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The Political Economics of Patriotism: Korean Cinema, Japan and the Case of *Hanbando*

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For Korea's confident and well-capitalized film industry, summer is a season to pull out the stops and offer the South Korean -- and increasingly international -- audience the most spectacular products it can produce. In the summer of 2006, one such blockbuster was the film *Hanbando* ('The Korean Peninsula'). It was produced by a syndicate of major companies headed by market leader CJ Entertainment and directed by Kang Woo-suk, well-known for genre action films like the *Two Cops* franchise and the *Public Enemy* films, and the nationalistic action thriller *Silmido.* The film was backed by a huge advertising budget and saturation bookings: it occupied 550 screens during the opening week, roughly one out of every three in South Korea. The film seemed destined to be the phenomenon of the summer releases.

Hanbando is set in the near future. The two Koreas are moving swiftly towards reunification. On screen appears TV-news footage showing families being reunited, sports teams combining members from North and South, road links opening. Now it is the turn of the railways. However, when the Japanese and other foreign representatives fail to appear at a grand ceremony to celebrate the re-opening of the rail link between Seoul and Pyongyang, signs are that reunification may be blocked. The villain behind the scenes proves to be Japan. On the basis of treaties signed, with highly questionable legality, during its take-over of the peninsula a century ago, Japan now lays claim to 'its' railway system.

Below I will try to give some idea of what the film is like, unravelling a sample of the narrative – roughly, the first half-hour – and adding a few considerations considering cinematic style plus a brief introduction to three of the film's cast. Then, after some consideration of the makers of the film and of the critical reaction to *Hanbando*, the essay will return to look at several general aspects of film content and style. On the way to a conclusion, some observations will extend to recent Japanese films and to the Japanese media market for South Korean film. Rather than simply criticize the film, though criticize it I will, this essay will try to suggest how an artistic and financial failure can reveal interesting lessons about South Korea's contemporary film culture.

The Film: story, style, stars

An opening montage of news reports condenses the history of the recent past and blends it into images from a hypothetical near future. A rapid-fire collage of footage from conflicts in the Middle East is followed by an image of Kim Jong-il, the smoke pouring from the Twin Towers, and George W. Bush announcing the second Iraq invasion. Banner titles announce that 'Japan dispatches biggest overseas force to Iraq' below images of Japanese armoured units, then come scenes of Korea's Zaytun Division deploying in Iraq. In quick succession come clips of Chinese anti-Japanese protests and Korean ones directed at the disputed Dokdo Islands – 'Korean ships told to stay away' -- and a number of scenes of protests over Japan's callous handling of 'the comfort women' issue. Cut to (now former) Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi in formal kimono at Yasukuni Shrine, then reports of heightened readiness of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, including the possible deployment of nuclear missiles; that is rapidly followed by Chinese claims concerning historical documents

proving that Korea was once a part of China. Next clips flash past presenting Bush's 'axis of evil' speech and reports of North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. Then, without allowing the spectator a moment to reflect – and having tweaked every raw nerve-ending concerning issues in dispute between Korea and Japan -- the sequence shifts register. We learn that the Six Party Talks have taken a dramatic turn, then follow the optimistic, fictionalized scenes noted above. We see news footage edited to suggest roadways being unblocked, tearful family reunions, a joint Olympic Team, and more.

The on-rush of images and voice-over information doesn't allow for much critical distance. For instance, it is probably only well after experiencing this montage that you may have time to realize how, in juxtaposing the scenes of Japanese troops and Korean soldiers in Iraq, the editors manage to suggest that the two groups of soldiers might be rushing off, fully armed, to confront one another. This bit of manipulation ignores the peaceful nature of the work undertaken by the mainly medics and combat/civil engineers sent by both countries, not to mention the fact that they supported the same side in the conflict.

The clips show Japanese troops on parade at home, hence the tanks rolling by; the Zaytun troops are in full battle gear for the TV cameras, not for action. Much less dramatic would have been images of men repairing bridges or giving injections to Iraqi children. The montage sequence performs a work of simplification – reducing complex regional issues to bilateral conflict – and intensification – conflict and disagreement are to be interpreted as preliminaries to war. The images are throughout sustained by a welter of anxious voice-overs and urgent titles, both shadowed by the kind of easy-listening martial music common to many blockbuster films in Korea and elsewhere.

Welcome to *Hanbando*.

After all of the above, packed into a few minutes, comes the first real-time scene, an impending ceremony to re-open the Kyeong-ui Railway Line, the main rail link between the Republic of Korea's capital Seoul and Pyongyang, that of Democratic People's Republic of Korea. (It is staged to suggest the real ceremonies held in June of 2003 to open a ghostly rail line, one which still stands idle waiting for reconnection of the two peoples and their socio-economic and political structures.)

The ROK President and a Kim Jong-il look-alike wait uneasily before a crowd made-up of officials and military top brass from both nations and young Koreans there to perform for them. An inserted graphic display has just shown the way in which this new line will link up to others in Korea and on across China towards Europe, and presumably a new future for the re-united nation.

