

Spectacle Korea: Transfiguring National Boundaries, Trans-Imaging National Culture in the Case of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*

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Abstract

In this essay I explore the Korean blockbuster, a film genre that enjoyed popularity in South Korea as a local translation of the Hollywood blockbuster. In examining this hybrid cinematic form, I focus on the cultural dynamics informing the genre's ambivalent—at times even contradictory—aspirations to globalization and localization, with both trends accelerating in Korea. As a particularly poignant blockbuster film, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (dir. Jee-woon Kim, 2008) may well showcase and expand this complicated equation, particularly through its apparent adoption of several genres, including the Manchurian Western. As a Korean sub-genre that was popular in the 1960s, Manchurian Westerns stage Manchuria of the 1930s, in which the Korean people's fight for the nation's liberation from the Japanese occupation played out in part, thus inevitably converging on the theme of mimicry and post-colonialism that has emblemized the Korean blockbuster's genre-defining desire. In an attempt to understand the intercultural dynamics that inform this hybrid genre, I rely on contemporary post-colonial theory and film genre theories. I illustrate how this film—and the Korean blockbuster more generally—interplays with ever-changing notions of Korean national boundaries and Koreanness today.

Keywords

spectacle, Korean blockbuster, post-colonialism, genre, the Manchurian Western

In a poignant scene in the South Korean film *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (dir. Jee-woon Kim, 2008), the camera captures a vast, wild sky that occupies almost two-thirds of the screen. The camera pans down a short distance to show a member of the Manchu underground gasping for breath. He raises his head slightly and blows a bugle with all his might before dropping wearily back to the ground again. The prolonged blare of the man's bugle signals the coming of the next sequence, which begins with high-tempo music and the sound of a galloping horse; a hero named Do-won Park appears, riding urgently. Taken in a long shot, the scene highlights Do-won riding his horse alone against a wild landscape. It is the Manchurian desert wilderness in the 1930s—a land that was not yet populated and thus remained a potential frontier for any given sovereign nation to settle. Do-won defeats Japanese soldiers among other antagonists, playing the Western hero who seeks to establish a new order. The camera also highlights Do-won's glorious feats against the wild sublimity of the landscape, and thus the film successfully displays modern Korean history as a spectacle, befitting the genre of the Korean blockbuster. As such, the film presents “Korea as a glorified spectacle” upon which Korean society projects its narcissistic desire in its own national imago.¹

The Good, the Bad, the Weird also inherits essential elements of a Korean subgenre, the Manchurian Western, but it breaks the generic law of the Korean blockbuster and the Western—the presumptive law that drives the film's dramatization of the spectacle of the sublime Manchurian wilderness. This law is constantly obfuscated by the ever-present underside of the landscape—the narrow, filthy streets and poverty-ridden areas in which ordinary Koreans struggle to survive, thus representing the flipside of the spectacle, or the (once-hidden) imagery that emblemizes Manchuria. As is well known, the Manchuria of the 1930s was a land in which a mix of ethnic groups struggled to claim control on behalf of their respective homelands. Living in the absence of a stable national regime, ethnic groups had to fight for security and the opportunity to eke out a meager life. Koreans seeking independence were among these people who had fled to a foreign land from Japanese imperialism. By staging its story in this spatiotemporal locus that engages deeply with issues of ethnic/national fluidity rooted in colonial times, the film highlights this diasporic chapter in both colonial (on the inner-cinematic level) and postcolonial (on the reception level) Korean history.

The doubled colonial/postcolonial sensibility that informs the film's depiction of Manchuria resonates with the complicated nature of the Korean blockbuster. As

¹ See Hayward, *French National Cinema* 1-8.

the Korean translation of the Hollywood blockbuster, the Korean blockbuster was conceived with an innate desire to catch up with its American counterpart, and to achieve this end, Korean filmmakers invested increasingly in splendid spectacles that grew ever more expansive in scale. In contrast to this growing (or evolving) pursuit of Hollywood-style success, however, the Korean blockbuster has exhibited a seemingly incompatible tendency: its predilection for Korean nationalism in apparent contradiction to the genre's desire to follow global conventions. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* fittingly exemplifies the inherent paradox of the genre. Following its release in the summer of 2008, the Korean film market experienced an unusual fever surrounding the new movie: journalists began to pour out a bombardment of promotion, praising the novelty of the movie's style, genre, and stars, and noting the extravagant production values (reportedly costing ten million US dollars), seeking to replicate the production values of Hollywood blockbusters,² using outsized spectacle to depict Korean history in the 1930s. Nevertheless, the filmed historical time frame, in contrast to its spectacular background, was tainted by the Japanese occupation of Korea and the Korean public's attempt to (re)write history within it.

To be sure, the ambivalent ethos of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* seems to have inherited the Korean blockbuster's complicated brand of globalism tempered by national particularity. In addition, the film takes the genre beyond the early mode of Korean blockbuster films. Since its initial success in the late 1990s, the Korean blockbuster has evolved to incorporate generic hybridity and diverse aspects of Korean culture. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* extends this evolutionary process while forging a new combination of modern Korean history and the Hollywood Western. The film also inherits a Korean subgenre that depicts Korean history under the Japanese occupation against the historical backdrop of 1930s Manchuria. This combination of wilderness spectacle and a thorny period in Korean history in effect reinforces the complicated nature of the Korean blockbuster and the constantly shifting boundaries of Koreanness.

