

Depictions of Korean Masculinity in *The Marines Who Never Returned*

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Throughout Korea's cinematic history, Korean films have reflected different renditions of masculinity as influenced by the surrounding historical events. War movies, in particular, generally promote a version of masculinity based on violence and demeaning women. This paper will analyze *The Marines Who Never Returned* (1963), a war film from the Golden Age of Korean Cinema in the 1960s, to show how men demonstrated their masculinity and how depictions of masculinity were constructed in the wake of the Korean War. Specifically, this will be achieved by analyzing the story arc of a soldier named Kim Hae-bong and by analyzing the brothel as a site of masculinity.

Content analysis was used to analyze the film. Content analysis is a research method that involves coding texts to systematically examine and interpret patterns. This method was used to examine both the textual and visual elements of the film. I made note of various dimensions of masculinity and wrote down each instance a man performed any of these actions: stayed strong in the face of danger or pain, saved someone, showed emotional vulnerability, treated women badly or as lesser, asserted dominance, was rewarded for an act of heroism, or talked about his manhood. By writing down these instances, I was able to compile a list of noteworthy occurrences regarding masculinity to analyze. To provide a historical context for the analysis, research will include the use of secondary sources to examine the

gendered conditions at the time.

*The Marines Who Never Returned*¹ was a 1963 South Korean film directed by Lee Man-hee and written by Jang Guk-jin. It tells the story of a group of Korean marines who fought during the Korean War. Lee was given the Best Director award at the Blue Dragon Film Awards in 1963 and the Grand Bell Awards (Daejong Film Awards) in 1964.² Lee was among the most prolific Korean directors until his death at age forty-three.³ He was born in 1931 and grew up during the time of Japanese occupation.⁴ Lee had himself served in the Korean War and therefore could draw on his own experiences in the making of the film.⁵ *The Marines Who Never Returned* was his third film and was largely sponsored by the Marine Corps.⁶ The film's sponsorship by the Marine Corps is an important detail to note because such sponsorship can lend itself to the creation of propaganda. With the sponsorship, Lee was able to produce the film on a grand scale, and it became the highest-grossing film of the year in Korea.⁷

In this film, one can see the beginnings of President Park Chung Hee's nationalist discourse. From 1961-1963, Park, as the Chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction, launched the ideology of official nationalism with themes of "self-reliant defense" based on fierce anti-communism and "national character."⁸ He deemed cinema as an especially effective medium for propaganda, and aimed to spread anti-communism by revising the Motion Pictures Act and strengthening film censorship and other institutional measures.⁹ *The Marines Who Never Returned* was one of the anti-communist films produced in large numbers after 1962.¹⁰ Until 1966, large-scale war movies comprised the most dominant sub-

1 In Korean, the title is 돌아오지 않는 해병.

2 "The Marines Who Never Returned," Korean Movie Database, *Korean Film Archive*, n.d.

3 Hayley Scanlon, "The Marines Who Never Returned (돌아오지 않는 해병, Lee Man-Hee, 1963)," *Windows on Worlds*, 2017.

4 Jun-Hyoung Cho, "Director Lee Man-Hee: His Life and Movies," trans. Han Nool Lee, *Korean Film Archive*, n.d.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Seungsook Moon, "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea," in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 1997), 36.

9 Hye-Young Park, "Korean Anti-Communist Films during the Cold War," trans. Free Film Communications, *Korean Film Archive*, n.d.

10 Ibid.

genre of anti-communist films.¹¹ Although the film may seem like a blatant anti-communist film on the surface, the film was critical of the war itself. Unlike other anti-communist propaganda films, it emphasized elements of humanism and questioned the very nature of the Korean War, with both Koreas being collateral damages of the Cold War between the superpowers.¹²

The film is 110 minutes long, and I watched with English subtitles. The film depicts the story of a squad of marines who participate in the Battle of Incheon against Chinese soldiers during the Korean War. Near the beginning of the film, a mother and daughter run through the battlefield and only the girl, named Young-hui, survives. The soldiers rescue the girl and adopt her into their squad. At first, she is hidden away so that their superiors do not find out about her presence. Later, the superiors give their approval, and she becomes the squad's mascot and a symbol of everything they are fighting for. The soldiers later go to a brothel, but their visit is cut short by an emergency. The soldiers must leave Young-hui and confront the incoming Chinese soldiers on the battlefield. The squad is placed at the front lines and all but three soldiers are dead by the end of the film.

