial (Cold War) eras he identifies the issue of visuality as "a certain product of the colonial past" which arose together with colonial modernity. The prevailing cultural theories of the English-speaking world make much use of this concept of visuality, usually as a theoretical source, for example in film analysis, but Hughes has much broader aspirations. He seeks to apply visuality not only to the typical visual genres,

such as movies, but also to the written media, including literature, for which visuality issues are more subtle. Essentially, he aims to explain the relation between visual behavior or the practice of viewing an object and a perceptive layer unique to modernity. To some extent, therefore, this book shares common ground with the work of W. J. T. Mitchell, who was largely responsible for developing the interdisciplinary study of "visual culture." This field emphasizes the phenomena happening in the process of "seeing other people, being seen by others," with the aim of exploring the "social construction of the visual field" (Mitchell 2010, 77). According to Mitchell, visual reciprocity is not merely a byproduct of social reality but rather actively constitutive of it.

For instance, Hughes closely analyzes the KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federatio) films of the 1920s from this perspective of visual culture, concluding that they were produced with the intention of "directly" changing reality by revealing to Chosun viewers the unbalanced capitalist relations which had formed between the imperial rulers and the colonial subjects. Radical imagery is frequently used in KAPF movies and posters which depicts "enlightening" visual motifs and structures associated with exploitation. These images can be understood as an attempt to make viewers see the familiar reality through new eyes, by using a type of shock therapy or "strategic defamiliarization." Ultimately, such efforts can be seen as an expression of the practical desire to change both the perception and the reality of the colonialized Chosun people. As well as the 1920s KAPF films, Hughes also examines the nativist art of the 1930s, such as Yi Kwang-su's novel *The Heartless* (1917), the visual culture of modernism during the same period, and the visuality of Japanization as it was, for instance, expressed in imperial mobilization movies towards the end of colonial rule.

The sheer scale of Hughes project, an attempt to explain the colonial and postcolonial periods through a single conceptual framework, "visuality," which he applies throughout the diverse fields of literature, film, and art, creates some unsurprising difficulties. As a reader, one cannot help but notice that the concept of visuality is used rather differently depending on the context. Thus, in one part of the book, "visuality" literally means the visual objects as dealt with by film and art, whereas in a different part, "visuality" is connected with the act of seeing. At the same time its description spreads over much farther dimensions because it closely resembles an abstract epistemological discussion on "modern thinking." Within this context, this book has an affinity with

Karatani Kojin's *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*. Kojin's insight is that a person's interior and (exterior) "landscapes" are discovered simultaneously, depending upon their perspective, rather than a person's interior existing prior to the (exterior) "landscapes." Hughes describes a similar type of "inversion" resulting from the implementation of a modern perspective, which leads to the discovery of a Chosun version of this understanding, seen, for example, in the way that Yi Kwang-su's text or a nativist artist views the world. The paradox typical to modern epistemology that the "landscape" or "landscape-ified other" is discovered by the "inner man" who is indifferent to the world surrounding him, is playing a big role in Hughes' book.

Given Hughes' ambitions, then, the meaning of visuality as presented in the book must inevitably be broad and flexible. For example, when discussing postcolonial Cold War visual culture, Hughes emphasizes the "political" realm of visuality, which is primarily concerned with identifying how ideology sets the borders of "the visible" and "the invisible." In short, one gets the impression that the term "visuality" is applied flexibly in terms of denotation, connotation, emphasis, depending on the period or realm of analysis, in order to prove the continuity of Korean Literature, which is a pre-requisite of this book. We can also rephrase the question as follows. By positioning KAPF and nativism, modernism, and imperial mobilization culture in a continuous spectrum in the name of visuality, Hughes brings the "Colonial Modern" excessively forward as a common ground that connects them loosely. On the other hand, we ask ourselves if the meaningful differences of visual culture for each realm are unwillingly reduced.

Ultimately, of course, the confused field of meaning for "visuality" comes from the ambiguity of its origins, deriving from the basic concepts of "image" or "picture." According to Mitchell (2010, 5), the English phrase "get the picture" is a direct example of the most extensive range of interpretation, where an image describes the entire situation in which one finds oneself. In fact, Mitchell's broad understanding of image and picture can be traced back to Heidegger's term "world picture," which takes the idea to its logical extreme: the (modern) world is actually understood as being a picture or representation, rather than as "it is." And indeed, Anglophone cultural studies have already started to gravitate away from a "linguistic turn" to a "pictorial turn," so what is happening in Korean cultural studies? Although there have been some attempts to employ similar techniques of analysis, the study of visual culture is

still confined to film and art, being rarely discussed in interdisciplinary studies or taken as a main topic in literature or literary criticism. Theodore Hughes' *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier* is therefore a welcome contribution to the understanding of South Korea's Cold War culture, and by prompting Korean academics to treat the study of visual culture more seriously, this book may become a seminal work in a turn toward the pictorial.

Reference

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