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U.S. AND ROK POLICY OPTIONS

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REMEMBER ME, REMEMBER US, REMEMBER KOREA: *HALLYU,* FLASHBACKS, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOUTH KOREA INTO AN UNFORGETTABLE NATION

Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park *

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I. Korea as the Forgotten, Forgettable, and Sometimes Remembered Nation

Growing up as a Korean-American, I was often asked, "Where are you from?" This question became a kind of standard line that opened or punctuated many first encounters. Sometimes, the follow-up inquiry of "Are you Chinese or Japanese?" also entered the conversation. Occasionally, though not very often, the direct question "Are you Korean?" did find utterance. When the questioner is reminded of the existence of Korea, Korea is found to be either an unknown entity or one that has been forgotten. Within this line of questioning, Korea is excluded, and the reigning paradigm that comes is: "Always China and Japan, but only sometimes, if ever, Korea."

Although Koreans have reminded the rest of the world of the existence of Korea, it is the global appeal of *hallyu* that is at the vanguard in promoting the reemergence of Korea into global vogue. *Hallyu*, sometimes romanized as *hanryu,* is defined as the "Korean Wave." The term addresses the rise in global popularity, especially in Asia, of South Korean cultural products such as New Korean Cinema, K-pop (Korean popular music), Korean television melodramas, Korean computer games, and Korean new media. This rise in South Korea's soft power creates a new factor in measuring socioeconomic success—Gross National Cool. This change in Korea's status from a forgotten nation to an unforgettable nation is enacted not by hard power but rather by soft power. Namely, it is the global success of *hallyu* as a cultural phenomenon that transforms what was once just a Korea-centric event into a global venture. In short, *hallyu* makes the long-delayed Koreanization of world culture possible. Under this framework, Korea's new "place in the sun"[1] now positions the country as an attractive, active, creative, and invited player. To be truly cosmopolitan and in tune with the zeitgeist, one cannot help but be marked by the present cultural dynamism and spark of Korea's cinema, television, music, computer games, and new media.

In spite of Korea's image as the Hermit Kingdom, its lapse into global obscurity—the memory limbo of the forgotten or the forgettable—is a recent phenomenon rather than its inherent state of affairs. Within the Sinocentric world order of the East before contact with the West, Korea held an honored position as the ideal little ethnic brother to China's successive dynasties. Because Koreans were not ethnically Han Chinese, we Koreans stood as an "Other," as one of many non–ethnic Han Chinese barbarians. Nevertheless, in the course of time, Korea's full adoption and even local improvements of Han Chinese culture elevated Koreans into the realm of honorable civilized barbarians. It is thus not a surprise that Koreans held the top seat of honor among the

1. The phrase "Korea's place in the sun" is a direct reference to Bruce Cumings's (2005) excellent history of Korea.

group of enlightened barbarians. The fact that Korea did not seek to conquer China also made Korea an ideal favored nation within the Sinocentric universe. In short, Korea held a prominent position despite its peripheral geopolitical location and diminutive size compared with the Middle Kingdom. In spite of its nickname as the Hermit Kingdom, Korea was a nation worthy of remembrance of the first rank.

Unfortunately, the Age of Imperialism brought with it a renewed marginalization of Korea and relegated Korea into a deeper limbo of the forgettable and the forgotten. As a peninsular entity, Korea is surrounded on three sides by expansionist neighbors: China, Russia, and Japan. For any country, having one such neighbor would be a headache; to have all three is dauntingly troubling. Like an alleyway caught in the shadow these three countries cast over the peninsula, Korea not surprisingly became an obscure nation in the modern era. While the "land of the morning calm" diligently applied *pungsu* (feng shui, Chinese geomancy) to enhance the nation's harmonious position within the universe and promoted the universal mastery of moral self-edification, the Korean peninsula was anything but tranquil.

In East Asia, the carving up of China was the biggest prize. Japan instigated a strategic modernization and Westernization campaign that transformed feudal Japan into the only non-Caucasian imperial power that aggressively sought to secure its own slice of empire in the reallocation of the globe. By means of sly, coercive, and murderous diplomatic manipulations, Meiji Japan actualized Hideyoshi's failed military conquests of Korea. With a nod from the other imperial powers, Japan annexed Korea. Thus, from 1910 to 1945, the Korean peninsula was an imperial possession of the Japanese empire.

The end of World War II harbored an unexpected eruption in Korea's arrival back into the international limelight. First, the Allies never formally agreed to the future of the Korean peninsula after the collapse of the Japanese empire. Thus, the division into equal territorial spheres of influence of border nations such as Germany was extended to the Korean peninsula. Although the partition of Germany can be explained because it was an instigator of World War II, the same does not apply to Korea because it was annexed against its wishes by Japan and mercilessly exploited to advance Japan's imperial ambitions with the forced sacrifice of human lives and national resources. The United States found itself reluctantly thrust into Korean affairs, first, by extending its overseas commitments to include Korea south of the 38th parallel and, second, by leading the first Cold War UN police action in repelling North Korea's military ambition of uniting the peninsula by force during the Korean War (1950–53). Unfortunately, Korea's new modern place in the sun was to become the first hot spot in the Cold War.

As devastating as it was, the United States remembers the three years of the Korean War as the "forgotten war." Stalemate back along the 38th parallel with a vicious war of attrition ended the proud U.S. military heritage of decisive victory over its foes. Despite its status as the number one nuclear superpower, the United States could not help in the unification of a democratic peninsula without the dreaded possibility of enlarging the local conflict into a global one. Under these prospects, a cease-fire was deemed preferable, and the formal creation of the divided Koreas became fact in 1953.

Devastation on both sides of the parallel was tremendous. Reconstruction faced Herculean obstacles, especially for the South, which did not have the advantage of a head start in industrialization, unlike the natural resources–rich North. Under this post–Korean War reality, the emphasis on restoring the nation to a sustainable existence required total devotion to hard power. Upgrading the military to defend against a renewed invasion from the North, industrializing the economy from light to heavy industries, raising the intellectual capital of the country by emphasizing higher education to train a technocratic elite to steer the nation's development, and fostering a unified self-sacrificing ethos transformed the devastated undeveloped country into the world's 13th economic power[2] with the fifth largest foreign reserves[3] as it stands today.

