



The Power of Cinema on the Korean Peninsula

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Abstract: The Korean peninsula is constantly in a dynamic discussion of identity and direction. For South Korean society, it is no surprise that the Korean War and the existential threat that North Korea poses loom large over its collective conscience. Although mostly disregarded within scholarly discussions in international relations, cinema has always been, and continues to be, an insightful, powerful, and transformative forum.

This essay discusses the ways in which cinema as an art form has been able to impact the way that South Korean society evolves, especially as an interpretative medium that argues for the ways in which the Korean demos should understand its own history as well as the the ongoing struggle with the enigma that is North Korea.

In particular, the essay examines two movies in detail – *Brotherhood* and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* – to reveal how the same socio-political discussions are going on beneath the surface of two seemingly completely different genres of Korean War movies. Led by these persuasive works of art, the essay argues, Korean society is already moving in a post-modern and humanist direction and suggests that as a democracy, Korean society should embrace the power of cinema in both internal and external affairs.

Keywords: Cinema; Film; North Korea; Welcome to Dongmakgol; Post-modernism; Korean War.

Introduction

Art as a Social Force

Movies are not direct representations of reality. Everyone knows this. Unless they claim to be documentaries, it would be a stretch to argue that movies have any responsibility to be historically accurate in the same way that novels wouldn't be required to adhere to such strict standards since they are not works of journalism. At the same time, it is evident that movies have a special place in a society's socio-political discourse. Governments and interest groups have always been very sensitive to cinema – much more than people would assume. Today, even the general public is very responsive to the smallest details in historical fiction movies. Why is it a big deal, for example, that Christian Bale is playing Moses? Why did the descendants of general Bae Seol feel the need to charge the producers of *Roaring Currents* for defamation? Don't we all understand that they are "just movies"?

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ISSN - 2464-9929, © ARISS, Global Politics Review, <http://www.globalpoliticsreview.com>

Pablo Picasso once said: “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand.”¹ The best of art is communicable and worth talking about for many people because it carries elements of truth in it. Artists have long philosophized that art is often more *true* than tangible reality. Whether this is true or not, this much is clear: art has always had the potential to be provocative, insightful, inspiring, accusatory, consoling, propagandistic, and even incendiary precisely because it has a unique power to persuade.

Art, however, derives its social power from the fact that it has the imperative force to demand that we think, feel, and believe in a certain way. As the most multisensory art, cinema does this very effectively. Turkish scholar Sengul argues: “Film is probably the most technologically sophisticated and narratively complete form of aesthetic fiction and a profound medium of inculcating in us a larger symbolic order [...] they show us and tell us who we are supposed to be by presenting an ideology that conveys an attitude toward everything from the trivial to the profound, from what we eat for breakfast to whether we should go to war.”²

The Unique Character of Historical Fiction

Historical fiction is unique because it places itself within a specific context that existed as a matter of fact, blurring the distinction between what part of the story is historically true and what is not. At the same time, because it is allegorical, historical fiction always contains within it the potential to be polyvalent. As was said in the Middle Ages: “*littera gesta docet, quid credas, allegoria*” - that is, “the literal sense teaches the facts; the allegory what you should believe.” The set, the characters, the story may all be historically accurate but it is the allegory that makes a narrative relevant to the contemporary audience. It also reflects the personal tastes, interests, and beliefs of the director, which are applied both consciously and subconsciously. Ironically, this is no different from what historians do: they gather hard evidence and write a narrative according to their own interpretation of what would have been closest to the truth.

The Evolving Public

With the passage of time and the help of archeologists and historians, our understanding of historical events draws ever closer to their original complexity and sophistication. This in turn provides greater breadth for artists to reinterpret and recast events to reveal hitherto hidden truths or imbue them with new meaning. An important element in this process that also evolves with time is the public’s willingness to open up and accept new perspectives.

1 Pablo Picasso, “Statement to Marius De Zayas 1923”, accessed September 20, 2015, http://www.learn.columbia.edu/monographs/picmon/pdf/art_hum_reading_49.pdf.

2 Ali Fuat, Şengül. “Cinema and Representation in International Relations: Hollywood Cinema and the Cold War.” (M.S. diss., Middle East Technical University, 2005): 5.

Generational transition as well as changing circumstances has a lot to do with this but new narratives and perspectives greatly contribute to challenging existing ways of viewing history and the world. This constant evolution in the collective conscience is reflected in works of art because artists themselves are members of the public, both limited by the same circumstances as well as open to the same potentialities.