Word finally comes that the Japanese are boycotting the event, claiming ownership of the railway system. The next scene takes place at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. The Japanese Ambassador, played by a Korean character actor, informs the President and his entourage that Japan has decided to enforce a claim to the railway system it built during the colonial period, based on a 1907 document bearing the official seal of the last Yi Dynasty King, King Kojong. The Ambassador and his scowling staff inform the President that Japan plans to use all its economic power and diplomatic leverage to reacquire the railways, and that it will withhold Japan's massive US$157 billion loan meant to support the re-unification

which this president has made his mission. Other scenes rapidly follow, such as a news conference at which a White House spokesman expresses US government criticism of Korea's failure to resolve this issue with Japan, or a Chinese newsreader expresses that country's straightforward disapproval of Korean re-unification. This first ten-minute jumble of sequences ends with the President assembling his full cabinet and calling for a Presidential Truth Commission (an echo of then President Roh's proposals for truth commissions) to investigate the validity of the documents put forward by Japan. He notes that this day is November 17, the date on which in 1905 five Korean ministers signed the notorious Eulsa Treaty, making Korea in effect a protectorate of Japan. The President vows not to allow Japan to violate Korean sovereignty again.

The President is played by Ahn Seong-gi (b. 1952), the most respected male actor in the Korean film industry. He had recently played a very different sort of national leader in *The Romantic President* (2002), but his career goes back to childhood roles in the late 1950s, and extends through some very ordinary films made during the 1980s to work with the most significant directors of the past three decades.

Ahn is not the most expressive of actors, but he carries with him into any film a considerable gravity earned by earlier lead roles. Consider the films he has appeared in by Im Kwon-taek, just one major director he has worked with: for example, *Mandara* (1981), *Taebaek Mountains* (1994) and *The Festival* (1996).

The script of *Hanbando* gives him very little to do other than deliver short speeches. It is a characteristic of the film's style to have main figures – here the President, later Queen Min or even King Kojong – deliver their lines framed squarely in the middle of a somewhat distanced close-up, looking just to the side of the camera lens. It is a strikingly un-cinematic technique, and as similar set pieces intervene in the narrative, a spectator may feel uneasy at this rather unrelenting speechifying. As when, for instance, the President makes his first direct-to-camera address about the significance of 17 November. He seems to be lecturing us as well as speaking to others in the scene.

The next sequence of scenes opens with something of an actual history lecture. Maverick yet patriotic historian Choi Min-jae is filling a white-board with key names and events concerning an early Japanese assault on Korean sovereignty, the 1895 assassination of Queen Min, and the infamous 1905 Eulsa Treaty. No longer able, because of his unstintingly nationalist views, to find work in a regular university, Choi has been reduced to teaching a group of middle-class women about a history in which they manifestly have no interest. Choi challenges one of the women to tell him about the Empress Myeongseong: the film always favours this more exalted, posthumous title for the queen. The reluctant student claims to recall her 'from the music video' version. This alludes to a TV drama about the 'Last Empress' and manages to suggest the superficial cultural competency of contemporary middle-class South Koreans. And when Choi asks why this very day of November 17 is important, one of the women suggests their lecturer is being romantic, since everyone knows this is Diary Day, the day on which you share your intimate thoughts with your lover. Choi explodes, and chases the women from the room.

Choi Min-jae is played by Jo Jae-hyeon. He is small and wiry, with unusually large eyes which give the piercing glare regularly deployed by the character Choi for extra impact. Jo began to appear on the screen in the early 1990s and may be best known for roles in the films of controversial director Kim Ki-duk. From Kim's debut feature *Crocodile* (1996), through roles as a dog-butcher in *Address Unknown* (2001) or mute criminal-rapist in *Bad Guy* (2001), Jo has constructed a fairly scary screen persona. To cast him as the outsider-intellectual who will persevere in the pursuit of thwarting Japan's falsified claims certainly emphasizes the passionate nature of Choi's quest. It does not insist on history as a very balanced or objective academic enterprise.

We catch up with Choi later the same day as he stares into a large glass of *soju* at a street-side eatery. When he speaks aloud a toast to the spirit of the late King Kojong, the owner-cook echoes his words and shares the sentiment and a glass with him. Most scenes in *Hanbando* involve middle-class men in suits and uniforms. This scene, where Korean scholar and Korean working-class bloke share the same patriotic nostalgia, is clearly meant to register the *vox populi*; that in turn can imply that the patriotism identified in the story most directly with the President and his supporters can be henceforth asserted as a natural expression of ordinary Koreans, and of ordinary Koreanness. When Choi learns of what has happened earlier that day to ruin the planned celebrations of the rail link, he resolves to act. That the *vox populi* should be called upon to get the committed historian up to speed concerning such a momentous occurrence is presented without irony.

The narrative next needs to bring the two foci of patriotism, the President and Choi, together, and it does so in the next few scenes. The President, with wife and entourage in tow, arrives at a concert to be given by visiting North Korean musicians.