South Korea willingly became a sweatshop to the world. This was then eclipsed by the rise of *chaebol* such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai, which now rank internationally as key players in the global high-tech information economy. South Korea became the world's first Internet society and is one of the key test markets for the advanced high-tech gadgets essential for the smooth running of our present society. Despite his draconian authoritarianism, President Park Chung-hee's export-driven industrialization and Westernization policies laid the foundation for this "miracle on the Han" to occur.

Yet these remarkable achievements in the advancement of South Korea's hard power remain cold. Technological, industrial, and consumer products do not necessarily offer the face of the Korean people or a feeling of Korean culture, let alone the duress that the country had to endure to make this happen. Even though South Korea has emerged as a strong economic contender with an enhanced high-tech military, a highly educated population, and a vigorous engagement with the world beyond the confines of the

2, South Korea was ranked 12th on the basis of gross domestic product by the International Monetary Fund in 2007 and the CIA *World Factbook* in 2006. South Korea was ranked 13th by the World Bank in 2006.

3. As of fall 2007, China led the world with $1.46 trillion of foreign exchange reserves and was followed by Japan ($970.2 billion), Russia ($452.2 billion), Taiwan ($270.1 billion), and India ($264.7 billion). South Korea came in fifth with $260.1 billion of reserves (*Economist* 2007; MOF 2007).

peninsula, there is still a certain degree of continued international obscurity vis-à-vis the public that keeps Korea in the realm of the not remembered. National efforts to secure the international spotlight, such as the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul and Korea's fourth-place finish in the 2002 World Cup, were limited in scope for they were single events that do not have a prolonged, sustainable effect. Even the quick recovery from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis of 1997–99 did not garner as many headlines as the crisis itself. These events mark a shift from the forgotten to the temporarily remembered. Still, none of them had the potential to sustain Korea's international aura for a prolonged period of time.[4]

The *hallyu* phenomenon signifies an end to Korea's international invisibility. Here, the dark alley of the Korean peninsula obscured by the shadows cast by China, Russia, Japan, and North Korea harbored the phoenix of a dynamic culture that, with the rise of its economic stature, welcomes the world in partaking in its cultural pleasures. While the population of ethnic Koreans may be small, the number of cultural Koreans is limitless. This Koreanization of global culture is what *hallyu* sets in motion.

II. *Titanic* Conquers the World, *Shiri* Conquers *Titanic*

Titanic, James Cameron's 1997 global blockbuster film, conquered every nation's box-office record for film attendance the year it circumnavigated the world, becoming the unwelcome iceberg that sank national film markets. No national cinema could compete. South Korea was no exception. The year *Titanic* was released in South Korea—1998—the attendance figure for the film in Seoul reached an all-time high of 1,971,780 as it played on 47 screens for a total of 2,093 days (KOFIC 2000, 264). South Korea's top domestic box-office hit could not compete with *Titanic.* In Seoul, Kim Yoo-jin's *A Promise* secured attendance totaling just 661,174 while it played on 57 screens for a total of only 916 days (KOFIC 2000, 264). The Hollywood tsunami had struck, and each and every national film industry was ready to throw in a wet towel against this hyperfinanced, state-of-the-art, computer-enhanced special effects–driven, historic, tragic love story.

Nevertheless, the following year brought with it Kang Je-gyu's *Shiri.* The number of moviegoers in 1999 for *Shiri* reached a dizzying figure in Seoul of 2,448,399 as it played on 74 screens for a total of 2,633 days (KOFIC 2000, 263). The national attendance figure is estimated at 6,200,000 (Paquet 1999). Kang Je-gyu was determined to captain a South Korean blockbuster film equal to, if not better than, the Hollywood

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4. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's tenure at the United Nations, however, has provided a very visible, international, and personal aura to South Korea's renewed prominence.

leviathan. To do this, he hired a number of Hollywood special effects experts to work on his film. This technical assistance, combined with an Armageddon action scenario specific to the ever-present possibility of a second North Korean invasion, created a national sensation. It was a nationwide cine-mania that startled not just South Korea's film industry but the entire global film industry, Hollywood included.

The case of *Shiri* could easily be dismissed as an aberration. However, *Shiri* represents a sustained neo-genesis of South Korean cinema. From 1999 to 2006, South Korean films have retained the number one box-office spot in South Korea for eight out of eight years.[5] ***Table 1*** provides a year-by-year box-office rundown of Korea's top domestic film versus the top foreign film, which has always come out of Hollywood.

These numbers indicate that the South Korean box-office hit of the year more than doubled the attendance rate when compared with its Hollywood competitor. This occurred in 1999 with *Shiri*, in 2001 with *Friend*, in 2004 with *Taegukgi*, and in 2006 with *The Host.*

The South Korean film industry has also done remarkably well in regaining its domestic market share. Prior to *Shiri*'s success in 1999, Korean films since 1991 accounted for only one-quarter of the market share at best. After 1999, this percentage steadily increased to reach a majority share in 2004 with 54.2 percent of the market.[6] Since then, the Korean film industry has retained majority stakes in the domestic box office up until 2006, with strong indication that 2007 will continue this trend.

With attendance figures and a market share such as this, South Korea's sustained domestic box-office preeminence became the talk of the town and confounded Hollywood executives who could not understand the how and the why of this Korean exception.

Other exceptions, India and China along with pre-1997 Hong Kong, have achieved longer mastery of their domestic screens. Hindi cinema's song and dance-infused *masala* films consistently provide a pan-Indian *rasa* aesthetic sensibility that is embraced by India's multiethnic, multireligious, and multilingual population. For China, its import quota on foreign films shelters its domestic cinema with a unique set of

5. The annual box-office figures provided by the KOFIC do not reflect the total annual data. Data from 2000 and 2002–05 are missing anywhere from one to three months of data at the ends of each year.