Against this historical and cultural backdrop, I examine *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* as a Korean blockbuster that adopted several of the genre's modes and, in so doing, emblemizes the complex equation relating the Korean blockbuster to Koreanness. I also explore how the film implicates other histories that had in the past informed filmic spectacles, particularly when interpolating stories borrowed from

² This cost is low compared with what is usually spent on Hollywood blockbusters. Yet, it was the second-highest investment in Korean film history in 2008 (*KOBIS*). Also, the film was successful at the box office although it did not cover its production costs. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that it ranked as the top-grossing Korean film ever as of 2008.

other genres (such as noir, comedy, and the Manchurian Western). In my examination of the film's generic and ethnic/geographic hybridity, I showcase how recent Korean blockbusters, including *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, have sought to remold Koreanness as the foundation of an imagined community within today's jumbled "post"-era (think of postcolonialism and postnationalism—not to mention the "post-post" genre in Fredric Jameson's sense). I do not confine my analysis to a form of nationalism that is related to the actual historical period depicted in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*; I also touch on the temporality of the present. In this way I consider contemporary Korean nationalism, which is currently challenged by a rising tide of foreign immigrants, neoliberalism and consumerism. My exploration will showcase how *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* carries the Korean blockbuster and Koreanness forward through a mimetic praxis that welds the Hollywood Western onto the Korean cultural legacy of the Manchurian Western.

Situating the Korean Blockbuster: Reading Transnational Desire through a Postcolonialist Lens

In Hollywood, the term "blockbuster" was fully embraced following the commercial success of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). The success of these films established the blockbuster as a lucrative business for Hollywood, which had been challenged by the arrival of television culture and the decline of the studio system after the 1960s (Gomery 475). From that point on, Hollywood rushed to convert itself into a system suited to producing blockbusters, signaling the arrival of the "New Hollywood." Studios increasingly focused on high-cost, potentially highly lucrative "special attractions," favoring spectacle over narrative, the big screen over the small screen, and proactively utilizing narrative cycles and genre-benders as well as star power (King 178-84). The studios also prioritized marketing strategies over aesthetic quality. The blockbuster genre also inherited hybridity as an innate feature, and thus, as Steven Neale observes, the New Hollywood appeared to function through the "mixing and recycling of new and old and low art and high art media products in the modern (or post-modern) world, and by the propensity for allusion and pastiche that is said to characterize contemporary artistic production" (qtd. in Desser 521).

The Korean blockbuster adopted the format of the Hollywood blockbuster in hopes of obtaining similar commercial success and being competitive on the global market. The term "Korean blockbuster" was coined when the film *The Soul Guardians* (dir. Kwang-Chun Park) was released in 1998. However, it was when the

first truly phenomenal hit, *Shiri* (dir. Jekyu Kang, 1998), came that the term achieved broad popularity (S. Lee 163). One news article from the period delineates the attributes of the genre, distinguishing the Korean blockbuster by several peculiarities: 1) the filmmaker invests most of the production costs in computer graphic design and special effects; 2) the film bends genre(s); and 3) the cast usually includes celebrity stars (qtd. in S. Lee 163). As such, the genre-specific features of the Korean blockbuster are marked exclusively by industry-specific factors, whereby it manifests its mimetic desire with respect to Hollywood blockbusters.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the Korean blockbuster was born out of commercial motivations. The Korean film industry has grown since the late 1980s owing mostly to favorable changes in legal and financial environments, which included the amendment of Korea's media and communications law in 1985. This revision of the law in effect enabled Korean conglomerates (*jaebeol*) to join the Korean film industry,³ spurring remarkable growth: new film companies proliferated and these companies were more easily able to attract funding for large-scale productions (Shim). The resulting massive influx of capital into the industry helped Korean films grow both commercially and aesthetically. Moreover, this shift in financial inflow served as a stepping-stone that enabled the industry to produce its own blockbuster forms (B. Kim 7-15). In the late 1990s, however, the Korean film industry experienced another radical change following the IMF-related financial crisis of 1997. Conglomerate capital began to retreat. In addition, the United States objected to regulations based on screen quotas, which had protected Korean films. Japan was also permitted to export domestic films that had long been banned from the Korean market. Faced with these challenges from inside and out, the Korean film industry began to adopt a more competitive survival mechanism.

Born out of this cultural demand, it seemed likely that Korean blockbusters would abide by the rules of Hollywood blockbusters while struggling to duplicate Hollywood quality. Despite its pursuit of a wider range of viewers—in both domestic and foreign markets—Korean blockbusters have taken on nationalistic overtones in the pervasive exploitation of national peculiarities and nationalism as thematic materials. *Shiri* for instance grapples with issues of separation and reunion between South and North Korea. Subsequent Korean blockbusters have also reflected similar signposts of national culture or nationalism (as in *Joint Security Area* [dir. Chan-wook Park, 2000] as well as *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* [dir. Je-gyu Kang, 2003] and *Silmido* [dir. Woosuk Kang, 2003]) (B. Kim 23; Hwang; K. Lee), enabling

³ In fact, the law allowed a film company to conduct its business without government permission.

critics to redefine the term “Korean blockbuster” to denote not only blockbuster films produced by Koreans but films that address Koreanness or Korean nationalism in the context of spectacle. It is true, as Susan Hayward suggests, that the phrase “national cinema” inevitably involves “cultural artefacts of particular kinds” and thus function on the assumption of “particularity” or “difference” in association with the country to which it refers (*French National Cinema* 6). Furthermore, a Korean film critic contends that such frequent appeals to Korean nationalism in Korean blockbusters have to do with the social mood that prevailed when the genre was born. As explained earlier, the challenges posed by Hollywood and Japanese films in the late 1980s in effect evoked nationalistic voices within and outside the film industry. This heightened nationalism was reflected in the content of the Korean blockbuster genre (B. Kim 23).