Choi shouts out to him from a lobby balcony that the Japanese documents being talked about in the news are fake. We see security mean bundle him away, only for Choi to reappear in the next scene seated with the President and his most loyal advisor in a quiet briefing room. We learn more of Choi's background and his quarrels with authority and mainstream, less patriotic historiography. He is given a generous opportunity to spell out to the President his theory as to one can prove the relevant Japanese treaties and other documents, supposedly approved by King Kojong, to be fraudulent. The king, surrounded by more and more collaborators after the tragic murder of his queen, had hidden his genuine seal and replaced it with a version bearing tell-tale flaws.

It is this ersatz seal that the Japanese seized after Kojong's mysterious death – Choi calls it 'assassination' -- in 1919 and used to validate their schemes. All this was foreseen by the wise old man, who trusted that his countrymen would in future detect the small discrepancies between the two seals. As the story moves on, one major subplot will be the search for the genuine seal and the effort to prove that the Japanese government's claim to the rail system is not simply arbitrary and unjust, but illegal.

And here, only twenty minutes into this long, convoluted tale, arrives the first of some five flashbacks set in the era between the 1895 assassination of Queen Min and the hypothetical poisoning of Kojong in 1919. The transition is dramatic: a street-level shot of marching feet cuts to a scene of Japanese soldiers surrounding the Kyeong-buk Palace; then from the distance marches forward a figure in a dinner jacket followed by a thuggish-looking mass of men in dark kimono. Most Korean viewers will understand the leader to represent a Japanese leader of the attack, such as Okamoto RyÅ«nosuke, the legation

official who was directly involved on the day, or even the Japanese minister Miura GorÅ□, who planned it. This determined-looking man is headed to the palace with ultra-nationalist Japanese rough-necks, all pledged to put an end to Queen Min and her plotting to resist Japanese plans for the peninsula. That at any rate is one common version of the event. Inside the palace, Queen Min sits at a table leafing though a Western-language book; a stack of other books, a Russian one on top, awaits her attention. The image appeals to a widely held view of the queen as both patriotic and international-minded, a woman well ahead of her time whose loss to a Korea in peril was especially cruel.

Kang Su-yeon plays the queen. In recent years, she has become best known for her work in TV drama, notably playing the lead in the SBS 150-episode period drama *Ladies of the Palace* (2001-02) which located its intrigues in the Choseon court of the early sixteenth century. She has appeared in some thirty films, a handful of them considered contemporary classics. Her starring role in Im Kwon-taek's *Surrogate Womb*, when she was only twenty, won her the Best Actress Award at the Venice Film Festival in 1987. While Korean films and Korean directors have won many international awards in recent years, no actor matched Kang in winning such an accolade from one of the top three European film festivals, until Jeon Do-yeon was awarded the Best Actress award a t Cannes in May 2007. Audience familiarity with Kang in a popular period drama was probably more instrumental in her casting here than her roles in some memorable films.

With the attack on the queen, the film shifts into historical-action-movie mode. Once the palace is surrounded, collaborating Korean soldiers scale its walls to open the gates for the invading Japanese. When the Japanese regular troops enter, their first action is to gun down their Korean helpers; then they make way for the in-rushing sword-waving thugs. We are already rather far from historical accounts: it is known that Japanese troops dressed as Koreans prepared the way for the invaders; they were not shot down by their comrades. The spectator is being interpellated by a film genre, not offered docu-drama.

Queen Min, despite the gunshots outside, refuses to hide. Meanwhile, Japanese minister Miura has confronted the King and promised, threateningly, that he will come to no harm. Meanwhile in the corridors of the palace the dark-clad Japanese hack away at, first the Imperial Guards, then every serving woman in sight. The climax takes place in an inner court. Kang Su-yeon's eyes brim with tears of rage and terror, as Queen Min gives her farewell to her king; she apologizes to Kojong, now captive inside his room close-by, for having to abandon her royal duties and admonishes him to think not only of his title but also of the fate of his nation. Here, the direct-to-camera staging is very melodramatic – the queen has been slashed and run through twice before the scene ends -- but thanks to Kang's skill, it is hard to feel unmoved. Now the waiting Japanese move in to finish off the queen and her entire entourage. Before cutting back to the present, a brief scene shows the king and his last loyal counsellor discussing the fate of the royal seal.