6. As was the case with the box-office figures in table 1, these KOFIC data do not reflect complete figures for each calendar year. Data from 2000 and 2002–05 are missing anywhere from one to three months of data at the ends of each year.

government protections designed more to retain ideological control rather than to foster economic prosperity. Moreover, both India and China are gigantic in terms of territory and population when compared with South Korea.

Table 1: **Number of Tickets Sold in Seoul for Top-Ranking South Korean and Hollywood Films, 1994–2006**

Year	Rank	Top South Korean film	No. of tickets sold in Seoul	Rank	Top Foreign (Hollywood) film	No. of tickets sold in Seoul
2006[a]	1	*The Host*	3,571,254	4	*Mission Impossible III*	1,584,202
2005[b]	1	*Welcome to Dongmakgol*	2,424,948	5	*The Island*	1,285,400
2004[c]	1	*Taegukgi*	3,509,563	3	*Troy*	1,513,408
2003[d]	1	*Memories of Murder*	1,912,725	2	*The Matrix Reloaded*	1,596,000
2002[e]	1	*The Way Home*	1,596,521	2	*Minority Report*	1,400,406
2001	1	*Friend*	2,579,950	6	*Shrek*	1,123,200
2000[f]	1	*Joint Security Area*	2,447,133	2	*Gladiator*	1,239,955
1999	1	*Shiri*	2,448,399	2	*The Mummy*	1,114,916
1998	4	*A Promise*	661,174	1	*Titanic*	1,971,780
1997	4	*The Contact*	674,933	1	*The Lost World*	1,001,279
1996	3	*Two Cops 2*	636,047	1	*Independence Day*	923,223
1995	10	*Dr. Bong*	376,443	1	*Die Hard 3*	979,666
1994	4	*Two Cops*	860,433	1	*Lion King*	920,948

Sources: For 2006, KOFIC (2007, 106); for 2005, KOFIC (2005, 388); for 2004, KOFIC (2004, 294); for 2003, KOFIC (2003, 316); for 2002 and 2001, KOFIC (2002, 216–17); for 2000, KOFIC (2001, 229); for 1999 and 1998, KOFIC (2000, 263–64); for 1997, 1996, 1995, and 1994, KOFIC (1999, 189–92 and 194–97).

Notes: Except where specific exceptions are shown, rank refers to the film's box-office rank among all films shown in South Korea that year. Full annual box-office figures are provided by Darcy Paquet's Web site (http://koreanfilm.org/); however, at the time of publication these data could not be confirmed with the use of existing KOFIC publications.

a National admissions were 13,571,254 for *The Host* and 5,740,789 for *Mission: Impossible III*.
b Data from January to November 2005.
c Data from January to October 2004.
d Data from January 1 to September 30, 2003.
e Data from January 1 to September 30, 2002.
f Data from January to the third week of October 2001.

***Table 2:* Market Share of Korean Films as a Percentage of South Korea's Domestic Box Office, based on Seoul admissions, all screenings, 1991–2006**

Year	Market share (%)
2006	60.3
2005	55.0
2004	54.2
2003	49.6
2002	45.0
2001	46.1
2000	32.0
1999	36.1
1998	25.1
1997	25.5
1996	23.1
1995	20.9
1994	20.5
1993	15.9
1992	18.5
1991	21.2

Sources: For 2005 and 2006, KOFIC (2007, 104); annual data for 2000–04, KOFIC (2005, 393); annual data for 1991–99, KOFIC (2000, 265).

Outside of Hollywood, other national film industries have sought to learn the secrets behind the Korean cinematic success story in order to replicate it and thereby regain supremacy over their lost domestic film markets. This new renaissance of the South Korean film industry is called New Korean Cinema. It is the cinematic component of *hallyu*. New Korean Cinema has in effect become the latest cinematic business model that Hollywood seeks to undermine and all others—including India and China—seek to emulate.

There is no doubt that *Shiri* successfully solicited nationalist forces with its marketing strategy. The film was released after the onset of the IMF-coordinated program. One of the domestic efforts to restore the national economy quickly was a "buy Korean" campaign. The account by Kim Sung-kyung (2006) of the success of South Korean blockbuster films such as *Shiri* highlights this important fact along with the hybridization of the U.S. blockbuster format with local Korean features to create a "glocal"

Koreanized Hollywood product that was found to be immensely appealing, especially to the larger Asian market. Still, the narrative content of *Shiri*, while it was Korea specific, offered a radical shift in the ideological representation of the North Korean "Other" and the cultural possibilities of a Korea beyond the divided peninsula.

Since 1953, the divided Korean peninsula has found itself in the uncomfortable situation where each side has had to promote itself as the true Korea while it has demonized the other side. This bifurcated position has been necessary because the ethnic unity of the Korean people and the country was taken as a historical fact, one that, if questioned, would largely be met with incredulous disbelief. While the divided Koreas are still united ethnically, they remain divided politically. Shin Gi-wook (2006, 19) observes this unique situation as one where "today, Korea is the only place in which ethnic homogeneity (real or perceived) remains broken into two political entities." Thus, the democratic and capitalist South Korea enacted a censorship regime to regulate the depiction of communist North Korea. This took two forms of approved representations: the North Korean as evil incarnate deserving of quick eradication or the North Korean as the bumbling country bumpkin deserving of mockery. Lee Man-hee's *Marines Who Never Return* (1963) represents the former and Jang Jin's *The Spy* (1999) represents the latter.

By 1999, film censorship rules in South Korea were liberalized. Kang Je-gyu took advantage of this to produce a Korean action film that highlighted the consequences of the long division of the peninsula where the Cold War logic is still in force even after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. *Shiri* begins with a graphic depiction of the extreme training process by which North Korea selects, by a chillingly brutal method of elimination, its operatives to conduct covert operations in South Korea. Against this special forces training that could only be sanctioned under a communist regime, the forces of South Korea cannot help but appear weak, unprepared, and poorly trained as a valid counterespionage force. The North Korean operatives seemingly cannot fail. Becoming one of these special forces operatives requires the eradication by extreme prejudice of many of the others in the group. Under this scenario, the North Koreans become dehumanized state assassins whose only pleasure in life is to expedite the quick and utter destruction of South Korea. Kang takes this predictable scenario and introduces a heterodox twist.