To be sure, the doubled nature of the Korean blockbuster exposes the complicated nature of national culture in the context of globalization and postcolonialism. As cultural critics have frequently suggested, the increasingly rapid flow of global exchange in politics, economic development, and populations has continued to challenge pre-set national boundaries in both geographical and ideological domains. In this regard, Homi Bhabha contends that the increasing fluidity of national boundaries leads us to pursue globalized and local temporalities simultaneously. Bhabha observes that “the currency of critical comparativism, or aesthetic judgment, is no longer the sovereignty of the national culture conceived as Benedict Anderson proposes as an ‘imagined community’ rooted in a ‘homogeneous empty time’ of modernity and progress” (Bhabha, *Location* 6). Nevertheless, as Ali Behdad points out, national borders, although they may no longer impede international economic transactions, still matter to human subjects. If we observe actual lives, we find pervasive traces of national apparatuses. In this sense, Behdad emphasizes that we need to keep in mind “the discrepancy between increasing consciousness of globalization and lingering traces of national community within people’s lived experiences” (Behdad 70-75).

It appears then that, as discussed earlier, Korean blockbusters have taken an ambivalent stance vis-à-vis Hollywood blockbusters. Observers of Korean cinema wonder whether or not the national particularities employed in the genre serve to consolidate Korean nationalism—presumably as an empty, homogenizing modern force. Nevertheless, as the exploitation of national culture (Koreanness) encounters globalized aesthetics (the standards of the blockbuster), its actualization may perform a type of symbolism that cannot be easily fixed in advance. Kyung-eun Lee, for instance, contends that both *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area*, in their treatment of the

relationship between South and North Korea, strongly reaffirm Korean nationalism. Nonetheless, she comments that the films disclose a nuanced dissimilarity from the preexisting mode of nationalism. She rightly claims that this fissure is symptomatic in her reading of how Korean blockbusters contribute to the rewriting of Korean national history beyond the simple repetition of fixed narratives that are presumed to lie within the modern concept of nationalism (K. Lee 166).

Furthermore, Korean blockbusters pursue their globalist desire through attempts to homogenize themselves into (or identify with) Hollywood blockbusters. When Korean blockbusters adopt Hollywood attributes, their desire to replicate that genre registers identification with (or being devoured by) its selected object, Hollywood. In this way, this identification takes on a structural homology with colonial identification insofar as Korean blockbusters emulate their rivals—Hollywood films—that they were initially designed to challenge. For this reason, the actualization of the Korean blockbuster cannot help but slip through its presumed standards (much like the ceaseless network of empty signifiers in poststructuralist semiosis). Focusing on this mimetic desire and the slippage in its usage, I argue that the Korean blockbuster is a product of colonial identification and a strategy of mimicry, in Bhabha's sense. In regard to colonial identification and the way colonial identity is formed, Bhabha contends, "what is implicit in both concepts of the subaltern . . . is a strategy of ambivalence in the structure of identification that occurs precisely in the elliptical *in-between*, where the shadow of the other falls upon the self" (Bhabha, *Location* 59-60; emphasis in original). Furthermore, this non-Hegelian negation always reveals that "dangerous place where identity and aggressivity are twinned" (*Location* 62). It is through this understanding of ambivalence in colonial identity that Bhabha highlights the strategic potential of mimicry. For Bhabha, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence" (*Location* 86; emphasis in original). Here, such an uncanny form of self-discovery takes place not only in the geopolitical course of globalization but also in the textual praxis of the Korean blockbuster.

The Good, the Bad, the Weird inherits the complicated nature of the Korean blockbuster, adopting primarily the American Western as its model, including its (post)colonial sensibility. In addition, the film inherited the framework of the Manchurian Western, which translated the Hollywood Western into Korean terms and achieved popularity from the 1960s through the 1970s. Manchurian Westerns are known for depicting heroic protagonists fighting for the Korean nation's liberation in

Manchuria in the 1930s. The genre brought an existing region into focus even while erasing (or altering) its actual history, creating an imaginary landscape that promised national liberation, providing hope to Koreans at the time (Yi 257). Nevertheless, the Manchuria that the genre brought to the fore is in effect the Chinese land located most closely to North Korea. Insofar as the 1960s was a period in which South Korea's President Park competed with North Korea, it would be odd to stage and glorify Manchuria as an ideal land for reinforcing national identity (S. Lee). In this light, the Manchurian Western—along with the Korean blockbuster—runs along an anxious boundary as a means of defining Koreanness.

It is also true, however, that Manchuria was unknown to Korean viewers of the time (or even today), but it remains imbued with adventure myths, and thus the genre enabled Korean viewers to freely imagine national triumph against the backdrop of Manchuria's wilderness sublimity, much like the Hollywood Western. In this light, one can say that the Manchurian Western, by its very presence, enables films to dream differently about the boundaries of Koreanness, which in effect encompasses current concerns about multi-culturalism and other issues. As such, the adoption of the Manchurian Western in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* discloses its complicated inheritance and relationship with Korean national identity today. It seems to inherit the generic desire for Hollywood glitter while restaging "spectacle Korea." Its gesture toward or "mimicry" of the Hollywood blockbuster seems however to diverge in important ways from previous Korean blockbusters. The film inherits the disavowed history of the Manchu, or the colonial, era, but it also engages, to a greater degree than other Korean blockbusters, with contemporary interest in representing history under the Japanese occupation. Insofar as the film also imports other narratives from the noir and comedy genres, thus highlighting the hybridity that pervades its narrative, it effectively showcases the (post)colonial impulse of the Korean blockbuster and the effort to redraw Korea's national boundaries. In this paper, I want to consider this complicated inheritance while closely examining the film's text in relation to a contemporary (and postcolonial) reading of Korean history.