In order to better understand the masculinity depicted in this film, it is necessary to examine past constructions of Korean masculinity. During the Choson dynasty (1392-1910), the idealized masculinity model among commoners included physical prowess and toughness, but it had to be balanced with a demonstration of loyalty to central Confucian values.¹³ Confucian values made men structurally relevant members of society and relegated women to social dependence.¹⁴ At the top of Korea's social hierarchy were the *yangban*. The idealized masculinity model for the *yangban*, especially those hailing from scholarly lineages, differed greatly from the commoners. Masculinity in the *yangban* meant conforming to the ideal of being an impassionate leader and of having a great sense of duty and righteousness without being violent.¹⁵ The refined, aesthetic restraint of a scholarly neo-Confucian gentleman contrasted greatly with the unrestrained,

11 Ibid.

12 Cho, "Director Lee Man-Hee: His Life and Movies."

13 Vladimir Tikhonov, "Masculinizing the Nation: Gender Ideologies in Traditional Korea and in the 1890s-1900s Korean Enlightenment Discourse," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 66, no. 4 (2007): 1040.

14 Myung-hye Kim, "Transformation of Family Ideology in Upper-Middle-Class Families in Urban South Korea," *Ethnology*, vol. 32, no. 1 (1993): 70.

15 Tikhonov, "Masculinizing the Nation," 1042.

physically tough and powerful commoner.¹⁶

Several factors in the early 1900's led to the militarization of Korea. For instance, Korea's experience of Japanese colonization (1910-1945) heightened the status of warriors tremendously.¹⁷ There began to be a focus on physical strength and patriotic sentiment. As written in an article by Kim Huison during this time period, it was stated "the vigor of the nation was dependent on the state of the nation's physical fitness."¹⁸ It was believed that physical weakness of the nation would lead to a weakened "spiritual or mental strength."¹⁹ During these years of Japanese colonization, the model of the patriotic and strong man emerged as an ideal of masculinity. This model combined the previous versions of masculinity of the scholarly gentleman and the physically tough commoner.²⁰ In addition, a new vision of masculinity began to permeate into Korean society through Japanese translations or adaptations of European ideologues and moralists.²¹ These new Western ideas caused Koreans to blame colonization on effeminate Koreans, and to praise and glorify the military tradition of honor and patriotism.²²

As a result of the Korean War, there was an increased emphasis on militarized national security and the sentiment of a need "for a strong military for decades to come."²³ The military service functions as a way to define manhood because the state has considered the system of universal male conscription the desirable method to recruit soldiers to protect the nation from the impending threat from North Korea.²⁴ Since its establishment in 1957, the mandatory military system requires all able-bodied, young men of the age of 19 and above to serve in the military for twenty-six to thirty months.²⁵ The compulsory military service of men in Korea has played a

16 Ibid., 1045.

17 Hoon Choi, "Brothers in Arms and Brothers in Christ? The Military and the Catholic Church as Sources for Modern Korean Masculinity," *Society of Christian Ethics*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2012): 76.

18 Tikhonov, "Masculinizing the Nation," 1056.

19 Ibid.

20 Choi, "Brothers in Arms and Brothers in Christ?," 77.

21 Tikhonov, "Masculinizing the Nation," 1047.

22 Choi, "Brothers in Arms and Brothers in Christ?," 77.

23 Ibid., 78.

24 Moon, "The Production and Subversion of Masculinity," in *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 91.

25 Ibid.

large role in instilling military ideals.²⁶ Aside from instilling military ideals, the compulsory service has also had a large impact on imparting militaristic ideals of masculinity. Mandatory military service is seen as a rite of passage for men. Ideal constructions of Korean masculinity require one to have undergone the hardships of military service. Therefore, participation in military service is required for one to be taken seriously as a man. This military culture reinforces “macho” conventions and forces soldiers to endure like “real” men.²⁷ Some of these conventions can be seen through the film. However, participation in military service does not automatically make one a man. Men must also conform to the aspects of the ideal military man.