Kang Je-gyu reimagines the already imagined nationscape of South Korea. In *Shiri*, Kang breaks genre and ideological norms to produce an apolitical South Korean action-infused melodramatic film that could be made only in a divided Korea, but he does not accept this division as an immutable constant. Korean cinema is criticized for being excessively melodramatic. This is, in part, due to the *shinpa* origins of Korean cinematic aesthetics. Vocal critics would go so far as to dismiss these melodramas as "tear gas films" requiring at least one box of tissues per screening. At worst, one had to be

Korean in order to have a chance to like them in the first place. In other words, Korean melodramas would not stand a chance in the international arena. Despite these critical dismissals of the melodramatic core of Korean cinema, melodrama is in the foreground in *Shiri*.

The divided peninsula itself is a tragic melodrama. This geopolitical tragedy is personalized in a dual-focus narrative centered on Ryu, the top South Korean counterinsurgency agent of O.P.[7] The first involves an action showdown between Ryu and Park, the commander of North Korea's top Eighth Special Forces unit. The second involves the heterosexual romance between Ryu and Hee, an undercover North Korean sniper whose South Korean alias is Hyun, a pet-fish merchant. The first relationship is a genre obligation because it presents an overt binary division of protagonist and antagonist. As a South Korean film, there is little doubt as to which side represents righteousness—the O.P. operatives of South Korea. This is where the expected moral and ideological clarity ends, however, and where the unexpected moral and ideological ambiguity begins. This occurs because the formerly demonized North Koreans are humanized. This is a central categorical change that transforms *Shiri* from a basic commercial escapist film into an artistic self-reflexive film. This diegetic metamorphosis occurs when the O.P. team members confront their North Korean counterparts in the stadium's power management control room. In *Shiri,* in a Mexican standoff, Park vocalizes the North Korean perspective of justifiable hatred of their Southern brethren:

> "Our hope is reunification. We dream about it." When you sing this song our people in the North are dying on the street. They barely manage to live with roots and barks. Our sons and daughters are being sold off for fucking 100 dollars! Have you ever seen parents eating the flesh of their dead kids? With cheese, Coke and hamburgers you wouldn't know. A soccer game to unite the nations? It's bullshit. We've had enough with the 50 years of deception. We are opening up a new history of Korea.

This monologue is a scathing critique of South Korea that would have been severely cut under the former censorship regime. Nevertheless, this moment of ideological self-reflexivity for the South provides a narrative means by which Kang uses the North Korean to level a critique of his own half of the peninsula. This event radically transforms the Hollywood popcorn film template of the mindless action cinema into an artistic medium for an ideological self-critique of South Korea. Kang unflinchingly

7. The full name of O.P. is never provided in English within the diegesis. Within the diegesis, O.P. stands for a South Korean counterinsurgency unit that is tasked with nullifying North Korea's attempts at destabilizing South Korea by sending covert teams such as Park and his Eighth Special Forces unit.

lays bare the ideological vacuum under which both sides of the divided Koreas valorize themselves and demonize the other side.

Kang doubles his ideological critique of the dehumanizing nature of the divided Koreas onto the personal realm through the heterosexual romance between Ryu and Hee. As an undercover North Korean assassin, Hee has managed to remain professionally active by constantly changing her identity, including facial plastic surgery. The only clue to her continued existence is her assassin's trademark signature—a bullet lodged between the third and fourth vertebrae of her victims plus another bullet penetrating the right and left atrium. One bullet alone is enough. Both bullets become bravura. Furthermore, Hee also allows Ryu to seduce her. This makes it convenient for her to have the fish that she sells in her store placed in numerous aquarium tanks throughout O.P.'s headquarters. These fish are implanted with miniature microphones that allow the North Korean operatives to always remain one step ahead of O.P. In spite of this, what began as "just business" becomes an unprofessional liability when Hee becomes Ryu's expectant fiancée. This romantic erasure of the divided Koreas is an ideologically forbidden romance because it involves falling in love with one's worst state enemy. This romantic pairing also plays with the folkloric Korean saying that the ideal heterosexual couple involves a cultivated man from Seoul and a beautiful woman from Pyongyang.

Within the logic of state espionage, sleeping with one's enemy is sound military strategy, but getting impregnated is not. The fetus that Hee carries has the potential to harbor the birth of a new Korea—an offspring who would be the most authentic Korean because of having parents from both sides of the 38th parallel. Hee's pregnancy is not revealed until after the stadium confrontation is over, with Ryu forced to shoot Hee as they both perform their professional duties to their respective states: Ryu ends the North Korean assassination attempts and Hee raises her sniper rifle to perform the assassination. The safety of the divided Koreas is secured by sacrificing the possibility of a nondivided Korea as Ryu knowingly kills his future wife but also unknowingly kills their unborn child.

As the main protagonist, Ryu is a formidable state hero who rescues South Korea and enacts revenge for the murder of his partner, but simultaneously dehumanizes himself by ending the life of his fiancée and unborn child. It is a Pyrrhic victory that reveals the extreme means by which Koreans have to act as either North Koreans or South Korean but never just as Koreans. The apocalyptic scenario is that the divided Koreas become the norm, not a temporary historical aberration. In this manner, the clear-cut, triumphant, happy endings of New Hollywood's action film series such as *Star Wars, The Terminator,* and *The Lord of the Rings* are relegated to the realm of escapist fantasy.