The Good Chases the Bad: The Western Hero Redeems Korean Nationalism

The Good, the Bad, the Weird opens by filling the screen with an enlarged image of a map—a mysterious map that will purportedly lead to the fabled treasures of the fallen Qing dynasty. Chang-yi (played by Byung-hun Lee), a professional killer, is hired to retrieve the map, currently held by a wealthy Japanese banker, signifying

Chang-Yi's compliance with Japanese collaborators. Do-won (played by Woo-sung Jung) is sent by the Korean Liberation Army on the same mission. They end up engaging in a gunfight on a moving train. In the midst of this tumult, however, Tae-gu (Kang-ho Song), a train robber, snatches the map and flees with it. From here on, the three characters race over the landscape in parallel, with Do-won and Chang-yi pursuing the robber who absconded with the map. As their paths converge, the film engages with members of various national and ethnic groups who were living in Manchuria in the 1930s. Eventually, they all find themselves involved in a heated battle. In the end, the only survivors (who continue pursuing the map and the Qing treasure) are the three main characters. They meet each other at the site where the map indicates the treasure is buried. A furious duel ensues in which Chang-yi dies and Do-won disappears in the chaos. Tae-gu recovers alone and witnesses the site exploding—presumably destroying the treasure (if it ever existed).

The Good, the Bad, the Weird is first and foremost a tale about Do-won, our hero. As he first appears with a woman from the Liberation Army, we identify with him as the “good guy” who will fight for Korea, the country that was oppressed by the Japanese occupation when the action in the film takes place. The film introduces Do-won by training the camera first on his chic black boots, after which it pans up to showcase his riding breeches, glossy blue vest, and worn leather jacket, one after the other, until it frames his dashing smile under a wide-brimmed hat. Outfitted in his stylish garments, Do-won rides into the pastoral valley where Manchu gangs and Japanese troops are constantly feuding. Do-won thus represents a hero born fully fledged out of a classic Western landscape. Here, this genre-specific feature of the Western, the use of the Western landscape, prevails. The film utilizes the extra-loud sounds of the oncoming train, the horizontal sublimity of the wild Manchurian desert, and the stylized choreography of the face and body in motion, of the shoot-out, of men riding over the landscape. By staging wilderness on a big screen, the Western blockbuster expands the mythical landscape of the traditional Western, thereby contributing to the narrative function of myth that contributes to the genre's power.

In *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, the rule of the Western (or even the enforced rule of the Western blockbuster) helps our hero, Do-won, win out over Chang-yi and gangs of “bad guys.” In fact, as a Western hero, Do-won must be indestructible. He soars freely over the sky, effortlessly eluding the gangsters (emulating Hong Kong martial arts films) even as, in the midst of fighting, he seems unaffected. For instance, in a late sequence in the film, members of all the quarreling groups engage in a rumble, a ferocious fight. As the heat of the battle intensifies viewers cannot tell which side will win. At this moment, we hear the light rhythm of “Do-won's song,” exemplifying

what Douglas Pye describes regarding the characteristic iconography of the Western hero, who is distinguishable by a unique “landscape, architecture, modes of transport, weapons and clothes, and even soundtrack, including recurrent sounds, voices, and kinds of speech” (Pye 206). In this way, Do-won sails effortlessly through the battle, another victory for another Western hero.

Do-won continues his journey into the endlessly unfolding desert expanses and valleys, through the succession of day and night, in action and repose. During this journey (marked by frequent encounters with antagonistic parties), Do-won, however, does not become involved in any desperate battles or struggles. Instead, he always remains calm and elegant; he is also alone, thereby suggesting a certain “freedom.” It is through his elegant command of his situation that he pursues another mission that is characteristic of the Western: domesticating nature in the wild land of Manchuria. Do-won (unlike the other two main characters) has settled down in Manchuria: he lives with Song-yi, his assistant, in a green meadow where residents can relax, cultivate their crops—and perhaps dream of a better life. Here, Do-won’s presence in wild nature and the settlement replicates the contrast inherent to archetypal Western heroes who are lone figures—promoting individualism—who yet seek to domesticate the wilderness and in that way contribute to a given collectivity or community (Pye; Landy 48; Schatz 55). In this light, the iconographies that surround Do-won enable him to master the wilderness and then contribute to his chosen community. Nevertheless, it is also true that this confluence of the wild landscape with the domesticated farm represents a departure from its homage film, Sergio Leone’s *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966),⁴ which relies on a dry and dusty desert landscape that signifies “the West,” yet merely represents an arena that is open for action but without a romanticized mythology (Landy 49-50).