The film-- still only 32 minutes into its 147-minute running time -- cuts to the present in which Choi Min-jae is now explaining his theories about the royal seal to the full cabinet. The rather forced match between flashback and present scene established here via the seal subplot occurs in later portions of the film. I will note just one later example of such cross-

cutting. It occurs soon after Korean radar has detected a fleet of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force headed for Korean waters. The President and staff have gone to the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, this time to meet with the Japanese Foreign Minister and his staff; they are urgently trying to avoid a military showdown with the large Japanese fleet. Here, the story jumps back a century, and seated in almost identical fashion to their twenty-first century avatars are Japanese officials decked out in Meiji-era uniforms, across the table from men in tall black hats and courtly *hanbok*. We are most likely back at a particularly infamous moment in history, the negotiations leading up to the signing of the Eulsa Treaty in 1905; that treaty, making Korea a Japanese protectorate, marked the beginning of the end for Korean national sovereignty. In both eras, Japanese officialdom declares its benevolent designs and its wish to protect Korea from hostile neighbours. Kojong sits at the head of the table in his time and place, so when we cut back to the present it is no surprise to see Ahn Seong-gi as President seated in the equivalent spot at the tense embassy meeting.

It is the actor Moon Seung-gun's difficult task, playing a cold-eyed pragmatic, Japan-leaning prime minister, to provide a foil to Ahn's instinctively patriotic president. Moon is highly regarded for earlier roles in films by directors such as Park Kwang-su and Chang Sun-woo, two film-makers associated with the anti-authoritarian, left-humanist cultural movements of the politically repressive 1980s. He is particularly remembered for roles as dissident intellectuals in Park's *Black Republic* (1990) and *A Single Spark* (1995), and as a violent loner in Chang's *Petal* (1996), still the most powerful Korean film made concerning the Kwangju Uprising of 1980. Moon has been involved in a range of artistic and political activities. He was a notable supporter of the Uri Party, and helped organize (real) President Roh Moo-hyun's online election campaign. (See the koreanfilm.org website entry under his name for more.)

The PM is depicted in a far from sympathetic light. We see him, for example, try to bribe Choi to abandon the quest for Kojong's seal, or all but mock a young subordinate's appeals to patriotism and the *minjok* – the racial/ethnic nation-people of Korea. His is a hard-edged, unromantic view of the world: it is far better to go along with Japan's outrageous claims than to risk economic disaster and political isolation.

He even seems behind a plot to drug the President and put him into a coma; and he will seize the occasion to attempt to undo all the latter's plans, re-unification included. Yet the Prime minister is the only complex, interesting character in the film. Where Ahn Seong-gi's role calls for straight-to-camera delivery of lines about the *minjok* or the need 'to show the world what Japan has done to our country' ('I am willing to sacrifice my life for this'), Moon's character is busy arguing, conniving and reasoning with people. He is not framed square-on, but in two-shots with others or shot from oblique angles in medium close-up. Moon is one of those actors whose secret seems partly to lie in never seeming to be acting; this gift makes him the exception in *Hanbando*.

After many plot twists and turns, the genuine seal is found, war is averted, the Japanese Foreign Minister ultimately forced not

only to abandon the claim to the railways but to make a public apology for Japan's treatment of Korea in the past and to offer compensation for the exploitation and injustices of the colonial past. All this is formalized in a public ceremony.

At the very end of the saga comes at least one scene that seems to belong to a different, more sophisticated cinematic world. All the PM's plans to thwart the patriotic President have themselves been undone. He finds the President alone in his office and hands in his letter of resignation. There follows a bitter exchange between the two chief antagonists. The President maintains his patriotic posture; the Prime Minister holds his ground. The latter still insists that this president, in his patriotic idealism and plans for re-unification, is dangerously mistaken. What about the real 48 million citizens of the Republic of Korea, what good are these lofty ambitions to their lives in the here and now if re-unification destroys thirty years of hard-won progress? With that, Moon Seung-gun turns about and marches towards the door.

Freeze frame, roll credits.

The company and the critics

Hanbando, it is worth emphasizing, was neither financed nor directed by people new to the film business. CJ Entertainment is only one of many subsidiaries of CJ Corporation. The parent company had been hived off from the Samsung group in the 1970s. While Samsung surged ahead into its extraordinarily successful future in electronics, CJ Corporation carried on mainly with the food processing business. In the mid-nineties, however, members of the CJ family involved the company in the start-up investment for a new Hollywood studio, DreamWorks (gobbled up since by Paramount); they set up CJ Entertainment to handle distribution of Hollywood product, and turned to the distribution and production of Korean films. [1] CJ Entertainment weathered the IMF Crisis better than most competitors, and was able to move into exhibitions as well. The first of a series of multiplexes opened in 1998; by 2000 CJ had produced and distributed Park Chan-Wook's hugely successful *Joint Security Area*. The box-office records set by this film, and Kang Je-gyu's 1999 *Swiri*, primed the take-off of the new Korean cinema. (For an excellent overview of this period, see Paquet 2005). According to *Korean Cinema 2006*, the official report of the Korean Film Council, CJ Entertainment released 47 films in the single year, which sold over ten million tickets in Seoul alone – almost a quarter of the capital's total box office. CJ also managed to produce four of the top ten films in 2006: number 3, *Tazza: The High Rollers*, a gambling/crime thriller; number 6, *My Boss, My Teacher*, a gangster comedy; number 8, *Hanbando*; number 10, *Forbidden Quest*, a racy period drama. A clear sign of the current financial success of the Korean film industry is the fact that during 2006, only two Hollywood films (*Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* and *The Da Vinci Code*) ranked among the box office top ten.