By studying numerous documents, Cho Song-suk observed three common aspects of the ideal military man:

The real man (*chinjja sanai*), (a) via common expressions and indoctrination of male supremacy, endures everything with superhuman toughness and fortitude; (b) via the rationalization of power, he accepts authoritarianism and strives for that power for himself; and (c) via sex as amusement or entertainment, he relieves stress by belittling women or by using demeaning sexual words, gestures, and actions.²⁸

Throughout the film, Kim Hae-bong, a soldier played by actor Kim Yun-ha, is constantly ridiculed for not being masculine enough. I will use focus on the third observation to analyze the actions and words of Kim and see how he compares to this ideal man. Soldiers who do not fit neatly into these expectations are often treated abusively.²⁹ Most of the abuse that Kim receives is verbal. Near the first quarter of the film, Young-hui, the young girl they adopt, comes up with nicknames for all of the soldiers, and she gives him the nickname of “big sister (*unnie 언니*).”³⁰ Out of all the nicknames she gives, it is perceived as the most insulting. The other soldiers are given unflattering nicknames such as hairy-beard, big nose, and toad, but the soldiers simply laugh when they hear this. When Young-hui calls Kim, “Big sister. Because you’re a girl,” Kim stands up violently and

26 Choi, “Brothers in Arms and Brothers in Christ?,” 78.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 79.

29 Ibid.

30 Man-hee Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned* (Dae Won Films, 1963), 28:16.

says, “you little...”³¹ This is due in part to the way in which nationalism has been constructed in Korea. The official nationalism pushed by President Park Chung Hee (1961-1971) and other military regimes constructed the nation as “the community of men and defended by men, in which women exist merely as a precondition.”³² Women are represented as subordinate to men in official nationalism.³³ Thus, being branded a girl or woman makes one as both subordinate to other men and an outcast to this community of men as described in nationalistic discourses.

Mid-way through the movie, the soldiers get the opportunity to visit a brothel called the Lucky Club. Many of the other soldiers act as described in the third observation of an ideal military man. They relieve “stress by belittling women or by using demeaning sexual words, gestures, and actions.”³⁴ When they arrive at the brothel, the men whistle and wink at a prostitute who in turn looks at them with a displeased expression. One of the soldiers says, “Oh, sexy. Sister, you’ve got a great body, and I bet you have a great heart, too.”³⁵ The prostitutes are remarked on and appraised by how good their bodies look. While the other soldiers are excited to have sex with the prostitutes, Kim backs away when one of the prostitutes approach him.³⁶ In fact, he doesn’t go into the room with the prostitute until his squad commander stares him down. His stiffness and reluctance to have sex with the prostitute breaks with the third observation Cho made about the ideal military man. In this aspect of masculinity, manhood is measured by how many women a man has slept with.³⁷ Even the prostitute seems exasperated with Kim’s unmanly behavior. She says, “You act just like a girl.”³⁸ Kim takes offense to this and stands up and says, “Men treat me like a girl; women treat me like a girl. I’m going to prove today that I’m a man.”³⁹ Kim then starts to aggressively take off his clothes, implying that through sexual conquest of women, he will become a man. Unfortunately for him,

31 Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, 28:25.

32 Moon, “Begetting the Nation,” 52.

33 Ibid., 57.

34 Choi, “Brothers in Arms and Brothers in Christ?,” 79.

35 Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, 44:35.

36 Ibid., 50:40.

37 Choi, “Brothers in Arms and Brothers in Christ?,” 80.

38 Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, 56:15.

39 Ibid., 56:20.

an emergency arises, and he is unable to prove his manhood at that time.

By bragging about their sexual prowess, these soldiers distinguish themselves clearly from homosexuals. Men who fail to adhere to hegemonic standards of masculinity are at risk of being labeled as gay. Oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men, and gayness represents all that has been symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity.⁴⁰ Although Kim is not labeled as gay, his sexuality comes into question during his reluctance to go into the room with the prostitute. However, the film makes it clear to the viewer by the end of the scene that he is not homosexual. It is fear, not lack of sexual interest that inhibits him.