The domestication of Manchuria implicates yet another symbol of the Korean people of that time. Being situated in Manchuria in the 1930s offered Korean migrants and the Liberation Army the unknown promise of the mythological symbolism of independence. Do-won’s mission in Manchuria now becomes that of realizing that mythological promise, of which Korean migrants had earnestly dreamed (an ethnic or national dream). Thus, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* extends the cinematic legacy of the Manchurian Western. This subgenre of the Hollywood Western comprises a group of films that achieved popularity in Korea in the 1960s and deep into the 1970s. It was during the 1960s, after the liberation of the nation in

⁴ In fact, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* has officially acknowledged the influence of Sergio Leone’s film *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

the 1940s and the devastating Korean War of the 1950s, that the Korean film industry began to grow. Furthermore, at that time the South Korean government sought to reconsolidate Korea's national identity by highlighting glorious chapters in Korean history, and the Manchurian Western seemed suited to extending the triumphant history of the Korean independence army. Nevertheless, as noted above, Manchuria is the Chinese territory located in closest proximity to North Korea. Considering the competition with the North that President Park waged in 1960s, Manchuria might be considered a curious choice for being staged and glorified as the ideal site of Koreans' national identity (S. Lee 152-56).

Manchuria's screen presence appears ambiguous in this light, not to mention that Manchurian Westerns generally did not stage the concrete history of the land (S. Lee). Instead, they highlight the sublime wilderness of the landscape, upon which people can dream freely about the "future." *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, utilizing the genre-specific desire of the Manchurian Western for liberation, inherits this complicated historical background, thereby obscuring and ambiguating the national spectacle. As the film nears its end, however, the narrative depicts Chang-yi's death and in so doing celebrates Do-won's triumph over the bad. Do-won conquers the outlaws and fulfills his ultimate mission as redeemer of the social order, thus reaffirming his story as mythological discourse and reestablishing Korean nationalism.

The Bad Chases the Weird: Noir Fetish or Comedic Survival

Do-won's heroic adventure is rewritten from Chang-yi's perspective as a vengeance-driven crusade. Chang-yi works for a Korean traitor who collaborates with Japanese imperialists. Chang-yi fails in the beginning of the film to retrieve the map, instead killing his boss, the traitor. From this point on, the film psychologically charges Chang-yi's past through ample use of expressionistic mise-en-scène and camerawork, frequently fixing on small gestures to stylize Chang-yi's noirish persona. In one scene the camera silently depicts him in a black suit pulling on his leather gloves, cuing his next act, a brutal murder. Such small gestures are often accompanied by cynical sneers over his victims, thereby consolidating his persona as a cold-blooded killer. As the film narrates Chang-yi's past, it deploys lighting and color to underscore contrasts between black and white on-screen elements and plays of light and dark in indoor scenes. In particular, once Chang-yi completes his act of spiteful violence, the camera captures his face in close-up and slow motion. Here, the film highlights a face saturated by pale light but stained with blood.

For Chang-yi, Manchuria no longer registers as a space of wild sublimity that is open to heroic adventure. Instead, the desert becomes forlorn and sinister. This tonality extends to his private spaces. Despite possessing sufficient wealth, Chang-yi never settles down. He sleeps in a hotel room, a borrowed place, echoing another hallmark of films noir: “there is no place like home” for such characters. As Vivian Sobchack observes, films noir often depict action in “hotels and boardinghouse rooms and motels, ... diners ... [and] swanky and seedy cocktail lounges and nightclubs” that are “all fragmented, rented social spaces.” In this regard, Sobchack argues that these places function “as substitutes for the intimate and integral domestic space of home” and thus exhibit cultural anxiety about lacking the “coherence of the domestic life of family and home” in the aftermath of war time (146). Such ambivalence resonates with Chang-yi’s rented hotel room as well as the emptied-out deserts of Manchuria. Through these iconographies, the film manifests Chang-yi’s deep-seated anxiety and resentment, the condition of a man whose “soul has no abode, is not housed.” (Sobchack 146).

In the meantime, Chang-yi exhibits a strong fetishism for Western culture. He enjoys jazz music, Hollywood films, and cigars. His modern, Westernized look and cyberfunk hairstyle clearly differentiates him from both Do-won and Tae-gu, who wears a thick quilted overcoat and worn sneakers. It must be stressed in this connection that fetishism always indicates the repression of truth, without rendering truth visible. As Laura Mulvey reminds us, fetishism serves as “an attempt to explain a refusal or blockage, of the mind, or a phobic inability of the psyche, to understand a symbolic system of value” (2). Fetishism however indicates what is repressed within its structure of disavowal. We can read similarly pervasive codes of fetishism in Chang-yi’s persona. Chang-yi collaborates with a traitor to work for Japan, which may trigger guilt. Yet another episode in his personal history of defeat inclines him to self-pity. Such a doubled psychological burden prompts him to adopt a fetish, which in effect enables him to manage his deep-seated anxiety and the wounds reflecting his (and even the nation’s) tragic past. In this sense, Chang-yi’s fetishism for Western culture represents not only worship of the colonizers’ culture (as performed by Korean traitors) but also an outcome of the complicated psychological burden of his past sins and wounds.

Chang-yi nevertheless embarks on his vengeance story, laden with psychic pain. In fact, the hybridity of genres resembles the later films in the development of the Western genre, which became “more complex, more psychologically motivated” (Hayward, *Cinema Studies* 471). Hayward describes how this hybridity affects Western heroes: “Something in his past has deeply scarred his persona. He still rides

in and out of the wilderness as before, but now that wilderness is also part of his temperament and embedded in his psyche” (471). Marcia Landy adds in this vein that the earlier mode of the Western, informed by more idealistic notions of the nation, begins to “rupture in representation concomitant with the postwar era and with the cold war. Genre lines begin to blur, even to the extent of grafting the crime genre and film noir onto the Western” (Landy 48). As such a hybrid-Western character, Chang-yi seeks revenge and directs this desire on Tae-gu, the “weird” in the film’s title. Tae-gu first appears in the early train sequence. The camera captures the train’s concession vendor from behind, walking down the aisle calling out “rice cakes, candy.” His funny-sounding voice signals that this is a man of no significance. Soon afterward, though, he opens a train compartment and draws out guns with both hands. This action abruptly converts his whimsical presence into one of life-threatening menace, enabling viewers to identify him as another protagonist.