A Serious Mistake

Unfortunately, cinema has largely been neglected in discourses about international relations. Mainstream political science tends to condescend on popular culture in general as unworthy of serious consideration when discussing international relations.³ This is a serious mistake especially since decision-makers do care about, and often regulate, cinema. “Lenin called cinema ‘the most important art.’ And whenever the American government had a difficulty in solving problems, the same machine would be at the service of it.”⁴ Decision-makers understand that cinema is an important tool in communicating with, indoctrinating, and influencing the public. Films also “contribute to the reproduction of foreign policy discourses” and they “produce consent.”⁵ What also gets lost in macro-political discourse is the fact that decision-makers are also members of the public. This implies that the same medium of film can be used to raise questions and objections to those in power, thereby inspiring a different set of values and propagating a different direction of policy.

Cinema in Korea

Led by movies such as *Old Boy*, the Korean filmmaking industry and moviemakers have achieved world recognition. The Korean public is also a very enthusiastic movie-going public, which has made the cinematic landscape in Korea very unique. With the politicization of the mainstream media especially in recent years, cinema has become an alternative forum for social and political discussion and even indictment; appealing directly to the public to raise awareness about issues the media may be negligent of.

The greatest example is *Dogani*⁶, a movie based on a novel, which was itself based on a true story about the abuse of hearing-impaired children at a school in Gwangju. This movie is an interesting case study because it led to direct legislation bearing its name in the same year. It not only raised moral outrage against what had actually happened but also raised questions about why it had not been investigated by mainstream journalists to begin with. This case is also noteworthy in that a film based on a novel had provided unprecedented impetus for action on the part of otherwise lethargic legislators.

3 Engert, Stefan & Spencer, Alexander. “International Relations at the Movies: Teaching and Learning about International Politics through Film.” *Perspective* 17, no. 1 (2009).

4 Ali Fuat, Şengül. “Cinema and Representation in International Relations,” 1.

5 *Ibid.*, 2.

6 *Silenced*, D-Cinema, directed by Dong-hyuk Hwang (2011; Seoul: CJ Entertainment, Film).

The Korean War Narrative

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, there were an incredibly large number of movies produced about the Korean War but its content was unsophisticated.⁷ According to the Korea Creative Content Agency: “the Korean War movies during the 1960s to the 1980s depict North Korea as the perfect enemy. With no tears or blood, they are simply human weapons threatening South Korea. On the other hand, these movies emphasize the loyalty and sacrifice of [South Koreans] fighting for their nation.”⁸ In 1973, the Park Chung-hee government created the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation mainly for the purpose of censoring movies but also to produce government-backed anti-communist films. Prominent award ceremonies even had a separate category for anti-communist movies. Those were different times, however, and these measures should not be judged by contemporary standards. Still, within this historical context, there could be no real investigative works dealing with the truth of the war. While it was well known by historians, for example, that atrocities were committed on both sides, only the North Korean crimes were highlighted whereas those of the South Korean and United Nations (UN) Forces were ignored. To some extent, opening up to the wartime atrocities on this side of the peninsula is still a sensitive topic but this is neither surprising nor hard to understand. War wounds do not heal easily.

Wave of Change on the Korean Peninsula

From the end of the 1980s to the early 2000s, there were huge changes taking place on both sides of the peninsula and the world. South Korea was preoccupied with economic development and democratization while the North continued to fall behind. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, finally bringing the Cold War to an end. Meanwhile, Kim Young-sam was elected president in South Korea in 1993, the first civilian president after three decades of presidents from military brass. Perhaps most notably, Kim Il-sung died in 1994, ushering the last prominent Korean War figure into the pages of history. Despite the fact that North Korea still remained a serious existential threat to the South, these changes took away the force of the ideological threat of Communism. Communism had been defeated - this much seemed undeniable. Indeed, the entire world has been waiting for North Korea to collapse ever since. Put another way, it was no longer the formidable threat it used to be but has been exposed as an impoverished pariah state clearly on the losing side of history. All of these things combined produced new confidence in South Korea to talk more boldly about the war and the North. Often overlooked, the financial crisis of 1997 was another important turning point because it broke confidence in government and leadership. It is

7 73 movies were released in the 1960s alone and another 40 were produced in the 1970s. The number decreases in the ensuing decades with 18 during the 1980s and only 11 since the 1990s.