Shiri therefore establishes a new paradigm for New Korean Cinema under which the hardships, sacrifices, and unintended consequences of the divided Koreas is more actively questioned under the new liberalized censorship regime. Another way to state this is that South Koreans are now in a position to reevaluate the past in the present in order to assert the creation of a new future for South Korea as Korea. Key events of the peninsula's traumatic past, mostly those enacted by Koreans against fellow Koreans, such as the Korean War and the Kwangju Incident become necessary topics for cinematic contemplation. This revisiting of the national past from a critical perspective is also advanced by the use of cinematic techniques that, through their use, redefine the cinematic. One key cinematic technique is the use of the flashback. This dual strategy of critical and cinematic engagement with the national past invigorates New Korean Cinema for its domestic population and excites global audiences who are now in a position to change their perception of Korea from the forgettable or the forgotten nation to Korea as the unforgettable nation.

III. *Hallyu*, Flashbacks, and the Will *Not* to Forget

Given the fact that Korea is a nation that is usually forgotten or, at best, only sometimes remembered, a special imperative exists for Koreans not to forget. This Korean will *not* to forget, a determined collective will to remembrance, is a factor in the overt repeated use of narrative flashbacks in many *hallyu* masterpieces. Repression of the past, intentional or unintentional loss of memory, and the recovery of memory become recurring tropes. The accumulation of these memory recuperation narratives serves to transform Korea into the realm of the remembered and restores Korea to its traditional past-oriented ethos.

The act of remembering and forgetting is a highly politicized act. On the national level, official remembrances of the historical past are deemed obligatory for the nation to celebrate year after year. Special days commemorating political, religious, military, and cultural events as well as the birth of outstanding individuals are the norm. Yet, as much as remembrance of the national past is a major national preoccupation, being a member of a nation also requires an equally compelling necessity to forget. Both Ernest Renan (1947–61) and Benedict Anderson (1991) have reminded us of this equally compelling imperative for national viability, with Homi Bhabha (1990, 310) taking the extreme position of the "*obligation* to forget." For South Korea, the Kwangju Incident that started on 18 May 1980 is one such event that was officially erased but redrawn from the depths of repressed memory by New Korean Cinema. Four films have broached South Korea's self-imposed ur–national trauma. They are Jang Sun-woo's *A Petal* (1996), Lee Chang-dong's *Peppermint Candy* (1999), Im Sang-soo's *The Old Garden* (2006), and Kim Ji-hoon's *May 18th* (2007). From this list, the first

two films prominently make use of flashbacks as cinematic and narrative vehicles to provide sunshine onto this tragic event.[8]

The Kwangju Incident and its violent suppression by the South Korean military is a horrific event in which the South Korean military was ordered to fire on its own citizens. It is Korea's version of Tiananmen for China and Kent State for the United States. On 18 May 1980, citizens in the southern city of Kwangju staged prodemocracy rallies calling for a return to full civilian control over the presidency. These rallies mirrored that which had emerged earlier in Seoul following the unexpected assassination of President Park Chung-hee by the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency on 26 October 1978, an event that ended 18 years of authoritarian rule and left a noticeable power vacuum. Unsure of the motivations and circumstances behind the assassination and fearing North Korean involvement, General Chun Doo-hwan staged a coup d'état on 12 December 1978, imposed martial law, and consolidated his power base. These measures escalated to also include the violent suppression of the Kwangju Incident.

From 18 May to 27 May, confrontations between the prodemocracy demonstrators and the police and military units deployed to keep them in line turned increasingly violent. The escalation in violence went from clubbings to gunshots and ended in direct armed confrontations. Elite paratroopers plus five regular army divisions were sent in during the predawn hours of 27 May to bring matters to a forceful conclusion. When General Chun became President Chun in 1980, discussion of the Kwangju Incident became taboo until after he left office in 1988. Upon leaving office, Chun spent two years in a Buddhist monastery as an act of penance for his excesses before he was sentenced to death, a sentence that was commuted to life imprisonment. President Kim Young-sam later pardoned Chun despite the fact that Kim had been a fierce and vocal critic of the regimes headed by both Park and Chun. In 1997, 18 May became an official memorial day. The historical event is officially known as the Kwangju Incident, but it is commonly referred to simply as 5.18. It thus went from a day that was repressed to one that is now fully granted national remembrance.

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8. At the time of this essay, the author did not have access to the latter two films so it might be possible to extend the analysis of flashbacks to include them, too. By 2007, events related to the Kwangju Incident had entered mainstream acceptance despite its traumatic past. Kim Ji-hoon's *May 18th,* backed by CJ Entertainment, surpassed seven million attendees nationally before year's end. The use of flash-backs and the recuperation of past memories do not always have to address national traumas: inventive uses of flashbacks to address personal traumas can be found in films like Park Chan-wook's *Old Boy* (2003) and Lee Myung-se's *M* (2007). For an argument on the use of flashbacks to validate reincarnation romances, see Magnan-Park (forthcoming). In Korean television melodramas, *Winter Sonata* (2002), staring Bae Young-joon, would also fit this mold.

In the cinematic world, it was 18 years after 5.18 before the Kwangju Incident became the subject of a completed feature-length film. Jang Sun-woo's *A Petal* received 2.8 billion *won* in production funds, making it a big-budget film. It came in fourth place at the box office in 1996 when compared with other Korean films. *A Petal* achieved 213,979 paid admissions in Seoul. The film is structured as a narrative involving a three-tiered search following the Kwangju Incident. The first tier involves a group of four college students from Seoul who board a train to Kwangju in search of their dead classmate's younger sister. A placard providing details about the young girl identifies her as the 15-year-old Lee Jeong-yeon, but her identity remains largely a mystery throughout the narrative. The young girl is herself in search of her deceased brother whose recent death while serving in the army is something that she cannot just yet comprehend. The final search involves Mr. Chang, a crippled, marginal laborer who at first treats the unstable young girl as a convenient sexual object, subjecting her to repeated rapes, but is then moved to investigate her true identity in hope of restoring her to her former stable mental state.