At first sight, Tae-gu provides genre-related symbolism associated with science fiction (judging from his costume) and ironic comedy (as in a spaghetti Western or Hong Kong action film). He wears a rugged overcoat, shabby blue pants, and weird-looking armor, eschewing elegance for survival. Tae-gu often improvises his armor. He transforms junk he buys at a market into a steel helmet (an item that makes him appear like a character in a futuristic science fiction movie).⁵ This funny-looking outfit gives Tae-gu a clown-like persona and casts a spaghetti Western quality over the entire story. As such, he is often depicted as the victim of a gag, sometimes using a dull, simpleton-like facial expression or one-liner jokes, while at other times displaying exaggeratedly slow or fast movements or cartoonish punches or tumbles as he contends with a series of incongruous situations. In one scene, for instance, Tae-gu runs across a street that is besieged by Chang-yi and his gangs. He has to run swiftly enough to escape a potential shower of bullets. Nevertheless, he leaps about in a boxer-like posture, like a figure in a sight gag or slapstick comedy.⁶ Another example of Tae-gu’s persona relates to his acquaintances, who seem to belong nowhere. Viewers cannot understand, for example, how a decrepit old lady can survive in the midst of a bombsite. We do not know where three children, who inject a mischievous quality into the otherwise perilous narrative, appear from or disappear

⁵ Regarding the science-fictional quality of Tae-gu, Soyoung Kim briefly mentioned a similar point (S. Kim).

⁶ According to Noël Carroll, “the sight gag is a form of visual humor in which amusement is generated by the play of alternative interpretations projected by the image or image series” (26). For Carroll, a sight gag can include several distinctive sources that evoke amusement (27-28).

to. They exist only to contribute to Tae-gu's gags and in so doing spotlight his all-too-human personality.

While the story unfolds, Tae-gu continues to be pursued (because he has the map that drives the plotline), fleeing until the end. Armed with rugged garments and comic gestures, Tae-gu's ultimate goal is to "survive" (so he can find the treasure and live happily ever after). His struggle culminates when he collides with Chang-yi's quest for vengeance. The film dramatizes their fight with stylish camerawork and deft editing: synchronized running, leaping, and diving, rapid zooms, fast-motion cinematography that captures the precision and timing of their gun- and swordplay, and repetitive slow-motion cinematography framing Chang-yi's face saturated with blood after a brutal killing—all of which seem homologous with traditions depicted in contemporary Hong Kong martial arts films. David Bordwell praises Hong Kong action films for their "expressive amplification" and "visual intelligibility." With these phrases he emphasizes how Hong Kong action films bypass "that appeal to realism that makes the typical Western action scene comparatively diffuse in its stylistic organization and emotional appeal" (86). As Bordwell also observes, a "Hong Kong action sequence arrests us not because it mimics normal behavior but because it felicitously magnifies the most emotion-arousing features of pursuit or combat" (86). Within this affective function of cinematic style, we can "feel the blow" (90). At the end of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, this spectacular fighting—playing out like a duel between flamboyant noir and sluggish spaghetti Western tropes—ends, however, with Tae-gu triumphing.

In the film's final sequence, after the heated battle involving all three protagonists, Tae-gu reaches the treasure site. At first delighted, his joy is short-lived. Do-won and Chang-yi enter the scene. This final duel between the three characters—the "good guy," the "bad guy," and the "weird guy"—ultimately leads to their mutual collapse. Do-won is saved by the timely arrival of his assistant, Song-yi. Tae-gu awakens in the aftermath. As he hobbles along, he removes a steel shield from inside his vest, a trick that enabled him to survive. As such, nobody wins this duel, yet Do-won enjoys sufficient financial gain after all—not from the presumed treasure site but as a reward for bringing Chang-yi down. Tae-gu also "survives," which was in effect his ultimate goal—his mere survival (after all the chasing and pursuing) is itself his "treasure."

In this way, Chang-yi fails to exact revenge while Tae-gu succeeds at surviving. This ending may have been predestined by the characters' genre "choices": the noir character merely reaches his typical ontological impasse, while the ironic comic figure fails at elegance but yet survives. The conclusion goes beyond these genre-

specific implications. Chang-yi's death and Tae-gu's survival against the odds represent the removal of the bad and the persistence of the weird; the defeat of a Japanese traitor and the triumph of ordinary Koreans; the dissolution of vengeance inspired by self-pity and endurance through a desperate struggle. Here, this seemingly common duel between Japanese collaborator and ordinary Korean may also carry additional significance in that this restaging of a Japanese collaborator in a fully stylized character equipped with a dynamic personal psyche seems to reflect the recent rereading of Korean history under the Japanese occupation.

Since the early 2000s, Korean scholars have sought to read modern Korean history, in which Korean colonial discourses broaden and deepen their research questions, influenced mostly by advances in subaltern studies and scholarly discourse on colonial modernity. Along with this cultural attempt to reread modern Korean history, scholars have also reconsidered the culturally disavowed question of pro-Japanese collaborators, expanding the understanding of colonial oppression beyond the previous nationalistic framework, thereby providing a more balanced perspective.⁷ Nevertheless, as the film restages the period of the Japanese occupation through this duel, it eventually delivers victory to ordinary Koreans, defeating the long-lasting evil of the Japanese collaborator for the sake of the Korean public, thus informing viewers that the most important outcome of this recent rereading of Korean history was in effect to embrace the life of ordinary Koreans, whose sole wish was to eke out a meager existence in a thorny period of time.