8 “How Korean Movies have been Depicted Over the Years,” Korean Content, last modified June 25, 2013, <http://koreancontent.kr/1552>.

worth noting that the government at the time was the first civilian government coming on the heels of a hard-fought process of democratization. In the economic turmoil that ensued, many people felt abandoned by society and this led to an increased sense of instability and mutual distrust. Leadership in particular lost the confidence of the people. The once seemingly all-powerful state had exposed its vulnerability and ineptitude.⁹ But overall, with the stabilizing situation in South Korea and the warming of Korean relations culminating in the first Inter-Korean Summit in 2000, it was now appropriate to revisit the history of the war. Moviemakers did just that.

Brotherhood (2004)

Taegeukki (Brotherhood) by Kang Jekyu was the first “Hollywood-style blockbuster” movie dealing with the Korean War but it was not his first movie dealing with inter-Korean relations. *Shiri* in 1999, a story about North Korean spies in South Korea broke the record set by *Titanic* in South Korea with 6.5 million at the box office. *Shiri*’s success was a turning point in Korean cinema as well as public discourse because it proved that people were still capable of taking great interest in a subject that had seemed exhausted. What was particularly interesting was the fact that this public was now one that remembered the Korean War as history rather than as experience.¹⁰ *Brotherhood* was released in 2004 with even greater success, attracting 11.74 million. *Brotherhood*, however, was normatively very different from even Kang’s own previous film.

Even in *Shiri*, the unfeeling, soulless image of the North Korean could still be recognized in some of the characters. But in *Brotherhood*, this icon of the North Korean is completely absent. Interestingly enough, there isn’t a prominent North Korean character at all until Jintae joins the North Korean forces. *Brotherhood* is unique in that it takes a war that was long described as fratricidal and makes it literally that. The brothers are not extensions of the state or any ideology but normal people who live simple lives. From the beginning, this story is not about the two Koreas as political entities. The macro-political view is already, or finally, being put aside for a more humanist approach to the history of the Korean War.

When the war is imposed on the brothers’ family, they appeal to the fact that there must be some misunderstanding. They don’t see a nexus between them and the war. The brothers are not aggressors or patriotic defenders of their state but victims of a decision beyond their reach. There is no nationalistic rallying around the flag – reflected in the subtle sarcasm of the Korean title “*Taegeukki Hwinallimyeo*,” which literally means “while waving the [national flag].” Some members of the older generation apparently were turned off by the title because they thought it was another propaganda movie.

⁹ Kim, Kyoung Wook. “A Study on Historical Changes and Genre Reconstructions of Representing Korean War in Recent Korean Cinema” (Sejong University, 2011).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

Ironically, the title was playing on just this kind of expectation.

From the very beginning, everyone's goal is to get home safely. The centrality of this theme is expressed through the slogan on the main poster, "We must get home alive." The end goal is life, not victory, and this life reverberates throughout the movie as peaceful memories of family and the quotidian. The battlefield is a hellish juxtaposition of this longing. There is no glory or heroism here, only suffering and death.

None of the soldiers have a clear understanding of why they are fighting the North Koreans. After the first battle together as a platoon, two South Korean soldiers witness a severely wounded comrade and have an altercation:

Soldier 1: They haven't given us food or water for days!

Soldier 2: We'll die an honorable death.

Soldier 1: Soldiers are human, too! Where's the honor in starving to death?

Soldier 2: You crazy bastard, you'd go to [the other side] for a piece of bread!

Soldier 1: It's better than starving to death! Who gives a shit about who wins! I don't know what ideology is but is it so important that brothers have to point guns at each other? At least against the Japanese, we fought to save the country, but what the fuck is this for!

Soldier 2: You damn commie!

This conversation foreshadows what is to come. With the entire country being taken and retaken by the opposing forces, the people caught in the middle do whatever they can to survive. With food lacking, many including Jintae's wife sign up for the communist party and volunteer at rallies for rice rations. This later becomes the reason many civilians are slaughtered, which is historically true. Soldier 1 says he doesn't know anything about ideology and indeed, the ideological reasons behind the war are unaccounted for in the movie. Nobody explains or advocates any ideology. It also turns out that Soldier 2 hates the North so viciously only because communists slaughtered his entire family. Even his reason for fighting is love for family, not ideology.