The search-within-a-search-within-a-search paradigm provides opportunities for each character to reflect on events because the Kwangju Incident cannot be discussed openly, even among those who were present when it happened. It is this recall procedure that ultimately reveals, via a series of black-and-white flashback sequences, the first-person-narrative horrors that the young girl witnessed on the day of the uprising. She survived the slaughter that claimed her mother's life because she forcibly extracted herself from her slain mother's clutch. She later collapsed on the street, was mistaken for one of the dead, and crept away from a mass grave. This series of compounding traumatic events left her unbalanced, and she became a wandering beggar living a feral existence.

The repressive nature of this memory is vocalized only to her dead brother. Mr. Chang witnesses her vocal egress from her inarticulate state when he follows her to a field of unmarked grave mounds, where she places flowers of condolence to the nameless dead before randomly choosing one grave mound to serve as the surrogate site of her brother's remains. She finally provides her own commentary to match the series of silent, unnarrated, black-and-white flashbacks that have erupted during awkward moments of her wanderings, including during repeated rapes. The immensity of her ordeal causes involuntary spasms of incomprehensible mumblings and loss of her motor functions before she can complete her testimonial. These raw, unprocessed, vivid memories of Kwangju remain overwhelming to the young girl, Mr. Chang, and the South Korean nation. Encountering them, even in these fragmentary glimpses, results in shock. Soon afterward, she disappears into the countryside. The film ends with a voice-over plea imploring the audience to show some concern for her and allow her to continue her wanderings should they encounter her. This is a plea to not

forget her and to remember how she and others like her became living ghosts among the living.[9]

This obligation to not forget is also addressed in Lee Chang-dong's *Peppermint Candy,* the second film about the Kwangju Incident. In this film, the delicate subject of the Kwangju Incident is the ur-trauma that sets off a series of unintended consequences for Yong-ho, who must live his life repressing his involuntary participation in this tragedy, during which he accidentally discharged his rifle and killed an innocent teenage schoolgirl. Lee structures his film in a succession of flashbacks in reverse chronological order. The mystery behind Yong-ho's suicide in 1999 has its teleological genesis 20 years earlier, in 1979. Once the film is rearranged to run chronologically, his suicide becomes inevitable because the progress of time is linear, with the past necessarily determining that which should come next. However, the reverse chronological order questions this very teleology because it could have been interrupted and redirected during any one of its seven historical vignettes. Here, historical inevitability becomes suspect. Since the diegesis begins in 1979, the Kwangju Incident of 1980 also did not necessarily have to happen. Given that the narrative withholds Yong-ho's participation in suppressing the Kwangju Incident, the reasons behind his later vicious and callous personality remain a mystery.

The film "ends" back in 1979 by presenting Yong-ho as a young man full of gentleness, kindness, and hope as he envisions a future as a photographer while he is in love with Sun-im, his first love. However, none of these aspirations is allowed to materialize because just a year later, in 1980, he unwillingly participates in the Kwangju Incident. Thus, his personal repression of this event and the impossibility of forgetting this event torture him because he is never given a chance to speak about what happened or atone for his actions. Coming clean about Kwangju would provide the possibility of redemption. By not addressing the issue directly, however, Yong-ho suffers silently and unnecessarily. Here it is the remembrance of Kwangju that can restore linear time and break the repeating trauma brought on by the intentional forced forgetting of Kwangju.[10]

There is nothing more fundamental in baptizing South Korea into permanent existence like the Korean War itself. However, a good 50 years after the end of the Korean War, this signature traumatic event in the birth of the nation is in danger of becoming a lost memory because the generation that fought in the war and experienced the war as refugees is passing away. Faced with the prospect of the Korean War disappearing

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9. I thank David James for reminding me to include this film in this section. For a psychoanalytic reading of *A Petal,* see Kim Kyung-hyun (2004).

10. For a full account of this argument, see Magnan-Park (2005).

from living memory, Kang Je-gyu masterminded a blockbuster treatment of the Korean War by taking his apolitical stance again. His *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War,* released in 2004, electrified the nation with its melodramatic treatment of the war film genre by centering the narrative on two brothers who find themselves fighting in the South Korean army immediately after the start of hostilities.

The narrative begins in the present when a group of volunteers from the Korean War Excavation Department uncovers the remains of a soldier who perished during the Battle of Dumillyong. The corpse has in his possession a fountain pen with the name Lee Jin-suk engraved on it. When a volunteer makes contact with Jin-suk by phone, it appears to be a case of mistaken identity: Jin-suk is very much alive. However, if the fountain pen connects the corpse to Jin-suk, then it identifies the corpse as that of Jin-tae, Jin-suk's elder brother. In response, Jin-suk seeks out the pair of dress shoes that his brother had lovingly made with his own hands prior to the start of the Korean War. Jin-suk's fountain pen in the possession of Jin-tae's remains and Jin-tae's shoes in the possession of Jin-suk materially unite the two brothers. These two objects then serve as the mnemonic trigger that sets off the extended flashback of their time together as fellow soldiers during the Korean War—blood brothers as well as brothers-in-arms.

Jin-suk rushes over to the former battle site and breaks down in tears when he is finally reunited with his older brother Jin-tae, whom he last saw manning a machine gun so that he, Jin-suk, could return to the safety of the South Korean lines. During the course of the war, Jin-tae witnesses the murder of his fiancée at the hands of South Korean anticommunist fanatics, and he thinks that they had also murdered his younger brother. In a blind rage, Jin-tae, a decorated veteran of the South, enacts revenge on these civilian fanatics before he defects to fight for the North. At the Battle of Dumillyong, both brothers, now fighting on opposing sides, are reunited during the heat of the battle. Jin-tae regains his senses and tames his rage after he accepts that Jin-suk is indeed still alive. Jin-tae reclaims his former persona as the protective elder brother and agrees to rejoin Jin-suk in the South. Their jubilant reunion is short-lived, however, as Jin-tae dies while covering his younger brother's retreat.

While the flashback in *Taegukgi* is not as inventive as the one in *Peppermint Candy,* it does allow the flashback to linger on the motivations of the two brothers as they fight in the war. It is not primarily about an ideological zeal for South Korea's democracy, but it is instead a commitment to protect each other and return to their family together. Here, it is family loyalty and perseverance that takes precedence over ideological fidelity to one of the sides of the divided Koreas.