The soldiers' visit to the brothel is especially important as a site of masculinity because this brothel is normally off limits to Korean men. The madam says, "This place is for UN soldiers far from home fighting for our country."⁴¹ Therefore, although sex for amusement and pleasure is a key part of the ideal Korean military man, these Korean soldiers do not have access to this resource. Naturally, there is some resentment. This brothel is the only one on the mountain, so they have nowhere else they can go. The soldiers feel that the situation is unfair, and they feel entitled to these sexual services. When the squad commander tells the soldiers that the brothel is off limits to Korean soldiers, one soldier responds, "That's what bothers me. We're fighting on the same front. Why shouldn't we too feel a woman's..."⁴² Another soldier chimes in and says, "Just want to have some fun before I die, sir."⁴³ This enforces the idea that the soldiers see sex as a source of entertainment. When the soldiers try to go the brothel anyways and are told to leave, one of the soldiers breaks something. The madam demands payment for the damaged goods, and the squad commander says, "As long as we pay, it's okay?"⁴⁴ She says yes, and the soldiers start completely trashing the place while cheekily handing the prostitutes money as compensation. They resort to violence to express their dissatisfaction. There is both a sense of resentment that the brothel is off limits to them and a sense of entitlement to the services of these women that leads them

40 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 78.

41 Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, 45:56.

42 *Ibid.*, 22:23.

43 *Ibid.*, 22:26.

44 *Ibid.*, 47:11.

to feel justified in wreaking havoc. In a way, it is portrayed as cathartic to the soldiers. Instead of relieving their pent-up stress and anger through sex, they can do it through violence. The madam eventually gets them to stop their destruction and says, “Tonight is a night for patriotic domestic goods. For this one night, we decline foreign goods.”⁴⁵

Although this brothel was open to all UN soldiers, the U.S. troop presence stood at about 60,000 in the 1960’s, and the U.S. effectively had command over the Korean military through its role as head of the United Nations forces in Korea.⁴⁶ Therefore, the brothel probably mainly served U.S. soldiers. Moreover, when the foreign soldiers came to the closed brothel, the Korean soldier who comes out to greet them calls them “made-in-USA soldier.”⁴⁷ During this time, the U.S. was superior in economic, military, and political capabilities compared to Korea,⁴⁸ and Korea relied on the U.S.’ help in the war. Since sex is so important to constructions of masculinity, through the designation of the brothel as off-limits to Koreans, foreign powers could be seen as suppressing Korean masculinity. It is these conditions that make it a particular powerful moment when they are able to claim the brothel as their own. In doing so, they are also reclaiming these Korean women who serve foreign soldiers. For one night, the U.S. soldiers do not have the upper hand in the situation. It is a point of pride for their identity as Korean soldiers that they are able to claim a place normally reserved for foreign soldiers.

In the military, women are often seen and talked about as objects of sex to be dominated and used at will.⁴⁹ An example of their demeaning actions occurs when one of the soldiers stuffs cash compensation for something he broke under the neckline of a woman’s dress and then kisses her without warning. The soldiers view the women, especially prostitutes, as lesser. One of the soldiers says, “Get this straight—we’re dying for people like you too.”⁵⁰ This statement conveys their disdain for people like prostitutes.

Military service itself is a major element of hegemonic masculinity. It

45 Ibid., 50:09.

46 Katharine H.S. Moon, “Prostitute Bodies and Gendered States in U.S.-Korea Relations,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 1997), 148.

47 Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, 52:17.

48 Moon, “Prostitute Bodies and Gendered States in U.S.-Korea Relations,” 148.

49 Choi, “Brothers in Arms and Brothers in Christ?,” 80.

50 Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, 46:46.

acts as a mechanism that essentializes and naturalizes gender differences, which reinforces the dichotomy of the masculine provider and the feminine housewife.⁵¹ When they must part with Young-hui, one of the soldiers says regretfully, “Stubborn little kid. If she were a boy, she’d make fine marine material.”⁵² Although Young-hui has traits that would make for being a great marine, she is limited by her gender. The American produced version of this film, *Marine Battleground*, takes place after the events of this film. In the film, Young-hui survives the war and dedicates her life to nursing, inspired by the protectiveness of the Marines who saved her.⁵³ Since she cannot become a marine, she chooses a career important to the war effort that still embodies ideas of femininity, such as care-giving.