Kang Woo-suk is regarded as one of the most influential men in film-making. Kang had 'been elected #1 in the "Top 50 Powerful" list chosen by *Cine 21* magazine nine times in a row until 2005' (Kim 2007). He left the company he had founded in1995, Cinema Service, right before making *Hanbando*, but remains influential in it still, and has close links to CJ as well.

Cinema Service, mainly a distributor, released 18 films in 2006, one of which was the surprise hit *King and the Clown*. Its domestic record of over 12 million admissions was only exceeded

by the 13-million-plus box office of Bong Joon-ho's monster tragi-comedy *The Host*, the most successful film domestically and internationally in Korean film history. While *Hanbando* was still in pre-production, Kang Woo-suk, wearing his director's hat, said in an interview that he had in mind making a 'film that will make you feel all of the dignity of the people populating the Korea peninsula . . . like in American films like 'Independence Day' or 'Air Force One' . . . They're so proud of themselves, they think they can go around running the world, why are we Koreans shrivelling so much' (Kang 2005).

Posters and TV ads for *Hanbando* had begun again to appear from late June of 2006. The poster reproduced here was one of the most ubiquitous. It places President/Ahn Seong-gi in the centre, PM/Moon Seong-gun to the far left and Choi Jae-min/Jo Jae-hyeon far right. The top line of text declares: 'We have never once been true masters in this our land'. Below it, riding atop the main title 'HANBANDO' in massive white font, is a line saying: 'Search for the hidden genuine seal of the Great Han Empire!'

By August the film was holding onto the number five spot among the top ten, but it began to fade by September. Criticisms of the film appeared after the first press screenings, a few weeks before the general release in mid-July. Kang Woo-suk made an effort to deflect those aimed at what many saw as the film's crude nationalism. As the *Korea Times* reported on 27 June 2006:

The film's director Kang Woo-suk doesn't cringe because of such negative criticism. He also does not hide his purpose and openly says that his film aims to criticize Japan. 'This is not a film that merely criticizes Japan without reason,' Kang told reporters earlier this month after the pre-screening of his film at Seoul Theater, downtown Seoul. 'Considering its thoughtless behavior, I really wanted to attack Japan through my film.'

Staff reporter/film reviewer Kim wrote, in a follow-up piece on July 19, that 'such movies with nationalistic themes, however, didn't translate into automatic success at the box office. There are such commercial flops as ``Phantom, the Submarine'' (1999), ``General of Heaven'' (2005), ``Fighter in the Wind'' (2004) and ``Rikidozan'' (2004) and others.' Indeed, Kim was able to lay out the numbers to show that among the top ten box-office hits of Korean film coming into summer 2006, five did feature nationalism and patriotism – but all of

these focused on the North-South conflict, including Kang's own 2003 hit *Silmido.* [2] In his own review of the film on 13 July, Kim Tae-jong grudgingly gave it 1½ out of 5 stars: 'Although the sensitive theme appeals to Korean audiences, who know the tragic history of Japan's rule, in the end it becomes a propaganda film full of radical nationalism. It lacks cinematic development, reality, and a balanced approach to historical events and the current situation'.

As another critic, Kyu Hyun Kim, more recently summed up: 'While it was by no means a commercial disaster, the film's final tally of box office tickets sold was around 3,880,000 tickets nationwide, falling short of the film's break-even point of approximately 4.5 million tickets and trampled flat by . . . *The Host*' (Kim 2007).

Politics of the flashback

It seems that makers of *Hanbando* had in mind making a blockbuster fiction-film along the lines of an *Air Force One*. At the same time, the film would be designed to take advantage of what many Koreans at present perceive in fact as Japan's 'thoughtless behavior'. The opening montage catalogues what Kang had in mind as such behaviour. To quote director Kang Woo-suk from a pre-production interview once more:

You could just see it as a Drama about the recurring past, present and near future, and the events that could happen. You know the word 'Faction (Fact+Fiction)'? 'Silmido' is one of those films, using reality as a foundation to create a fictional story. Instead, 'The Korean Peninsula' is the other way around: It uses fiction as its basis, but connections to reality keep emerging from the story. It'll be something that historians will be satisfied about (Kang 2005).

Presenting the film as a 'faction', however, assumes that it incorporates a reasonable degree of fact, of historical reality. I noted above just one minor rewriting of the assault on the Kyeong-buk Palace. Historians of the late-Choseon era are certainly unlikely to see much to be satisfied about in the film's handling of the assassination of Queen Min either. The details of the event are still hotly disputed, as a glance at the *Wikipedia* entry for 'Empress Myeongseong' will attest. It is unlikely that this wily political realist presented herself for slaughter to the invaders for the sake of a final patriotic address to her husband. She seems to have dressed as one of her own serving women, before being detected and killed by the Japanese. It is also probably a mistake, historically, to continue to describe or portray the actual killers as 'Japanese thugs' (Cumings 1997: 121). One Japanese historian has noted the sober fact that while the men involved in the killings at the palace did include some local Japanese roughnecks, many were journalists and correspondents – men such as Shiba ShirÅ□, with a degree from an American university and budding career as political novelist. Intellectuals from samurai stock, equipped with modern educations but occupying careers on the margins of social and political influence, they represented just the kind of 'enlightement' figures who would push the colonial project forward and not hesitate to advocate or use violence in its cause (Takasaki 2002: 61).