The film discloses the fact that people did not volunteer to fight for a particular side because of ideological fervor. Instead, many just ended up fighting for a particular

side on the basis of their circumstances as the war progressed. Moreover, both sides committed atrocities in the name of pure ideology. Even if one fought with self-sacrificing courage and won the highest military honors in the process, these did not provide protections, guarantees, or privileges, as Jin-tae discovered to his personal loss. Although history books focus on the clash of ideologies and grand geopolitical strategy, *Taegukgi*'s perspective is that of those who had to fight the war. For these grunts, whom the officials were all too ready to view as acceptable and necessary casualties for the greater cause, these so-called greater causes never lived up to their purported greatness.

This notion of living on a highly politicized Korean peninsula is again referenced via the extended flashback structure in *Once in a Summer.*[11] Directed by Joh Keun-shik and released in 2006, this film's privileged past is set in 1969 during a period in South Korean history when any family links to a procommunist affiliation meant that its members were ostracized even if they were not communists themselves. *Once in a Summer* is a romance that, had South Korea been in a more relaxed political environment, would have been celebrated. Indeed, the film recounts a taboo love affair between Yoon Suk-young, a young college man whose father owns a construction firm, and Seo Jung-in, a young woman whose parents are staunch communists who abandoned her in South Korea after they defected to North Korea.

Their romance is possible in the summer in a remote village but not in the political maelstrom of Seoul. Upon their arrival at his university campus, they find themselves immersed in a major confrontation between students demonstrating for democracy and the riot police who enter the campus to arrest them. In the ensuing roundup, despite the couple's nonparticipation, they both find themselves detained, interrogated, and threatened with long prison sentences for their antigovernment activities. Jung-in's communist connections by way of her parents automatically position her as a North Korean spy. This means that any confessed association with her would result in Suk-young also being charged for spying. Given this catch-22, Suk-young takes his father's advice and denies knowing Jung-in before the interrogators. He must do this in the same room facing Jung-in who, though heartbroken, comprehends the political necessity of Suk-young's betrayal. Instead of condemning him, she changes her testimony to match Suk-young's. This results in his release from detention and her facing time in prison.

Here, the Cold War politics of a divided peninsula compromise an otherwise true romance. Despite Suk-young's efforts to elicit Jung-in's quick release from prison

11. The author wishes to thank Lee Choon-yun (chief executive officer of Cine2000), Lee Hana (former producer for MK Pictures), and Associate Professor Lee Young-Lan (Kyunghee University) for their invitation for the world premiere of *Once in a Summer* and for the discussion that followed the screening.

and their meeting upon her release, Jung-in understands all too clearly that her communist tinge can never be forgiven under the Cold War scenario. Feigning a headache, she disappears after Suk-young departs in search of a pharmacy, even though he made her promise she would wait for him. Jung-in decides for the two of them that this is a promise that she must not keep. This is the repressed past that is recalled in a number of flashbacks that are initiated when a television station contacts Professor Yoon, inquiring whether there is someone from his past whom he would like to find again after separation. As was the case in *Shiri*, the divided Koreas required Koreans to live in a hyperpolitically sensitive environment that produced "good" South Koreans, like Suk-young, who should never mingle with, let alone fall in love with, "bad" South Koreans like Jung-in.

The rigid construction of South Korean versus North Korean identities is most forcefully addressed in Park Chan-wook's 2000 box-office hit, *Joint Security Area.* In this film, four soldiers strike up a forbidden and unthinkable close friendship across the 38th parallel, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas. Sergeant Lee Soo-hyuk and Private Nam Sung-shik represent South Korea. Sergeant Oh Kyung-pil and Private Jung Woo-jin mirror them as the representatives of North Korea. Their secret friendship is made possible because the North Korean guards saved the life of Sergeant Lee who, during a night patrol, stepped on a mine. He was unintentionally left behind in his squad's haste to depart the area upon the realization that they had mistakenly crossed over into North Korea. Having stepped on a live mine, Lee has no recourse except to remain still. Sergeant Oh and Private Jung unexpectedly find him. Because of Lee's tearful plea for succor, Oh defuses the mine and saves Lee's life. This event creates a human bond between Lee and the North Koreans.

The North Korean pair is matched by a South Korean pair when Lee is assigned Private Nam to create a two-man observation post. All four soldiers are assigned to patrol the DMZ, and the two pairs find themselves manning observation posts immediately across the DMZ from each other. The "Bridge of No Return" separates their positions. Lee initiates contact because he feels obligated to repay his Northern brethren's kindness in saving his life. First just Sergeant Lee but later also Private Nam cross the Bridge of No Return for late-night parties where they find that their mutually exclusive political indoctrinations cannot disrupt the birth of a deeper camaraderie that dissolves 50 years of vigilant division. Unfortunately, this unexpected friendship of Koreans who have discarded their political straitjackets is discovered by a third North Korean, Lieutenant Choi, and in the ensuing panic Lieutenant Choi and Private Jung are shot dead, leaving only three soldiers—Sergeant Lee and Private Nam of South Korea and Sergeant Oh of North Korea.

The need to hide the secret of the cross-border friendship causes the official stories of the survivors to differ so much that it requires the determined investigation by Major Jean, a Korean-Swiss officer representing the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, to uncover the truth behind this unthinkable, let alone actionable, DMZ fraternity. Each clue and each interview with survivors Lee, Nam, and Oh results in flashback sequences that incrementally reveal the truth that must be denied by the survivors and their countries as well as by Major Jean. As the truth behind the forbidden fraternity materializes, Oh spouts even more extreme communist propaganda while Lee, like Nam, chooses suicide. The truth behind the flashbacks reveals the ease by which Korea's ethnic homogeneity can easily overcome 50 years of enforced political separation. So, while the peninsula remains divided, it is a political charade that must be strictly practiced, especially by those who are assigned to guard the very border that enforces this separation. In the end, political division is the aberration, ethnic unity the norm. Here the fantasy is the divided Koreas, not the spontaneous friendship that occurs among four soldiers.