The belief in the inherent differences between men and women are highlighted through Kim’s comments toward the end of the movie. At the end when the soldiers are stranded on the frontlines after completing their mission, Kim volunteers to run and contact command for reinforcements. He says to the squad commander: “Of course, I’m a man like a girl, not brave or strong. And more than anyone, I have a strong attachment to life. But the only thing is, I have a sense of responsibility. I’m the signalman. If we can’t make radio contact, I feel it’s my duty to go make contact in person, sir. If I succeed, acknowledge that I am a man.”⁵⁴ In his statement to the squad commander, Kim acknowledges his unmanliness through his lack of bravery or strength. These traits are so central to conceptions of manhood that not having them makes one feminine. In talking about his strong attachment to life, he conveys the idea that he lacks the ability to die for the nation, an essential trait for those serving in the military. He goes against the collective ethos of “sacrifice of the individual for the sake of a larger goal, that is, the military security of a nation.”⁵⁵ Since he lacks these essential masculine traits, he describes himself as a girl. Girls, and by extension women, are therefore cowardly and weak. They cannot protect and must be protected. This sentiment of men as providers was supported by law between 1960 and 1990.⁵⁶ Throughout the film, we see

51 Moon, “The Production and Subversion of Masculinity,” 101.

52 Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, 56:48.

53 Robert J. Lentz, *Korean War Filmography: 91 English Language Features through 2000* (McFarland, 2008), 215.

54 Lee, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, 01:29:05.

55 Choi, “Brothers in Arms and Brothers in Christ?”

56 Moon, “The Production and Subversion of Masculinity,” 101.

how Kim feels insecure about his masculinity and how he tried before to prove himself by attempting to have sex with a prostitute. However, he is able to overcome his limitations through his sense of responsibility to his teammates, suggesting he is willing to die for his teammates. He hopes to prove his manhood by doing this “heroic deed.” However, when analyzing how the plot unfolds, his “heroic deed” does not cast him as the masculine military hero in the end, especially when compared to the actions and the ultimate fates of the other soldiers.

When he reaches command, they tell him their situation is too urgent, and they cannot send reinforcements. Kim makes his way back to the base, finds Young-hui, and hugs her in an emotional embrace. Meanwhile, the Chinese soldiers are overrunning the rest of the soldiers. The soldiers die one by one until the Chinese soldiers suddenly retreat. Until they die, each one of the soldiers continues to shoot and kill the enemy. Aside from Kim, there are only two soldiers who survive at the end, and one is severely wounded. The film ends there with them still on the battlefield. Since the Chinese soldiers retreated, it seems likely that they make it back alive, but their survival is not certain. As viewers, our sympathies go to the soldiers who died, and the two soldiers left who watched all of their fellow soldiers die. From the title of the film, *The Marines Who Never Returned*, it is clear who is being honored. Knowing how the film ends, Kim’s actions seem especially non-heroic and feeble in comparison. His heroic action of risking his life to contact command ends up being completely useless as command is unable to send reinforcements. In addition, the act required him to run away from the battlefield while his compatriots fought to the death. He is the only soldier we know who survived for sure, yet there is no glory attached to his survival.

Constructions of masculinity in the military in the wake of the Korean War can be seen through an analysis of *The Marines Who Never Returned*. Through the character arc of Kim Hae-bong, one can see how masculinity was defined in terms of femininity and in a way that positions women as lesser. The film offers a fairly narrow definition of masculinity. Kim’s lack of conformity to masculine ideals throughout the movie ultimately results in the least heroic end for him compared to the other soldiers in the film. Admiration and a sense of patriotism are felt for the men who died fighting on the battlefield. That same sense of admiration is not cast on Kim, who is shown to not meet the masculine ideals. In addition, the brothel serves

as an important site of masculinity. Through their interaction or lack of interaction with the prostitutes, the soldiers demonstrate how masculine they are. Furthermore, as a brothel that is normally off-limits to Korean soldiers, the brothel is representative of the oppressive force by foreign powers on Korean masculinity and the ways in which the Korean soldiers fought against that. Through this paper, one can get a better sense of the military masculine ideals of the 1960's as shown through film. As the highest grossing Korean film of that year, this movie helped viewers to define the image of masculine Korean men as strong, patriotic, and brave.

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