Family is placed at the front and center of the entire movie, especially throughout the evolution of the older brother Jintae and this reflects the changing focus of the people from the state unit to the family as the dominant community structure. As the newly wed leader of his family that includes his mute mother, Jintae fights so he can earn a medal and send his younger brother Jinseok home. As Jintae gets drunk on violence and militaristic glory of war, it is his brother who keeps him sane, acting as the voice of conscience and humanity.

In a gladiatorial scene, Jintae is abusing North Korean prisoners of war, forcing them to fight each other for food, but the two prisoners are reluctant to fight against their fellow comrade. As the South Korean platoon demands blood and entertainment, Jinseok jumps into the pit and replaces one of the prisoners of war, laying bare the uncomfortable truth that these North Koreans are just like them, literally their *brothers*, and just as reluctant

to fight the war as they are.

The fratricidal nature of the war and the irony of the central place of family become most apparent when Jintae joins the North Korean forces. The only reason he joins the North is because he believes that the South Koreans have murdered his wife and his brother. For the same reason Soldier 2 was fiercely antagonistic towards the North, Jintae now is towards the South. When Jinseok finds Jintae on the battlefield, Jintae has drastically changed: he is the manifestation of the classic image of the soulless North Korean soldier.

We have to linger on this final scene just one more moment because there is much more going on here than simply a sad ending. Through Jintae, *Brotherhood* turns the classic image of the North Korean soldier on its head. The ferocious North Korean soldier is not some ideological fanatic: he is a victim of war. It is only when Jinseok appeals to Jintae's memory of the good life and his family that he comes back to his senses. The humanist perspective is most prominent here where you realize that the so-called killing machine is actually your own brother who has simply lost his way and is in need of redemption.

Welcome to Dongmakgol (2005)

This story takes place in a hidden village in the mountain during the Korean War. Two South Korean soldiers and three North Korean soldiers end up staying at the same village under the hospitality of a community that knows nothing about the war. The movie depicts an Eden-esque village. The name Dongmakgol itself, a character explains, means to "live carelessly like children."

Questions have been raised about what exactly this village is since it is not historical. Some have suggested that it is a utopian pre-modern society and the only thing that is important is that it is conceivable.¹¹ Others have also pointed to the possibility that it represents the world after death. These are interesting discussions but neither holds up when we consider other evidence in the film itself. Unlike an ephemeral existence, the village people can, and do, come in contact with people from the outside. People in this village not only physically die; they actually have a history of coming in contact with the outside world. The father of the little boy left for the world under the mountain and the villagers are aware of historical invasions from the Japanese and the Chinese. Therefore, the village is not completely fantastic but rather a depiction of the purely peaceful elements of Korean society and what Korean society today aspires to – a community hospitable for all and a life of peace and harmony.

The premise of the movie is that war is imposed on innocent people who are simply trying to live their normal lives – a theme already familiar to us through *Brotherhood*. The main concern of the people is whether they will have enough to eat for the coming winter. The movie carries within it a very pacifist and post-modern argument that people

11 Kim, Kyoung Wook. "A Study on Historical Changes and Genre Reconstructions of Representing Korean War in Recent Korean Cinema."

really don't care for political-ideological conflict and that they are perfectly happy in their peaceful civilian lives if the integrity of that life is undisturbed. When the North Korean officer asks the village elder how he is capable of exercising such strong leadership without ever speaking, the elder replies nonchalantly, "Feed them well." Scholars point to this scene as Korean society's fatigue and distrust towards leaders who don't understand the leadership the people want.¹² People don't want ideology, they want bread.

One of the most important scenes is when Moon, the younger South Korean soldier, is explaining to the villagers about the war below the mountain. The villagers ask whether it is the Japanese or the Chinese that have come this time, to which he has trouble explaining because he cannot decide whether North Korea is a "different country" and he also doesn't have an accurate understanding of why they are fighting. The only thing he knows is that the National Defense Forces are fighting the North Korean 'puppet army,' which is a term he clearly got from his authorities. The villagers are left confused.

It is just then that the North Korean soldiers appear. Immediately, a chaotic situation ensues. The villagers get caught in the middle with both groups of soldiers essentially treating them like hostages, a miniature version of the situation on the Korean peninsula. Rounded up in the middle, the villagers begin talking to one another about a wild boar that has appeared in their potato field, threatening their crops. Both groups of soldiers try to recover the villagers' attention but the villagers are uninterested. They remain in this awkward position until the next morning and one by one the villagers get up to move on with their daily chores while the soldiers remain in their ridiculous standoff.