The historical flashback is one key cinematic and narrative device by which *Hanbando* works to construct a sense of patriotism based on a presumed collective Korean experience of Japanese infamy both in the past and in the film's projected near future. 'The flashback is a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference. A juncture is wrought between present and past and two concepts are implied in this juncture: memory and history' (Turim 1989: 1). It is hardly unusual for a feature film to simplify or to rewrite history for the sake of narrative effect or genre boundaries or in order to intensify rhetorical leverage, whether that leverage is exercised for commercial benefit or more clearly ideological ends. It is rather unusual, however, to find a cinematic 'faction' this single-mindedly determined to edit together events separated by a century without the least attention to the decades in between. *Hanbando* uses the flashback to exorcise among

other things the long colonial period. This means the exorcism of the story of Korea's early modernization and, more specifically, of any accommodation to or collaboration with Japan's rule in Korea on the part of ordinary Koreans (Morris 2007).

Perhaps what makes the film's use of flashback particularly worth criticizing is the way it forces the issue of memory upon the spectator. The flashback is most familiar to film-viewers as a subjective device linking a character's past to events experienced in the present. The historical flashback as used in *Hanbando* depends upon the conjuring up of a collective subject -- the Korean people, the *minjok*; the film unfolds in such a way that, through the rhetoric of cuts back and forth between the poles of its versions of then and now, the *minjok* is frog-marched through a lesson in righteous indignation -- what in Korean is often summed up in the highly-charged term *han*. Such a commodification of *han* is what Kang Woo-suk and CJ Entertainment seem in fact to have sought to create. I think it is this simplistic, coercive visual rhetoric of pre-packaged *han* which has most assuredly turned the critics, and many ordinary viewers, against the film.

Screen wars

As noted above, a little over an hour into the story, *Hanbando* weaves into its plot-lines of political thriller and quest for a missing seal, another set of genre conventions: a threat-of-war, looming-armed-conflict bundle of scenes and conventions. It asks the spectator to watch a sort of war film within the film.

The President receives an urgent phone call while visiting Choi. The maverick historian is by now leading a full-scale archaeological excavation in search of the genuine royal seal. The call claims that Japanese ships have been detected headed toward Korea. We cut to the interior of the Japanese ship leading the fleet and a tough-looking, chop-haired commander growling orders to subordinates in strongly accented Japanese. Up to this point, 'Japanese' characters, whether modern diplomats or their uniformed and be-medalled Meiji predecessors, have spoken in their normal Korean voices; sailors have that fictional license revoked. Later scenes shift to the war room at ROK defense headquarters. The President turns to an aid and asks, 'Who is chief of the Navy?' Patriotic credentials may excuse this lack of attention to detail; once again, no irony seems indicated in Ahn's straight-laced delivery. Considerable use of rapid cutting with ships steaming, helicopters taking off and jets scrambling, do give these portions of the film more momentum than the stage scenes with the politicians. It is perhaps an unsurprising result of the production's political clout that they gained the participation of the Korean government and military to shoot crucial segments on secure military locations, although the Korean film industry is still some way from mobilizing whole fleets the way, for instance, Paramount could for major scenes in a Korea War film like *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (1953). As for the Japanese forces, apart from ship interiors, they have to make do with computer generated imagery (CGI).

Tension builds, and soon an officer at the HQ decides to contact the Americans. He picks up a phone. The telephone call fails to get through to US forces, and we hear no more of the US. As for the DPRK, their navy and their massive arsenal, never appear. It is indicative of *Hanbando*'s lack of attention to verisimilitude and emphasis on bare-bones confrontation that its big naval scenes take place in an ocean cleared of all but the ships of the two protagonist nations. All that American weaponry and technology about to collide, and one failed telephone call leaves the super-power out of the loop.

Japanese film-makers have a long history of putting war on the screen. The most recent variety of their war films, calculated to catch the current mood of neo-nationalism, have featured conflicts in a near future, such as *Aegis*, or a sci-fi inflected revision of the war with America, as in the submarine film *Lorelei*. Both of these films from 2005 show a highly contradictory sense of what is at stake in playing the patriot game, particularly given geo-political dependence on the US – the old enemy and, as some neo-national intellectuals

might even suggest, potential future foe (Gerow 2006).