IV. *Hallyu*, New Korean Cinema, and Korea as the Unmistakably Memorable Nation

The emergence of New Korean Cinema into the global limelight raises a situation in which Korean cinema no longer considers its films as an insular art form; instead, Korean cinema considers itself more than capable of attaining greater degrees of universal popularity and relevance. The key difference is that the South Korean momentum questions the national project. Korean cinema can do this, in fact it must do this, because Korea is still a divided country. However, outside of Korea, the rest of the world operates as if the still-divided Koreas should be forgotten, or at least not mentioned at all, given that the first hot war in the Cold War, the Korean War, is still active because the cease-fire of 1953 was never replaced with a permanent peace treaty. As a creation of the Cold War, the divided Koreas are outlasting the "end" of the Cold War—the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union—and, while the rest of the world is pursuing alternative geopolitical paradigms, the eclipsed Cold War scenario is still very real on the Korean peninsula.

New Korean Cinema's ability to critically and aesthetically revisit its painful national past and creatively assert new possibilities for its national future has done much more than merely secure its domestic market for itself. New Korean Cinema also advances *hallyu*'s global popularity by winning successive international film festival accolades, attracting a growing number of new international cinephiles into its ranks, and raising hope for other smaller national cinemas to regain their domestic markets. It is successful because of an intimate connectedness between the film industry and its domestic audience, whereby the people of a nation can address themselves as a nation in a

plurality of perspectives—even perspectives that criticize the country's shortcomings. New Korean Cinema effectively creates a national feedback loop of symbiotic cultural synergy where the national, popular, and critical are united rather than exclusive of each other.

The narratives of *not* forgetting are only one major narrative concern of the cinematic works of *hallyu*, and this theme does not automatically secure New Korean Cinema's future successes. New Korean Cinema's celebrated domestic resilience and international vigor require careful thoughts on sustaining, nurturing, and enhancing this phenomenon. New Korean Cinema has attracted the interest of the United States. Hollywood seeks to disrupt this localized cultural synergy in South Korea because this instance disrupts Hollywood's long-reigning globalized cultural synergy under which its films dominate the box offices of all other national film markets. A surprise local hit in a given year is to be expected and can be tolerated; however, a sustained run of eight strong years out of eight and possibly one more, as has been the case in South Korea, raises too compelling an exception to an otherwise smooth operation. Hollywood's long-standing modus operandi is the assumption that what is popular inside the United States is automatically universally popular outside of the United States. Repeat box-office domination across national borders only serves to reinforce this idea. In the extreme, this predisposition smacks of national hubris. What is missing in this point of view is the fact that the United States largely closes its domestic film market to foreign films, holds a near monopoly in global film distribution, and has access to deep financial assets that make possible monstrous blockbuster films. The very sustainability of this mega-blockbuster strategy requires that Hollywood continue to keep its domestic film market largely closed to foreign films and keep its near monopoly in global film distribution intact.

Culture is critically important. Culture, in the form of soft power, is even more critically important than economic, political, or military power—the bread and butter of hard power. During the period of Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula (1910–45), the cultural force of Korean-ness permitted the idea of an independent Korea to linger within the hearts of the Korean people and to find expression after 1945. After 1953, it is this same cultural force of Korean-ness that permits the idea of a unified Korea to still burn fiercely within the hearts of the Korean people as the unfinished national project that must not be abandoned.

If we do not help to promote Korean cultural production, especially audio-visual media, what we end up with is seeing Korean subject matter through non-Korean eyes. We can imagine the Kwangju Incident given a Hollywood treatment. It would involve an A-list white male Hollywood actor such as Tom Cruise in the lead role. If you are a Korean female, you automatically become the translator and love interest. If you are the lead Korean male, you have two possibilities: becoming either the male ethnic

buddy sidekick or the evil incarnate villain. The problem with this type of Hollywood treatment is that if the script does not have that American male present at this historical moment in history, then it did not happen. Or even if it did happen, it is without consequence because it cannot become a backdrop for yet another Hollywood film that reinforces U.S. innocence, moral rage, and the ultimate victory over the situation because of the white-knight-in-shining-armor qualities of our representative of the all-American white male hero.

Given the hegemonic control that Hollywood has over global cinema, a free trade agreement between South Korea and the United States would present a clear and present danger for the Korean film industry. U.S. insistence on the abolition of the screen quota is especially pernicious. The U.S. position vis-à-vis the cinema is that it is purely a commercial venture where box-office receipts are the only criterion that matters. However, this U.S. perspective is not the one and only perspective that exists. The cinema is both a commercial and a cultural enterprise. It is a highly expensive enterprise to undertake, and yet it has tremendous cultural expressivity. The U.S. position stands in opposition to the insistence of the French and of UNESCO on defining the cinema as a cultural product that reflects the national characteristics, aspirations, and imaginings of its host national film industry. From the joint French-UNESCO perspective, the cinema is not merely a means to commercial aggrandizement but rather a testament of a national entity that can serve as a historical record of itself and as an ambassador to others who may not share the same experiences. It is to be hoped that France and UNESCO's insistence on cultural exceptionalism serves as a blocking mechanism that can veto the commercial, profitability-only model of the United States.

The global circulation of Korean audio-visual products represents a welcome phenomenon that is reversing Korea's status as a forgettable nation to one that is unforgettable. The will *not* to forget that centers on Korean cinema is doing its part to transform Korea's national image from a Hermit Kingdom, to a Dynamic Kingdom, to a Sparkling Kingdom, to the Remembered Kingdom, and to the Unforgettable Kingdom. Hence, present and future conversations will begin with: "Are you Korean?" This will then be followed by: "Of course I know Korea. Korea is cool. *Hallyu* is fascinating. New Korean Cinema is hot. I like Korea. Korea is unmistakably memorable."

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