After what seems like an entire day, the two groups grow tired and a grenade is accidentally dropped, exploding none other than the storage where the village had been gathering crops for the winter. In the meaningless distrust and enmity, it is the innocent people and their livelihood that suffer. Who could miss the allegorical message here of the half-century standoff between the two Koreas taking the people hostage and threatening the livelihood of both?

The soldiers decide to work together to restore the crops for the villagers. It is in this process that they develop a deep friendship and later give their lives to save the villagers - that is, they do what 'Korean' soldiers are supposed to do. The movie, therefore, suggests a new direction for Korean relations - one of reconciliation *through* reconstruction.

One more thing that should be pointed out is that the eventual enemy is the South Korean and US forces. The soldiers come into the village assuming that there are communist units hiding in the village. They are right in that there are North Koreans there but the demonic communists they have in their militaristic fantasy do not exist in any real sense. The true threat to the village is militarism and the perpetuation of a fabricated image of the enemy.

12 Kim, "A Study on Historical Changes and Genre Reconstructions of Representing Korean War in Recent Korean Cinema."

A Postmodern Collective Conscience

It is difficult to argue that these movies are the primary movers in inter-Korean relations, especially since the influence of cinema on the public is nearly impossible to quantify. But because cinema is both a projection of already existing sentiments as well as a presentation of a new direction, movies have a significant impact on molding the collective conscience. The success and high regard for *Brotherhood* and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is also a democratic representation of how the people feel about their history as well as their consent and support for these post-modern perspectives.

On the flip side, the failure of a recent movie like *R2B: Return to Base* also demonstrates what the people do *not* empathize with. *R2B* was a movie heavily supported by the air force and was meant to be a sequel to *Red Muffler*, a successful movie in 1964 that brought many to the Air Force Academy. *R2B* had many elements that could have made it successful including a cast made up of famous celebrities and relatively impressive action scenes. However, the movie was by all accounts a failure at the box office and was ridiculed by many as being corny and militaristic. Indeed, the depiction of North Korea was too simplistic and devoid of sophistication for a public already thinking within a postmodern framework. Just as much as this sort of Cold-War narrative is bound to fail at the box office, a politician who espouses policies in the same vein will also find it very difficult to garner support, especially from the younger generation.

The changing ways in which North Korea, the Korean War, and war in general are viewed are making war a nearly impossible option for South Korean decision-makers. When we look back at the past decade, there were many incidents in which military escalation was possible. North Korea committed regional provocations most notably in 2002 and twice in 2010 with the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. But in spite of the fact that the latter two were some of the most detrimental and provocative in a long history of North Korean provocations, there was no social push for retaliation beyond limited reciprocation. Although the entire country was outraged after the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan, president Lee was highly criticized for war mongering when he claimed that he was “not afraid of war.” For better or worse, there has developed an adamant unwillingness on the part of the South Korean public to support militaristic policies. As movies such as *Brotherhood* and *Dongmakgol* both projected and newly illustrated, people now recognize all too clearly that it is their sons, brothers, and their peaceful lives that will be threatened.

Conclusion: The potential of cinema in Korean relations and beyond

As all moviemakers know, no movie can be successful if it does not tell a story that the public can empathize and relate to. At the same time, it also has to have an element that is new for the public to be stimulating. In this way, cinema has the power to both illuminate

thoughts and sentiments that already exists within the collective conscience while also focusing and funneling them into a particular direction, a particular logic. This is why governments and political leaders have long been both weary and attracted to the medium.

Especially in a democratic society like Korea, the public needs to understand that when they are going to the movie theater, they are participating in an inevitably political activity – they are voting with their movie tickets. Moviemakers should continue to make movies that discuss important topics and the public should actively go to the theatres, thereby also protecting the industry from having to turn to particular interests groups for survival. Especially movies that deal with North Korea are even more political today because of just how little we know of the country. This enigmatic quality of a country that is both mysteriously our brother and our greatest threat leaves our understanding of the country to the verdict of an internal discussion between competing interpretations that are politically radioactive. In other words, the debate is less about who North Korea is as a matter of fact but more about how we should be viewing them, which is fundamentally an internal discourse.

Korean society is still in the midst of a fierce debate about its identity, its rightful direction, the role of government, and the people's will, if there is one at all. Knowingly and unknowingly, cinema has been both a mirror and a forum for these debates. It is high time that we take this forum more seriously as a society and fully utilize it as a democracy. It has been, and can always be, more than just entertainment. **GPR**

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