One obvious comparison for the South Korea-Japan confrontation embedded in *Hanbando* is that imagined by the 1999 Korean film *Phantom, the Submarine* (*Yuryeong*) a film which was also released in Japan, in 2001. The film inherits and faithfully rehearses many of the clichés of the many submarine films set in the Second World War or Cold War, but does so rather well and is, in terms of narrative coherence or cinematography, better crafted than the two Japanese films referred to above.

The plot has it that South Korea has acquired a nuclear missile-equipped submarine from Russia in a near-future in which Japan, too, may be deploying nuclear missiles. The sub, manned by a crew of men who have had their past identities expunged, has been sent on a mysterious mission. When it becomes clear that the mission is actually one to scuttle the boat with them still in it, the second-in-command has the captain killed and takes control of the boat. His plan is to attack Japan. The film's climax will occur as the seconds count down to missile launch. (Any resemblance to a Hollywood post-Cold War thriller such as *Crimson Tide* [1995] is probably earned.)

What is striking is how, even within its genre limitations, *Phantom* presents the rogue commander's anti-Japanese patriotic zeal as pathological. Japanese submarines, once the intruder is located, act in a defensive, cautious manner; only when they are attacked by the Korean sub do we encounter some old cinematic friends: silent running, depth-charge attacks, torpedoes whooshing on their sinister paths. And when the Phantom drags a Japanese submarine below its diving range, an intercom broadcasts the screams of the dying men around the ship. Hearing the agony of fellow submariners, the Korean crew begin to realize how dangerous their captain is. He turns off the intercom.

Phantom, the Submarine was released in Japan in 2001. It is no doubt the film's presentation of zealous patriotism as at best ambiguous which allowed it to find a Japanese audience. It may have even touched a chord among older spectators who could recall postwar films which portrayed the doomed heroism of the country's submariners in a way rather more akin to the great German TV production *Das Boot* than to Hollywood war films.

A Kind of Conclusion

CJ Entertainment has usually done very well in the Japanese media market. Consider the case of the alzheimer-themed melodrama *A Moment to Remember*. As the Japanese *Wikipedia* tells the story, this CJ product premiered in Korea in November 2004, and was at the top of the box office for three weeks. It was an adaptation of a Japanese television drama. For the Japanese premiere, both lead actor and director went to Japan in October 2005, to be greeted at a press conference by the Japanese star of the original program. Under the Japanese title 'An Eraser Inside my Head', and thanks to a carefully planned ad

campaign, the film became the first Korean film to top the box office charts in Japan, earning some 3-billion yen, roughly US$ 25 million. That makes it more profitable than the blockbusters which launched the new Korean cinema in Japan, such as *Joint Security Area* (Japan release 2001) and *Swiri* (Japan release 2000). Director Kang Woo-suk's own action-'faction' film *Silmido*, produced by his Cinema Service, did fairly well in Japan when released there in 2004. CJ has more recently launched in Japan the CJ Series, a collection of multi-disk DVDs of its more popular films with Japanese subtitles.

Other production companies have involved Japanese actors in their productions, used Japanese theme songs, made entire films (*RikidÅzan*, *Fighter in the Wind*) concerning Koreans who became famous in Japan while hiding their origins. It has even been reported that the first big hit of the new Korean cinema, *Joint Security Area*, is to be remade as a Japanese 20-part TV drama (see Japanese *Wikipedia*, 'JSA'/*Kyôdô keibi kuiki*'). While some media figures claim that enthusiasm for the Korean Wave may be waning in Japan, there is still a lucrative market for romantic comedy, melodrama and action films.

Hanbando has been largely ignored in Japan. There do not appear to be plans for a release there, nor is there as yet a DVD version of the film available with Japanese subtitles.

So why make the film in the first place? The decision by CJ Entertainment and director Kang to make such a stridently nationalistic film may be based on elements of genuine patriotism. It more plausibly seems based on the financial calculation that 2006 was ripe for a film exploiting political tensions and ill-feelings filling TV screens and newspaper pages. This time, the Japanese market could be sacrificed, and the all-important domestic market [3] relied upon to buy tickets for a story evoking as many as possible issues of dispute between South Korea and Japan.

Consider the contrasting case of the biggest success of 2006, Bong Joon-ho's *The Host*. The overall budget of US11 million was shored up by pre-sales to Japan, accounting for some 40% of the funds needed. This meant not only that Bong could make the film he wanted to make – and be free to wager over a third of the budget on CGI and animatronics – but by the time he took *The Host* off to the Cannes Film Festival that summer, he felt confident that he would be able to recoup investment from Korean and Japanese exhibition even before launching the film on the international market. 'In Cannes .. it caused a bidding frenzy' (Roddick 2006: 33).

In its official report *Korean Cinema 2006*, the Korean Film Council noted that films in pre-production, with possible release dates by 2008, included a number of examples of 'faction films about modern history that stimulate nationalism and intellectual curiosity'. The fascination with the late-Choseon Dynasty and the rehabilitation of the royal family seemed likely to continue, with films in development about 'Empress Myeungseung', [4] about the tragic legend of 'Lee Shim', wife of a French diplomat and one of Kojong's romantic entanglements, even about the American wife of the last Korean prince, Julia Mullock. On the other hand, the *Hanbando* tactic of big-budget anti-Japanese patriotism might have been tried yet again if the film 'Dokdo Defense Force' got the go-ahead. However, to my knowledge, none of these projects has yet to appear as a major film.