I would like finally to refer to Marcia Landy's remark regarding Tae-gu's comic persona. She contends that the comic figure in spaghetti Westerns of the 1970s reflects the pessimistic moral context of neorealism, and thus "the melodramatic and comic treatment of character and situation in these films serves to foreground historical excess, allowing these historical elements to be examined, if not understood, within a present context" (49-55). Tae-gu's clowning in this light offers us a locus where we can reflect on our own present condition. I discuss this attribute in greater detail in the following section.

⁷ Following this scholarly effort to reread Korean history, many cultural representations of early twentieth-century Korea emerged, including *Capital Scandal* (KBS [Korean Broadcasting System], 2007) and *Modern Boy* (dir. Ji-woo Jung, 2008) to name two. The Korean public was infatuated with these representations of forgotten episodes of Korean history—albeit under the Japanese occupation. The spectacle of Manchuria in the 1930s may represent an extension of the Korean popular unconscious of the time.

The Good Chases the Weird: The Ambivalence of National Culture in the Postcolonial Era

As *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* approaches its end, the film depicts a moment in which Tae-gu and Do-won experience something like fraternal solidarity. They manage to escape Chang-yi's attack and spend a night of repose together in a valley. They sleep a tiny distance apart, separated only by their sleeping bags and blankets. This physical proximity allows them to engage in an intimate conversation about their past experiences and dreams. Tae-gu becomes enraptured with this momentary freedom and recounts his dream: "When I find the treasure, I will purchase the land. There, I will raise cows, horse, hens, etc." Do-won interrupts and asks, "So, is your dream to buy the land and raise livestock?" (01:14:18-01:14:44). Tae-gu seems perplexed by this remark, yet soon resumes his enumeration: "I will also breed dogs, sheep, and so on" (01:14:47-01:14:51).

This gently comical dialogue informs us that these two figures occupy distinct stances. Do-won abides by the principle of reality, acting "in the name of the father" in the Freudian sense. He does only what he can and ought to do. He seeks not only to remove the bad, but also to obtain financial gain as a fair price for his effort. As such, he reaffirms his name, "the good," in the universe of reality, under the name of the father. Meanwhile, Tae-gu no longer cares about (political) reality. He observes that "neither Japanese nor Korean feudal dynasties help lower-class people like us" (01:14:49-01:14:59). In this way, he wants to live outside of the current law of reality. His clownish gestures can be explained by this pre-Oedipal situation. As a castrated figure, he dreams of returning to his hometown, to the land, nature, domesticity, and the "mother." His only dream, "survival," amounts to the retrieval of his infantile identification with his mother (nature), which is in effect the last resort in his attempt to avoid political castration. As such, Tae-gu represents the position of most ordinary Koreans at the time: colonized—and thus "castrated"—suffering under constant surveillance and suppression, and thus thirsty for freedom.

I contend that the three "guys" in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* allegorize the tripartite structure of Koreanness. Chang-yi registers the self-pity and resentment that oozes from a regrettable past, particularly a past entangled with the Japanese occupation, which in this sense ought to be expunged (not only in the narrative but also in reality). After this removal, the film sets up another chase in which Do-won pursues Tae-gu: the superego's attempt to govern the id, or the potential of the national imaginary to empower its people. Nevertheless, the film puts little effort into elaborating this chase. It only stages Do-won asking around in an attempt to locate

Tae-gu. Do-won's search however soon cuts to the next scene, in which we witness Tae-gu riding freely on his motorcycle into the wild expanse of the Manchurian desert. The ending in this way reflects a deeply ambivalent notion of a modern national boundary. Put another way, we might say that the film dramatizes the efforts of the political authority (Do-won) to govern its people (Tae-gu) and then showcases the elusive nature of those people, who slip across previously demarcated boundaries. In this light, the ending seems to cancel out Korea's "imagined community" (to use Anderson's term) and thus negates the film's own efforts to reestablish Korean nationalism.

The Good, the Bad, the Weird's ambiguous ending, with no resolution of the narrative between Do-won and Tae-gu, involves a doubled temporality, suggesting on the one hand the absence of the Korean government in the past and on the other the liminal boundaries of present-day Koreanness. Regarding the past, the film represents the absence of the Korean government through Do-won's ambiguous persona. Unlike the other two main figures, Do-won has neither a past nor a future, suggesting the absence of (or the impossibility of definitively articulating) Korean history or Koreanness. Nevertheless, Do-won has a dream. After Tae-gu finishes his remarks by the fireside, Do-won begins speaking hesitantly about his own dream. Do-won's narrative, which stretches towards the future, is however interrupted when he hears Tae-gu snoring, thereby informing viewers that Do-won has neither a future nor a past; he is most definitely a supporter of reality and a redeemer of present-day society. By showcasing the discontinuous temporality of Do-won's narrative, the film seems to reveal its own doubt over the existence of Korea or Koreanness as a concrete entity. Here one might remember the brief moment of hesitation before Do-won left his confession uncompleted: "If you ask me, you know, my dream is . . ." (01:16:41-01:17:10). In so doing, the film discloses its hope for Do-won, who symbolizes the entity of the nation, the Korean imaginary. He does conceive a dream, although it cannot be enunciated at this moment—yet this moment of resistance may foreshadow that it might, or should, become known in the future.