One thing the report did not predict was the way in which the profitable 'Korean Wave'/*Hallyu* phenomenon would begin to ebb during 2007 regardless of Korean screen patriotism. In 2005 the South Korea film industry had exported films worth some US$ 76 million abroad, a full 79% to Japan. The figures for 2007 were down to a total below US$ 13 million and Japan's share of 27% seemed to register a wave beginning to run out of energy. The most recent pick-up in the Japanese domestic film market will make Korean distributors even less confident.

Since 2006, South Korean films have continued to plunder and re-write the Korean past and

to intervene in contemporary political and ideological debates. For example, the summer after *Hanbando*'s fraught debut saw the appearance of two films centered on the Kwangju Uprising, both of which recreated the contentious past in ways which seemed in significant measure conceived in order to contain and commercialize it rather than to re-examine the relevance of the pre-democratic era for the mixed political messages circulating today. The monster film *D-War* (*Dragon Wars*), in contrast, became the hit of the summer by infusing genre conventions with a considerable dose of Korean patriotism directed, in this instance, at competing with the commercial power of the US film industry (see Morris 2008b).

Whether digging into the Japanese colonial past or long American military-economic neo-colonial relationship with South Korea, film-makers will, it is safe to conclude, continue to produce films that will be seen around the world, *Hallyu* or no *Hallyu*. Not all the films will be good, some will be awful, others will win awards at film festivals around the world, and a few may even earn profits on the monster scale of *The Host.* [5] Some production companies will be outward-looking and seek to cultivate the Japanese and wider international audience, others may focus on the domestic box office; a big company such as CJ Entertainment will no doubt try both routes. But no one should under-estimate the financial or cultural presence of the new Korean cinema and the implications of its visions of patriotism.

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Notes:

[1] For more about CJ Entertainment, see Russell 2005, English *Wikipedia*, and the company's website.

[2] In January of 1968, a North Korean commando squad made an audacious attempt to assassinate Park Chung-hee. They were stopped before reaching the Blue House, and a bloody mêlée ensued until they were hunted down. Park wanted revenge, and had his KCIA work with air force personnel to train a commando squad that could be sent to kill Kim Il-song. When, after long brutal training which cost the lives of seven of the 31-man commando their lives, a thaw in North-South relations made them surplus to a politics of entente, in August of 1971 they mutinied and headed to Seoul to press their case with Park. They in turn were gunned down, took their own lives or were executed.

Kang was himself pretty audacious in putting this long-covered-up incident on screen. A US$ 8 million investment allowed for the production of a full-scale blockbuster which has recouped its costs many times over. In this 'faction' Kang glamorized the male roles with stars like Ahn Seong-gi and recast the narrative in the formulas of a South Korea *Dirty Dozen*. Yet the impact of the film did help force a newly democratized government to finally open up the files on the whole disaster. The Japanese *Wikipedia* has detailed entries on both the incident and the film; see as well the critical review by Darcy Paquet.

[3] As Darcy Paquet reported in 2005, 'Korea's TV, cable and video/DVD markets remain miniscule. Online piracy and high prices have stunted the DVD sector, which is dominated by rentals rather than sell-through. Surveys indicate that only 29% of the two million households that own a DVD player have ever bought a DVD. Whereas US or European releases can double their revenues on DVD sales alone, Korea more resembles the US in the 1970s, when films had to earn two and a half times their budget in theaters just in order to break even': see Paquet 2005a.

[4] In addition to being the star of a 2001 KBS television 2001, the romanticised empress is celebrated in a full-scale musical. *The Last Empress* premiered in 1995 and is still in business. See the detailed English and Korean website on this 'spare no expenses spectacle executed with exquisite taste', available here.

[5] On the way to its success, *The Host* has illustrated one of the extrinsic factors by which cinematic achievement on the domestic commercial level continues to worry observers concerned about the overall artistic health of the industry. In a country with a total of some 1500 screens in cinemas nation-wide, companies promoting large-scale productions pour increasingly huge amounts into advertising campaigns and have also, so far at least, managed to organize saturation bookings on proportions perhaps only possible in a moderate-sized country with a resurgent, highly competitive entertainment sector. As *The Korea Times* film specialist Kim Tae-jong observed on 4 September 2006: 'Many people believe that the film has opened a new era for the film industry, but there are also concerns over shadows that the film casts on the industry as a whole. As the film opened on 620 screens and the domination continued for several weeks, were unable to find available theatres'. *Hanbando* certainly owed its early earnings to the fact of occupying some 550 screens during the first week of its

release. Whether seriously complex films about anything as challenging as the past or present relationship of Korea and Japan can succeed, or survive, in this climate remains to be seen.