This acknowledgment of the absent present and hope for the future is extended into the imagery of Manchuria—the land remaining mysterious yet representing the "promised land" for Koreans under the Japanese occupation. Historically, the region was occupied by many ethnic groups, as noted above. The film tries to depict these ethnic and national diasporas in reality. As the camera shifts onto the wide Manchurian landscape, however, the diasporic images become obscured. Here, the scenery appears completely deserted, and thus might represent a "virgin land," where only the wind and an eagle claim sovereign rights. Under Do-won's governance,

however, Manchuria is tamed as was once promised, suggesting the establishment of Korea as an abstract entity in Do-won's universe. This imagery becomes reinforced when he is shown at his homestead along with Song-yi, dining on baked potatoes. Behind them, the land is no longer a desert but all green meadows. They are settled down in Manchuria and having a free night of repose, which would be a dream come true for Tae-gu—as well as for most ordinary Koreans, who suffered during the difficult days of modern Korean history, particularly without having an independent national home.

Manchuria however remains a vague space. There is no concrete community, and thus the object that Do-won ought to protect is immersed in ambiguity, an ambiguity that reflects the anarchistic state of Manchuria at the time. The ambiguity cast over Manchuria was also inherited from the Manchurian Western, which in effect falls short of a concrete portrayal of Korean history, leaving an imaginary and mere “spectacle” of the land to viewers. If the film manifests a concrete national boundary in Do-won's presence, it also, however, undoes this national boundary with Tae-gu—the figure who seems inherited from Leone's spaghetti Westerns. As Tae-gu is constantly involved in a filthy and desperate struggle, this figure surely acknowledges that the world is not always rosy. Instead, it reveals “the inevitability of mankind's Hobbesian state and the ‘sham’ of religion and civilization,” as film critics have described spaghetti Westerns (McClain 62). As such, as Tae-gu mirrors the spaghetti Western's desperateness, his fate in the film fittingly emblemizes the thorny life of Koreans under the Japanese occupation. It also showcases a certain cynicism about the constantly blurring boundaries and unstable status of the ordinary people's experience in a contemporary setting. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* in this light clearly undoes the ambition embedded in the national spectacle offered by the Korean blockbuster.

Nonetheless, the national community does exist. We see the Korean Liberation Army, which constantly presages the (future and currently persisting) presence of Korea and its people. As such, the film showcases its ambivalent stance towards Korean nationalism, and thus transforms its concept of the imagined community that Do-won's presence has represented, turning the steadfast Western hero into a flexible character, thus laying bare the liminal boundaries of a nation. Here we see an ambivalence that applies not only to this hybrid genre of the blockbuster Western but also to today's problematic—defining Korea's true national boundaries. Since *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* came out in 2008, Korean society has faced a series of challenges to its preset national boundaries. The country had only recently overcome the national IMF economic crisis. Along with the cultural effort made to overcome

that crisis, Korean scholars and the public were fully invested in rereading Korean history, focusing particularly on the forgotten chapter of the Japanese occupation, thereby contributing to reestablishing the Korean national identity. One additional challenge has come from the ever-growing influx of foreigners and immigrants into Korea in recent decades. Until recently, immigration has never been a contentious issue in Korean society, and thus public discussions of multiculturalism and related issues have sparked frequent debates, particularly urging change in the Korean racial imagination and newly demarcating not only its social and cultural boundaries but also the limits of Koreanness (Kang).

In this light, as *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* retreats from the fixity of nationalism, it brings us back to the present, where Koreans must find a way to reconcile the issue of national culture in the face of cultural and ethnic challenges in contemporary Korea. In this regard, the film confirms what Fanon famously argues: National culture resides in neither the precolonial era nor in the position of the colonizer (Fanon). In the same vein, Bhabha contends that “such pedagogical knowledge and continuist national narratives miss the ‘zone of occult instability where the people dwell’ (Fanon’s phrase)” (Bhabha, “DissemiNation” 303).⁸ Thus, as these postcolonial scholars assert, national culture needs to be “written” in consideration of all relevant temporalities. Such an act of writing national culture cannot be conducted in complete form in any given single moment. Instead, national culture will be written and rewritten continuously. As such, the task of defining Korea’s cultural/national identity (or the Koreanness in the film) should include careful consideration of cultural difference and the indeterminacy of national culture, which will thus be repetitively reinscribed and relocated in relation to other cultures, the past, and the future.

Finally, we must reconsider the ambivalent meaning of the film’s closing sequence by referring to Bhabha’s concept of rewriting national culture (and cultural identity) in the postcolonial era. Bhabha once mentioned, when discussing the rewriting of “history” in concrete form, that “[t]he borderline work of culture . . . does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; *it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space*, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. *The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity*, not the

⁸ Bhabha discusses the writing of national culture and the establishment of cultural identity at length. He notes that “the borders of the nation . . . are constantly faced with a double temporality: the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation (the pedagogical); and the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification (the performative)” (“DissemiNation” 304).

nostalgia, of living” (*Location* 7; emphases added). In the end, he concludes, with respect to “rewriting,” that remembering “is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. It is such a memory of the history of race and racism, colonialism and the question of cultural identity” (*Location* 63). In this light, *the Good, the Bad, the Weird*, as a blockbuster Western, particularly one staged in Manchuria in the 1930s, successfully dramatizes the hidden memories of colonial times and the people’s efforts to redraw the national boundaries of the culture—not only in the past but also in the present. As an example of a hybrid global genre, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* also highlights the effort to “re-member” history as an act of rewriting national culture and identity in the today’s global and neo-colonial context.

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